The Ontology of Social Practices

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Abstract: Although social practices are widely considered to be essential building blocks in the construction of our social world, there is not much of an agreement regarding what kind of entities they are and what constitutes their nature. As an attempt to make progress in this direction, I provide here a general account of their ontology. By implementing specific resources from contemporary social ontology and collective intentionality, I argue that social practices are composite, material entities socially constructed by organised social groups through their individual members acting according to collective reasons. With this, I intend to contribute towards the understanding of both the reality of social practices and their role in the construction of other social entities; particularly, artifacts and institutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

That social practices are essential building blocks in the construction of our social world (from artifacts and moral values to legal norms and institutions) is commonplace within contemporary philosophy. For example, Wittgenstein (1972) famously argued that *meaning* is constructed through communicative

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practices, and Hart (1994) considered *legal systems* to be created based on normative practices of recognition. However, except for some remarkable contributions (e.g., Schatzki 1996; Tuomela 2002; McMillan 2018), a thorough discussion regarding what social practices are and what constitutes their nature is still awaiting.

As an attempt to make progress in this direction, I provide here a general ontological account of social practices. I start by arguing that in order to elucidate their causal power and their role in the construction of social objects, we should consider social practices not only as abstract, but also as concrete entities; that is, not merely as conventions, tacit knowledge, or patterns of behaviour, but also as recurrent group actions.

When examining what kind of entities social practices are, I show (following Tuomela) that they are events intentionally produced by organised social groups through their individual members acting according to collective reasons. Then, by elaborating on the content of such reasons, I argue that they specify the action-types, informally created by the reiterative performance of similar action-tokens, that determine both ontologically and normatively the success conditions for those group members to carry out the activities that constitute the relevant group actions.

Although my intention here is to account for the ontology of social practices as socially constructed entities, I also aim to explain how we construct other social objects based on their performance. In clarifying this, I introduce a *social constructionist* approach to the reality of social practices which offers a novel and comprehensive analysis of both the existence of social practices and their role in the construction of our social world.

To present this account, I structure the paper as follows. Firstly, I argue for a characterisation of social practices as composite, material entities (§2). Then, I motivate their ontological analysis from the perspective of social constructionism and specify the elements involved in their social construction, viz., social groups and group agency (§3). Next, I provide a detailed analysis of each of these elements by looking specifically at their conditions of existence: I introduce a structuralist account of social groups (§4) and discuss group agency in terms of a non-reductionist theory of collective intentionality (§5). Finally, I put all these pieces together to explain both the construction of social practices in terms of the realisation of recurrent group actions and the way in which we can create and maintain other social objects based on their performance (§6). I conclude with a brief summary (§7).

2.   WHAT ARE SOCIAL PRACTICES?

Although the importance of social practices for the understanding of our social world has long been established by philosophers (as well as sociologists, anthropologists, economists, etc.), it is a bit surprising that there is not yet an agreement regarding what kind of entities they are. For example, the diversity of views ranges from those who take social practices to be 'routinised actions' or 'individual habitualisations' (e.g., Giddens 1984; Turner 1994) to those who see them as 'conventions,' 'tacit knowledge,' 'paradigms,' or 'presuppositions' (Oakshott 1975; Polanyi 2009; Kuhn 1970; Bourdieu 1977).[1]

Since the purpose of this essay is not to engage with any of these views in detail, but instead to develop a comprehensive analysis of social practices, I limit the discussion to the particular elements that are usually emphasised by some of these authors when accounting for their reality. Then, by focusing on what I call 'the collective action' view, I argue that to explain the construction and causal efficacy of social practices, we need to examine both the role of social groups and group agency in the realisation of the corresponding group actions.

To begin with, let me illustrate with some examples what I mean by 'social practice.' While the content of this term is not always clear, we normally use it to classify such things as having a birthday party, playing football in the street, queuing to board public transport, having a conversation, greeting, dancing, dating, etc.[2] Yet, though all these practices differ from each other in various specific respects (e.g., in terms of who can participate and how, or where they can take place and when), the analysis I submit below aims to provide a unified account of their ontology.

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1   It may be important to mention here that lack of agreement is not always fatal. As an anonymous reviewer observed, "in philosophical debates, there are several views about an issue that are in disagreement and that is perfectly fine so." However, I believe that this is not a reason to abandon any hope for settling a dispute. In what follows, I provide an ontological analysis of social practices that recognises the merits of various views but aims to make progress in resolving (rather than just perpetuating) the discussion about what kind of entities they are.

2   For reasons that should be clear below, I am excluding from this classification those practices that are constituted by *formal* activities (e.g., voting, driving, participating in jury trials, playing chess tournaments, etc.). As I have argued elsewhere (Garcia-Godinez 2020a), analysing the ontology of institutional practices requires a discussion about institutional groups and institutional agency, which goes beyond the scope of this work.

2.1.   The Abstract Element of Social Practices

Perhaps the most popular characterisations of social practices are those which emphasise their abstract character. Take, for example, Haslanger (2018). In her 'What is a social practice?,' she says:

> Social practices are *patterns of learned behavior* that enable us […] to coordinate as members of a group in creating, distributing, managing, maintaining, and eliminating a resource (or multiple resources), due to mutual responsiveness to each other's behavior and the resource(s) in question, as interpreted through shared meanings/cultural schemas (Haslanger 2018, 245, emphasis added).

Although Haslanger does not elaborate on what she means by 'patterns of learned behavior,' it is clear that they are abstract objects.[3] For patterns of behaviour (as well as norms, rules, conventions, and the like) are objects of thought, associated with certain (revisable) meaning that people use to guide their actions (Weinberger 1986, 32-8). So, under this characterisation, social practices are conceived of as templates or models of social action, viz., a group can act according to a practice by adjusting the group members' behaviour to the corresponding model. If the model says, for instance, that one should stand behind the last person in the row, then one is participating in the social practice of 'queueing.' If it says, instead, that one is meant to score a goal, then the practice is that of 'playing football.' Etcetera.

