

The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory

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Laurent Thévenot

'We play at paste,
Till qualified for pearl,
Then drop the paste,
And deem ourself a fool.
The shapes, though, were similar,
And our new hands
Learned gem-tactics
Practising sands.'

The Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson,
(New York: Barnes and Noble, 1924: 19)¹

The social sciences have benefited greatly from the elaboration of a concept of 'practice' that contrasts sharply with the model of rationally calculated action. 'Practice' brings into view activities which are situated, corporeal, and shaped by habits without reflection. This notion has been extraordinarily successful and has now been extended to cover every sort of human activity. Not surprisingly, this success has generated debate and revealed problems in this extended usage which covers an enormous diversity of behaviors designated by that term. From one branch of the social sciences to another, the specific character of what counts as a practice differs significantly. Yet, applied with decreasing rigor, the category serves today as a sort of cement for the social sciences. It may be said that the felicity of the concept comes from its extraordinary breadth. It points equally well to agency of the most personal or intimate kind and to agency that is collective, public, or institutional. But the obvious cost of this extension is that it hinders the detailed clarification of differences between types of agency. This is important because these differences are a major feature of our contemporary societies.

The differentiation of 'pragmatic regimes' is the main part of my research I want to clarify in this paper. In order to characterize a concept of pragmatic regime and the way it differs from practice, I shall work through two basic questions which I find insufficiently addressed by most usages of practice. One concerns what I shall refer to as a lack of realism: theories of practice typically do not provide good accounts of our dynamic confrontation with the

world. The other concerns the moral element in practice which shapes the evaluative process governing any pragmatic engagement. I begin this essay with some reasons why I am concerned to differentiate regimes. This will bring me to comment on the two problems raised by the concept of 'practice' as a way to introduce the most basic elements of my own approach.² A second part of the essay offers a more concrete picture of the type of pragmatic versatility required in everyday life in contemporary society. Three commonplace and related scenes, ranging from the most intimate to the most public, will help us to see how best to characterize the configurations of activity. The third part advances the general features of my analytical framework, organized around a differentiation of three main pragmatic regimes: familiarity, regular planning, and justification. This allows us to bring out into the open the ways we detach ourselves from proximity and enter a public space where critique and legitimate justifications hold sway. It will make clear the benefits and the costs of such a move in contrast to the possibilities offered by more local regimes.

Why do we need to recast the concepts of practice and action in social sciences?

The concepts of practice or action constitute the elementary bricks of any construction in social sciences. Reforming these concepts is a serious undertaking. Nonetheless, many social scientists are today involved in such a task. The Sociology of Science and Knowledge (SSK) greatly contributed to this enterprise, with the help of some philosophers of science and knowledge. I have followed a different road to arrive at a political and moral sociology of an 'equipped' or 'furnished' humanity (Thévenot 2001a).³ Therefore, my approach involving the plurality of pragmatic regimes is driven by an effort to relate them to a variation of scope in the delimitation of what is good. However, by contrast to most political and moral philosophers, I am deeply concerned by the various ways the natural and artificial equipment of the human world is involved in diverse conceptions of the good. I shall defend a kind of realist orientation which departs from many philosophical views but also from major trends in social constructivism.

The versatility of agency in contemporary societies: engaging in a plurality of pragmatic regimes

It is not only the variety of activities covered by the term 'practice' which poses a problem. In addition, one must also take into account figures of action which, beyond showing habit and the body, point towards intentions and plans, or towards forms of activity that require reflective argumentation. I am concerned with the fact that in our contemporary societies human beings constantly need to change the scope of their engagement, shifting along a scale between greater or lesser generality. The differentiation of pragmatic

regimes illuminates this necessity of moving between modes of intervention and agency engaged in local or individual circumstances and those modes oriented towards the general or the public.

One of the canonical debates in the social sciences distinguishes between macrosocial structures and microsocial behaviors. This has elicited various attempts to integrate these two levels – notably by Bourdieu and Giddens – by way of conceptual schemes that show the circulation between reciprocally ‘structuring’ and ‘structured’ elements. Like other researchers, I have given special attention to the contribution made by agents in this integration. My research first examined the agents’ capacities to move from particularized situations to general forms according to operations of ‘investment of form’ (Thévenot 1984) which are grounded in a relation to things and their transformation. These operations shape the world by forging likeness and contribute to homogenization, across contexts, in the treatment of people and things (classifications, codes, standards, etc.).⁴ Having identified these operations of making people and things general, it became necessary to relate these ‘invested forms’ to certain modes of coordinated action which are conceived as more legitimate than others and for which these ‘shaped beings’ are qualified. The next step was realized in collaboration with Luc Boltanski. We related these operations of generalization to the issue of legitimate evaluation, that is to the problem of ranking people and things in relation to conceptions of the common good within a public regime of critique and justification.

I introduce here my subsequent research. It returns to the issue of practice and action. I want to situate a public regime in a variety of more local regimes of engagement, in order to analyze this demanding and strenuous pragmatic versatility which is required by our contemporary societies.

The lack of realism: which reality is engaged?

