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*First Order Account Versus the Second  
Order Account of the Concept "Practice"*

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**Abstract**

In this paper, firstly, it is shown that the standard account of the concept 'practice' in the Wittgenstein's philosophy is a therapeutic one. According to this account, the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words cannot be put into words. This account can be seen as the negative aspect of the whole idea of normativity. Secondly, I argue that therapy alone is not adequate. In order to give a plausible account of the whole idea of normativity, the positive aspect of the concept 'practice' has to be presented. Thirdly, I suggest that distinguishing between the first order and the second order account of the concept 'practice' might be a way of explaining the positive aspect. According to the first order account, the constituents of the concept 'practice' have to be given. The second order account sketches out the idea that practice goes all the way down. Our confrontation with things in the world is based upon doing rather than theorising at the very basic level. Overt activities ultimately depend on mental activities.

**Key Words:** 1-Practice 2- First order account 3- Second order account

**1. Practice As therapy: The Negative Aspect of the  
Whole Idea of Normativity**

The standard account of the concept 'practice' in the Wittgensteinian story emphasises that not what we say, but what we do with words is crucial and central to an account of the metaphysics of the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words. This account can be regarded as an anti-theoretical approach, according to which the normative

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standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words cannot be theorised and put into words. Theorising has to stop somewhere, otherwise we are confronted with an infinite regress situation which never comes to an end because each theoretical candidate for the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words has to be interpreted and interpretation never comes to an end. In other words, instead of what we say, it is what we do with words that provides normativity. This account of the concept of practice results from a negative thesis: the normativity of word use cannot be put into words. In the absence of the theoretical account of normativity, the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words cannot be put into words.

This Wittgensteinian anti-theoretic approach, which is often read as a therapeutic account, amounts to a denial of the idea that there are theoretical endeavours in the realm of philosophy. This is a negative thesis about practice which emphasises that there is nothing over and above practice and what we do with words which provides the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words. Normativity is grounded in what we do with words.<sup>1</sup>

According to the therapeutic account, Wittgenstein tries to show that philosophy does not deal with making theories. Rather, philosophy is an activity which never comes to an end. Philosophy deals with what we do with words. Being engaged in philosophy does not lead to arriving at theories. There is nothing over and above activity and being engaged in practice. We have to do something instead of saying something to be involved in philosophical activity. In such a way, we can make our problems clearer. Wittgenstein says:

Our... investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language (8, §90).

Philosophy deals with an ongoing clearing-up of different parts of language. There is no such thing as a theoretical approach to resolving philosophical problems. Rather, to the extent that we are engaged in practice, we can cure ourselves of thinking that philosophical problems exist. In other words, an ongoing arrangement and re-arrangement of words helps us to remove

incorrect usage of words from language. Philosophy is about what we do with words.

According to the therapeutic account, there is no such thing as a general and pre-existing signpost and criterion according to which we can find the right way to use a word. Rather, the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words is formed through our practice. There is no such thing as a theorised normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words which is posited over and above practice. Being engaged in practice, on its own, guides us to how to go on.

### **1. 1. Rule-Following Argument**

Let us now look at the rule-following argument in *Philosophical Investigations* to make the therapeutic account clearer.<sup>2</sup>

According to the therapeutic account of Wittgenstein, the rule-following argument deals with the inability of a pupil to theorise and put into words the notion of following a rule like ‘add 2’. Each explanation and interpretation needs to be interpreted. The interpretation never comes to an end. So, there is no such thing as a theorised normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of following a rule. There is no final theoretical account of how we arrive at the normativity which we are looking for. Consider the following quotes by Wittgenstein:

...Now we get the pupil to continue a series (say +2) beyond 1000—and he writes 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012.

We say to him: “Look what you’ve done!”—He doesn’t understand. We say: “You were meant to add *two*: look how you began the series!”—He answers: “Yes, isn’t it right? I thought that was how I was *meant* to do it.”—Or suppose he pointed to the series and said: “But I went on in the same way.”—It would now be no use to say: “But can’t you see....?”—and repeat the old examples and explanations(8,§185).

According to Wittgenstein, there is no such thing as a theoretical understanding according to which we follow the rule. However, it does not follow from this that the whole idea of normativity will evaporate when we talk about obeying a rule. Rather, the right way of following a rule comes out to the extent that we are engaged in practice. The right way of following a rule cannot be theorised and put into words. It cannot be articulated in a proposition, otherwise we will be confronted with a regress situation which never comes to an end.

In fact, the slogan of this therapeutic account of the rule-following argument is that instead of adhering to rules and their interpretations to give an account of what normative constraint consists of, focusing on practice and what we do with words over time provides normativity.<sup>3</sup> In the denial of the Platonic source of normativity, according to which the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words consists of the theoretical patterns which are formulated entirely independently of what we, as language -users, do with words; we have a crucial role to provide normativity by being engaged in practice. What we do with words has the main role in the metaphysics of the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words.

