

## **The Role of Social Practices in Interpretive Political Theory**

Interpretive normative theorists often take the interpretation of social practices as an indispensable component of their normative approaches. Critics of interpretive normative theory often challenge that even if it is true that empirically human agents at times have come to adopt the reasons they have via their social practices, this does not make their reasons any more justifiable. Their fundamental skepticism is this: one may very well interpret any historical or contemporary values and that can be a plausible historical, empirical, or literary project—but why should that interpretation of our *social practices* hold normative significance for us?

Much work has been done on defending the philosophical commitments behind interpretivism and interpretivist social science in general<sup>1</sup>; there is a considerable amount of work defending the normative value of particular types of interpretation<sup>2</sup>; there is yet however an explicit account of the role of social practice in interpretivist normative approaches. Crucially, interpretive normative approaches are often (mis-)understood in two ways. Either they are understood as implausibly arguing that we should commit ourselves to a certain set of values *solely because* these values are embodied in our social practices, or they are understood in an intellectualist manner as merely inferring normative commitments from the set of beliefs they are situated in with no reference to social practices.

In this paper, I take on two particular challenges against the role interpretivists give to social practices in their normative projects. The first strand of challenges questions the normative relationship between our shared social practices and the normative commitments we are alleged to hold, suggesting that we cannot draw a relationship between them with sufficient normative significance that could motivate interpretivist normative projects. The second strand

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Taylor (1971); Williams (2000); Bevir & Blakely (2018).

<sup>2</sup> One type of interpretation that has garnered more attention than others in the realm of political theory is genealogy. See, for instance, Tully (2002); Bevir (2008; 2015); Srinivasan (2019).

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of challenges argues that against a background of (reasonable) pluralism, we do not share a wide enough range of social practices or interpretation of such practices to sustain any robust interpretivist normative projects.

I shall argue that interpretivists could robustly defend themselves against both challenges by rejecting the intellectualist commitment that underlines both challenges. More specifically, I shall make two claims in this paper in response to the two challenges. My first claim is that we should reject the first challenge because it mistakes as normative what is an ontological claim. The ontological claim interpretivists could take here is that we can only *count* as (good) reasons for us against an inarticulate background of social practices. What it means for  $x$  to count for us could only be expressed in our practices of making  $x$  count and not by some formulaic set of rules. There is therefore no alternative but to articulate these background practices if we are to understand our reasons without mystification and distortion. My second claim is that the interpretivist normative project survives the second challenge both because it is conceptually possible for interpretivists to draw out commonality and because the interpretivist could draw on both fragmentation and commonality as the basis for her normative project. Recognizing this opens interpretivists up to possible normative projects of various kinds.

Both claims are mine, and while not all interpretivists may agree with my claims given the diversity of the tradition, I make these claims by taking various elements from existing interpretive normative approaches. My defense would be successful if it fulfills the following criteria. Firstly, it should enable us to understand the role social practices play or should play in interpretive normative approaches. Secondly, this understanding should be *(a)* resilient to the prominent challenges against it and *(b)* compatible with the core commitments shared by most interpretivists. Thirdly, it should be compatible with most existing normative interpretivist approaches even if it could lend some critical lens in evaluating these approaches.

The following sections are structured as follows. In section (I), I begin with a debate over Walzer's *Spheres of Justice* to bring out a dominant perception of interpretivist normative approaches and the challenges thus posed to them, especially regarding the role interpretivists give to social practices. In section (II), I tackle the first set of challenges on the role of social practice in interpretivist normative approaches. In section (III), I discuss the second set of challenges and show why plurality does not undermine the possibility of meaningful normative projects. In section (IV), I conclude by showing how my defense in (II) and (III) opens up a diversity of normative approaches for interpretivists and how we can evaluate them.

## **I. How Interpretivism gets interpreted and challenged**

Interpretivism denotes a family of resemblance among theorists who share partially overlapping ontological and normative commitments. However, instead of beginning with these commitments (something I will unpack at length in the subsequent sections), I want to begin with a particular interpretation of Walzer's *Spheres of Justice* and the challenges it invites. I begin with this not because I find this interpretation of Walzer's work best represents interpretivist normative approaches. Rather, I believe not only that this work fails to represent the rich diversity of interpretivist projects, but the following reading of this work is also misleading in important aspects. However, it is this misguided reading that grounds some of the existing attacks against interpretivism, and it is this reading that I intend to correct in this article, and so it may well serve as a starting point.

Such a reading could be found in Joshua Cohen's review of *Spheres of Justice*. Cohen (1986, 462-463) characterizes Walzer's project as "value interpretation" in which "shared values can be discovered through interpretation of institutions and practices" and that this shared understanding provides the *only* point of departure for political philosophy. As Cohen understands it, Walzer takes it in each sphere of justice, the conception of the particular social good (money, political power, health, love etc.) contains within it standards of distributive

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justice, and we can find out that conception through interpreting the existing social practices by the community within that particular sphere.

