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On Being Social in Metaethics¹

Kate Manne

What kinds of facts can provide us with practical reasons? To put the question another way, which I will take to be equivalent for my purposes, what is the *source*—or what are the sources—of our normative reasons for action?² There is a broad divide within contemporary metaethics (or, depending on how you carve up the terrain, normative theory) between *objectivist* and *subjectivist* responses to such questions. Objectivists hold that practical normativity has its source in objective facts about what matters, about what is better or worse, or about what there is reason to do.³ On such views, practical reasons are supposed to exist and bear on our choices independently of what I or anyone else thinks about how we should proceed. Social practices, in particular, are supposed to bear on our choices only in so far as they can sometimes *affect* the ways in which an objectively valid mandate can be successfully fulfilled. Suppose, for example, that there is some sort of requirement in our local milieu that we take special care of our own children. Social practices might affect what is involved with taking special care of our own children, but they do not generate the requirement itself, a card-carrying objectivist will say.⁴

¹ Many thanks to audience members at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Metaethics Workshop, and a colloquium I gave at Syracuse University, both in 2011. I am also grateful to Sally Haslanger, Julia Markovits, Rae Langton, Richard Holton, Lawrence Blum, J. David Velleman, Sharon Street, Nishi Shah, Matthew Silverstein, David Owens, Christopher Lewis, Kevin Vallier, Mark Alfano, Larisa Svirsky, Daniel Manne, David Plunkett, and two anonymous reviewers, for very useful comments and advice on earlier drafts of this chapter.

² I am happy to allow that there may be versions of the ‘source’ question which are rather different from the question I am asking here, e.g., which instead press the issue of what makes normative reasons *normative*, or to what they owe their *authority*. But I take it that there is a question of the kind I am interested in here, which it is helpful to think of in terms of the source of reasons, or—more prosaically—in terms of where reasons ‘come from’.

³ See, e.g., Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, vol. 1, part 1 and David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*.

⁴ One of Enoch’s examples of the sorts of fact which he is a ‘robust realist’ (and hence, in my terminology, an objectivist) about is ‘that we should all care more for our own children than for other people’s children’ (*Taking Morality Seriously*, p. 2). Cf. Parfit, who talks about more general objective requirements, e.g., to care for those who cannot care for themselves (*On What Matters*, vol. 1, p. 145).

The main rival to objectivism considered in the recent literature is subjectivism. Subjectivists hold that practical reasons have their source in facts about what matters to us as individuals, or about what we want, choose, will, or desire.⁵ Thus, on a subjectivist view, practical normativity is supposed to arise directly from facts about people's individual psychologies, which have to do specifically with what they want or would choose to do, perhaps under certain idealized conditions. Social practices might tend to affect what we want, choose, will, or desire, but they have no role in actually generating practical reasons, a card-carrying subjectivist will say.

Objectivism and subjectivism are currently the leading families of views about the kinds of facts that provide us with practical reasons.⁶ There are evidently other options, though. For one thing, many people hold—if only implicitly—that the source of practical normativity is God, via his will or commands. But while divine command theory is hardly in vogue in contemporary philosophy, there is yet another view that this chapter argues may represent a genuine and promising alternative to both objectivism and subjectivism as characterized above—at least in certain cases. This is the view that practical reasons (of the relevant kind) have their source in *social practices*, rather than objective facts about what to do, or facts about what we want as individuals. Such a view may be understood as a form of *intersubjectivism*—one which identifies the social practice, specifically, as generating the practical reasons in question. So, a proponent of (what I'll thus call) a practice-based view about a certain type of reason will claim that these reasons arise directly from facts about *what we do*, or about *what one does*, as a participant in certain sorts of collective practices, joint enterprises,

⁵ See, e.g., Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions*. Subjectivism (or what Schroeder dubs the 'Humean Theory of Reasons') should not be confused with *reasons internalism*, a position which I defend elsewhere, which holds merely that desires are a necessary condition on practical reasons. But, in this chapter, I focus solely on what sorts of facts might *provide* us with practical reasons, leaving it open whether or not reasons have to meet some further, desire-based condition in order to retain their *prima facie* normative force.

⁶ See, e.g., Parfit, who writes that 'there are two main kinds of view about what I shall call *practical reasons*'—namely, objectivism and subjectivism, as characterized above (*On What Matters*, vol. 1, p. 45). Ruth Chang, in her 'Grounding Practical Normativity: Going Hybrid', carves up the territory similarly, but distinguishes between versions of subjectivism that take our reasons to be provided by passive desires, versus active willings. And Chang herself is a *hybrid voluntarist*, holding that there are both objective and subjective sources of practical reasons. See also Christine M. Korsgaard's four-way distinction within roughly the same terrain. And 'source' talk owes its popularity to her seminal *The Sources of Normativity*, of course. Korsgaard's own view is that 'the source of normativity lies in the human project of self-constitution' (Self Constitution, p. 4). A full engagement with Korsgaard's intriguing and complex position would be impossible in this short space. But I say little to differentiate the practice-based view from her view that reasons spring from our 'practical identities' in n. 47.

or particular social relationships.⁷ These practices (as I'll call them, for a general placeholder notion) are not supposed to be objectively given to us, but nor are they supposed to be a matter of individual decision-making or choice. Rather, they will generally be the historical products of a process of *collective* negotiation and collaboration that is entirely man-made, but not by any one man or woman. Of course, nobody would want to hold that every social practice—however cruel or pointless—generates practical reasons, just as nobody would want to hold that every fact is objectively normatively significant, and few people believe that every desire—however crazy, malevolent, or ill-informed—gives rise to reasons to act accordingly. So part of the challenge for a practice-based theorist is to specify conditions under which social practices do give rise to reasons. And, in doing so, we may want to avoid effectively claiming that these are the conditions under which the social practice fulfils some *objective* normative requirement. For, that would be to fall back into a view with an objectivist component, and hence some of the well-known disadvantages associated with objectivism (which I'll discuss later on).

But first to motivate the view that certain practical reasons are generated by certain social practices. I'll start out by clarifying, in section 1, what I take a social practice to be, and how social practices might be held to generate practical reasons (namely, via the norms thereof). Then I'll argue, in section 2, that several controversial examples in contemporary ethics feature an agent who is motivated to abide by the norms of social practices (or, more specifically, relationships) which she is involved with. In section 3, I'll go on to argue that the practice-based view may give us a better account of *partial reasons*—i.e., moral reasons to fulfil special obligations to one's friends and loved ones—than the nearby objectivist alternative. We should thus take seriously the idea that social practices can themselves generate practical reasons, when certain background conditions hold. Finally, in section 4, I'll take a stab at specifying what these background conditions might be. That is, I'll try to say something (admittedly preliminary and speculative) about what might make a social practice *valid*—i.e., sufficiently good so as