Sociologists have heavily relied on practices viewed as habits, dispositions, routines, customs and traditions to account for static perpetuation and reproduction of social order. There are some exceptions.⁵ The inheritors of pragmatism emphasize the dynamics of practice and creativity (Joas 1993). De Certeau was concerned to elaborate such a dynamics and thereby oppose the rigidity of Bourdieu’s habitus (1972) and Foucault’s disciplinary arrangements (1975). He opened the path to ‘a science of everyday life’ which acknowledges the creative character of disseminated tactics and usages that resist the ‘monotheism’ of panoptical and formal disciplines (de Certeau 1990).

My approach aims to account for not only the movements of an actor but also the way his environment responds to him and the way he takes into account these responses. That is what I refer to as the ‘realism’ of each regime. Most conceptions of practice pay little attention to this type of responsiveness. In my view, it is a matter of central importance. As long as the practice is seen as regular and stable, it can hardly be viewed as a realistic

adjustment to a resistant, changing and transformed world. Thus, it becomes important for me to conceive of the dynamic aspects of activities, even where these are accounted for in the static terms of practice, routine, or habit. Worry over this kind of realism has been disqualified by sociologists who discarded the conception of a reality ‘out there,’ and who have spent much effort to elaborate the alternative concept of a ‘constructed social reality.’ But the dynamics of this material engagement between an agent and his environment is a central issue in my conception of pragmatic regimes. Differentiating regimes brings to light variations in the relevant reality which is put to a test in the dynamics of each kind of pragmatic engagement. The relevant reality depends on the different ways one has to ‘take hold’ of the environment.⁶

The absent moral element: which good is engaged?

The second problem concerns the force that governs each pragmatic regime. Too many candidates present themselves: value, norm, belief, interest, disposition, etc. In my view, the force is based on some conception of the good. This conception differs from one regime to the other. The moral element is crucial. It is the reason why pragmatic regimes are social. It drives both the agent in his conduct and determines the way other agents take hold of or ‘seize’ this conduct. This element might also be called ‘making sense of’ if we are clear that much more is at stake than meaning, language, and understanding.⁷ It originates in a notion of the good that grounds each regime. In fact, my aim is to re-moralize sociology. It would be easy to misunderstand what is meant by this, so I raise a flag of caution. For, by the moral element I mean various conceptions of the good, and these appear in places where social scientists usually identify causal factors such as interests or dispositions and not only in ‘morality’ in the narrowed sense.

This brings us face to face with a main problem of modern social sciences. The question of the good is inadequately addressed. I contend that the previously mentioned candidates for governing practice, or action, are avatars of the good which result from the modeling of social sciences on the pattern of natural sciences. With its inaugural rupture from political and moral philosophy, sociology distanced itself from ideas of good. As a result, sociologists tend to mistrust such ideas because they are reminiscent of the moral and political philosophy from which they believe they have liberated themselves. They replaced them with concepts – like ‘norms’ or ‘values’ – which are supposed to be neutral and descriptive. This has led to the strange situation in which most sociologists, while deeply concerned with political and moral issues (sometimes overtly, sometimes not), generally offer accounts of the social world which poorly acknowledge actors’ preoccupation with the good.⁸

Worry over the good – whatever might be its definition and scope – has been currently transformed into a category of ‘social norm.’ Thus, this category offers an opportunity to examine the reduction of the good to a law-like regularity, within the frame of a classical conception of social practice.

'Social practice' designates a model of human behavior which is congruent with the Durkheimian perspective: regular conduct to which the members of the same collective conform. The realism of this social practice is the kind of objectivity which is typical of what Durkheim called a 'social fact.' This objectivity holds as much for the researcher as for the person implicated in the practice. For the sociologist, it is expressed when the regularity and the collective character of practices is translated into scientific laws with the help of social statistics. What about the good of social practices? Mauss conflates social practices with institutions (Mauss 1927) and the concept of institution suggest some connection to a common good. But Mauss does not elaborate such a good. The superposition of regularity and collective in the notion of institution has been formerly made in two steps. First, Quetelet's construction of *'l'homme moyen'* in emerging social statistics (Desrosières 1998) equated the mean of a series of human beings with the moral ideal. Second, Durkheim gave a twist to Rousseau's political philosophy and assimilated his conception of a civic general interest with a factual collective. Laws created by human beings become laws of regular and therefore objective behaviors (Thévenot 1994a). Grounded by the operation of the statistical mean, 'norm' appeared in sociological theory as a powerful way to incorporate within an objective account of behavior the significance of 'the good' even while radically reducing its moral force. This approach was consistent with the project of the social sciences to adopt the bases and models of natural science (Thévenot 1995b).

Linking the reality and the good engaged: regimes of engagement

The problem may be summarized as follows. The category of 'social norm' closely follows the definition of the social; but the social also supports objectivity; hence, the sociological avatar of the good happens to be very similar to sociological objectivity so that both categories are easily collapsed into the single core notion of 'social.'

Therein lies the problem. This reduction obliterates the main tension that human beings have to resolve and which I view at the basis of all regimes. This general tension is between some kind of good which governs the intervention and some sort of response that comes back to the agent from reality. I employ the term engagement precisely because it captures the link between these two orientations. When used in theories of practice, it usually signifies a material adjustment with the world. But it has a second acceptance which points to a moral or political covenant.⁹

This second aspect makes explicit the agent's commitment to some kind of good. I contend that the kind of pragmatic articulation between the two orientations, the engaged good and the engaged reality, is what makes for the force of each regime. The notion of good needs to be put to a reality test where it is realized in the evaluation of some performance. Symmetrically, the capture of relevant pieces of reality depends on the outline of some good.