Cohen's reading takes Walzer's approach as one that is licensed by its communitarian foundations and one that relies on two commitments: (a) the practices of a political community serve as the *only yet sufficient* evidence for identifying the community's shared values, and; (b) these values, by virtue of them being shared by that political community, constitute the *only and all* values that hold normative authority over that community such that any theorizing or critique must begin with these shared values.

This reading indicates how interpretivist normative projects are understood: some normative values are read off from an interpretation of shared social practices, then these values are taken as normatively authoritative by virtue of them being shared. This reading, if accurate, invites two sets of criticism against interpretivism.

The first set of criticism argues that we cannot read any coherent sets of values out of social practices nor impute them with any normative authority by virtue of them being shared. According to Cohen, we cannot infer values from practices because we do not know *why* they comply with these social practices. If they do so out of "combinations of fear, disinterest, narrow self-interest, a restricted sense of alternatives, or a strategic judgment" about how to advance some other values, they cannot be said to share the values embodied in such social practices (Cohen 1986, 462). In other words, unless we can confidently argue that members of the community *consent* to existing social practices, the latter cannot be said to indicate the values held by the former. More fundamentally, because existing social practices do not result from a product of a supreme legislator but instead stem from contingent conflicts and interactions between different groups and individuals, there is no such coherent set of social practices that can serve as a foundation for a project like Walzer's.

Relatedly, it seems such an interpretivist project would fail to have any critical bite. If the values are derived from existing practices, these values cannot possibly deviate from existing practices and therefore cannot be used to criticize existing practices. However, if it is said that part of existing practices betrays the values embodied in another part, it seems arbitrary for the interpretivist to favor one part over the other (Dworkin 1983; Cohen 1986, 463-464). More generally, interpretivists of both vindicatory and critical strands seem to run against an *is/ought* problem in the sense that they seem to derive the *ought* from an *is*, thereby committing what is called a *genetic fallacy*: “to falsely suppose that there is a general entailment from a belief’s origin to its truth-value” (Srinivasan 2019, 128). To recapitulate the fallacy more generally: the context of discovery of a belief (its origin, process formation, and popularity) is irrelevant to its context of justification (reasons that justify the belief).

The second set of criticism argues that we can neither be said to share a sufficient range of social practices nor be said to share the same reasons to endorse these practices. This is already gestured at by Cohen’s claim above that our social practices constitute a messy picture drawn by various contingent interactions between different agents. A Rawlsian may argue that there is very little that we share or could mutually justify to each other in terms of our substantive conceptions of social good. In fact, there is so little that we share all we can be said to share is a public political culture of constitutional democracies (see Mulhall & Swift 1996, 206). And even if and when we do share a set of principles in our public political culture, we come to this “overlapping consensus” from our different substantive values and commitments. The interpretivist then seems to be implausibly asserting and even valorizing a homogeneous shared culture when there is not any.

These criticisms would hold force if the initial reading of interpretivism through Walzer were correct. Crucially, it seems that interpretivists are unable to offer a satisfactory account of social practice that can warrant its normative significance in political theory. Unfortunately,

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for the critics of interpretivism, this reading fundamentally misses the point of interpretivist projects. Correcting their misunderstanding allows me to clarify the place of social practices in interpretivist approaches.

## II. The Role of Social Practices

In this section, I shall begin with a survey of Walzer's work to show that he is less motivated by a valorization of existing social practices and more by an anti-foundationalist ontology of what reasons are. While there are different varieties of anti-foundationalist ontology, Walzer does not explicitly offer a robust account of his own. I shall offer my own preferred account and demonstrate how under this account social practices do not serve as a new foundation for normativity but rather as the intersubjective process through which normativity is achieved and learned. I shall demonstrate how my account offers a robust understanding of the role of social practices in interpretive normative approaches by explaining the normative authority and conceptual determinateness our reasons have for us and how this understanding exposes that the charges of the critics are misguided.

Walzer sometimes tries out all types of defense for his interpretivist project, and that may motivate a reading such as Cohen's. He argues, for instance, for the *connected critic*, a critic who makes their criticism internal to the community's local practices and culture, in strategic terms based on questionable moral psychological premises: without the necessary sense of belonging, people would not be willing to live up to and defend the demands of normative principles (Walzer 1983, 318); if so, the implementation of these principles would press their "practitioners toward manipulation and compulsion" (Walzer 1985, 55).