⁷ A practice-based view of practical normativity belongs to a tradition of thinking of ethics as having a distinctly social basis—a tradition which has its historical roots in Aristotle, Hegel, Bradley, the later Wittgenstein, and (I would argue) the later Hume. More recent thinkers who are particularly attuned, albeit in very different ways, to the role of the social in normative theorizing (broadly construed to include epistemology) include P. F. Strawson, Stanley Cavell, Kurt Baier, Cora Diamond, Charles Taylor, Robert Pippin, Alasdair MacIntyre, David Gauthier, Robert Brandom, Michael Thompson, Stephen Darwall, Sally Haslanger, Rae Langton, Lawrence Blum, J. David Velleman, Tamar Schapiro, Alice Crary, Miranda Fricker, and Gerald Gaus, among many others. (Compare also the communitarian tradition, and role-based ethics, more generally.) However, such socially inflected lines of thinking have not yet, to my mind, been sufficiently integrated into discussions about the grounds and nature of practical reasons. This chapter is intended to be a preliminary exploration of one way this integration might be envisaged.

to generate practical reasons to abide by its norms. This is, note, largely a question in first-order normative ethics, but it is one which someone with my (broadly) metaethical views needs to tackle head-on. I'll conclude with a few words about how one might potentially go about extending the view on offer from the claim that some moral reasons are generated by social practices to the more radical claim that many, or even most, of them are. But I would be quite content to convince you here that some moral reasons are indeed grounded in social life—although I myself am attracted to a significantly stronger claim.⁸

1. THE PRACTICE-BASED VIEW

What would a practice-based justification for action look like, exactly? First, we need to say something (admittedly general and schematic) about what a social practice itself is. Social practices—as I understand them—involve multiple agents, who coordinate their actions with respect to one another, and who interact in the process, rather than merely doing things in tandem.⁹ Participants in a practice often occupy specific roles, which determine how they behave, and how they affect one another's behaviour. By the lights of this (admittedly rough) characterization, the game of baseball is a prime candidate for being a social practice; whereas an online game of solitaire played by multiple people will not be, since it is not genuinely interactive—they are merely doing the same thing at the same time. Social practices of the kind I am interested in will meet a further condition: namely, the participants' interactions are structured and governed by social norms which purport to have normative force for the participating agents. Moreover, practices of the kind I am most interested in will be at least partly, and sometimes largely, *constituted* by said norms—that is, these putative reasons

⁸ As I briefly indicate later, I think that practice-based reasons may stand a chance of encompassing that portion of morality which T. M. Scanlon helpfully distinguishes as 'what we owe to each other'. There will be other kinds of moral reasons too, though, of course—e.g., reasons that have to do with our relationships with beings who we do not interact with socially, like certain non-human animals, or which pertain to the natural environment. And self-interested reasons are admittedly going to be another story as well. Facts about our embodiment and our need to relate to others in certain (e.g., respectful and loving) ways seem to me to be the best *prima facie* candidates for providing self-interested reasons. But I set self-interested reasons entirely to one side in this chapter. I am also not committed to thinking that moral and self-interested reasons exhaust the normative domain (see n. 24).

⁹ Although the problem of individuating social practices is a difficult one, I here assume that we have some pre-theoretical, intuitive grip on where one practice ends and another begins.

for action are supposed to be a vital part of what makes the practice what it is. This is certainly the case in baseball; as John Rawls emphasized, part of what makes baseball the game it is is the ‘three strikes and you’re out’ rule.¹⁰ This rule could potentially be changed, but it would make baseball a somewhat different game (which might still deserve the name ‘baseball’, admittedly). Moreover, baseball as an activity cannot be characterized independently of its rules, whatever they happen to be at the time. The same is not true of some other multi-agent and arguably interactive practices—when riding on the subway in Boston, one is certainly *subject* to rules, but these rules do not help constitute the practice in the way I am adverting to here. For example, the ‘no smoking’ rule could potentially be changed without changing what it *means* to ride on the subway in Boston. It would be a different experience, but it would not be a different kind of act.

As well as games and their ilk, social practices can take a more relational form. Indeed, friendship and marriage will comprise my main examples of social practices in this chapter.¹¹ These practices are evidently multi-agent and genuinely interactive. Moreover, they are partly constituted by norms in the way sketched above. Friendship, for instance, would not be what it is (I propose) without its characteristic norms, such as loyalty and trust. A disloyal and distrustful friend is, in the first instance, a bad friend—and, eventually, if the disloyalty and distrust persists, they are not really a friend at all. It is important to notice that, as the example of friendship brings out, the norms of a social practice may include not only explicit rules but also implicit ones. And they may call for specific actions under specific conditions, or for certain attitudes or ways of *undertaking* said actions.¹² For example, it is a plausible norm of friendship that one helps one’s friends in a spirit of generosity or at least willingness, when they are in trouble, and you are able to help them out. There are also emotional norms of friendship: one should like and feel some warmth towards one’s friends, at least a good portion of the time, presumably. Comparable things are true of

¹⁰ ‘Two Concepts of Rules’, p. 25.

¹¹ Throughout, I mean ‘marriage’ in the social, rather than the legal, sense of the term—i.e., very roughly, an intimate domestic relationship which is intended or hoped to last for life. Note that same-sex partnerships may certainly count as marriages in this social, or *de facto*, sense, even if same-sex marriage is not legally recognized. Those who do not like the word ‘marriage’ may substitute the notion of ‘partnership’. But I stick with the term ‘marriage’ because of its powerful cultural and historical resonances—which is arguably one reason why same-sex couples have fought to have their relationships recognized as marriages proper, under the law.

¹² Moreover, some norms are partly a matter for negotiation and decision, within the individual relationship. Many of our relational norms also develop over time, such that the participants ‘fall into a pattern’ of behaviour that comes to be expected (in the normative sense of ‘expectation’). We might call the whole body of norms governing the relationship an ‘ethos’.

marriage—although differing in the details, of course. We should also make room for norms which refer back to the practice itself. A norm may, for example, prohibit *exiting* the practice without a certain kind of excuse, or going through a certain kind of procedure. Friendship is another case in point here: one is plausibly required to maintain one's close friendships, unless there are reasonably serious rifts, disagreements, or breakdowns in fellow-feeling, which make dissolving the friendship appropriate. And there are more and less appropriate ways to go about this dissolution in turn. This is the case with marriages too, of course.

Social practices are evidently rich, complex, and varied in their nature. How, though, could they be a source of practical normativity? How, in other words, could social practices actually generate practical reasons? On (what I take to be) the most natural way of developing this idea, the norms of a social practice will take on genuine, normative force under certain conditions, which render the practice as a whole valid. Compare the (potentially rival) idea that there are reasons to fulfil one's desires under certain conditions, which render the desire 'deep' (i.e., roughly, well-informed and stable). Note here too that the idea that desires are the source of practical reasons needs filling in before it has any first-order normative implications whatsoever. We will say (most naturally) that desires can generate reasons for an agent *to fulfil her desires*, much as I have said here that social practices can generate reasons for participating agents *to conform to its norms*.

Why buy into a practice-based view about the source of (some) practical reasons? In what follows, I seek to develop a preliminary answer to this question. In the next section, I will consider three flashpoints in contemporary ethical writings. I will argue that these examples show that practice-based considerations are an important source of moral motivation. In section 3, I will then make a case for taking these sorts of motivating reasons to be normative, or justifying, reasons proper—as is made possible by a practice-based view.