This interdependence is precisely what turns a mode of adjustment into a common regime. And this is eventually the characterization I would offer of the social.

From personal convenience to collective conventions

I now turn to a concrete story which deploys different modes of engagement with the environment to illustrate the way human beings are compelled to shift from one mode to the other. I will highlight the kind of good which governs the engagement (varying from personal and local convenience to collective and legitimate conventions) and the kind of realism which orients the way to treat the environment.

A scenario of pragmatic versatility

Personal and local convenience

When I have to present my research on pragmatic regimes to a new audience, I often develop my account by starting from a widely shared set of 'practices' which might be covered by the phrase 'inhabiting a home.' I ask people to give very concrete examples of the reason why their home is personally convenient, and to point to how they accommodate a familiar environment.¹⁰ To provide such examples in public is not an easy task; indeed this difficulty is part of the issue I want to address. People feel embarrassed to publicize practices which they rightly view as part of their intimate personality. What we call *pudeur* in French, or what the British have refined with the spatial and moral conception of 'decency,' hinders such publicity. Elias and Goffman devoted a large part of their work to the study of public civility and to the management of the self in public. But we need to pay as much attention to the familiar engagement which is wrecked by the publicization process.

People meet another interesting difficulty in their testimonies. The everyday use of language, which is such an efficient means to carry an event by a discursive representation, is not very suitable to picture these familiar practices. Persons would do better to show me photographs or invite me to visit their home and refrain from anything but a very indexical use of language. Young people are more inclined to disclose the gestures of accommodation by which they aim at a personal and local convenience. A Russian student admits, blushing slightly, that he puts most of his clothes on an old armchair now entirely dedicated to the usage normally reserved to a shelf. A Mexican girl refers to the way she arranged a table with piles of books supporting a board. An American graduate mentions tinkering with his rickety car, with an adjustable wrench in place of a missing door handle. A French man mentions the peculiar way he found to hold the match and simultaneously press the gas button to turn on his old water-heater.

'Intimate' familiarization evokes a direct corporal implication, the idea of a

tight union between bodily gestures and an environment which makes for highly local convenience. The dynamics of the relationship between the human and nonhuman entities which compose familiar surroundings are highly dependent on personal and local clues that were made out as salient features for adjustment in the commerce with all these familiar beings. In this regime, agents are guided by a wide range of sensorial data, including not only visual but also tactile, auditory, and olfactory clues, as well as indications from spatial positioning (Conein and Jacopin 1993). Such clues are very widely distributed in the web of connections which sustain familiarity.

None of this familiar accommodation is 'social' in the sense of 'social practices' which designate collectively aligned gestures. Other persons might get accustomed to my home if they cooperate in accommodating this habitat into a convenient setting. It does not follow that they have identified the same clues for their own use, since these marks depend strongly on the person and on his or her 'path-dependent' process of learning. The resulting 'collective,' if we can speak of any, spreads from one person to the next and is deeply supported by the familiarized environment. The arduous and gradual task of becoming capable of living with another person's environment does not actually consist in 'sharing' objects or practices. It requires getting accustomed to another personality through connection with that other person's used habitat and familiar world. This process involves weaving and extending the web of all these idiosyncratic linkages with an entourage. By contrast, the clues which have been deposited during the tuning process are not available to any unfamiliar visitor who might enter the appropriated habitat. Such mannerisms will appear bizarre to any observer lacking the intimate knowledge that has been learned through a long process of accommodation. This intrusion of an 'outsider' leads us to the next scene which is governed by a more conventional arrangement of the world.

Conventional utility

When speaking to a young audience, I usually refer to a painful but common experience which introduces the critical encounter between the regime of familiarity just considered and the one we shall consider in this section. I ask them to recount the scene when they were asked by their parents, as children, to put their room into order. Indeed, it is part of the empirical methodology developed by Boltanski and myself to work on such critical situations, paying close attention to the kind of tensions which are at stake.¹¹

Such critical situations induce the agents to disclose the pragmatic requirements of each regime in terms of the engaged good and reality. Young people are very loquacious when it comes to such upsetting happenings. They are inclined to criticize an undue authority or rule which reduces their local arrangement and even their personality by calling it a 'mess.' To facilitate a more balanced view on both regimes and distance from the heteronomous imposition of an order, I would ask my students to imagine the following move

from the first to the second scene: 'leaving your home for an internship, you propose that a friend comes to live in your room during this period.' Most people arrive quickly at the following point. However convenient our familiar belongings are for us and other cohabitants, we cannot leave the environment in a state which, from the newcomer's point of view, appears to be nothing but a mess. To allow an unfamiliar visitor a conventional utilization, the first thing to do is to put our home and belongings in a different sort of order, one that is appropriate for a regime of engagement based on regular action and utility. To do this, we must destroy a fair amount of the familiar capacity of the complex web of our habitat. In addition, we need to restore to their normal state the things that were heavily used, in spite of the fact that we had found ways and clues to handle them with great success. The armchair regains its utilization for sitting, the books are made available for reading, the car handle is fixed to serve as a conventional handle, detailed instructions are added to the water-heater.