Presumably, those who look at social practices from the 'model' perspective think of them as generalisations of social actions (inductively constructed by assembling the appropriate 'steps' that configure the 'patterns'). If assumed further that such generalisations can be learnt and applied in practical contexts, then the idea seems to be captured by Giddens' notion of 'practical consciousness':

> How do formulae relate to the practices in which social actors engage, and what kinds of formulae are we most interested in for general purposes of social analysis? As regards the first part of the question, we can say that awareness of social rules, expressed first and foremost in *practical consciousness*, is the very core of that 'knowledgeability' which specifically characterizes human agents. As social actors, all human

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3   By 'abstract objects' I mean "non-spatial, atemporal, and acausal objects as numbers and sets [including impure sets]" (Hale, 1998).

> beings are highly 'learned' in respect of knowledge which they possess, and apply, in the production and reproduction of day-to-day social encounters; the vast bulk of such knowledge is practical rather than theoretical in character (Giddens 1984, 21-2, emphasis added).

Although Giddens (1984, ch.1) does not identify social practices with practical knowledge (indeed, his 'Structuration Theory' makes clear that structure and action are two separate things, and only the first is the object of practical knowledge), it follows from his view that we can infer a pattern (or a norm, or a convention, etc.) from the (intentional) performance of certain (individual or collective) actions.

From Haslanger's characterisation, I think that something similar to this is what she has in mind.[4] In fact, the idea that a social practice is a pattern of behaviour is not only very common, but also extremely convenient to understanding why not just any action can *fit* the appropriate model (see, e.g., Haugeland 1998, 314 in relation to 'greeting'). Yet, we should be cautious not to identify social practices with those patterns, as this will lead us right into Turner's puzzle:

> The concept of shared practices—'the social theory of practices'— requires that practices be *transmitted* from person to person. But no account of the acquisition of practices that makes sense causally supports the idea that the same internal thing, the same practice, is *reproduced* in another person (Turner 1994, 13, emphasis added).

To understand this puzzle, we need first to distinguish between practice as an object of thought (an abstract object) and as a recurrent action (a concrete entity). Although Turner is not explicit about this difference, his target is the former (Turner 1994, 1-3). That is, what he finds difficult to be 'reproduced' in another person is the concept or pattern that potential participants in the practice are supposed to share. So, if there is no guarantee (as he believes) that this pattern can be 'transmitted' from person to person, then there is no guarantee (as he concludes) that it ever makes sense to talk about people engaging in the same practice.

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4   It was pointed out to me by an anonymous reviewer that this understanding may not match with the rest of Haslanger's project; in particular "with her insistence on the materiality of the social realm and the importance of structural explanation." To be clear, I do not mean here to criticise Haslanger's overall theory of the social (which I myself find particularly attractive). However, I want to underline that she emphasises the *abstract* character of social practices, which I intend to use below to account for a more comprehensive analysis of their ontology.

Though we cannot avoid falling into Turner's puzzle when considering the *types* that define or conceptualise social practices, if we focus on the particular instantiations or *tokens* thereof, we can explain both their causal power and their sameness of nature.[5] In other words, by characterising social practices not only as abstract but also as concrete entities, we can account for the way in which we construct social objects (including the action-types or patterns of behaviour that are to be shared amongst group members). This kind of strategy has been suggested by those social practice theorists (e.g., Rouse 2007b) who seek to ground the existence of language (and its normativity) in language uses (and exhibited conceptual competence).

As I cannot evaluate here the success of this strategy, I simply assume its plausibility. So, what I am interested in now is in elucidating the ontology of social practices as comprising both group activities (i.e., events intentionally brought into existence by group agents) and action-types. The point of this is to make sense of the idea that participants create and maintain a social practice by their acting according to a certain type of action. Think, for instance, of 'having a conversation.' For us to perform this practice (i.e., for us to have a conversation), we must carry out certain activities that are, according to our conception of 'having a conversation,' constitutively relevant (e.g., greeting, kindly asking, responding to questions, etc.). Thus, our social practice possesses both an abstract and a concrete element (viz., an action-type and an action-token).

To the extent that we want our characterisation of social practices to accommodate these elements, we need to emphasise equally their concrete nature. With this, we should be able to explain social practices as overt social phenomena with spatiotemporal nature (i.e., with a particular location in spacetime) and so as essential building blocks in the construction of our social world.[6]

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5 Barnes (2001, 30-1) makes a similar point when discussing Turner's objection to the concept of 'shared practice.'

6 Focusing on language as a social practice, Rouse makes a similar point: "language is not primarily 'in the head,' the mind, thought, or 'the space of reasons.' Linguistic utterances and marks are right out there in the world. Indeed, they are among the most pervasive and salient features of the world in which we find ourselves" (Rouse 2007a, 52). Similarly, Barnes suggests that to explain social practices as the "bedrock of all order and agreement," they must be taken as "something public and visible, something that it is manifest in what members do" (Barnes 2001, 25).

2.2.   The Concrete Element of Social Practices

In *The Constitution of Social Practices,* McMillan characterises social practices as "specific kinds of regular actions" (McMillan 2018, 21) and then argues that "an analysis of practices should be grounded in a framework for the analysis of action" (McMillan 2018, 22). Similarly, in his *Social Practices*, Schatzki says that "[a] practice *is* a manifold of doings and sayings (basic actions)" (Schatzki 1996, 106). And Reckwitz, while characterising a practice as purposive action, suggests that it "consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (Reckwitz 2002, 249).