2. PRACTICE-BASED MOTIVATIONS

I'll start this section with the case of Huckleberry Finn, originally discussed in this connection by Jonathan Bennett.¹³ Huck believes, wrongly, that he ought to snitch on Jim, a runaway slave. The two have become companionable, floating down the river together in their flimsy raft (a thinly veiled moral metaphor: i.e., 'the same boat'). Still, Huck is increasingly plagued by his conscience—he

¹³ 'The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn'.

feels guilty for the great crime of stealing Jim from his ‘rightful owner’.¹⁴ From Huck’s perspective, his eventual failure to turn Jim in is just that: a failure. But he ends up doing precisely what the situation calls for, demonstrating real cunning in protecting Jim, not to mention considerable courage. So he ends up doing the right thing, and not for the wrong reasons, either. But he lacks a clear grip on his own motivations. He infers that he shielded Jim from the slave-hunters only out of weakness, rather than anything that could properly be called a moral motive. And, indeed, there was nothing explicitly moral in his thinking at the time—not even any obvious signs of moral recalcitrance or ambivalence. Still, Huck is not suffering from a case of straightforward *akrasia* in which the will happens to be at odds with the supposed dictates of morality (such that the weakness ends up pointing the agent in the right direction, as luck would have it). Huck’s case seems psychologically and morally more complicated than a case in which someone erratically fails to follow through with some well-meaning but wrong-headed intention they’ve formed.

So it is not obvious how best to think about the moral and psychological issues raised by Huck’s case. One thing to say initially is that, in so far as we are inclined to praise Huck’s behaviour, we are moved by what we might loosely call his instinctual grasp of what to do. Admittedly, Huck behaves well in spite of himself—but it’s not by accident, either, since his spur-of-the-moment *volte-face* seems to stem from his inchoate but nagging sense of the true moral contours of the situation. (Or at least, we can fill in the case this way imaginatively, although I think it also happens to be the right reading of the novel.)

But, setting aside the issue of praise for the moment, there is a prior question about how to even characterize or explain what Huck did. (This is a question at the level of moral psychology, then, rather than at the level of normative theorizing.) Various accounts in the literature are interestingly prone to miss the mark on this score. Bennett has it that Huck ignores his conscience, and instead acts on his sympathies. But it is striking just how unsympathetic Huck actually is to Jim at this point in the novel. As the time to tattle draws near, never does a tender moment compete with such bitter, self-righteous ruminations as:

Jim talked out loud all the time while I was talking to myself. He was saying how the first thing he would do when he got to a free State he would go to saving up money and never spend a single cent, and when he got enough he would buy his wife, which was owned on a farm close to where Miss Watson lived; and then they would both work to buy the two children, and if their master wouldn’t sell them, they’d get an Ab’litionist to go and steal them. It most froze me to hear such talk. He wouldn’t ever dared to talk such talk in his life before. Just see what a difference

¹⁴ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p. 103.

it made in him the minute he judged he was about free. It was according to the old saying, 'Give a n— an inch and he'll take an ell'. Thinks I, this is what comes of my not thinking. Here was this n— which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children—children that belonged to a man I didn't even know; a man that hadn't done me no harm. I was sorry to hear Jim say that, it was such a lowering of him.¹⁵

And Huck is deeply satisfied with—even smug about—his subsequent plan to hand Jim over.

My conscience got to stirring me up hotter than ever, until at last I says to it, 'Let up on me—it ain't too late, yet—I'll paddle ashore at the first light, and tell'. I felt easy, and happy, and light as a feather, right off. All my troubles was gone.¹⁶

Julia Markovits suggests that Huck's turnaround can be explained by his recognition of Jim's value as a fellow human being.¹⁷ Nomy Arpaly has offered a similar explanation.¹⁸ These explanations are closer to the mark than Bennett's, I think, but they still don't strike me as quite right. They sound a bit too high-minded if intended as a take on Huck's actual thoughts and feelings. He is a very ordinary boy with a sophomoric sensibility, after all. Furthermore, Huck's fixation on Jim's utility as a slave (that is, as a piece of property) seems quite hard to reconcile with his sudden recognition of his human and moral value. Admittedly, we live with cognitive tensions pretty routinely, probably by hiving them off from each other in our thinking and reasoning, somehow. But Jim's status as a slave remains unquestioned and is (at this juncture) very much at the forefront of Huck's uncritical mind. So what happened to stop him from snitching?

It's important to notice the moment in the novel when everything changes for Huck. What happens is that Jim comes out with this:

Pooty soon I'll be a shout'n for joy, en I'll say, it's all on account o' Huck; I's a free man, en I couldn't ever ben free ef it hadn't been for Huck; Huck done it. Jim won't ever forgit you, Huck; you's de bes' fren' Jim's ever had; en you's de only fren' ole Jim's got now.¹⁹

Twain makes it quite clear that it's this speech that stops Huck dead in his tracks. In other words, Jim's identification of Huck as a *friend* proves decisive in sealing his lips. The next lines read:

I was paddling off, all in a sweat to tell on him; but when he says this, it seemed to kind of take the tuck all out of me.²⁰

¹⁵ *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, pp. 99–100.

¹⁶ *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p. 100.

¹⁷ 'Acting for the Right Reasons', p. 208.

¹⁸ *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency*, p. 77.

¹⁹ *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p. 100.

²⁰ *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p. 100.

Huck doesn't change his explicit moral beliefs afterwards—in fact, he feels roundly ashamed of himself, even going so far as to give up on trying to be good entirely. ('I knowed very well I had done wrong, and I see it warn't no use for me to try to learn to do right ...')²¹ Indeed, Huck acts as he believes he has *no* reason to act, even though the protective course of action hardly seems appealing: it is, after all, very risky. But the matter is nevertheless settled for him at that moment. ('I see I was weakening; so I just give up trying ...')²² Somehow, Huck stumbles into a kind of decency that is never understood by him as such. But it does seem to be a kind of decency, for all that it is inchoate.

Huck's moral psychology is likely to remain puzzling, I suggest, unless we recognize the existence of practice-based motivations. For, Huck is not gripped by explicit moral considerations, nor even—seemingly—by his sympathy for Jim, nor by a precipitate sense of common humanity. His head is turned, at least in the first instance, by his recognition that he is embroiled in a social relationship of friendship with Jim, which is governed by various norms and putative practical requirements.²³ Among such putative practical requirements is that *one does not snitch on one's friends* (just as one does return another's rightful property). This, I suggest, is just a constitutive norm of friendship. Moreover, Huck is seemingly also aware that friendship is not the sort of thing which one can simply walk away from (another constitutive norm, which effectively declares the others binding). So, in coming to recognize Jim as a friend—following Jim's opportune declaration—Huck finds himself not only unwilling but seemingly unable to blow the whistle on Jim. For, doing so would transgress against the constitutive norms of a friendship he's lately formed and suddenly come to recognize. Thus, despite Huck's explicit, misguided moral beliefs, he gains access to a potentially important source of moral insight, which is tacit but decisive in determining what he does. This recognition of their friendship thus plausibly marks a crucial turn-around in Huck's moral thinking, and one which reflects well on him too. After all, he could not have *had* such a moment had he not in fact become Jim's friend: a relationship that turns out to be incompatible with treating Jim as a slave, or as a piece of property, in the end.