However, this configuration of conventional utility and regular action includes substantial latitude within the particular way to achieve the action and concerning the state of the object. What counts as 'good working order' is supposed to be common knowledge, but no warranty of any sort can lead to a more precise qualification. Everyday narrative use of language, with its loose denomination of actions and objects, is sufficient to monitor the propriety of the engagement. This is in marked contrast with both the 'personal and local convenience' of the first scene and 'collective conventions' to which we come in the third and last scene.

Legitimate conventions of qualification

In which circumstances does the previous regime of engagement happen to be insufficient to handle an agent's commerce with people and things? When do we have recourse to a more conventionalized way to seize beings and their relationships? The following answer, frequently given by someone among the audience, offers a good opportunity to explore the shift to a third regime governed by conventions with the highest degree of legitimacy. The new situation is created when the home is rented. The extension of the good which governs the engagement goes a step further, resulting in a more conventionalized handling of persons and things. We imagine that things are not going well for the tenant. An accident occurs because the newcomer to the home did not know how to handle adequately one of the appliances. Such mishaps normally result in nothing more than polite and mutual apologies for misuse and misinformation concerning the appliance. But perhaps the guest or the host are particularly acerbic people, or the accident is serious enough to raise questions about responsibility. The format of 'conventional utility' used to capture things and their relations to people was fine while everything was running smoothly. It is not sufficient when a dispute arises, however, because it assumes a large tolerance concerning the regular utilization of objects.

Should the dispute grow, both parties would go beyond the implicit assumptions of an object in 'good working order.' They would begin to refer to general principles of efficiency (of the car handle), or safety (of the water-heater), or market price (of the books), or patrimony (of the antique armchair), to justify their claims. They would ground their arguments on broad conventional requirements that human or nonhuman entities need to satisfy in order to 'qualify' for being offered as evidence of the argument. If the issue is efficiency, the 'qualification' is clearly different from the case where price is at stake. And things or persons are put to different tests. For instance, by referring to operating instructions, disputants question the action of the user. They may attempt to identify 'misuse' and thereby disqualify the other party as incompetent. Or they might point to the 'deficient behavior' of the object in terms of efficiency to identify a 'defect' and thus disqualify the object. By contrast, efficiency would not be a good test if the market value of a torn book is at stake. In that case, qualification would be based on price. Each characterization indicates that the thing is relevant for some general form of evaluation which orients the kind of repair appropriate to the incident. The dispute leads the parties to make reference to the most legitimate collective conventions. The arguments and the evidence which back up their claims rely on conventionalized linguistic terms and entities.

I chose to locate the scenario in a home space but I could as well have placed it on a different stage, for example the commerce with a ticket-selling machine in a public space (Bréviglieri 1997), or the workplace. In this latter case, conventional qualifications would commonly be more prevalent, while personal and local convenience are less commonly taken into account.¹²

Lessons to be drawn from observed pragmatic versatility

The three scenes discussed above offer a first way of seeing the plurality of modes of engaging the world. I am now in a better position to comment on the analytical options introduced in the first section and to confront them with other orientations in the literature on practice.

The relation between human agency and material environment

I share with a series of authors in the sociological tradition a main interest in the relation between human agency and material environment. Unlike Durkheim, Mauss's notion of practice goes beyond a consideration of social sanctions to take into account bodily gestures, or *techniques du corps*, and the agents' dependence on a local environment (Mauss 1934). This figure stresses an agent's ability to adjust his gestures to a natural or artificial environment. This interest in what will be called later an 'ecological' approach to activity is illustrated, for instance, by Mauss's regrets that telegraph workers do not generally climb the 'primitive' way, with the help of a belt around the pole and their body (Mauss 1934). Mauss's interest in a dynamics of adjustment which

encompasses gestures, objects, and natural elements of the environment was a guiding inspiration for all the work of Leroi-Gourhan – who pointed to the risk of 'pouring the social realm into material realm' (Leroi-Gourhan 1964: 210) – and Haudricourt (1987). Among sociological literature, works on the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) have been unusually concerned with the relation between human agency and material environment and have traced many avenues of research in this direction. The sociology of scientific controversies developed by Latour (1987) and Callon (1986) pictures human agency as the *a posteriori* attributions that result from the network linkage between human beings and non-human entities (Callon and Latour 1981). Recent literature on the role played by the material environment in action and cognition (Conein, Dodier, and Thévenot 1993; Conein and Thévenot 1997) connects with perspectives in cognitive anthropology and cultural studies that stress the fact that human cognition is strongly dependent on the environment of objects (Lave 1988; Norman 1989). Karin Knorr Cetina considers laboratories as sites of both enhanced nature and enhanced agents (1992). Extending her work on the 'manufacture of science' (1981), her studies of the 'ontologies of organisms and machines' in experimental arenas (1993) looks for 'symbolic repertoires' through which 'the structure of things is reset in an epistemic practice.' In her theory of practice, Knorr Cetina refers to the active element as 'tinkering' (Knorr Cetina 1981). Pickering discusses this element under the term 'tuning,' which designates the 'delicate material positioning' so important to practice. This idea supports his argument that 'material agency' is temporally emergent in relation to practice (Pickering 1995a). Ethnomethodologists have been particularly attentive to the settings of action and to the methodological devices which produce a meaningful world (Garfinkel 1967). Cicourel's cognitive sociology illuminated the way the actor perceives and interprets his environment, recognizing what is 'familiar' or 'acceptable' (1974a). Material devices such as photographs and schemas strongly contribute to the scientist's alleged synthesizing capacity (Lynch 1985).¹³