Although not the only ones, these are some of the authors that most clearly express their seeing social practices as *actions* of a certain kind, and so attempt to elucidate their ontology in terms of concrete events (i.e., spatiotemporally located changes in objects). For example, McMillan, though he does not reduce actions to events (since not all events are actions), endorses the view according to which, as Davidson puts it, actions are "true particulars" (Davidson 2006, 93), of which we can say (however roughly) where and when they take place (depending on which changes are relevant for the obtaining of those events).[7]

Also, in light of this 'action' view, social practices are taken to be intentionally produced by agents (where being an agent, as Ludwig (2016, 17) explains, amounts precisely to having the capacity to produce changes intentionally). To illustrate this, consider the following example. If I hit a baseball with a bat, I bring an event into existence (i.e., I cause the baseball to change its direction), but if I hit the baseball intentionally (under this or another description), then I produce the change intentionally, and so I perform an action. Thus, so understood, actions are events causally related to individual agents.

By taking on board this action theory, McMillan, Schatzki, and Reckwitz articulate a conception of social practices that makes explicit their contingent, historical, and context-dependent nature. For instance, contra Kant and Ihering, McMillan argues that social practices are not 'invariant forms' or 'timeless options of action,' but rather 'historically constituted' entities: "they come into being, for the first time in history, at a specific time and place; they have discernible temporal duration; and they may or may not at some point disappear, perhaps never to re-emerge" (McMillan 2018, 30). Also,

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7   For a thorough discussion about the individuation of events, see Davidson (2006, ch. 4).

in highlighting their concrete character, he stresses the importance of social practices in the construction of our social world: "Human practices are a fundamental constituent—arguably 'the' fundamental constituent—of social reality" (McMillan 2018, 1).

The point here, then, is that in virtue of their causal power, social practices are essential building blocks in the creation and maintenance of social objects (e.g., norms and conventions) that result from the performance of certain regular actions. It is in this sense that social practices help us in building up our social world, from physical and mental skills (e.g., throwing balls into a basket and speaking a language) to social orders (e.g., forming queues to board public transport and taking hats off when entering churches).

This causal power of social practices also explains the truism that some form of *consumption* and *acquisition* is inevitable in their realisation. There is consumption, as Holtz (2014) contends, because performing social practices requires capitalising the material resources (e.g., water and energy) available in a particular time and place. And there is acquisition, on the other hand, because, as a result of participating in their performance, people obtain practical and theoretical knowledge (i.e., know-hows and know-thats), as well as objects of various kinds (e.g., money) and specific status in their social groups (e.g., proxy and operative roles).

Yet, while all this advances our understanding of the ontology of social practices, we should be aware that the 'action' view does not provide us with a complete analysis of social practices. As McMillan puts it: "The study of practices must cohere with and grow out of an understanding of action" (McMillan 2018, 22). However, this is simply to say that an account of action is necessary for an account of social practices, though it is not yet sufficient. As I presently show, we also need to emphasise the 'collective' character of those actions.

2.3.   The Collective Character of Social Practices

In *The Philosophy of Social Practices,* Tuomela takes a social practice in its core sense "to consist of recurrent collective social actions performed for a shared social reason" (Tuomela 2002, 3). In emphasising the 'collective' character of the recurrent actions and the 'shared' quality of the reasons involved, Tuomela makes explicit a further condition on the analysis of social practices, viz., to understand their reality, we need to analyse social groups and group agency (Tuomela 2002, ch. 4).

As I elaborate later on the ontology of both social groups and group agency (see §4 and §5 below, respectively), I focus here only on social actions as the fundamental element for conceptualising social practices. Without going into so much detail about Tuomela's theory of sociality, let me simply mention some of the key ideas that make his theory particularly insightful.

First, the collective element provides the basis for distinguishing more accurately the various kinds of practices that exist. For instance, although certain regular actions, e.g., brushing our teeth, having a shower, watching tv, marking important events in diaries, etc. belong to the category of 'practices,' they are significantly different from all those other actions, e.g., playing football, having a conversation, dancing, dating, etc. that we refer to with 'social practices.' Brushing our teeth or having a shower, for example, does not require the participation of a group (I can brush my own teeth, and I mostly prefer to have showers on my own). On the contrary, playing football or having a conversation does require there being a certain group (I cannot genuinely play football on my own, nor can I genuinely have a conversation with myself). As Tuomela (2002, 42, 79) seems to conceptualise things, only the latter are genuine cases of *social* practices (where social groups rather than only individuals are those who perform the relevant actions).[8]

Secondly, precisely because of the implication of groups, social practices are more resilient than other kinds of practices. For example, our playing football in the street can survive various changes in our team (e.g., we can rotate, substitute, and even expel some players, without this affecting the existence and identity of our group action). This strength of social practices is, to an important extent, what guarantees their long-lastingness (viz., they live through both leavers and new-comers).

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8   There are a few things that I should clarify here. Firstly, I do not want to deny the relevance of social *experiences* as part of our engagement in individual practices. For example, I learnt how to brush my teeth because I had some social experiences (e.g., seeing my mother brushing her teeth or being told by her how to do it). By taking social practices as only those that involve social *groups* (rather than social experiences), I intend to respect the intuition that, although there are various types of practices (e.g., individual, social, and cultural), there are important differences between them (e.g., regarding the kind of agent that participates in their performance). And secondly, I am aware that 'social practice,' as a term of art, is susceptible of several (and perhaps even incompatible) interpretations. My point here is not to stipulate a definition, but to propose (following Tuomela) a compelling characterisation of social practices centred on the agent that produces the relevant actions. The resulting analysis, for that reason, should be of interest to those who appreciate not only the difficulty of specifying the semantic content of the term 'social practice,' but also the importance of tracing significant distinctions amongst the competing alternatives. Thanks to two anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to clarify this.