Crucially, however, Walzer also states that we have no other way to conduct political philosophy but "to interpret to one's fellow citizens the world of meanings that we share" because "we are (all of us) culture-producing creatures; we make and inhabit meaningful worlds" (Walzer 1983, *xiv*; 314). In other words, it is not a matter of rhetorical strategy that is

optional for the theorist. Instead, distributive principles can only be derived from the social meaning of the particular goods to be distributed, and principles fail to have any sufficient determinate action-guiding content unless and until they are interpreted by people in concrete situations (Walzer 1985, 24). In both instances, interpretation is non-optional.

It does not matter, for my purpose, which defense Walzer takes as foundational (they are not, I believe, mutually exclusive). My point here is that the latter defense reveals that Walzer takes on an anti-foundational ontology of what normativity *is*, and that a defense of interpretivist normative theory on this ontology is resilient to the challenges raised in section II. Unfortunately, Walzer himself fails to provide a robust account of these commitments, so in the following, I shall provide my own. To be clear on this, the following account, while it takes on elements from existing interpretivist approaches, is primarily mine. It is not intended to be a faithful exegesis of what interpretivists *do* commit themselves to. Rather, it is an account of commitments that I would recommend interpretivists to subscribe to.

With that caveat in place, I begin my reconstructed account with a commitment to meaning holism that is broadly shared among interpretivists. Meaning holism implies that a belief makes no sense in its atomistic form; it only obtains meaning when it is situated “within a wider context or web of beliefs that sustain and inform” it (Bevir & Blakely 2018, 21). This holistic nature of meaning implies that people do not create or express meanings *de novo*—they always need to make use of their other background beliefs to make sense of existing meanings and create new ones, even if they can be creative, or idiosyncratic, in how they do so (Bevir & Blakely 2018, 27-29).

Meaning holism is anti-foundational (or post-foundational, as some may prefer to call) because it implies that there cannot be any absolute, ultimate, or transcendental *foundation* that self-authenticates and in turn authenticates our system of beliefs. Taking this implication to the realm of normative theory, it implies that there cannot be some ultimate self-authenticating

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normative principle that grounds the rest of our normative reasons. This is so in two ways. Firstly, any self-proclaimed universal principle can only obtain concrete determinate meaning when it is understood within a web of other beliefs. To understand the principle “thou shall not lie”, we already need to have subscribed to an understanding of what a “lie” is, and that in turn requires us to be nested within a web of beliefs about truth and untruth, sincerity and insincerity, human communication, so on and so forth. Secondly, for any such self-proclaimed universal principle to be justifiable, it must invoke supporting reasons external to that principle, and to justify those reasons, we invoke yet other reasons, so on and so forth. We may well attempt to rest all our normative principles on the ground that humans are rational autonomous agents. But that simply begs the question as to what reasons we have to cherish rationality and autonomy.

Non-interpretivists need not reject meaning holism. In fact, few contemporary philosophers would. Scanlon (1998, 65-69; 2014, 16), for instance, argues that *reasons* are irreducibly normative truths but nonetheless agrees that (a) we necessarily employ a set of background judgments to decide what counts as a good reason and the meaning of that reason, that (b) these background judgments are sometimes constituted by social meanings, and that (c) there is a plurality of moral reasons and principles. Rawlsian constructivists would agree that there is no claim about universality truth or human nature that can serve as the ultimate foundation for our conceptions of justice; rather, our conceptions of justice are “founded on public agreement in judgment on due reflection” by persons who hold substantially different sets of beliefs (Rawls 1985, 230).

What non-interpretivists reject, and what I want to bring into the spotlight here, is that a holistic understanding of normativity requires us to give a prominent role to our *social practices*. While non-interpretivists concede that there cannot be some ultimate foundation for our normative reasons, for them it is *sufficient* to situate their project within a set of reasons or



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the commonality between some sets of reasons for their project to take off. Whereas non-interpretivists agree that reasons cannot be understood atomistically, they believe that they can sufficiently explain and justify normative reasons in relation to other reasons without any reference to social practices. Underlying this belief is an *intellectualist commitment* that human subjects are subjects of representation with an inner space (or mind) to process external objects, reasons, desires, and feelings as representations that can all be articulated independently of our social practices (Taylor 1995a, 169). I shall now debunk this premise and thereby elucidate the role of social practice in interpretivist normative approaches.

At the core of this intellectualist commitment is a belief that our background judgments against which reasons count for us are or can be made transparent to us as a set of reasons or interests. This belief is fundamentally mistaken. Upon reflection, we would realize that much of our intelligent action and formulation of representation flow “from an understanding that is largely inarticulate” (Taylor 1995a, 170). This background understanding remains inarticulate not because we are unreflective or lazy. Instead, it is inevitably inarticulate because there is no end to that demand for reasons unless we already share that grasp of things in our practice: “As if giving grounds did not come to an end sometime. But the end is not an ungrounded presupposition: *it is an ungrounded way of acting*” (Wittgenstein 1969, §110, emphasis mine). Normative reasons do not simply presuppose a mutually supporting system of reasons; they also presuppose a set of background practices.