I see a risk in the characterization of the relation between the agent and his environment in terms of symbolic work, meaning, understanding, interpretation, etc. This risk is increased by researchers seeking a 'comprehensive sociology' which conceptualizes the *social* as starting from common frames of understanding rather than pragmatic engagements. It leads to that particular antirealism of which social constructionist views are often accused.¹⁴

The social character of the relation between human agency and material environment

My own approach is different and it goes this way. First, I situate each kind of human agency within a particular way of engaging with the material environment. I am not only concerned with bodily adjustments. Since human beings live in social relationships with others, my second step is to examine their ways of adjusting to the world in light of a particular mode of coordination. My

contention is that coordination with other human beings (and oneself, from one moment to the next) presupposes that the agent makes use of models of activity to take hold of what happens. What is at stake is not simply a matter of 'representation' or 'interpretation': these models are used to monitor one's own conduct and are put to the test of effective coordination with other beings (or oneself) and with the material world. Then, I include in the analysis the agent's modeling which contributes to coordination.¹⁵ The third step is the elucidation of what makes certain modes of coordination commonly enforced and, as such, 'social.' Let us consider this last step in more detail.

The familiar gestures of the first scene, with all their singularity, clearly move us away from the idea of 'social' action in the sense of an act oriented towards other people. They also break with the idea of a 'social practice' which derives from customs, beliefs, symbols, or dispositions shared at the core of a collectivity. Although Bourdieu expressed an initial interest in familiarity, my view on familiar engagement differs from what he says in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977). The notion of habitus, which Bourdieu elaborated as the centerpiece of his theory of the reproduction of social order, short-circuits the analysis of the personalized and localized dynamics of familiarity.¹⁶ Bourdieu was too concerned to make a solid connection between the level of bodily habits and the Mauss-Durkheim level of regular and collective 'social practices.'¹⁷ All the dynamics and personally inventive adjustments are fundamentally impeded by the assumed collective alignment and permanence of habitus which are needed to explain the reproduction of order. Also referring in his own way to the classical notion of habitus, Merleau-Ponty captures more precisely the personal process of familiar accommodation between the human agent armed with a perceiving body and the objects in his or her environment. He considers senses as 'apparatuses to make concretions from an inexhaustible material' (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 245), the body being 'a system of holds on the world' (1964: 53).

Personal and local convenience shows that the social character of the relation between human agency and material environment cannot result from an idea of a collective of shared practices. This relation is supported by idiosyncratic and path-dependent gestures. What is shared is not the gesture which might be hardly understandable, but the mode of engagement from which this gesture gets its propriety (Thévenot 1990b).¹⁸ The three scenes recounted above presented variations of the kinds of propriety which govern the relation between human agents and their environment. I used terms from the root *convenir* (which means literally 'to go with') to designate these variations: personal and local convenience, conventional utilization, collective conventions.¹⁹ Obviously, I do not intend the classical conventionalist approach which is often involved in social constructivism. Propriety does not imply the conformist alignment of practices but leaves a place for creative dynamics.²⁰ At the heart of propriety is the kind of evaluation which governs these dynamics.²¹ As was stated in the first section and exemplified in the second, a notion of the good specifies the relevant reality.

This connection between realism and evaluation requires a significant move from the clear-cut classical fact/value distinction.²² The next section is dedicated to this issue and to the presentation of the main features through which I identify and differentiate a range of pragmatic regimes.

Ways of engaging the world

The notion of pragmatic regime and its main features

Each pragmatic regime that I analyzed is adopted as a common stance to capture events and agents for the purpose of active intervention. In that sense, it is 'social.' A full account of this adoption would require more space than the present essay permits. Thus, I shall provide just a sketch of the line of argument here. Pragmatic regimes are social devices which govern our way of engaging with our environment inasmuch as they articulate two notions: (a) an orientation towards some kind of good; (b) a mode of access to reality. Let me now summarize the main characteristics of regimes (see Table 4.1).

Every regime is built on a delineation of the good. This notion is used to evaluate the state of people and things and judge whether they are appropriately engaged. The extension of the good varies according to the regime. When the evaluation has to meet the requirement of public justification, the good has to be a legitimate common good. The good might be significantly more limited and mundane when it appears in the achievement of some regular planned action. It might be even more personal and localized when it involves some kind of usual attunement with well-known and near-by surroundings. The three scenes sketched in the section entitled 'A scenario of pragmatic versatility' illustrated such variations of the scope of the good.

Table 4.1 Pragmatic regimes of engagement

	<i>Regime of familiarity</i>	<i>Regime of regular planned action</i>	<i>Regime of justification</i>
Which good is engaged? With what evaluation?	Personal and local convenience, within a familiar milieu	Successful conventional action	Collective conventions of the common good
Which reality is engaged? With what capacity?	Usual and used surroundings providing a distributed capacity	Functional instrument	'Qualified' object
What is the format of relevant information?	Local and idiosyncratic perceptual clue	Ordinary semantics of action	Codification
Which kind of agency is construed?	A personality attached to his or her entourage	Planner	'Qualified' person

The relevant *reality* which puts the engagement to a test is connected to the outline of some good. Two consequences result from this view on the agents' realism. In accord with the pragmatist tradition, I deal with a reality which cannot be detached from some sort of activity or intervention (Cartwright 1983; Hacking 1983). In contrast to many pragmatists, however, I do not hold to a uniform notion of action when figuring out human interventions which encounter the resistance of reality. A familiar manipulation will not give access to the same kind of reality as a regular planned action which involves a functional environment, or an act which is open to public critique and takes into account qualified evidence. Which type of reality offers resistance to activity depends on the good, and the dependence is actualized by the pragmatic engagement.