Thirdly, when Tuomela addresses the role of social practices in the construction of social objects, he attributes this to social groups rather than only individual agents. For example, in saying that "the social world is made and maintained by people by means of their social practices," he means organised people, and not just any random (or arbitrary) collection of individuals (Tuomela 2002, 5). Thus, e.g., when talking about artifacts and artworks (as material objects constructed through the realisation of social practices), he takes their existence to depend on there being a certain form of coordination and cooperation amongst participants (which cannot be fully explained in terms of individual preferences, the constant clashing of which usually prevents participants from harmonising their efforts).

Finally, Tuomela's 'collective action' view sustains that social practices are not ontologically irreducible (Tuomela 2002, 78-80). Since they are constituted by group activities (performed according to certain action-types), they are susceptible of further ontological analysis. In particular, he recognises that social practices are themselves social constructions, the existence of which should be accounted for in terms of a general meta-ontological analysis of social reality. Although Tuomela himself does not use the term 'meta-ontology' (see Garcia-Godinez 2023 for a development of his ideas within a meta-ontological discussion), he does mention 'social constructionism' as a general ontological framework, based on which we can examine the elements that constitute the reality of social practices (I undertake this task in §4 and §5 below).

3.   SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

As commonly portrayed, social constructionism is the view according to which a certain entity exists because it has been created by some collective agent. In general, this view is supported by those who defend that facts involving social entities are, to put it in Searlean terms (Searle 1995, 10), *ontologically subjective* (i.e., facts that depend on certain human actions and attitudes for their obtaining).

As Goswick (2020) explains, to understand what 'social constructionism' is, we need to understand the ontological relation that obtains between three relata, viz., a constructor, a construction, and a building block. The *constructor* is a collective agent, the *construction* is the product of a collective activity, and the *building block* is the material upon which an entity is socially constructed. The constructing (or building) relation that obtains between these relata explains what it is for an entity to be socially constructed. In contemporary metaphysics, this relation is analysed in different ways (see Goswick 2020 for

an overview). Here, I only focus on two, viz., *causality* and *constitution*.[9]

If the constructing relation is understood causally, then we would say that an agent (e.g., a sculptor) causes a construction (e.g., a statue) to exist by transforming or manufacturing some material (e.g., a lump of clay). Hilpinen, for instance, holds that this is the kind of relationship that explains what it is for an author to create an artifact: "The object's existence, as well as some of its properties, are causally dependent on the author's intention" (Hilpinen 1993, 157).[10]

But causality is not a fine-grained enough relation to capture what it is for an object to be socially constructed. After all, as Thomasson argues, we would not say that babies are social constructions just because they are *caused* to exist by means of intentional activities of sexual intercourse (Thomasson 2007b, 52). Artifacts, for instance, depend on intentionality in a different way than babies do. When an author intentionally creates an artifact, she has a certain conception (an *artifact-type*) based on which she adjusts her actions to produce an instance of it (an *artifact-token*). So, the object created is an artifact, not only because the author causes it to exist intentionally (which is true of many other objects, including babies), but also because she makes it so that it is (or counts as) an instance of the appropriate type.

So, the analysis of the constructing relation requires considering the essential role of the conceptual framework in bringing about social constructions (see McMillan 2018, 7). This would guarantee that babies are not treated as social constructions, since they do not require for their existence that anyone has a conception of what they are or are meant to be (i.e., human and non-human animals have offspring even without having any conceptual framework). For this analysis, then, some philosophers have suggested that the constructing relation should be understood not (only) as causal, but (also) as constitutive (e.g. Searle 1995; Baker 1997; Thomasson 2007a).[11]

If the constructing relation is understood constitutively, then we can say that an agent constructs something (a traffic-sign) by transforming or

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9   Presumably, *grounding* is another option. As Schaffer (2017) and Griffith (2018) suggest, social construction claims can be understood as grounding claims. However, as I have argued elsewhere (see Garcia-Godinez 2020b), grounding is not a better alternative to constitution. Yet, since I cannot develop this argument at length here, I leave this point open to further discussion. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for asking me to elaborate on this.

10   Similarly, Hacking (1999, 48) focuses on the 'causal routes' involved in the construction of social entities.

11   In the present context, we do not need a thorough discussion of constitution (but see Wasserman 2017 for an overview, Baker 2007 for a non-identity theory of constitution, and Thomasson 2013 for a deflationary interpretation of Baker's view).

manufacturing some material (a scrap piece of metal) in such a way that it counts as an instance of the intended type. What makes constitution different from mere causality is that there is an artifact-type ('traffic sign') associated with a certain type-description (or rules of use that a competent speaker can employ to refer to an object of the appropriate type) that informs the corresponding author's intentions (see Thomasson 2007a, ch.2). This explains why in order for an agent to create a traffic sign, she must have a conception of what kind of object she intends to create.[12]

On this understanding, type-descriptions are necessary for the construction of artifacts and other kinds of social objects. However, this is not to say that the mere existence of type-descriptions entails the existence of social objects (rules of use, that is, do not have ontological import). Another constitutive element is therefore necessary, viz., an intentional activity through which a token of the intended type is produced. So, what constitutes the existence of an artifact is simply the fact that the agent both possesses a certain conception of what it intends to make and performs a manufacturing activity that results in the object satisfying such a conception.

Now, considering that social practices consist, as seen above (§2.3), in 'recurrent collective social actions performed for a shared social reason,' elucidating the elements that constitute their reality by applying this constructionist framework requires a detailed discussion of the nature of *social groups* and *group agency.* I take up this task in the following sections.