²¹ *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p. 103.

²² *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p. 101.

²³ I say 'in the first instance', because, although Huck can perhaps still be described as behaving out of a sense of Jim's humanity, I suggest that this would ultimately be *because* friendship is one of the things that can put us in touch with another person's humanness, in terms of their individuality, vulnerability, and basic similarity to oneself. For, Huck likely doesn't have abstract or lofty concepts such as that of 'the human'. But friendship is a (more prosaic) mode of presentation by which other people can make themselves known to us as human individuals.

How common is it, we might ask, to be motivated in morally fraught situations by thoughts about one's social relationships, and what they centrally involve or require one to do? I suspect it is *very* common, despite our relative inattention to such forms of (I've suggested) implicitly moral thinking.²⁴ A second famous example that I believe conforms to this general pattern, also involving the concept of a friend, is Michael Stocker's hospital case. The set-up is as follows:

Suppose you are in a hospital, recovering from a long illness. You are very bored and restless and at loose ends when Smith comes in once again. You are now convinced more than ever that he is a fine fellow and a real friend—taking so much time to cheer you up, traveling all the way across town, and so on. You are so effusive with your praise and thanks that he protests that he always tried to do what he thinks is his duty, what he thinks will be best. You at first think he is engaging in a polite form of self-deprecation, relieving the moral burden. But the more you two speak, the more clear it becomes that he was telling the literal truth: that it is not essentially because of you that he came to see you, not because you are friends, but because he thought it his duty, perhaps as a fellow Christian or Communist or whatever, or simply because he knows of no one more in need of cheering up and no one easier to cheer up.²⁵

In this example, Stocker draws our attention to the relatively dim view we would take of someone who visits their friend out of the motive of duty (or even out of rather less grand and general motives, such as Communist solidarity). Stocker uses the example to suggest that there is something *alienating* about (in particular) the Kantian view of moral worth, wherein (in its simplest form) an act is morally worthy only if one's driving thought is something like: 'I must: it's the (moral) law'. And this certainly seems right, so far as it goes (how far the Kantian must retreat, if at all, is a question for another day). But the correct positive characterization of the good case is not altogether clear. What do we want someone's motivations to be here, exactly?

I suggest that the line in the above passage 'because you are friends' is actually the key. For, I think the good case will involve the friend being motivated by a sense of what friendship involves, and a subsequent

²⁴ Why moral thinking, specifically? I am inclined to call it moral (or 'ethical'—I use the terms interchangeably) because violating the norms of social relationships, e.g., by behaving disloyally, will often induce morally toned reactive attitudes such as resentment, blame, and guilt. Moreover, the actions of the three characters to be considered in this section also have a strong intuitive claim to being *morally worthy* to some degree, as I will argue in the next section. To be clear, though, I am not sure that all practice-based reasons for action can be naturally characterized as being moral in nature. Some (e.g., the reasons to obey the rules of baseball) might be better characterized as 'collective' reasons, perhaps. I leave the issue open.

²⁵ 'The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories', p. 462.

understanding that visiting one's friends when they are sick in hospital is just what one does, circumstances permitting. Now, one might also think that the visitor should ideally call on their friend not out of a sense of grudging obligation, but rather out of a genuine and personalized concern with their friend's well-being and morale. But this thought in fact goes towards my point: for, again, this emotional norm or constraint on the way in which this act of friendship should be undertaken is (very plausibly) a constitutive norm of friendship too. One is supposed to care about one's friends, and want them to fare well (or get better) for their own sake. This is just part of what it *means* to be friends with someone, it seems to me.²⁶

As a final example of practice-based motivating reasons, we move from the ties of friendship to the still more stringent bonds of marriage. Recall then Bernard Williams' famous 'one thought too many' case, which is supposed to make trouble for even partialist versions of consequentialism. Williams takes issue with the idea that the husband who chose to save his wife rather than a stranger from mortal danger (e.g., drowning) needs some further justification for doing so—such as a moral principle which yields the conclusion: 'In situations of this kind it is at least all right (morally permissible) to save one's wife'. He goes on to remark that:

This construction provides the agent with one thought too many: it might have been hoped by some (for instance, by his wife) that his motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be the thought that it was his wife, not that it was his wife and that in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one's wife.²⁷

This seems quite right to me.²⁸ Obviously not everyone agrees, but the famousness of the example testifies to the fact that many people at least feel that there's something to the idea.

²⁶ A further complication: a norm of politeness can counsel against going into the reasons why you've turned up at someone's bedside too explicitly, lest they feel like a burden. 'I wanted to be here!' may thus sound better than 'I'm here because we're friends', even though both statements might well be true. Nevertheless, I think the ideal visitor's act can be understood as one of friendship, even if adverting to the friendship explicitly might violate certain conventional Western norms of politeness. And it need not violate these norms inevitably. 'What are friends for?' said in the right tone of voice, can be just the thing to say—especially if it is followed by an expression of concern or care for the friend herself, which friendship (I've suggested) constitutively involves and requires.

²⁷ 'Persons, Character, and Morality', p. 18.

²⁸ Although I'm inclined to be somewhat pluralistic about what the husband should think, precisely. 'It's my wife!' is one possibility; 'I've got to save her!' or just 'Sarah!' is another (assuming the wife's name is Sarah); or the husband might think nothing at all, and just dive straight in. I think we should avoid getting competitive about how few thoughts we can whittle the husband down to. Some (possibly truncated) approximation of 'It's my wife—I've got to save her' will do just fine, I'd suggest.

It is commonly held that Williams' case is not really a problem for consequentialism as such—consequentialism being intended as a first-order criterion of right action, not as a guide to deliberation. I'll discuss this attempt to hive off *how to act* from *how to decide* in the next section. But first, what *about* deliberation? What does Williams' case show us about that? I think it reminds us that concepts like 'husband' and 'wife', as they figure in ordinary thinking, often go beyond their legal and/or conventional foundations. In particular, it is partly constitutive of a marriage (in the sense of an intimate partnership, rather than a merely legal union) that *one does not let one's wife drown* over a 'competing' drowning stranger. Central norms like these are also expected to have been fully and deeply internalized. Having to stop to think about it would not just be bad for one's spouse (although it would be that too), it would generally reflect poorly on the marriage itself. And the husband who didn't dive in to save his drowning wife more or less automatically would reveal himself not so much to be a below-par husband (although he might be that too), but rather to be completely out of touch—out of touch with the nature of marriage. This is why a decent excuse might be: 'I'm sorry, I was temporarily beside myself. I just shut down'. But in hesitating purposefully ('Now let me just have a think'), he would show himself to be radically unattuned to what is involved with one of his supposedly biggest commitments. For, one's marriage is supposed to be a priority in one's life, according to the prevailing conception of marriage in modern Western society. And, in such a marriage, one's partner's well-being is supposed to be a priority for one, especially when they are in dire straits, at least all else being equal. And here it is specified that they *are* equal. Here are two people, thrashing in the water. The norms of modern marriage require one to save one's spouse, it seems safe to say. Indeed, they require one to do so with a sense of urgency, and little if any intervening thought. This is the kind of deep, internalized love and commitment that marriage is supposed to be based on, nowadays.²⁹