## **2. Therapy is not Adequate**

At this stage, I wish to criticize the therapeutic account of practice and the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words in more detail.

So far, we have dealt with the negative aspect of the whole idea of normativity and normative constraint. Now, what I am planning to show is that if we concentrate only on the point that being engaged in practice is enough to provide normativity, it seems that we are offered a mysterious and unclear account, according to which there is no account available of how we arrive at the rightness and wrongness of the use of words in a concrete situation.<sup>4</sup>

According to the therapeutic account, the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words cannot be put into words. If this is the case and there is nothing which can be put into words, how can we make the distinction between the rightness and wrongness intelligible? If there is nothing which can be put into words, how can we tell a convincing account, according to which someone who has got the wrong normative judgment in a concrete situation, changes his judgment? Is there any story to be told in this respect? It seems that the way in which a therapist arrives at the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words is vague and unclear.

In order to give an account of how the distinction between rightness and wrongness makes sense, something has to be added to the negative conception of practice. There is an account with

regard to the positive conception of practice which has to be given. The notion of practice has to be unpacked in such a way that the distinction between rightness and wrongness makes sense. It is not adequate to say that the concept of practice cannot be theorised. Something else has to be added and doing this provides the positive account of the concept of practice.

As long as we adhere to the unanalysed account of the notion of practice and being engaged in practice, we are not offered a positive account of the idea of normativity, according to which we can distinguish between rightness and wrongness.

In fact, by analysing the issue we are talking about the practical legitimation of the concept of practice. What follows below is just a sketch of the idea of practical legitimation of the concept 'practice'. I give an outline account of the positive aspect of the concept 'practice'.

### **3. First Order Account of the Concept 'Practice': Its Constituents**

In order to give an account of the positive aspect of the normative story, it might be a good idea to distinguish between two different aspects of the concept of practice. Let us regard these two different aspects of the concept of practice as the first order account and the second order account.<sup>5</sup>

The discussion with regard to the concept 'practice' from the first-order point of view deals with the components of the concept of practice. It concerns the elements of practice which have to be acquired before one can be regarded as a person who practises well. In other words, talking about the constituents of the concept 'practice' at this level makes clear what one must do in order to be regarded as an individual who practises well. Moreover, the whole idea of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words, at this level, concerns the circumstances in which a practice can be regarded as correct or incorrect, though it cannot be theorised. However, the role of the concept 'practice' in arriving at the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words is not at stake.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, having endorsed what we do with words which cannot be theorised and provides the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words, the discussion with regard to the notion of practice, at this level, tries to

shed light on the constituents of the concept of practice which have to be considered so that one can be regarded as a person who practises well. Let me give an example to clarify the point.

Consider the case of a professional tennis player preparing to take part in a tennis championship. He starts practising under the supervision of his coach. Now, would it be enough for the coach just to say to the tennis player that one has to be engaged in practice to be prepared for the championship? If this is the case, how can the coach assess the tennis player's progress? How can the coach say that the player is going the *right* way or not?

It seems counter-intuitive to say that the coach has only to ask the tennis player to be engaged in practice without clarifying what he means by practice in detail. In other words, the components of the notion of practice have to be unfolded during the training. If this is not done, the tennis player cannot see how to go on and make significant progress. For instance, the coach has to give the tennis player some instructions according to which he manages his energy throughout the game. The coach has to train him how to use the racket in different positions in the game; how to manoeuvre his body during the game; how to serve; how to return serve in the game; how to assess the height of the net; how he maintains his self-confidence even if he is losing the game, etc.

The components of practice have to be given in detail. If not, the trainee is offered a strange and mysterious account of practice, according to which there is no way to evaluate his progress. In other words, being engaged in practice is associated with being familiar with the components of practice. To the extent that the tennis player is familiar with the components of practice, he can be assessed. Suppose that the tennis player does not pay attention to what the coach says with regard to the circumstances in which he needs to smash. Rather, the tennis player smashes whenever he thinks that it is a good time to do so. In such a situation, we can say that the tennis player is not going the right way and he practices *wrongly*. So, the constituent of the concept of practice which makes part of the positive aspect of the whole idea of normativity gives an account of how being engaged in wrong practice can be distinguished from being engaged in right practice.