4.   SOCIAL GROUPS

My aim here is to discuss the ontology of those groups that bring social practices into existence by looking specifically at Ritchie's structuralist account of organised social groups. Although there are various theories of social groups out there (e.g., Sheehy 2003; Epstein 2019; Thomasson 2019), I focus on her theory to describe what is necessary for a group to be *organised* in such a way that the group members can contribute collectively (rather than each individually) to the performance of a group action.

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12 Two caveats are in order here. First, having a conception of something is not the same as having the term to name it. For example, one can create a traffic sign even without having the term 'traffic sign' to refer to it. Second, there seems to be a problem with requiring that artifact-types exist prior to the construction of artifact-tokens. However, we should realise that artifact-types can be introduced through the creation of artifact-tokens. Indeed, this is what happens with *prototypes*: a prototype is an artifact-token for which no prior artifact-type exists, though the properties of the artifact-token can be specified in such a way that the artifact-type is thereby created.

To understand Ritchie's account, let me briefly mention its main concern. In contemporary analytic social ontology, the philosophical discussion about social groups revolves around two general issues, viz., what it is for some people to constitute a group and what it is for a group to be an agent. In several articles, Ritchie has addressed the former issue, thus developing a structuralist account of organised social groups. In the present section, I analyse this. However, since she does not engage with the problem of group agency, I consider the second issue in the next section.

In various works (e.g., Ritchie 2018; Ritchie 2020), Ritchie has argued for a structuralist account of groups, according to which organised social groups exist as structured wholes, i.e., realisations (or instantiations) of social structures. In developing her view, she has introduced a crucial distinction between two kinds of groups, viz., feature and organised social groups (Ritchie 2018, 13).

Feature social groups are those groups whose members have (or are taken to have) a certain feature (e.g., some skin colour or sexual preference) in virtue of which they are classified into a certain social kind (e.g., black men or LGBTs) (Ritchie 2020, 415). *Organised* social groups, on the other hand, are those groups constructed by the realisation (or instantiation) of a social structure: "When an organized social group exists it has both a structure and some members who [instantiate] the structure" (Ritchie 2020, 411). A football team, for example, exists when some people take on the corresponding roles (e.g., the goalkeeper, the striker, the sweeper, etc.).

Now, since organised social groups "are structured wholes that come to be when a group structure is realized" (Ritchie 2018, 24), the difference between them and feature social groups is that, whereas the latter are determined by (a cluster of) social properties, the former are determined by the instantiation of a social structure. Let me consider this in more detail.

4.1. Organised Social Groups

According to Ritchie, structures are "complexes, networks, or 'latticeworks' of relations," which can be represented as graphs composed of 'nodes' (or positions) and 'edges' (or relations) (Ritchie 2020, 405). In virtue of a structure, if some object occupies a node, then it holds certain relations with some other object. Although, in general, this is true of any kind of structure (think, e.g., of mathematical structures), when it comes to *social* structures, there is an additional feature, viz., they are "dependent on social factors" (Ritchie 2020, 406).

To understand what makes a structure 'social,' we need to understand, firstly, what social factors are; and secondly, what 'dependent on' means. I start with the former. For Ritchie, social factors "include at least social behavior, patterns of action, habits, beliefs, intentions, processes, practices, activities, rules, laws, norms, and arrangements" (Ritchie 2020, 404). As for the second element (viz., the dependence relation), Ritchie says that it cannot be explained simply in terms of causal dependence, but only in terms of constitutive dependence (Ritchie 2020, 407).

A structure is *causally dependent* on social factors if (and only if) those social factors cause the structure to exist. For example, if Sofia, Raul and Pekka are all standing at a 2m distance from each other, they are all instantiating a structure—let us call it '2m distance.' However, there is nothing intrinsically social about this structure. Anyone (or anything) can be at a 2m distance, and so instantiate the same structure. Moreover, they need not intend to stand at 2m from each other to instantiate the '2m distance' structure.

A structure is genuinely social, on the contrary, to the extent that it is *constitutively dependent* on social factors. To spell out what constitutive dependence is, Ritchie adopts a 'disjunctivist view.' In her terms: A structure S is socially constructed 'just in case'

1. in defining what it is to be S reference must be made to some social factors or
2. social factors are metaphysically necessary for S to exist or
3. social factors ground the existence of S (or the fact that S exists) (Ritchie 2020, 407).

With this, Ritchie does not mean to give a full analysis of 'constitutive dependence.' Quite the opposite, she only means to be as inclusive as possible for whatever characterisation of constitution one adopts. Yet, what is important to highlight here is that the function of the social structure is to determine appropriate roles or positions that characterise the group. As Ritchie has it, positions "are defined in terms of both (a) relations to other nodes and (b) (possibly null) additional requirements on occupiers" (Ritchie 2020, 405). Thus, for instance, a position can impose requirements as to what kind of object can occupy it (e.g., an individual or a group), for how long, under which conditions, by doing what, etc. In this sense, the position socially defines the occupant. Additionally, a position also establishes the normative powers (rights, duties, etc.) that the occupant will be attributed with if she successfully occupies the position. Using Ritchie's own example, in the structure of a baseball team,

a catcher has the duty to return the ball to the pitcher in virtue of the positions that they each occupy, which are partially defined by the 'should-return-the-ball-to' relation.

To summarise, then, according to Ritchie's account, the existence of an organised social group depends on there being a social structure instantiated by certain individuals through their taking on the relevant roles (and acting according to, and within the limits of, their associated normative powers). Indeed, as I turn now to discuss, it is precisely in virtue of this property that we can attribute intentionality to organised groups (viz., the people joining the group have, at least *prima facie,* the correct intentions to perform actions as a group), which is exactly what is relevant for understanding how such groups are involved in the construction of social practices.