To summarize the intended upshot of this section: in some of the cases which have recently provoked the most doubt about the adequacy of this or that first-order moral theory (competing theories, as it happens), I think we are partly encountering an inadequacy in our moral psychology. That is, we lack an adequate explanation for cases in which someone acts in a way which is reflective of the norms which govern their social relationships—absent, or even in spite of, their explicit moral beliefs. And, as we

²⁹ It is a further question, and an important one, whether there *should* be marriage as we know it, and (I think closely relatedly) whether the norms of marriage have genuine normative force. I take up these sorts of questions—in abstract form—in the next two sections.

have just seen, the idea of practice-based motivating reasons is well placed to address this explanatory inadequacy. It shows how an agent might behave in essentially instinctive ways, by navigating the social world by means of concepts like friendship and marriage, which implicitly contain rich and detailed codes of conduct. This is why just one explicit thought ('He's my friend'/'She's my wife') is plausibly motivation enough to move the agent towards doing what many people take to be the right thing. For, it covers a multitude, and it is an implicitly moral thought.

3. PRACTICE-BASED JUSTIFICATIONS

I argued in the previous section that certain paradigmatically ethical actions can be motivated by thoughts about what the social practices we are involved with are, and what they in turn require us to do. I now turn to defend (in a preliminary manner, at least) the idea that practice-based *motivating reasons* can serve as *normative reasons* proper—that is, as genuine justifications for acting in certain ways. This metaethical or (as some might prefer to think of it) normative-theoretical claim depends, for its plausibility, on the first-order normative claim that there are indeed often reasons to do as certain social practices prescribe. I will assume, in particular, that there are genuine, *pro tanto* reasons to protect one's friends, visit one's friends when they are sick in hospital, and save one's spouse from drowning before saving the life of a stranger. I will not try to defend the existence of so-called 'partial' reasons of this kind.³⁰ Instead, I will take their existence as a datum to be explained, on the basis of intuitions which are fortunately widely shared.

The operative question then, is this: how are we to understand the *nature* of the reasons to do what the social practices of friendship and marriage require us to do in such cases? Where do these reasons come from? What, in this sense, is their source?

Perhaps the closest and thus initially most notable competitor to the practice-based view I recommend is the view that the *real* reasons to conform to social practices are given by broadly consequentialist considerations, which in turn have objective, normative importance. So call this view *objectivist practice consequentialism*. Note that this view goes beyond the first-order normative claim that the relevant version of consequentialism provides the correct criterion of right action. Without further elaboration, such a

³⁰ I do not much like the terminology, because there is something somewhat misleading and potentially trivializing about the idea of being 'partial' to (e.g.) one's spouse. One is not *partial* to one's spouse; one loves them (it is hoped). But since this is the terminology philosophers have settled on, I'll use it too, for clarity's sake.

claim is silent on the broadly metaethical question of where the reasons for acting in the purportedly right ways come from (or, as I take it equivalently, what they are *generated by*, *provided by*, or *given by*).³¹ This distinction is important in the current context. For I could allow, as a practice-based theorist, that the only practices that are suitable to generate practical reasons are the ones which conform to some consequentialist standard.³² I am indeed sympathetic, as I'll explain in the next section, to the idea that social practices generate reasons for the participating agents if and only if they are reasonably conducive to general human flourishing, for people both inside and outside the practice.³³ According to such a view, there are reasons to conform to the norms of social practices one is *actually* involved with, and which count as at least *satisfactory* by broadly consequentialist lights. In this sense, my view is consistent with a consequentialist criterion of right action. However, I would resist the stronger, and more metaphysically loaded, claim that the reasons for action in such cases are provided by consequentialist considerations about which practices are satisfactory, which are in turn purported to have objective, normative significance. Rather, I prefer to say that social practices themselves provide the reasons, with the consequentialist considerations figuring merely in the background, effectively *enabling* these reasons to go into effect.³⁴ Thus, I think that social practices provide moral reasons in examples of the kind considered in the previous section, in which partial reasons are in question.

Why think as much? The first ground for preferring a practice-based view has to do with the ease with which these partial reasons can then be made sense of. Indeed, on a practice-based view, *all* reasons thus generated have a partial cast—that is, they are generated by local facts about one's particular commitments, and what these in turn require one to do,

³¹ Similarly, some theorists talk about the normative *right-makers*, where the notion of 'making' is understood metaphysically.

³² Compare Rawls's pp. 4, 11, 23 defence of utilitarianism, in his 'Two Concepts of Rules'.

³³ This claim will doubtless need refinement, and I mention some important complications in section 4. But it at least represents a plausible starting point, I believe.

³⁴ See Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics without Principles*, ch. 3, on enabling conditions for practical reasons. One of Dancy's leading examples, congenially, is that 'the ordinary reason' to keep my agreement is simply that *I agreed to it*, with the fact that the agreement was just functioning merely as an enabler for this reason (p. 41). See also Schroeder, who rejects the 'No Background Conditions' constraint on reasons. Schroeder thus advocates distinguishing between what a reason *is* and *why* it is a reason—which includes necessary background conditions which are not part of the reason itself. See *Slaves of the Passions*, ch. 2. Interestingly, Schroeder makes this distinction partly to accommodate the 'Deliberative Constraint', which says that good deliberation involves thinking about your reasons. As I will shortly explain, I am similarly motivated to put the good consequences of a practice in the background partly to keep our reasons in close alignment with what we ought to be thinking about, when we deliberate morally.

as part and parcel of the relevant social role.³⁵ Whereas, if objective facts about the good consequences of a practice were held to play the role of providing practical reasons, then it is not at all obvious how partial reasons to do things which manifestly lead to sub-optimal consequences could be accommodated in a non-ad hoc way. It might be clear, for example, that taking one's child to the doctor when they are sick with a mild but uncomfortable ailment would not produce consequences nearly as good overall as donating one's time and money to Oxfam instead. And if the real reason to conform to social practices such as middle-class parenthood is that it generally leads to objectively good consequences to do so, then why not just cut out the middle man, and do the maximally good thing in the first place? Why are we permitted, let alone required, to behave with loyalty or integrity within the relevant social role?³⁶ A practice-based theorist has a ready answer to this question. We will deny the premise that the real reason to conform to good social practices is that it generally leads to good consequences to do so. Rather, we will say that one's real reason is simply that *this is what parents are required to do*, in this social milieu—assuming that the practice of middle-class parenthood is valid in the broadly consequentialist sense to be discussed in section 4. And it makes little sense to require or even permit people to maximize good consequences, if the good consequences of the practice do not generate these reasons, but merely play the role of enabling them to have the normative force they do. Partial reasons (in particular) can thus survive unscathed.