A central feature of the dynamics of engagement consists in the clues, or marks, or qualities, that the agent uses to take hold of or capture the environment and to evaluate the success of his or her engagement through revision and creation. The analysis of different regimes demands that social researchers pay as much attention to the distinct *formats* through which actors take hold of their material environment (through functions, properties, clues, etc.: Thévenot 1993) as to the ways actors deal with their human environment. The standard notion of information usually obscures this variety of formats because it presupposes a standardized coded form.

It is only after having made clear the ways the good and reality are jointly engaged and *articulated* through a specific form of evaluation that we can turn to the kind of capacity of the principal agent which is involved in each pragmatic regime.²³ Beginning with the mode of engagement, it is possible to infer from it the capacities and agencies that are consistent with this mode.

The conjunction of three main pragmatic regimes

In this final section I shall sketch the conjunction of three principal regimes, suggesting their interconnections and the reasons why human beings have to shift from one to the other.

The regime of familiarity

The liberal notion of 'privacy' does not capture the kind of good involved in the regime of familiarity. Privacy assumes the individuality and autonomy which goes with free will and planning, i.e., with the kind of human agency involved in the next regime. By contrast, the regime of familiarity rests on an accustomed dependency with a neighborhood of things and people. The notion of 'use' grasps this intimate relation to the world but ordinarily lacks the dimension of care which reveals the kind of good engaged in a careful tuning with a nearby environment. Reality is not sliced into clear-cut objects which are ready-made for a regular utilization in accordance to their functional design. Things are worn out and fashioned by personal use. Fragmentary and

deeply anchored clues of 'information' are laid down in a web of uses. The resulting integrated capacity is particularly visible in the case of human-machine interaction because it contrasts with the normal way of attributing functional properties to the machine, assuming that it is completely independent of the worker who uses it.²⁴ Human and nonhuman capacities are entangled: one could either say that the things are personalized or that the personality is consolidated by surrounding things. This regime displays the pragmatic requirements that sustain the format of personality which is among the ones most commonly used to treat other human beings. Such human agency depends on the binding web of familiarity ties illustrated in the first scene of the scenario which takes place at home (*chez moi*; in French, literally, at my self). The web of customized attachments constitutes an extension of an 'attached' personality. It strongly contrasts with the agency of the autonomous individual which is involved in the regime of planned action (and actually depends on the functional capacity of objects). The entities of the regime of familiarity are not detached from the personality which appropriated them; rather, they enlarge his or her surface and secure his or her maintenance. When the things we appropriate are customized, tamed, or domesticated they maintain our intimate being.

This distributed capacity hinders the moral and legal process of attributing responsibility, since such attribution requires an individualized and autonomous agency. The web of customized attachments does not allow the detachment of capable (and eventually culpable) individualized entities, either human or objectal, which is required for imputation. A type of management which fosters local and personal attunement to flexibilize the workplace faces the difficulties of imputation in a 'messy' place. An exemplary contrast is offered by the spatial setup of a workplace which fosters detachment. The physical separation of workstations and the standardization of machines and instructions facilitate imputation of responsibility against a familiar type of collective (Thévenot 1997).

The regime of regular action

The regime of regular planned action mirrors a conception of action which is embedded in everyday language and which has been widely explored in the philosophy of action. What difference does it make to refer to this as a specific regime of engagement?

First, I am looking for a figure which agents use to handle what they do and what others do, in an effective mode of coordination of their activity. It departs from a theoretical debate on 'intentional action' as a general model for all human behavior.²⁵ I am not considering one theory of action competing with others, but one of the ways people grasp and monitor their engagement with their environment for an effective coordination. In this respect, the idea of regimes of engagement converges partly with the view proposed by Dennett (1987) when he suggests that we treat intentionality as a kind of

'interpretative stance' which the human actor adopts efficiently to deal with certain events and behaviors. Through empirical exploration of the commerce with things, I have found many examples of people who reasonably attribute an intentional planning agency to certain computerized artifacts which are endowed with refined cognitive abilities (Thévenot 1994b).²⁶ Second, I aim at a more balanced account of the different entities which are engaged, i.e., a principal human agent and his/her environment. The classical view of intentional action concentrates all the attention on the planning capacity of the human agent.²⁷ In the regime which I identify, the environment is seized in a format of functional capacity and the perspective I adopt brings to light the joint elaboration of both intentional-planning agency and instrumental-functional capacity. Third, I want to relate this regime to a kind of good to which agents are committed. Individual interest is often viewed, in social and political sciences, as the universal cause of human action. By contrast, the analysis in terms of regimes helps to see the pragmatic requirements which sustain an individual agency interested in the success of his/her elementary action. The specific delimitation of the good which governs this engagement is both related to the human individual willing agency, and to the functional preparation of the world. It is the good of a fulfilled planned action.