5.   GROUP AGENCY

One of the main questions we ask when thinking about groups is what is it for a group to act? That is, under which conditions can we say that a group has performed an action? The discussion we step into when asking such questions belongs to a more general debate regarding *group agency,* viz., whether social groups "are agents that act for reasons" (Tollefsen 2015, 53). Since groups (unlike individual people) are not phenomenological entities that can act for themselves, it is a common platitude within contemporary social ontology that we need an account of collective intentionality to explain what makes it possible for some people to act together, as a group.

To understand this as well as the relevance of group agency for an ontological account of social practices, let me discuss in some detail what collective intentionality is and how it is related to the realisation of the activities that constitute social practices.

5.1.   Collective Intentionality

As Searle famously puts it, collective intentionality can be conceptualised as the capacity of individual minds to be jointly addressed to certain objects (Searle 1995, 37-8). 'Jointly' indicates the collective character of this form of intentionality, whereas the 'addressed to,' its direction of fit (e.g., mind-to-world, in the case of perceptions and beliefs; and world-to-mind, in the case of desires and intentions). In what follows, I focus only on collective intentions (i.e., joint commitments towards performing certain actions).

If a group is an agent, then it acts for a reason. But what does this mean? As I presently show, whereas Searle claims that this is an irreducible capacity of human agents that needs no further explanation, Tuomela offers a highly sophisticated account in terms of I-mode and we-mode collective intentionality. After presenting some of its main elements, I argue that by combining it with the structuralist account of organised social groups introduced above, we can spell out the conditions for social groups to perform the recurrent collective actions that give rise to social practices.

For Searle, both individual and collective intentionality are primitive (or irreducible) capacities (idem). Human beings, along with some other non-human animals, possess intentionality capacity in both forms (individually and collectively). As such, Searle thinks, there is nothing mysterious about collective intentionality that we have not already accepted for individual intentionality: if we already accept that there is something like I believe that p or I intend to φ, then there is no reason not to accept that we believe that p or we intend to φ can also be the case. The 'we' here does not refer to a plural or supra-individual subject; it only indicates the *mode* in which the corresponding intentional state is held (Searle 1995, 26).

With this, Searle claims that the correct analysis of our collective intentional state in 'we intend to φ' (e.g., we intend to play football) is the conjunction of our corresponding individual we-intentional states, viz., I we-intend to φ, and you we-intend to φ: "I [and you] intend only as part of our intending" (Searle 1995, 26). And this, he adds, shows that individual intentional states do not suffice for collective intentional states because both are different (and mutually irreducible) forms or modes of intentionality (Searle 1990, 404).

Although a non-reductionist view of collective intentionality that is not committed to the existence of plural subjects seems to be the right way to go, Searle does not live up to his promise: he does not offer any explanation of what collective intentionality is. Instead, he only says that we already enjoy this capacity: "Whenever two or more agents share a belief, desire, intention, or other intentional state, and where they are aware of so sharing, the agents in question have collective intentionality" (Searle 2003, 198). Yet, without explaining further what 'share' and 'being aware of so sharing' consist of, his theory cannot be taken as providing any successful analysis of what having this capacity amounts to (see also Salice 2015 for a similar objection).

Tuomela, on the other hand, does explain what this sharing is: individual agents intend and act collectively either in the I-mode or in the we-mode when doing so for a shared or a group reason, respectively. To appreciate his account,

let me introduce some of its core elements. Firstly, for Tuomela, collective intentionality is not reducible (epistemically, conceptually, or ontologically) to individual intentionality (Tuomela 2013, 10, 90-3); secondly, a collective intentional state is an intentional attitude held by an individual in relation to a structured group (Tuomela 2013, 31-3); and thirdly, the full-blown we-mode collective intentionality, which is stronger than the I-mode collective intentionality, can be explained in terms of group members having a collective attitude of acceptance towards a group, rather than a shared, reason (Tuomela 2007, 3-4).

In general, these elements amount to what Tuomela identifies as the most basic building blocks in the construction of sociality. Though I cannot explain any of them in much detail here, I dedicate the following subsection to show how organised social groups can perform intentional action based on their obtaining. After this, I explain recurrent group actions in the next section, thus completing the analysis of the elements involved in the construction of social practices.

5.2. Group Intentionality

The importance of focusing on the functioning of group members is, as Tuomela says (Tuomela 2013, 52), because groups do not act for themselves (since they are not phenomenological entities), but only through their individual members (provided a certain organisation between them). So, functionally speaking, groups can still be attributed with the intentional performance of an action:

> A group can exercise causal and other control over its members, but such exercise must of course bottom out in relevant members' joint action in the sense in which all group action is joint and which, importantly, must be action as group members. Such a joint action is a causally objective event that is brought about by an epistemically objective group agent that has been collectively constructed by the group members (Tuomela 2013, 52).

Attributing an action to a group, thus, depends on the fact that the group members act based on their individual we-intentions addressed to the satisfaction of a shared/group reason. To illustrate this, consider the following example.

The group whose all and only members are you and me can be attributed with an intentional joint action, e.g., painting a fence, if (and only if) you and

I we-intend to paint the fence and succeed at doing it together. If our we-intentions are held in the I-mode, then this means that we share some private reasons to paint the fence together. For instance, I intend to paint the fence with you because I want the fence to be painted but I do not want to paint it on my own, and you intend to paint the fence with me because you want the fence to be painted but this is the only way you can make sure that I participate.

Although only partially coincident, there is some significant content shared in our reasons. So, even when my reason can be satisfied if you do not paint the fence with me (e.g., if I paint the fence with someone else), and your reason can also be satisfied if I do not paint the fence with you (i.e., if I paint the fence on my own), our acting based on these shared private reasons will entail that we shall have performed a joint intentional action.