The practice-based view also has the advantage of allowing agents' practice-based *motivating reasons* to count as *normative reasons* proper. Why might this be an advantage? Suppose one accepts, as I argued in the previous section, that people are often motivated by practice-based considerations, which spur them towards doing (what I'm assuming to be) the right thing. That is, considerations like 'He's my friend—I've got to help him' or 'She's my wife—I've got to save her' are more natural motivating thoughts to attribute to the loyal friend or spouse than thoughts like (e.g.) 'He's my friend—and the practice of friendship has

³⁵ Note, however, that some social roles require one *not* to favour one's intimates in any way. The role of a judge or even an employer includes a mandate against nepotism, for example. Compare also the more general practice of citizenship, and what some theorists call 'civic friendship'.

³⁶ Compare Korsgaard's lawyer example, which she uses to argue that a Humean view of virtue is prone to collapse into utilitarianism. See *The Sources of Normativity*, pp. 86–87. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I offer a sketch of how a practice-based theorist might handle the problem of instability that tends to afflict 'two-level' views.

good consequences, which renders it permissible or even obligatory to abide by its norms'. If this is right, then a proponent of the objectivist practice consequentialist view introduced above will have to say that the loyal friend is *less than fully in touch* with the real reasons for acting as she does. But it seems to me that, all else being equal, it is best to avoid positing ignorance of this kind. This is especially so here because the loyal agents seem to be deliberating in a fashion that is actually closer to the ideal than their consequentialist-minded counterparts. But, if their consequentialist-minded counterparts were more in touch with the real reasons for acting as they do, then it would be hard to explain why their motivations seem *less* than ideal.

This point does not rely on the (implausibly strong) contention that normative theorists cannot draw a distinction between the correct criterion of right action (i.e., *what to do*) and the best methods of deliberation (i.e., *how to decide*). Aiming at the thing we have most reason to achieve is not always the best, or even a feasible, way of achieving it. For example, just because one should get some sleep does not mean that one should focus on the *reasons* to get some sleep, in order to induce unconsciousness. Nor does it even mean that one should *ultimately* be motivated to get some sleep by the considerations which in fact count in favour of sleeping. One's motivations do not much matter in such cases. But moral behaviour seems to me importantly different in kind. We generally think that a person's being in touch with the real reasons for acting as she does differentiates 'mere conformity' with moral norms from morally worthy (or virtuous, or wise) behaviour.³⁷ When we act in a morally worthy way, we do the *right thing* for the *right reason*—or so it is very widely assumed. Now, admittedly, there is much debate about whether we need to do the right thing for the right reason *de dicto* (i.e., *because* we think it is right to act in this way), or whether it is enough to do the right thing merely *de re* (i.e., with the real reason for acting somehow present in one's mind).³⁸ But I do not need to weigh in on this difficult issue here. For, if the real reason to act partially is consequentialist in nature, then (I submit) people acting partially will rarely do the right thing for the

³⁷ Peter Railton perhaps could have said more about this potential difference, it seems to me, when he deftly defends the idea that the correct criterion of right action and the best moral decision procedures may come markedly apart, on an analogy with the paradox of hedonism. See his important paper, 'Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality'. I am also inclined to think that the paradox of hedonism may be somewhat overstated. For someone to be likely to be a successful hedonist, their ultimate motivations may have to be about being happy, even if they do not always deliberate with happiness consciously in mind. But I'll leave this worry to one side here.

³⁸ See Markovits, 'Acting for the Right Reasons', for discussion.

right reason in either of the two possible senses identified above.³⁹ Thus, although it may arguably be socially or morally beneficial that they have the motivations that they do, they will rarely be billed as behaving in morally worthy ways, when they fulfil their partial obligations.

This result strikes me as unfortunate and counterintuitive to boot. For it seems to me that Huck Finn, Stocker's loyal friend, and Williams' spontaneous spouse, all behave in a fashion that is morally more attractive than their consequentialist-minded counterparts. It strikes me as not just socially or morally beneficial that Williams' husband dives into the water, thinking 'It's my wife—I've got to save her', or something along those lines. It seems to me that he is thinking not only auspiciously but *wisely*—and thus, on widespread assumptions, accurately—about his current predicament.

The practice-based view about the source of partial reasons is able to preserve these appearances. For, we can say that the real reason for saving one's wife *is* the simple fact that she's one's wife, and that this is what marriage involves—just as the good husband might say if called upon to justify his behaviour.⁴⁰ We thereby avoid depicting ordinary people as essentially out of touch with, or—to use a more pejorative term—*alienated* from, the real reasons for acting as they do.⁴¹ This is a salutary result, I believe, and it is (again) made possible by understanding partial reasons as generated by social practices, with consequentialist considerations

³⁹ On the *de re* reading, the person would be motivated by the thought that this action is required by a relationship that tends to lead to good consequences; on the *de dicto* reading, the person would be motivated by the thought that *it is right* to act in accordance with the requirements of a relationship that tends to lead to good consequences. I doubt that either of these thoughts is generally attributable to the average person as she acts partially. And, as I am about to suggest, it does not seem to me that someone would be a wiser or more morally perceptive person for having such motivations.

⁴⁰ To be clear: I think it is certainly *permissible* to consider one's relationships in a broader moral light, during a proverbial cool hour. I thus have no quarrel with Railton's character Juan, who cares for his wife as a husband should but, when asked how his marriage fits into his 'larger scheme', replies: 'Look, it's a better world when people can have a relationship like ours—and nobody could if everyone were always asking themselves who's got the most need' (*Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality*, p. 150). Now, I am not convinced that people need to be capable of articulating why their relationships are valid—some people may be dumbfounded by the question, and none the worse morally for that. I leave the matter open. But I would primarily resist the thought (which it is tempting although not compulsory to extrapolate from Railton's position) that consequentialist considerations provide one's ultimate reasons for being loyal, as opposed to the norms of loyalty holding in virtue of the requirements of the valuable relationship itself.

⁴¹ Compare Stocker's basic point in 'The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories', in which he argues that mainstream normative conceptions beget a schizophrenic disharmony between reason and motive.

figuring merely in the background—i.e., enabling these reasons to actually take effect.⁴² Such consequentialist considerations allow us to get the necessary critical purchase on social practices, as I'll argue in the next section, but without billing all moral reasons as having an unwieldy consequentialist form that seems quite different in nature from our typical partial motivations.

To summarize the above argument: morally worthy action is standardly taken to involve doing the right thing for the right reason. And, as I argued in section 2, an agent's motivating reasons to fulfil a partial obligation often seem to be practice-based. I also suggested above that these actions can be morally worthy. So, there are grounds for preferring the normative conception that can count these agents' motivating reasons as normative reasons proper (*ceteris paribus*, of course). For, only then can we maintain that these actions do indeed have moral worth (in the standard sense, anyway). It follows that there are grounds to prefer the practice-based view of partial reasons to that of objectivist practice consequentialism, provided that the *ceteris paribus* condition does indeed hold. I'll go some way towards arguing that it might hold in the next section.