From the above specification, we can view the limits of this regime. The absence of conventional markers, or qualifications, is an obstacle to generalized evaluations which are needed in public disputes involving critique and justification.

The public regime of justification

The dynamics of the regime of critique and justification are discernible in disputes that display the kind of arguments and proofs which demand the highest degree of legitimacy, as illustrated by the third scene above. Boltanski and I identified the different orders of worth which constitute common forms of public evaluation and which are grounded in the same grammar of the common good (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991). Publicity puts a strain on the judgment which guides action. The critical test to which arrangements are put requires that people and things qualify for this reality test. Qualifying is not only a categorization or the creation of a typology; nor is it merely a convergence of beliefs. It depends heavily on capacities that can be tested in relation to the different orders of worth. The third scene above showed how objects might qualify as efficient tools, or commodities appropriate for marketing, or regulatory devices enforcing civic equality in terms of health or safety in particular, or patrimonial assets that relate to the past and anchor trust. Other qualifications relating to different orders of worth are signs supporting fame or creative innovations which testify to inspiration.²⁸

Persons qualify jointly as: professionals or experts; dealers and customers; equal citizens; trustworthy and authoritative people; celebrities, creators. The format of relevant information is always conventional. Reports are much more formalist than the ordinary language used to narrate regular actions.

The three scenes recounted above also suggested the fact that this regime of justification is built on the limitations met in the collective extension of the regime of regular planned action. When large-scale coordination is needed, and this need is combined with the necessity of distant adjustments with anonymous actors, the limited strategic interaction which rests on the mutual attribution of individual plans is no longer appropriate. The dynamics of coordination require a reflexive and judgmental stance which can be viewed in terms of the horizon of a third party.²⁹

Conclusion

The concept of 'practice' frequently points to repetitive and collective types of conduct. Bourdieu's social theory offers a systematic picture of society based on a unique model of behavior guided, from one situation to another, by the collective and stable force of the habitus. With Luc Boltanski, I explored an orthogonal avenue of research. We wanted to address an important issue which could not be dealt with by Bourdieu's framework: the capacity demanded by contemporary societies to shift from one pragmatic orientation to another, depending on arrangements specific to the situation. We initially focused on the pragmatic orientations which are required by public critique and justification. My subsequent work has examined other pragmatic requirements in order to investigate other types of agencies and how they are sustained. Emerging from the point of contact between the outline of the good and the format of reality engaged, the pragmatic regimes of engagement supply some analytical tools for a pragmatic sociology that is concerned about the conditions for realizing political and moral goals in a 'furnished' human world.

Notes

I am grateful to Karin Knorr Cetina and Theodore Schatzki for their useful critiques on previous versions of this text. I am indebted to Peter Meyers for linguistic correction or translation of part of the text and for helpful advice on its organization. I also benefited from his fruitful comments resulting from his ongoing work on power, will, and dependence (Meyers 1989, 1998). He is clearly not responsible for the remaining errors of form and content.

- 1 I owe Peter Meyers the indication of this Emily Dickinson poem which relates qualifying, deeming, shapes, tactics, and practice.
- 2 See Turner (1994) for a quite comprehensive criticism of the notion of social practice.
- 3 The Groupe de Sociologie Politique et Morale (EHESS-CNRS, Paris) has been directed by Luc Boltanski and myself, and I developed the framework which is presented here in the continuation of our former work on critique and justification (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991; in translation). For a short presentation in English of this framework, see: Thévenot (1995a), Boltanski and Thévenot (1999). For discussions, see: Bénatouil (1999); Dodier (1993b); Wagner (1994b, 1999); Wilkinson (1997). For an up-to-date survey of recent moves in French social sciences and humanities, see Dosse (1998). For a US-French comparative study of environmental conflicts built on this framework, see: Thévenot, Moody and Lafaye (2000). On Boltanski's developments about 'régimes d'action' and