It is a different story when we each intend to paint the fence together for a group reason, i.e., in the we-mode. Let us suppose that we decide that from now on we shall paint fences to make money. Let us take this to be the ethos of our group – let us call it 'the Fency Club.' If we each accept this group ethos, then our painting a fence will be entirely based on a group reason: I intend to paint the fence with you because this is what the Fency Club is up to, and you intend to paint the fence with me because this is what the Fency Club is up to. Thus, my (and your) intention can only be satisfied if we (as all and the only members of the Fency Club) paint the fence together. When doing so, we perform a joint intentional action based on our full-blown we-mode collective intentionality (or *group-mode* intentionality, for short).

Although both the I-mode and the we-mode are necessary for understanding sociality, as Tuomela argues, the analysis of the group-mode is crucial for an account of the social construction of highly complex and resistant social entities; particularly, social institutions (Tuomela 2013, 142). What makes it especially relevant, that is, is that when group members intend an action for the group, they collectively accept to act *for the group*.[13] Holding this attitude of acceptance, however, does not need to be explicit. For example, satisfying the membership conditions (or the role requirements) for occupying a position in a group structure may be enough for the role occupant to accept, though implicitly, the group reason.

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13 Though group-mode intentionality, as briefly characterised here, is the strongest form of collective intentionality, it is still compatible with (a) there being only operative members fully functioning as group members, (b) there being a limited number of free riders, and (c) there being some group members actively opposing the group's ethos (see Tuomela 2008, 18).

Now, with this conceptual machinery at hand, let me explain how organised social groups (as structured wholes) can be attributed with the capacity to act intentionally. Organised groups are genuine agents if (and only if) their individual members hold we-intentions addressed to the satisfaction of shared or group reasons. Since group members, as seen above, are those individuals that contribute to the instantiation of the group structure by taking on appropriate roles, they are (taken to be) committed to acting according to their associated normative powers. So, to put it shortly, when the group members act *qua* group members, they each contribute to the realisation of group actions; and they do so by each performing the individual intentional activities (either in the I-mode or in the we-mode) that collectively amount to the existence of an intentional joint action.

6.   GROUP ACTIONS

Based on this account of group agency, I take up in this section the analysis of recurrent group actions and explain in which way they constitute the reality of social practices. After distinguishing between *one-off* and *recurrent* group actions, I argue that organised social groups create social practices by carrying out the activities that constitute the latter's existence.

6.1.   Recurrent Group Actions

When talking about group actions, there is a useful (though usually overlooked) distinction between 'one-off' and 'recurrent' group actions. The first, as their name suggests, are actions performed by a group agent on a non-regular basis (e.g., helping to push a car up a hill or carrying a table upstairs). The participants here need only act based on the conception they have of what they are doing, without this involving any specific type of action. For example, two people can push a car up a hill, even if the activities that they need to perform are not yet determined by any action-type. In such cases, those participating in bringing about the group action intentionally may simply agree on what to do and how to do it, but not on what *type* of action they are to perform.

On the other hand, when an organised group intends to play football, host a birthday party, or go out for a date, it intends to perform a recurrent group action. This is the kind of action that is performed by group members following the norms (or type-description) constituting an action-type.[14] Such

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14 I should emphasise here, firstly, that an action-type can change (intentionally or unintentionally) by changing its associated type-description; and secondly, that group

norms, unlike the shared ideas based on which one-off group actions are realised, are historically created by the regular performance of similar action-tokens.[15]

When explaining the creation of the norms that constitute action-types, we usually appeal to specific kinds of facts, e.g., the enactment of legal rules, the approval of a code of practice, or the establishment of official guidelines. Yet, in all such cases we are talking about *formal* norms constituting an institutional normative framework (e.g., a legal system). However, when the relevant facts only involve shared beliefs, normative opinions, or tacit agreements between the group members regarding what to do and how to do it, then the norms are *informal,* and so implicitly and non-authoritatively created.

As I have argued elsewhere (see Garcia-Godinez 2020a), this distinction is crucial for the ontological analysis of social and institutional practices. To understand their distinctive reality, that is, reference must be made to the formal or informal character of the group actions that constitute their corresponding nature. Since I do not engage here in this discussion, let me simply say that, because of their informal character, the group actions constituting the nature of social practices are not determined (neither ontologically nor normatively) by explicit and authoritative norms. So, the organised social group that performs the recurrent group actions, does so by its group members performing certain activities that collectively amount to the instantiation of an *informal* action-type (e.g., 'playing football,' 'having a conversation,' 'queueing,' 'dating,' etc.) which consists in the informal norms that are implicit in the participants' common background.

In general, although there may be important reasons for groups to perform one-off group actions (e.g., to solve an unexpected coordination problem or respond to an emergency), the performance of recurrent actions (even when determined only by informal norms) defines the character of the organised social groups themselves: from small groups (e.g., some friends playing football in the street, or a couple dating or dancing tango at a wedding) to much larger and varying groups (e.g., hundreds of people queueing to enter

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members can disagree with each other as to what activities they need to perform in order to produce a token of the intended type.

15 Of course, 'historically created' is a vague expression, but it helps us accommodate those cases where the social norms constituting the action-type are the result of a long and persistent performance of similar action-tokens, and those other cases where such norms quickly become customary after fewer performances. Also, it should be clear from this that when talking about 'a group performing a recurrent group action,' I do not mean that it is always the same group performing the same action (in fact, most of the social practices we are acquainted with have been performed by many different groups throughout history).

a church or to board public transport).[16]

6.2.   The Construction of Social Practices

To finish presenting this ontological analysis of social practices, let me now put all these pieces together to clarify what they are and how they come into existence. I intend this analysis to offer a new perspective, from the meta-ontological view of social constructionism (as introduced in §3), to understand not only the constitutive elements of social practices (as specified in §2) but also the relationship between them.