So far, I've argued that partial moral reasons plausibly have their source in social practices, by showing that this view is distinct from, and has theoretical advantages over, its closest objectivist competitor. Obviously, to complete my argument, I would have to look at other objectivist and desire-based competitors to my view about the source of partial reasons. This would be a big task, so the argument offered here is only intended as preliminary, and to (I hope) create interest in practice-based alternatives or supplements to dominant competing normative conceptions. However, it is worth at least mentioning one more reason for countenancing a practice-based view about practical reasons more generally—one which is considerably more sweeping than the argument just tendered, and has the potential to apply well beyond intimate relations. For, many theorists seem to agree that objectivism of *any* kind about practical normativity is a position of last resort. It might seem

⁴² An objection here is that it is not enough that agents be in touch with the reasons for acting as they do, in order to count as behaving in a morally worthy fashion; they must also be aware of the background conditions that enable these reasons to actually take effect. This strikes me as an implausibly strong requirement on normative justification, in general. But, if this stronger condition is insisted upon, we could add that agents must have reflected at some point on the validity of a social practice, in order to be justified in acting in accordance with it. This would rule out Huck Finn's behaviour as justified—for, he hasn't reflected on the validity of friendship over slavery, he just happens to switch from one mode to the other as the result of what Jim says. But, more mature, reflective agents who act as friends and spouses would be justified in acting as they do, provided they had reflected critically about these social roles in the past. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing up this issue.

metaphysically insupportable to posit irreducible, non-natural normative facts as part of the fabric of the world.⁴³ Yet the view that objectively normatively significant facts can be understood in a naturalistically acceptable fashion (whether reductionist or no) is notoriously controversial.⁴⁴ Many theorists of a naturalist bent have thus preferred to go for a desire-based view, holding that desires are the source of practical reasons, since they are presumably naturalistically acceptable (since psychological) entities. However, a desire-based view of practical reasons suffers from well-known problems too.⁴⁵ It is not clear, in particular, how desires could generate bona fide moral reasons, given that our desires often seem to peter out precisely when moral obligations are in question. Since social practices exist and bear on our choices independently of anybody's particular desires (or defiance of said practice), a practice-based view may have a better chance of capturing the sense in which people's moral obligations seem to be categorical (or at least desire independent).⁴⁶ Although most social practices could not persist if *everyone* defected, they can certainly instruct isolated defectors to conform, regardless of their apathy for or rebellion against the practice.⁴⁷ Moreover, social practices—like desires—are plausibly naturalistically acceptable entities. So naturalistically inclined theorists have good reason to consider a practice-based view, at least as a supplement to a desire-based view, provided that we can tell a naturalistically acceptable story about the conditions social practices must meet in order to generate practical reasons. There is also the question of how far the practice-based view might extend beyond the domain of partial reasons. These are the issues to which I'll now turn. I will also consider worries that the practice-based view cannot be extensionally adequate.

⁴³ J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, §1.9, is the *locus classicus* of this complaint.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Parfit, *On What Matters*, vol. 2, part 6 and Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, ch. 5.1.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Parfit, *On What Matters*, vol. 1, ch. 3.

⁴⁶ A complication is that I myself believe that practice-based reasons are merely *prima facie* reasons, and are subject to a further, desire-based *constraint* (see n. 5). I argue elsewhere that the idea that there are *prima facie* reasons to do what morality requires gives us enough of what we want, in terms of categoricity. But this is admittedly a highly controversial view.

⁴⁷ Cf. Korsgaard's instructive notion of a 'practical identity'—a description under which you value yourself and find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking (Self-Constitution, p. 24). Korsgaard's notion yields important commonalities between her view and the practice-based conception, but there are also important differences. In particular, I am not convinced that the idea of an *identity* captures what matters most here. For, people may refuse to identify with social positions and roles which seem to me nonetheless reason-providing for that. Moreover, we might doubt that purely individualistic practical identities are genuinely normative. A full discussion of these matters would take me too far afield, though.

4. VALIDATING SOCIAL PRACTICES

As I mentioned in opening, nobody (I take it) would want to hold that *every* social practice provides practical reasons. Social practices can be wicked, corrupt, or simply defunct. It can be vital to subject them to critique, and to reform or even abolish them. So what makes the difference between practices that plausibly *are* such as to provide reasons, and practices that are debarred or prevented from doing so? What are the background conditions which might *enable* the practical reasons potentially provided by social practices to actually take effect? What might make a practice *valid* in this (minimal) sense?

As I have also already indicated, I am sympathetic to an answer to this question with a broadly consequentialist flavour. That is, rather than filling in the view by saying—as a Kantian might—that social practices are valid in so far as they could be willed to be universal law, I myself am initially more inclined to think that social practices are valid in so far as they are conducive to human flourishing at large.⁴⁸ I cannot defend this first-order inclination of mine here. Moreover, the above suggestion is of course only the bare beginnings of a story about what might make a social practice valid. Asking how to fill in the story precisely would be tantamount to asking what constitutes a significant portion of the correct first-order normative theory—a big task, to put it mildly. So I will not attempt to go beyond some rough blocking out in the brief discussion that follows. However, given my present limited aims, we fortunately need not nail down the first-order details with very much precision. What matters more is to consider the status of the first-order normative claim that practices ought to be such as to help people live good, happy, productive, or (for a general coverall notion) *flourishing* human lives.

One possibility is that the constraint that social practices have to meet in order to generate practical reasons has the status of an objective, or transcendent, normative requirement. However, if we go down this road, one of the potential advantages of a practice-based view will be lost straightaway. For, while the first two considerations adduced in the previous section (to do with accommodating partial reasons and vindicating the moral psychology of ordinary agents, respectively) would still apply, a practice-based view would then no longer be naturalistically more promising than any other

⁴⁸ This contention obviously needs to be filled in with a suitable story about human flourishing, one which is attentive to how our social nature shapes what *constitutes* flourishing for us. To avoid these complex issues, we can focus initially on clear cases. Undesired suffering in particular is not conducive to flourishing, on any sensible view. The initial proposal above also needs filling in by specifying *how* good and *how* conducive to such good a practice needs to be, and for *whom*, in order to count as valid. I cannot do justice to these complex matters here. But I believe that valid practices certainly need not be the best ones conceivable—so, the kind of consequentialism I am sympathetic to (if it is still deserve that label, which I would be happy to forgo) is not a ‘maximizing’ consequentialism.

form of objectivism. For these reasons, I suggest we consider other ways of understanding the idea that social practices have to be good for people at large, in order to generate practical reasons.