At this stage, we must remember that talking about the components of the concept of practice from the first-order point of

view does not lead to the theoretical account of normativity and the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words which was criticised earlier. Rather, once the point has been endorsed, the whole idea of normativity and normative constraint cannot be theorised and put into words; this part of the positive aspect of the whole idea of normativity tries to give an account of how the concept of practice and its constituents provides normativity and a normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words which we are looking for. In other words, according to the negative aspect of the normative story, not what we say but what we do with words provides normativity. We have to do something with words in order to provide normativity. But, according to the positive aspect of the normative story which deals with the concept of practice from the first-order point of view, saying only that what we do with words provides normativity would not be enough and we will end up with an unclear account of what the distinction between right and wrong is. So, we have to unpack the notion of practice and give more detail with regard to the components of the concept 'practice'.

#### **4. Second-order Account of the Concept 'Practice': Doing Goes All the Way Down**

Now, let us consider the concept of practice from the second order point of view in order to give more detail to a possible account of the positive aspect of the whole idea of normativity.

Talking about the concept of practice from the second order point of view deals with the issue of whether or not being engaged in practice is prior to theorising at the very basic level of our confrontation with things in the world. Which comes first at the very basic level? Being engaged in practising or being engaged in theorising? Shall we say that our overt activity is the end of the line? Or, going deep down, our overt activities are based upon mental activities?

At this stage, I am outlining the idea that overt activities are ultimately grounded in mental activities. Being engaged in practice and doing is prior to theorising at the very basic level of our confrontation with things in the world. In other words, our beliefs, desires, etc. which outline our cognitive relationship with the world are based upon what we do instead of what we say. Doing goes all

the way down, theories come afterwards. Moreover, we have to bear in mind that there is a normative element in saying that our beliefs, desires, etc. are formed by practice all the way down, which has to be taken into account. In other words, it is not the case that only theories are associated with *ought* and the idea of normative constraint. Rather, if we subscribe to the point that what we do with things in the world shapes our cognitive profile even at the very basic level, an account of how we arrive at the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words is presented. We show that we ought to respond to things in the world in such a way rather than the other way. In other words, there is a normative constraint which is being formed here to the extent that we are engaged with things in the world. If it is practice 'all the way down', then practice has to be intrinsically normative: it does not need theory to provide the normative 'ought'. What I want to sketch is one possible way of making sense of this idea. The idea is that in performing practice, we are *committing* ourselves to responding to the environment in a specific way. Attending and committing to the environment starts with mental activity, not a mental stasis that is then shaped by reasons. It is not the case that the way in which we are engaged with things in the environment is derived from some fixed and static rules. Rather, it is flexible and based upon our ongoing commitment to things in the world. Mental activity is the point of departure. Bodily practice is based upon mental activity. Let me give an example to clarify the point.

Consider a very simple action and the role of mental activity. Take the case of a student sitting in front of his laptop and typing his essay which is supposed to be submitted in the near future. At the same time, a bee comes into the room through the window. Now, if the student is planning to carry on with typing his essay, he has to stand up and wave his hand in such a way that the bee will leave the room through the window. Otherwise, the bee could sting him and stop him from typing. The crucial point at this stage is that the way in which the student engages with the bee at the very basic level is an ongoing mental activity which cannot be theorised and put into words. Bodily practice is based upon mental activity. There is nothing over and above his straightforward attending to the bee and being engaged in mental activity which can make his cognitive profile in this respect. Overt activity is

based upon mental activity. For instance, he follows the pathway of the bee over time and waves his hand in such a way that he can make the bee move in the direction of the window. In other words, by being engaged in attending to the bee over time which is a kind of mental activity, the student is shaping his cognitive profile. As a result of this, he appeals to bodily practice in order to get the bee out of the room. The student's bodily practice is based upon his mental activity which emerges from his confrontation with the bee in the room at the very basic level.

Now, it seems that what is going on in the environment is a matter of doing rather than theorising. It is not the case that the student resorts to theories in order to make his relationship with the bee intelligible. Rather, attention as a basic doing comes first. He *attends* to the bee and the way in which he is confronted with the bee forms his cognitive profile with regard to the bee. In other words, what is going on, at the very basic level, is a matter of doing and committing to the bee in the environment rather than following theories. In other words, what is primitive is the way in which the student attends to the bee and commits himself to what is going on in the room. This kind of commitment and attending cannot be theorised. Rather, he has to be engaged in doing and attending to the bee at the very basic level. There is nothing beyond being engaged in practice and doing which can make intelligible the student's confrontation with the bee in the first place. In other words, as the student's cognitive profile with regard to the bee is shaped following his being engaged in practice and doing, we can say that the student is involved in a kind of mental activity. It is not the case that there are theories according to which the student's confrontation with the bee can be explained, normatively speaking. At the very basic level, the student does not resort to theories to make his relationship with the bee intelligible. Rather, he attends to the bee in the sense that he commits himself to the way in which the bee moves in the room over time. This kind of confrontation, which is relational in the sense that it is formed only after perceptual coupling and relating with a thing in the environment, cannot be theorised. So, according to this account, what comes first in the confrontation with the bee is attending and mental activity rather than following rules. Attention and commitment is prior, theories come after.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, if attending and perceptual coupling with things leaves no place for theorising at the very basic level, the role of the agent who engages with things is crucial and has to be taken into account. What I mean by the task of the agent is his capacity to engage actively with things in the environment. The agent has a capacity to shape his cognitive profile following his active engagement with things in the environment. In fact, his capacity to couple with things at the very basic level and the way in which the agent conceptually engages with things in the environment gives an account of how we couple with things in the world at the very basic level. This kind of engaging and coupling with things in the environment is relational and provides a normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words. Luntley says:

By 'coupling' I mean a conceptually articulated engagement with a thing or property of the environment. Couplings are relational (3, p.2).

So, the subject as an agent has a capacity to couple actively with things in the environment. The way in which his thought is formulated can be regarded as a kind of mental activity. This is an agent with a capacity to be engaged with things in the environment through mental activity which is primitive in the formation of a normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words. Theories come afterwards.

Having sketched the concept 'practice' from the second order point of view, we can say that the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words deals with what we do. Doing and practising goes all the way down in the analysis and forms our cognitive relationship with the world at the very basic level.

Moreover, the account of the concept 'practice' from the second-order point of view, unlike from the first-order point of view, is far from the common sensical account of the concept 'practice'. In other words, the common sensical account of the concept of practice deals with what we do in real life. For instance, a goalkeeper during a football match practises goal keeping. He can be a better goalkeeper provided that he keeps practising throughout the tournament. This is the account of the concept 'practice' which we have seen in the discussion from the first-order point of view. On the other hand, the account of concept 'practice' from the second-order point of view does not deal with the common sensical

account of the concept 'practice'. Rather, it tries to show that we cannot get away from being engaged in practice and doing even at the very basic level of our confrontation with the world. According to this account of the concept 'practice', doing goes all the way down. The way in which we are conceptually engaged with things in the world is based upon what we do rather than what we say at the very basic level.

To recap, in order to sketch the idea of the practical legitimation of the concept 'practice', giving an outline account of the positive aspect of the whole idea of 'normativity', it is a good idea to distinguish the first-order and the second-order accounts of the concept 'practice'. According to the first-order account of the concept of practice, taking into account 'what we do with words', which provides the negative aspect of the normative story, sounds mysterious and vague. So, in order to eliminate the mystery from the concept 'practice' and give a justified account of the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words, the constituents of the concept 'practice' have to be articulated. The more the components of the concept of practice are unfolded, the more we see what the distinction between the rightness and wrongness of the use of words is.

Furthermore, according to the second-order account of the concept 'practice', the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words is entirely associated with activity. Overt activities depend on mental activities. Doing and being engaged in practice goes all the way down in the analysis to the extent that there is no space left for theorising in the first place. Being engaged with a thing or a property in the environment at the very basic level provides the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words.

### **Notes**

- 1- For more elaboration with regard to the therapeutic account, see the following references: (2, chapters 1,2 and 3). See also (5, Lecture 5). See also (7, pp. 17-20 & chap.1).
- 2- What I am doing is utilising the rule-following argument to make the distinction between the therapeutic account and its rival, the theoretical account, clearer.
- 3- For more elaboration on the rule-following argument, see (6, pp. 50-73 & pp. 198-218). See also (1)

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The role of time in arriving at the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words is this. Seeing the rightness of the usage of a word requires the word to be applied on different occasions. In other words, the language-user needs time to be engaged in using the word in several circumstances. Only in this way the language-user can arrive at the right usage of the word.

4- We must remember that we are talking about the whole idea of practice and its association with the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of the use of words in a first order sense. In other words, whether or not the way in which we are engaged with things in the world at the very basic level, is practising and doing but not theorising is not my concern at this stage. This is an issue with regard to the concept of practice from the second order point of view.

5- The mystery and vagueness of the concept of practice which I am discussing lies in *the way* in which we arrive at the rightness of 'telling the truth', in the realm of morality, in a concrete case in which it is combined with another morally relevant feature such as reparation. So, it is a first order perspective in the sense that it deals with what we do in each concrete ethical situation to arrive at the rightness and wrongness of moral vocabulary. In this philosophical endeavour, the normative standard of the rightness and wrongness of words, and the way in which we arrive at rightness or wrongness are under investigation.

6- Note that what I am saying with regard to the distinction between the first-order and the second-order account of the concept 'practice' is only a possible suggestion to elaborate the positive aspect of the concept 'practice'.

7- This is the issue with regard to the concept of practice from the second-order point of view.

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