Social practice thus comes into the picture, not as some final court of appeal, but as a grasp of how things are that we share, and it is via this shared background that we manage to make sense to each other. To use Gadamer’s term of art, we are always in a hermeneutical circle: we can explain an emotion term like “shame” by referring to situations that would incite that emotion, but these “shameful situations” could in turn only be understood by reference to the feelings of “shame” experienced in them (Taylor 1985, 23). In the end, we cannot but

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simply point out to the other person, “see, *that* is how you would feel.” And that pointing succeeds because we share a grasp of practices. And if somebody who just does not share our “common sense” and insists that he has never felt shameful nor seen anyone feeling shameful in any situation, that the earth does not exist, or that he gets on the moon whenever he goes to bed, we probably feel like we can go no further—we simply “feel ourselves intellectually very distant” from him (Wittgenstein 1969, §108).

Let us take stock here. Not only is normativity learned in intersubjective contexts; *normativity is an intersubjective achievement*. Not only do we learn the meaning of “shame” but grasping how one situation is shameful and the other is not in our intersubjective practices; “shame” takes on the meaning it now has for us in light of our history of counting some situations as shameful and others as not. Certain reasons have come to count for us because we make them count in our practices; reasons come to have conceptually determinate meaning for us because we distinguish what are the appropriate and inappropriate usages of them in our practices. It is not then, as some critics suggest, that interpretivists take social practices as foundational. Rather, it is only through sharing practices of normativity that we come to grasp the normative authority and determinate conceptual content of normative reasons, and an account of these reasons that leaves these practices out of the picture would simply radically incomplete.

In fact, such an intellectualist account of normative reasons would not only be incomplete but also *mystifying* and *distorting*. Intellectualists mystify their normative authority by presenting them as if they rest upon some finite set of reasons or interests. Utilitarianism does so by presenting rational desire satisfaction as its absolute foundation. In fact, rationality and desire consummation only have come to count for us in our social practices of reaffirming control and everyday life (Taylor 1985b, 266). Scanlonian contractualism, despite all its lip service to meaning holism, does so when in its operation it takes the interests persons have by

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virtue of their standpoints as fundamental. In fact, these so-called fundamental interests have only become intuitively appealing under particular constellations of social practices. Intellectualists distort the conceptual contents of reasons not only when they present them in atomistic ways, but also when they present them as being conceptually determinate *merely* by virtue of being in relation to a set of reasons or beliefs. Freedom can well be defined “holistically” in relation to equality and democracy and other concepts, but what is amiss in any such formulation is what counts as free and unfree in practice.

The implication of my ontological account is that interpretivist theorists should treat *all* reasons as *public* reasons, in the sense that there cannot be a private language of normativity that only one person understands. Reasons only make sense and can only be evaluated within the social practices of some community, and we cannot articulate these reasons without mystification and distortion unless we articulate them through the relevant social practices. This does not mean that the theorist must endorse these practices or these reasons. Instead, as I shall demonstrate in the penultimate section, interpretive theorists could launch a variety of vindicatory and critical projects from this point of departure. The point is rather that this is the *only* point of departure if one wishes to avoid the pitfalls of foundationalism and intellectualism.

We are now on firm footing to respond to the first set of criticisms brought out in section I. This set of criticisms, in its most general expression, argues that the context of values is irrelevant to the justifiability of these values. The fact that certain practices are shared does not imply that the values embodied in these practices thereby possess normative authority. We can now see that this criticism simply misses the point of interpretivists, for they take as a normative claim what interpretivists see as an ontological claim. It is not the interpretivists who treat reasons as authoritative because they are embodied in shared practices. Rather, reasons simply come to be determinate and authoritative through practices.

Recall further critics specifically demand interpretivists to show that members of the community have *consented* to their shared practices and argue that or else the interpretivist normative project is undermined. The preceding paragraph just shows how this criticism is misguided. We don't first consent to practices before practices hold power over us (in terms of shaping our background of judgment). Instead, it is sufficient that we engage in these practices for us to embody the background judgment that is presupposed in them. In fact, this demand for consent seems to me another attempt to assert self-determination as the ultimate foundation for all our normative reasons, but again, we would neither know what consent means nor why consent matters unless we are already engaging in practices of consenting.