- particularly 'régime d'agapè,' see in French: Boltanski (1990). For a comprehensive presentation in French of the framework which is introduced in this essay, see: Thévenot (1990a, 1993, 1994b, 1997, 1998, 2001b).
- 4 *Modernity and Self-Identity* is interestingly dedicated to the interconnection between globalizing influences on the one hand and personal disposition on the other, which Giddens rightly views as a distinctive feature of modernity (Giddens 1991). His developments on 'disembedding mechanism' which separate interaction from the particularities of locales is convergent with my analysis of 'investments in forms.' Giddens's analyses of 'self-actualization' are illuminating but still rest, through his elaboration of 'lifestyles,' on a classical notion of social practice.
 - 5 Winch already noticed the adaptation and local change of custom (Winch 1958).
 - 6 These operations can be designated in terms of 'handling,' 'grasp,' 'seizure' or 'capture.' In French, I have used the generic term *saisir* because it covers manual grip as well as data capture. For a discussion of the vocabulary of 'capture' in relation to the formalization of action in AI, see Agre (1994).
 - 7 Gibbard recently elaborated his moral philosophy on the normative meaning of 'making sense of' (Gibbard 1990).
 - 8 On these issues and an research project of 'empirical political philosophy,' see Wagner (1994a, 1998, 1999).
 - 9 The term 'engagement' might work even better in French where it covers quite concrete material adjustments (a key entering lock, a man moving in a corridor, or a car in a street) as well as a wide range of moral or political commitments.
 - 10 I chose 'environment' as a generic term because of its flexibility. It offers a wider opportunity than 'situation,' 'milieu,' 'setting,' or 'surroundings' to permit variations of the scope and format of what might be taken into consideration for the adjustment. These differences are highly significant in the characterization of the engagement. The phenomenological tradition, in particular Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, contains the most acute insight of the intimate relationship with proximate surroundings. On the relation with the *milieu*, see Berque's stimulating elaboration in terms of 'mediology' (Berque 1986). For a recent and remarkable comprehensive analysis of the engagements involved in 'inhabiting' and 'using,' going back to the classical notion of *khresis*, see Bréviglieri (1998).
 - 11 Ethnomethodologists opened the path with the idea of a 'breaching experiment' which might expose the 'taken-for-granted' in a kind of experimental epoche. With the development of a pragmatic sociology of regimes, we have been able to differentiate the kind of 'breach' which is involved: a critical tension between orders of justification which ground a sentiment of injustice (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991), a critical tension between a regime of justification and regimes of more local arrangements when shift to publicity is required (Thévenot 1990a).
 - 12 But some managers foster this last kind of convenience (Thévenot 1997).
 - 13 For a critique of the consequences in the way to treat objects, see Conein (1997).
 - 14 Among other researchers seeking to overcome this risk, Law and Mol explore three 'theory-metaphors for sociality-materiality' with the idea that materials are relational effects (1995). Rouse's own reflection upon the philosophy of practices is largely dedicated to this issue (1996b).
 - 15 Schatzki recommends that we do not confuse causal mechanism which produces action with practical intelligibility which makes sense of it (1987). But once we pay full attention to the way models of activity are effectively used in modes of coordination, and put to the test, the picture gets more complicated.
 - 16 For rich connections with Durkheim's, Weber's and other authors' uses of the term *habitus*, see Hérin (1987).
 - 17 Schatzki criticizes Bourdieu for conflating corporeal dispositions and a theory of intelligibility (1987). This theory conceived in terms of fundamental oppositions

- is actually Bourdieu's anthropological complement to Durkheim's view on social representations which rule practices. For a criticism of the way Bourdieu deals with the 'individualist dilemma,' see Alexander (1988, 1995).
- 18 I found deep convergence with Rouse's intervention to the seminar which led to this volume. Rouse also refers to 'propriety' to oppose an idea of practice which is grounded in regularity (see his contribution to this volume). I diverge from him by my main interest in acknowledging different kinds of propriety which delineate different pragmatic regimes.
 - 19 Terms from the family 'conven-' do not offer exactly the same possibilities in English and French. Both 'convenience' and 'convenance' are able to capture the level of personal and local propriety. The English term 'conventional' suggests rather broadly a normal, common, or customary conduct. Although insufficiently specified for my need, it can be used to designate the type of normal plan of action and objectal function involved in the second level of propriety. By contrast, the French 'conventionnel' implies a more formal and general agreement and is more adapted to the level of most legitimate forms of coordination. Finally, the French 'déconvenue' designates the rupture of a 'convenance' and points to our methodological approach to investigate these different modes of propriety.
 - 20 This orientation is surely in accord with the pragmatists', particularly Mead's, view concerning ongoing action and the creative part of the process which Joas has been pointing to (Joas 1993).
 - 21 For a pragmatic analysis of different forms of judgment, see Dodier (1993a).
 - 22 On this point, I depart from Powell and DiMaggio (1991) when they build their convergence with ethnomethodology, Giddens, and Bourdieu, on the 'practicality' as an 'affectively and evaluatively neutral' approach to activity. By contrast, I shift to a notion of pragmatic engagement which highlights the connection between practical material engagement and evaluation.
 - 23 Inversely, Law brings together the concrete conditions necessary for citizen competence in a liberal democracy, showing that such competence excludes 'disabled persons' (Law 1998).
 - 24 For this process of familiarization with things, see Thévenot (1990a, 1994b and, at the workplace, 1997). Karin Knorr Cetina reports convergent observations: because of the 'familiarity with the thing (through a joint biography with the detector), [its responses] may be "understood"' (Knorr Cetina 1993, Chapter 5).
 - 25 On this issue, see Meyers (1989). His ongoing work on the notion of will provides an unusual and illuminating view of the historical construction of this notion, of the various roles it plays, and of an alternative constructions of action. See also Meyers (1995, 1998).
 - 26 For stimulating proposals about 'material agency' and a comprehensive discussion of this issue (including the 'Epistemological Chicken' debate initiated by Collins and Yearly [1992]), see Pickering (1995a).
 - 27 For a discussion on the place of plan in action, situated action, and situated cognition: Conein and Jacopin (1993).
 - 28 Things might have multiple conventional qualifications and not only multiple purposes; in that case they sustain *compromises* between these qualifications (for an empirical analysis on the workplace presenting the methodology, see Thévenot [1989]). In the interactionist paradigm, the literature on 'boundary-objects' highlights the benefits which can result from connections to different social worlds and the translations they foster: Star and Griesemer (1989), Fujimura (1992).
 - 29 This third-party reference traces back to Adam Smith's impartial spectator and informs theories of social interaction and public space through Mead's 'generalized other' (1934) and Habermas (1984). On the impartial spectator, see also Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), Boltanski (1999), Meyers (1991).