An alternative way of understanding this idea which I'm tempted by is that social practices have a *constitutive aim* or *telos*, which flows from their very interpersonal nature. This constitutive aim might be supposed to encompass, and perhaps even be exhausted by, the aim of helping people fare well rather than badly. So a practice that does not meet these standards is at least misguided, and possibly downright inhumane. It is inhumane not because it violates objective standards, but rather because it violates intersubjective, or communal, ones. It is wrongheaded not from the point of view of the universe (whatever that might mean), but rather is indefensible from a distinctively human point of view. In other words, some social practices violate a sense of common humanity that underwrites the very *point* of interacting socially—namely, cooperating and collaborating with one's fellow human beings in such a way that life is liable to go better for everyone amongst us. Some social practices are thus terrible by their own lights, by virtue of the sort of thing they are (or that they pretend to be). And other social practices are quite simply pointless. They serve nobody's interests, and are thus unsuitable to generate reasons. These practices are a *defunct* version of the sort of thing they are.⁴⁹

Evidently, I'd have a lot of work in front of me to make good on the promissory notes just tendered. Clarifying and defending the idea that social practices have a constitutive aim at all is one task; showing that this aim is plausibly construed as human flourishing is another. And clarifying the sense of objectivity to be—and I'd have to argue, successfully being—avoided here also gets us into tricky territory. I cannot hope to pull all this off in this short space, of course.⁵⁰ Instead, in the remainder of this chapter, I hope to convince you that the effort might be worth it, by showing that the materials supplied thus far give us sufficient grounds for criticizing some social practices, and roundly condemning others, just as one would wish. Conversely, there are enough seemingly valid social practices to engender cautious optimism as to how large a chunk of the moral domain we can capture with the above materials.

⁴⁹ See Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, §2.1, for a discussion of this kind of teleologically based criticism.

⁵⁰ Pressing further (largely first-order) issues include how to think about invalid social practices where the exit costs are currently too high, for you or other people; whether and how we have reasons to challenge, reform, disrupt, or exit invalid social practices; what to think about social practices that are valid but markedly sub-ideal, or otherwise ripe for improvement; how much we can be expected to know if we are acting on genuine reasons, when the practice is invalid; and how to handle conflicting reasons that stem from our various (valid) social roles. There is also the noteworthy question of how our various diffuse practices interact and intersect with the (in my view, fundamentally social) practice of reasoning itself.

The consequentialist constraint on the validity of social practices is a simple but powerful theoretical scythe for preventing the practice-based view from *overgenerating* reasons. Social practices as different in nature as slavery and sex trafficking would be ruled out as valid practices right off the bat, since they tend to lead to terrible suffering for those whom they enslave and exploit. The violent Mafioso practice is similarly a non-starter.⁵¹ Moreover, exclusionary practices will be ripe for condemnation, since the people who they marginalize may be expected to be made significantly worse off by dint of being excluded. I am inclined to think, moreover, that social practices must not be prone to bring serious suffering to anybody in the moral community, in order to count as valid. This additional (broadly rights-based, or possibly Formula of Humanity-esque) constraint helps to avoid counter-examples in which a social practice is good for the majority, but only at the expense of a smaller number of the marginalized or disenfranchised parties which it blithely rides roughshod over.

We can also dismiss as valid social practices which are essentially in nobody's interests, such as arcane systems of table manners, perhaps. However, how common it is for such codes of conduct to actually be pointless on the whole is a matter for genuine debate. I am inclined to think that systems of manners that are currently adhered to often do generate weak reasons to follow suit, in so far as in following them we manifest a certain socially beneficial *politesse* and graciousness.⁵² We should not pooh-pooh good manners too quickly, I believe. Rather, we should carefully investigate whose interests they serve, and how.

The idea that valid social practices need only be conducive to human flourishing, rather than having to actually lead to it, seems necessary to avoid the converse problem of the practice-based view *undergenerating* reasons. Consider the practices I've concentrated on in this chapter—of friendship and marriage. It seems optimistic at best, and grossly naïve at worst, to insist that these practices are always conducive to human flourishing, even if everybody abides by their norms.⁵³ There is (I submit) no guarantee against intimacy making one's life much more difficult, or even being heartbreaking, when one's intimates are (e.g.) ill or in some kind of trouble. Nevertheless, friendship and marriage each

⁵¹ The example is due to G. A. Cohen, in his commentary on *The Sources of Normativity*.

⁵² Thus, I tend to think that, although many systems of manners could have been very different, they are nevertheless reason-providing in so far as they are socially beneficial. They are 'merely conventional', then, in one sense but not another. It does not matter *what* they are, within certain limits. But, now that they are in place, they do in fact matter—i.e., we have reasons to conform to them.

⁵³ What if the practitioners routinely fail to abide by the norms of a valid social practice? It may well be a fair criticism of a practice that it tends to become deformed or distorted in a specific and predictable way. Marriages tend to be blighted by domestic violence, for example.

have a strong claim to being an important and fulfilling part of human life, when their norms are properly abided by, and no external misfortune or disaster ensues.⁵⁴ Hence, these practices have a strong claim to being valid, and to subsequently generating practical reasons, on the practice-based view I've been developing in this chapter. This seems to me to be the right result, intuitively speaking. For, one's intimate relationships may certainly demand loyalty, even if they are making one quite unhappy at the time. But I do not think that such demands would make much sense unless this relationship was of the right *kind* to foster human flourishing, in the absence of bad luck. One generally enters into a friendship, say, with the hope and expectation of making each other's lives a little more enjoyable and less lonely. Once one has forged the friendship, however, one may find oneself encumbered with difficult and even positively onerous responsibilities, if events take an untoward turn. This is just the sort of risk that you run in becoming someone's friend—as the people forging the friendship will be aware, ideally speaking. Similar things can be said of marriage. One should enter into marriage hoping to have one's life enriched and improved as a result of it, but prepared to handle misfortunes that may occur along the way, which might be quite devastating to one's personal happiness. Marriage would not have the emotional depth that it does without the explicit knowledge that you are in it 'for better or worse'. Unless you are both prepared to be made unhappy by the plight of the other, then the succour of unconditional love would be simply unattainable. Hence the demand for marital loyalty can intelligibly float free of its potentially grave personal costs, notwithstanding the fact that happiness is in some sense modern marriage's ultimate point—or so I would suggest.

Even if one accepts the idea that valid social practices generate *some* moral reasons, what about moral reasons that arguably pre-date or float free of human sociality? There is thus another version of an undergeneration worry in the offing. Now, I am happy to simply admit that social practices generate only some moral reasons, with the remainder having their source elsewhere. On grounds I've already indicated, we might want to try to avoid positing an objective, normative reality to pick up the remainder. But where the remainder might come from will depend, fairly obviously, upon what you think it is. The idea that certain non-human animals, say, make moral claims on us in virtue of their sheer ability to suffer is one I'm very sympathetic to. Still, I think that the possibility of accommodating that portion of the moral domain that concerns human interactions solely via practice-based reasons is interesting and live. For, we might hold that there are very general social practices—perhaps

⁵⁴ This may be partly because the inclusion of friendship and love in a human life partly *constitutes* flourishing for us. If so, then the justification of some version of these practices will be more or less automatic.

even social norms—which apply to human beings as such, i.e., *qua* interacting, social creatures, who are the mutually intelligible objects of friendship and love. If we do recognize the existence of such an overarching practice of common humanity, then we might hope to defend the radical claim that all of the moral reasons that pertain to our treatment of our fellows are ultimately practice-based. Exploring this idea would require a lengthy treatment of its own, though—so leave these deep and difficult matters for another day.

I hope, in the meantime, to have made a plausible case here for thinking that some moral reasons have their source in social practices—friendship and marriage in particular may themselves generate moral reasons to conform to the relevant norms of each. And, more generally, when we ask the question of where our moral reasons come from, it is worth exploring the social world for potential insights and even answers.

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