Critics of my account may express skepticism that my account is compatible with the commitments held by interpretive normative theorists. It appears, after all, that interpretive normative theorists do commit themselves to some universal reasons. I believe, however, that they are or can be made largely compatible. To the extent that interpretive normative theorists believe that there are some universal reasons, they usually believe that they arise from their holistic ontological commitments, either *negatively* or *positively*. Negatively, "the ontological does help to define the options it is meaningful to support by advocacy" (Taylor 1995b, 183). If one is committed to a holistic understanding of human agents, conceptions of freedom that presuppose an atomistic understanding of human agents cease to be meaningful. This negative approach does not ally itself with any particular normative tradition, but simply eliminate certain normative approaches and ways of thinking, specifically those that demand a universal foundation or presuppose an atomistic or intellectualist conception of human agency (see Bevir & Blakely 2018, 163). As such, it needs to re-introduce any foundation into theorizing and is hence compatible with my ontological account.

Positively, interpretivist theorists could either argue that there are some universal reasons that either arise from their holistic ontology or are compatible with it. While

interpretivists such as Walzer or Taylor sometimes do seem to lean towards the former, I find that implausible if simply because there is no one-to-one relationship between ontological and normative beliefs that allow one to deduce a unique set of normative beliefs from a set of ontological beliefs. The latter is debatable. Some interpretivists suggest, for instance, that there would still be some universal epistemic standards for comparing interpretations, such as that of coherence. I believe the best way to understand these standards is that they arise from human practices in which we understand, interpret, criticize, and compare competing reasons and beliefs (see Bevir 1999, 98). There may be some human practices that are sufficiently shared by most if not all humans across space and time given the similarity of natural conditions of our body or world we inhabit, and that may give us a sufficiently shared grasp of some reasons that count for most (if not all) of us, but these reasons arise from human practices nonetheless. There would also be some human practices that are sufficiently shared all of us *as moderns*, though not by people in other eras, and against that background some reasons count for all of us *now*, for instance, reasons against slavery. To take a different point of departure than that of shared human practices would render interpretivism vulnerable to the pitfalls of foundationalism and intellectualism.

### **III. The Challenge of Plurality**

The previous section ends with the insight that normative reasoning is irreducibly social and hence any satisfactory account of reasons must include an interpretation of the practices that constitute their background. This insight, however, is threatened by the second set of criticisms discussed in section I. Recall that the gist of that set of criticisms is that we can neither be said to share a sufficient range of social practices nor be said to share the same interpretation of these practices, hence we cannot meaningfully talk about *our* practices or *our* values without concealing that plurality. In this section, I want to recast this challenge in light of our insights in section II into two separate challenges. First, the challenge of *contingency*: if

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individuals can deviate from their socially inherited background of values in contingent ways that are not fixed by the logic of that background, in what sense are their newly held values still social? Furthermore, if individuals can come to adopt contingently arrived values, why is there still a need for interpretation? Second, the challenge of *fragmentation*: if our community is split into an infinite number of small groups that engage in diverse practices and interpretations, in what sense can we say that *we* have shared practices and values? If the community is so fragmented, is there still sufficient ground for any interpretivist normative project to take off?

Let us begin with the challenge of contingency by unpacking it further. Even if we agree that all human agents begin by inheriting some social background of judgment, we also must accept that they would modify their inherited reasons as they proceed with their lives. When human agents encounter a new experience, that experience may generate new beliefs that run their existing beliefs into dilemmas, forcing them to make revisions to their previously held reasons (Bevir & Blakely 2018, 25). Crucially, they can do so in contingent ways not fixed by the logic of their previously held background of judgment, and unless this is so, we cannot plausibly explain change and divergence in the history of human values. If we accept this notion of contingency, the challenge that confronts interpretivist normative theorists is to explain how the individuals' newly held beliefs are still meaningfully social in a way that demand interpretation of the practices they are embedded within. If these beliefs are contingently arrived at, can we not simply describe the conceptual content of these beliefs without a reference to their background?

The immediate response is that an interpretivist can fully bite into this challenge and accept that the sociality of reasons concerns merely their origin should individual human agents modify them in a contingent manner. This does not undermine the need for interpretation for two reasons. Firstly, given the vast number of reasons we inherit from our social background,

throughout our lives we most likely consciously only modify a small subset of them and leave the others unchanged (Bevir & Blakely 2018, 29). Secondly, even under modification, the determinate meaning and force of the newly adopted reason only obtain within the very narrative of modification. In other words, the meaning and virtue of the new reason are explained by how it overcomes the problems of previously held reasons. What is amiss if this narrative is taken out? Most importantly, the reason why the new belief appeals to the agent. The new belief is appealing because it overcomes problems of some old beliefs, and the reason why that overcoming constitutes a good reason for it to be authoritative is that the old beliefs themselves are initially appealing. This structure is preserved only within an interpretive narrative.