First, let us recall what the constitutive elements of social practices are. By mentioning Haslanger's characterisation (in §2.1), I sought to emphasise the relevance of the abstract element of social practices. As she says, "[s]ocial practices are patterns of learned behavior" (Haslanger 2018, 245), which I took to mean that they provide participants with a model to coordinate their individual contributions to the corresponding group actions. Here, rather than disputing her characterisation, I simply outlined the problem (identified by Turner) about the transmission of social practice concepts. Though I believe that Turner's puzzle has severe consequences for an analysis of social practices as comprising such concepts or abstract objects, I think it can be eased by re-focusing on their concrete element (i.e., the recurrent actions performed by social groups based on their shared understanding of what they are doing and how). In this sense, I considered (in §2.2) the 'action' view, which characterises social practices as actions, and so events, of a certain kind. However, while I recognise the importance of emphasising their concrete element, I also regard it as important to appreciate that social practices are made out of not just any kind of actions, but of *group* actions. To ensure a more fine-grained analysis of social practices, I appealed to Tuomela's theory (in §2.3), which highlights the role of both social groups and group agency in the performance of the activities that constitute the relevant group actions.

Thus, following his characterisation of social practices, I suggested that we can spell out their existence in terms of recurrent actions performed by organised groups according to collective reasons. To that end, I sketched both a structuralist theory of social groups that elucidates what it takes for an organised group to exist (in §4), and an irreducible theory of collective intentionality that explains in which way an organised group can be attributed with the performance of intentional actions (in §5). The resulting idea was

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16 The character of the group can also be normatively evaluated (e.g., by judging its action as morally permissible or legally prohibited) and then be attributed with some responsibility.

that organised groups as structured wholes can bring social practices into existence by their group members acting intentionally collectively, either in the I-mode or in the we-mode, based on the normative powers associated to their corresponding roles.[17]

Finally, building on all this, I proposed understanding the performance of social practices in terms of group members carrying out the activities determined by the appropriate action-types (e.g., 'playing football,' 'having a conversation,' 'queueing,' 'dating,' etc.). These action-types, as mentioned in (§6.1), are created, maintained, and further specified by the regular performance of similar action-tokens. Although this implies that people have a shared conception of the actions that they are meant to perform together when participating in a social practice, it is in fact a fair assumption given the historical development of their common background.

Now, the purpose of presenting this analysis of the constitutive elements of social practices is to provide a better understanding of how they come into being and become building blocks in the construction of our social world. As recurrent group actions, social practices are composed of all those activities that are performed with the collective intention to instantiate an action-type (i.e., what glues those activities together is a collective commitment towards accomplishing the tasks that are necessary to produce an action-token). As suggested in (§2.2), though, this performance involves the use of various natural and artificial resources, which may also give rise to unintentional by-products (e.g., noise, pollution, environmental damage, animal suffering, discrimination, injustice, etc.). Moreover, by performing social practices, we create and maintain social objects, e.g., social kinds, collective emotions, social structures, and institutions. To an important extent, this is one of the reasons we engage in their realisation. Thus, appreciating the nature of social practices as being constituted by both abstract and concrete elements (viz., action-types and action-tokens) can help us see the relevance of social groups and group

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17 Since, according to Ritchie (2020, 404), normative powers and group structures are dependent on social factors, including social practices, we may worry that this analysis will end up viciously circular. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point. To avoid this kind of objection, we should remember the other social factors that Ritchie mentions: "social behavior, patterns of action, habits, beliefs, intentions, processes, practices, activities, rules, laws, norms, and arrangements" (Ritchie 2020, 404). Thus, as I understand her proposal, structures are social if they depend constitutively on social factors; but all these factors are each (individually) sufficient. So, a group structure that depends on habits or beliefs is as social as a group structure that depends on practices or norms. The implicit idea in my analysis, then, is that the *basic* structure (and normative powers) of those organised groups that construct social practices depends constitutively on the least complex social factors, e.g., habits, beliefs, and intentions.

agency (i.e., a certain degree of organisation and collective intentionality) in the construction of our social reality.

7.   CONCLUSION

My goal in this paper was to analyse the ontology of social practices. I started by characterising them as recurrent actions performed by organised groups according to collective reasons and elucidated the content of such reasons as specifying action-types constituted by informal norms, the collective following of which amounts to group agents bringing about the corresponding group actions. Then, to clarify the ontology of organised groups and group agency, I utilised both Ritchie's structuralist theory, according to which organised groups exist as structured wholes (i.e., instantiations of group structures), and Tuomela's theory of collective intentionality, according to which groups perform intentional actions if (and only if) their group members act based on we-intentional attitudes towards a shared or group reason.

When elaborating on their salient properties, I discussed the ontology of social practices not only as social constructions, but also as the building blocks in the construction of other social objects. In this sense, following Schatzki, Tuomela, and McMillan, I claimed that social practices are indispensable social grounds in the making of our social world.

A promising extension of this analysis, moreover, will take the idea that we construct social practices by acting according to informal norms (which, as MacCormick 2007, 1, 286 says, only requires there being *norm-users*) to ground the existence of institutions in our acting according to formal or official norms (which further requires there being *norm-givers*). Thus, by analysing the general conditions under which social groups formalise action-types and group structures, we can engage in a thorough discussion about *institutional groups, institutional agency,* and *institutional activities.* This discussion will help us understand the distinctive role that social and institutional practices have in our social reality (e.g., from establishing an informal normative order through customs and traditions, to setting up an international legal order). Although this goes beyond the reach of this paper, the work I present here provides the bedrock for this project and can be taken as the first steps towards its completion.

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