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Excerpt

The Effects of Practice Theory

Practice theory ... has a double-effect: Compared to mentalism, it does not invite the analysis of mental phenomena 'as such', but the exploration of the embeddedness of the mental activities of understanding and knowing in a complex of doings, thus, the analysis of the interconnectedness of bodily routines of behaviour, mental routines of understanding and knowing and the use of objects. Compared to textualism and intersubjectivism, practice theory does not encourage the regard of institutional complexes solely as spheres of discourse, communication or communicative action, but their consideration as routinized body/knowledge/things-patterns of which discursive practices (understood in the sense elucidated above) are components. The way, for instance, that organizational, gender or science studies change their outlook under the influence of practice theory can be imagined even if one does not know the works that actually are influenced by it. There is a considerable heuristic difference between whether we are, for instance, encouraged to analyse the 'mental maps' that scientists, men/women or members of an organization use; to explore scientific discourses, gender discourse or 'organization as communication'; or whether our interest is directed to reconstruct how gender, science or organization is produced by a nexus of (non-discursive and discursive) practices as body/knowledge/things-complexes.

Not only the model figures of classically modern social theory, the homo economicus and the homo sociologicus, but also the 'high-modern' theories of culture in mentalism, textualism and intersubjectivism imply a rigid formal rationalization of what human agency and social order are. From the point of view of practice theory, Charles Taylor and Pierre Bourdieu make very clear this tendency of 'hyperintellectualization' and situate themselves in opposition to it. Taylor has again and again reconstructed the tradition of 'rationalism' in modern philosophical and social thought. This tradition has in diverse ways narrowed our understanding of human agency and the social. Above all, the traditions of atomism and mentalism, rooted already in early modernity, have promoted the understanding of a 'disengaged subject' and marginalized the importance of the 'significance feature', i.e. the importance of practical understanding. In the form of his critique of the 'scholastic habitus', Bourdieu has arrived at a similar judgement: modern social theory and social philosophy have a tendency to present human agency as a highly reflexive and formally rational enterprise which resembles to an amazing extent the self-images of modern intellectuals and their life-world – in the form of calculating or duty-obeying agents, in the

form of consciousness or mental machines, of dominating texts or conversation.

In fact, it seems that practice theory revises the hyperrational and intellectualized picture of human agency and the social offered by classical and high- modern social theories. Practice theory ‘decentres’ mind, texts and conversation. Simultaneously, it shifts bodily movements, things, practical knowledge and routine to the centre of its vocabulary. The ‘hyperrationalism’ of mentalism consists in encouraging us to understand ourselves not as agents, but either as systems of unconscious mental categories or as intentional streams of individual consciousness. Intersubjectivism invites us to understand ourselves as participants in the highly specific constellation of conversational acts. Textualism calls upon us to regard the social world as a chain of discourses, symbols and communication – all of them preferred intellectual motives – thus, as an unintended play of meanings, distinct from ‘agents’. Practice theory, in contrast, encourages a shifted self-understanding. It invites us to regard agents as carriers of routinized, oversubjective complexes of bodily movements, of forms of interpreting, knowing how and wanting and of the usage of things. We can only speculate on which shifts such a self-understanding could also mean for our ethical outlook on agency and the social. However, it does not seem out of place to assume that practice theory encourages us to regard the ethical problem as the question of creating and taking care of social routines, not as a question of the just, but of the ‘good’ life as it is expressed in certain body/understanding/things complexes.¹⁸ Ethics thus does not refer only to the relation between subjects, but also to the relation to things (including nature) and to oneself (including the body, the motivations and emotions) – a distinctive shift in relation to the utilitarian ethics of the homo economicus, the ethics of duties of the homo sociologicus, the existential ethics of mentalist subjectivism, the discourse ethics of intersubjectivism and the general scepticism towards ethics as it is furthered by mentalist objectivism and textualism.

Practice theory should develop more philosophical perseverance and at the same time not give up its embeddedness in empirical social and cultural analysis. Then, in future the hitherto loose network of praxeological thinking might yield some interesting surprises.