However, interpretivists could also take on a stronger claim: the human agent's process of belief modification itself is governed by social reasons in a way that does not erase its contingency. The crux of the claim here is that for a person to think that she has reconciled a dilemma of her conflicting beliefs or resolved some problem in her pre-existing beliefs, she must have some criteria of success, and those criteria must be social. Consider, for instance, that a person finds two of her beliefs to be in tension with each other, and by introducing an auxiliary belief, she renders her system of beliefs *coherent*. She may be creative in her choice of auxiliary belief in a way that cannot be determined by her background of pre-existing beliefs. However, the criterion she uses to judge her success, the criterion of coherence, is an intersubjective product through and through. Coherence counts as a virtue for us because we make it count in our social practices (e.g. we treat a person as intelligible if she is coherent throughout her speech, and we treat a person as credible if her deeds are coherent throughout her life). Furthermore, the meaning of coherence is obtained in our day-to-day practices of counting what is coherent and what is not. As the debates surrounding Rawls' reflective equilibrium and more broadly coherentism should inform us, coherence is not some logical

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category with uncontested meaning. This can be generalized into any criteria of success the person employs. Obviously, human agents can likewise modify what these criteria are, but even so, they have to in turn employ other criteria of success in that modification, so on and so forth. Without some such social criteria, the change of beliefs would simply be arbitrary or even pathological—it fails to obtain meaning for either the agent in question or for others.

This does not take away the contingent nature of the process because it does not stipulate what combination of new beliefs the agent must take on or go through to arrive at her final constellation of beliefs. It also does not stipulate which criteria they must use to define their success in that change, except that these criteria must be social. The interpretivist project thus remains meaningful in the face of the contingency challenge. The answer thus far, however, brings on the fragmentation challenge. If individuals can change their beliefs in a contingent manner, we can reasonably expect a fragmented community in which different members take on different practices and interpretations. While this does not challenge the interpretivist framework ontologically, it challenges the normative variant of it on a pragmatic level. If there is so little that we share, can we really launch any meaningful normative projects with “shared values”? Or should we, like Rawls, limit ourselves to a narrow domain of political culture where we can expect overlapping consensus? I will answer this challenge first with a conceptual response, followed by a practical one.

Conceptually, I want to argue that it is possible for us to have shared practices without each of us having *personally* engaged in or endorsed those practices, and recognizing this conceptual possibility takes away some of the force of this pragmatic challenge. Why is that possible? Recall that part of the point about shared practices is that we share a grasp of what those practices are without being ever able to fully and exhaustively articulate their meaning. This constitutes our shared horizon, to borrow a Gadamerian term. Now consider a gymnastics enthusiast who has never ever played himself but enjoyed watching a vast amount of



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gymnastics competitions. He has, in a sense, nonetheless a good grasp of what gymnastics entails without practicing it (unless you count watching as practicing, but as my argument plays out, my conclusion would nonetheless follow). Now consider a bachelor in a society like ours in which monogamous marriage is a widespread practice. He has never practiced marriage himself, and yet he has some grasp of what marriage is. Furthermore, it is possible that he agrees that the reasons people have for engaging in marriage counts as good reasons. And even if he himself does not believe in these reasons personally, it may still be possible for him to find these reasons are reasons that count in public justification (he may just also believe that there are good competing reasons that also count). Contrast this with how we who live in the modern society populated by nuclear families now scorn practices of a traditional community that imposes strong control over the “private lives” of members within their families.

Note that all of these are conceptually possible but not empirically necessary. This conceptual possibility, however, reveals to us that we live under complex social backgrounds with a wide array of social practices, many of which we do not personally engage in. Yet these practices nonetheless form part of the background against which we make some reasons count and others not, even when sometimes we explicitly disavow some of these practices. This is so because our normative activities are so intertwined with this complex background we cannot simply neatly isolate reasons and practices one by one and only commit to them after we examine them one by one respectively. We may well be fragmented if we zoom in to a small set of our specific beliefs and categorize members of the community according to where they stand on these particular beliefs. However, if we zoom out and look at the complex background of normative activities behind these disagreements, we can speak of common threads and currents despite that fragmentation. The interpretivist normative project is not doomed even if we think that it requires commonality for it to take off.

To prevent myself from being misunderstood, I need to offer two caveats here. Firstly, this is merely a conceptual possibility and that says nothing about it being empirically necessary or even likely. Commonality can neither be *a priori* presumed or ruled out. Secondly, and this is what I want to turn to now, interpretivist normative projects need not presuppose commonality. Instead, it matters greatly what the interpretivist practically wants to do. In the remainder of this section, I will examine how Walzer's *Spheres of Justice* could be said to be vulnerable yet also sensitive to just this problem, and then I will show a more successful exemplar, Taylor's examination of the legitimation crisis in contemporary capitalist societies. In the next section, I will generalize the insight obtained from this examination to show that the diverse normative projects interpretivists could engage in that are compatible with my account.

