Three

PRACTICE THEORIES: SCIENTIFIC CHARMS, DIVINE SPELLS

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The mission statement of Society for philosophy of science in practice nicely acquaints to the scope and capacity of practice approach regarding philosophical problems of contemporary scientific edifice:

Philosophy of science has traditionally focused on the relation between scientific theories and the world, at the risk of disregarding scientific practice. In social studies of science and technology, the predominant tendency has been to pay attention to scientific practice and its relation to theories, sometimes wilfully disregarding the world except as a product of social construction. Both approaches have their merits, but they each offer only a limited view, neglecting some essential aspects of science. We advocate a philosophy of scientific practice, based on an analytic framework that takes into consideration theory, practice and the world simultaneously (Society for Philosophy of Science in Practice, 2014).

Two perspectives I ought to stress here and to converge them into practice theories forthwith: first, the notice of necessary restrictions inherent in “traditional” and “social” philosophies of science, and second, the promise not to simply elaborate common themes characteristic to previous endeavors, but to amend them at a substantial level while invoking “the world”. Quite intriguingly the world appears to be the most lacking part of practice theories’ philosophical associates, despite the obvious – it must be, one way or another, a point of departure and ultimate goal of any scientifically, i.e. seriously inclined philosophical talk. If we have too much of theory or too much of practice – eventually, our “analytic framework” does not work properly. This is why the Society addresses some general principles for research programs that contrary to their predecessors engage the world simultaneously merging knowledge with its purpose, conceptual tools with laboratory machinery, individual qualities with political fibre, as well as cultural strands with biophysical environment. If any kind of knowledge is not separable from its aims and concreteness to be fully grasped, an integral practice theory, no matter under a label of naturalism, pragmatism or cultural studies should be based on practice as implicitly constructive ontological source.
I hold Theodore Schatzki’s *Practice theory* one of the best introductory texts concerning subject matter of practice approach. Having in mind the diversity of so-called practice accounts he provides convincing assumptions determining the apparent tension between traditional standpoint and practice attitude. For Schatzki, practice theories (even though practice thinkers are naturally sceptical about *theory* as an instrument capable of precisely depicting or explaining practice as such) present human activity as intimately materially engaging the world in a way that inextricably joints understanding and embodiment. Ongoing experiencing of immediate environment and its performativity thereof constitutes bodily activity framed within practical context. At this phase, practice approach takes up a broadly materialist bearing to inculcate nonhuman agency into practice-oriented structuring of the world. Thus, practice thinker (or thought practitioner) finds himself in (or rather is captured by) a process of reciprocally mediated realm of, say, objective/subjective, material/spiritual, factual/speculative, natural/normative, etc. However, somehow paradoxically (and imperatively) practice thinker is susceptible of actively issuing those distinctions and is amply aware of it.

To be more exact, Schatzki describes practice theory as a platform firmly rooted in “material configurations” and “nonhuman entities”. The point is that practice theory so reconfigured may take an initiative to revise traditionally sound distinctions on the grounds of practices that are neither identifiable with nor reducible to human acts, social sphere, theoretically designed compositions of the natural, or an arrangement of them all. If “nonhumans do not just mediate, but themselves propagate practices” so that practices “comprise human and nonhuman activities”, practice invariance, in other words, casts doubt on any practice analysis that is putatively substantiated through articulation of essential differences between human and nonhuman agency. Accordingly, the primacy of practice is supposed to surmount distinctions of mind/matter, body/self, nature/culture, etc. employing performativist, nonrepresentationalist strategy. Therefore reason, language, actions, individuals, institutions, life worlds and so on are themselves practice phenomena that have only derivative weight, and are subsumed within practice field by practical understanding (Schatzki, 2001, pp. 10–23).

In this light, I single out practice theories’ radical posthumanist party, as it virtually stands alone even among fellow practice co-thinkers, who do not necessarily adopt performative idiom and hardly are nonrepresentationalists or antiessentialists. Posthumanists (I consider Andrew Pickering and Joseph Rouse the foremost deputies among them) typically target at scientific realism, antirealism, constructivism, to a certain extent hermeneuticism and phenomenology, and seemingly push practice approach agenda to its extreme logical end. The assumed shortcomings of philosophies of science involved in Cartesian oppositions are settled here by disentangling practice from its imaginary subordinate bondage to humans. Furthermore, posthumanism does not turn into nonhumanism or anti-humanism either, for engaging the world practically would be exactly the way out of human-nonhuman confrontation.