Walzer's project in *Spheres of Justice* could be rightly criticized for brushing over the plurality of practices and values in America. He seems often all too quick to assume that there is one dominant practice in a particular sphere, such as healthcare, and assume that that implies Americans share a particular conception of good in the healthcare and this conception ought to guide our distributive principles in that domain. However, he can also be read, and he certainly intends to be read that way (see Walzer 1983, 8), to be rebelling against the thought that there is some overarching conception of good across all spheres. In other words, the basis of his interpretive normative project is in rejecting that there is such an overarching commonality and in asking us to look at the different practices in different spheres instead. One could take on the insight of this critical idea without accepting his often hastily made substantive claim about what practices and values are shared within each sphere.

If Walzer shows us how we can launch an interpretive normative project on the basis of fragmentation of social practices according to spheres, Taylor could show us how we can draw common threads across different spheres while admitting to the fragmentation of these

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common threads. In fact, this is precisely what Taylor attempts to do in trying to show us why we may feel ambivalent towards capitalism. He argues, in his essay “Legitimation Crisis” (Taylor 1985b), that on one hand, we share the values of instrumental rationality and efficacy, and these values are embedded in the emergence of the private sphere and the institutions that affirm our status as equal subjects of human rights, as citizens, and as producers. On the other hand, we also hold expressive Romantic values, values that are interwoven in our love and family lives. These values can come together, as we see rationalized production and consumption “as aimed to make fulfilment in family life available to the many” (Taylor 1985b, 273). The two, however, come apart and run into tensions when we look at our relationship with nature, and the latter often become the reasons that prop up critiques against capitalism.

Without going into further details into Taylor’s substantive account about capitalism, I want to highlight what is remarkable in his treatment of it. He is able to draw out how the various practices together constitute a background that embodies certain common values, a commonality that I have shown is conceptually possible. He is able to parse out the two dominant sets of values here and show how they come together and apart and how this dynamic process underlines the ambivalence we experience capitalism (not to mention both the inner tensions of each respective set of values and the unexpected consequences of capitalist practices that end up denying the realization of these values). This treatment shows that it is a rich appreciation of both commonality and fragmentation that forms the basis of a successful interpretive normative project.

My defense of an interpretivist account that takes social practices as crucial is thus resilient to the challenge of plurality. It shows that under my account, interpretivist normative projects remain meaningful against the challenges of contingency and fragmentation, the two threads of the challenge of plurality.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Possible Normative Projects**

I have shown in the two previous sections that it is possible to provide an account of why an interpretation of social practices is inevitable if we are to understand our reasons without mystification and distortion. I have further shown that this account is resilient to existing critiques raised in section I, is compatible with key interpretivist commitments, and allows for meaningful interpretivist projects. In the concluding section, I want to give more specificity to the last of these claims by demonstrating the diversity of normative projects compatible with my defense and how my account opens up a more critical understanding of these projects.

My account thus far is compatible with the two major kinds of interpretive normative approaches, categorized by their *intended normative ends*: a vindication or a critique of a web of values. These two normative ends can be further divided into internal and external vindications/critiques. These are by no means the only possible normative ends an interpretation could have, but they capture a wide array of existing normative approaches.<sup>3</sup> Let us now unpack these distinctions, starting with vindicatory approaches. Vindication as a normative end offers reasons to strengthen our confidence in a web of values in relation to its rivals. An external vindication compares between competing webs of values; an internal vindication compares between competing interpretations of the same web of values or compares between competing reasons within that same web of values.

Internal vindication is obviously in line with my account defended thus far. It appeals to a shared web of values and reasons to justify why our shared reasons should commit us to a particular sub-set of values. This does not require us to appeal to any foundation in addition to the reasons that we share. This requires us to appeal to an interpretation of our shared social practices in order for us to understand our shared reasons without mystification and distortion.

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<sup>3</sup> See Williams (2000) for some other normative values of historical interpretations. One such instance is to understand the limits of the normative values we can hold, which is less about vindicating or criticizing any web of values but more about understanding the normative capacities of our current selves.

Walzer's *Spheres of Justice* is an exemplar of this approach: he looks at our shared practices in one sphere to understand our shared commitments in that sphere and use those commitments to vindicate a particular sub-set of principles.

External vindication need not refer to external criteria or foundation either. One way interpretivists conduct external vindication is via interpreting competing webs of values into terms mutually recognizable by their holders. These terms are not value-neutral: they are interpretations that contain reasons and judgments. The *reason* for its success is that it makes sense of two webs of values and any actual or imaginary transition between them in terms such that holders of both webs of values have reason to recognize the transition from one set to another set as an improvement (Williams 2000, 486). If this interpretation provides reasons to favor one web of values over another, it can be said to be vindicatory. The success of this approach need not assume that the holders of two webs of values share any reasons or even any social practices. What is needed is rather an interpretation of the social practices of the other such that we know that another, given their grasp of things, could have reasons to recognize our web of values as an improvement (or vice versa).<sup>4</sup> One exemplar of this approach is William's *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002), in which he argues that the adoption of the value of truth could be recognized as an improvement for people who do not already subscribe to such value.

Let us turn to critical normative ends. Insofar as any vindicatory interpretation is comparative internally or externally, it already criticizes the competing webs of values and interpretations that are being compared against. An internal critique is simply the flip side of an internal vindicatory approach: a sub-set of values is criticized in relation to the web of values we share. There are, however, other external critical approaches that do not rely on comparison.

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<sup>4</sup> The possibility of this understanding of course needs to be argued for rather than assumed. However, arguments for this possibility abound in the literature on incommensurability and I do not wish to rehearse them here, nor do they have significant bearing on my argument. For one example of such an attempt, see Bevir (1999, 111-116).

A critique need not aim at an evaluation of specific arguments; it can also aim to show “a new and more persuasive account” of a web of beliefs, demonstrating that this whole web of beliefs is “systematically mistaken about its own nature” (Bevir 2015, 228).<sup>5</sup> An example that we have already looked at is Taylor’s “Legitimation Crisis”, in which he argues that the practices of capitalism ultimately undermine themselves by falling short of the values these practices are intertwined with.

More broadly speaking, genealogy is one type of such critique. Put simply, genealogy “is a historical narrative that explains an aspect of human life by showing how it came into being” (Bevir 2008, 263), and by doing so, it exposes the contingency and contestability of that belief. However, to say that a belief is contingently formed does not imply that the belief is unjustified—if not, genealogists would commit the genetic fallacy and would paradoxically have to reject all beliefs including their own. What *reason* do we have to believe that genealogy could achieve its intended normative end? To persuade us, genealogists must show how a web of values relies upon certain assumptions about the nature of its concepts and practices and that these assumptions are revealed by genealogical interpretation to be mistaken. Genealogy, then, by revealing all beliefs to be particularistic, has the strongest critical effect against normative theories that premise themselves upon universal assumptions (Bevir 2015, 235).

External critiques such as genealogical ones rely on an interpretation of social practices. Their critical force comes from exposing the gap either between our social practices and the reasons we give for them, or between the reasons we give for these practices and the underlying reasons we have for continuing to endorse them. What we should understand here is that the *act* of expressing, interpreting, or justifying our social practices is itself a practice, and there could at any time be a gap between this expressive practice and the practice that is expressed

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<sup>5</sup> Note, however, that this analysis is still comparative, albeit on a different level: it compares, among existing accounts, which is the best available account of the *nature* of a web of beliefs.

such that we distort and mystify the latter (or sometimes both). Thus interpreted, such critiques are perfectly compatible with my account of social practices.

However, my account also enables interpretive normative theorists to critically examine their accounts. Firstly, while interpretive normative theorists need not adopt my ontological account, it remains true that if they make the interpretation of social practices central to their approach, they would have to face the various challenges I articulate in this paper, and they will have to decide what trade-offs they want to make if they don't follow my account. Secondly, while the ontological account of social practices does not stipulate one unique method of interpretation, it does map the possible ways interpretivists could understand social practices and rule out those that make fundamentalist or intellectualist assumptions. Thirdly, while my account of how reasons arise from social practices is compatible with a range of normative approaches, it is not compatible with an approach that takes social practices as authoritative. That is, social practices do not serve as justificatory grounds for normative values. Instead, the interpretation of social practices only helps articulate our understanding of our background reasons, and that can only serve as a point of departure. Depending on the theorist's specific intended normative goal, they have to pay the additional normative effort in addition to that interpretation of social practices to justify their point.

This paper contributes to the existing literature on interpretivist normative theory by explicating the role of social practices as part of the inarticulate background against which some reasons count for us in particular ways whereas other reasons do not. This defense, as I have shown, shows that the interpretation of our shared practices is an indispensable part of our understanding of the reasons we have but these practices do not automatically serve as a justificatory foundation for our norms. Instead, interpretive normative theorists could launch both vindicatory and critical normative accounts from that point of departure. This shows that this account of social practices is resilient to existing critiques against interpretivism, consistent

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with core interpretivist commitments, and compatible with a diversity of interpretivist normative projects.



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