

Rouse Joseph (2023) Social Practices as Biological Niche Construction. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. 352 pages. ISBN 9780226827957.

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Joseph Rouse is concerned with (re)conceptualizing practice and practices-in-practice as the basic element of human social life and human nature. In promoting a thorough-going contemporary philosophical naturalism, he argues that practice, episodes of humans doing their varied socialities in various situations as doings of their very being as lively social organisms, effect epistemic and moral norms simultaneously. The projects of describing the world and making judgements as agents, which Kant, inspired by Hume, separated out as distinct, are re-imagined as one.

Central to Rouse's most recent book is the issue of how challenges to cognitivism, arguing for explicit recognition of complex assemblages of institutional practice, might proceed. Rouse implicitly offers a radically novel working imaginary of human social life and human nature as based in institutional procedure and humans' practices-centred work. He cogently argues that humans' practices-centred work is an evolutionary extension of the practices-centred work that non-human animals enact in living as particular non-human animals. The title names this using the appropriate technical concept: 'biological niche construction'. The book's chapter 2 is given over to making this argument.

The dominant ideology of cognitivism locates meaning, understanding, and critical assessment in individual minds and thought. Cognitivists see those human capacities as informed by bodily perceptions but assume analyses of social life that inform individual human social agency is

mind-work. By contrast, a fully-fledged practice-based account emphasizes individual practices of embodied experiencing in situ, and subsequent articulation in wordings by individual participants, along with proceduralizations as practice in institutional functioning.

As a practitioner of sciences and technologies studies, I have been inspired by Rouse's writings for many years now, albeit my focus on using practices-based methods will seem remote from Rouse's theorising. My work has been driven by the need to manage on-the-ground relations between incommensurability and commensurability in working in epistemic good faith between disparate knowledge traditions. As a philosopher of science, Rouse is focused on theorizing contemporary human nature and human social life as an expression of a thorough-going philosophical naturalism that refuses the traditional Humean empiricist dichotomy of description and judgment (cf. Määttänen, 2022). Understanding Rouse's project this way positions it as both a direct descendant and potent challenger of the tradition of empiricism attributable to David Hume (cf. Prinz, 2015). Although Rouse mentions Hume only once in a minor footnote, and he does not propose this book as participating in a paradigm change, my claim is that it is not inappropriate to read it this way.

In the opening chapter of this latest contribution to his long-term project, Rouse suggests that at least three major challenges have in the past been mounted in opposition to the signifi-



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cant shift in conceptualizing human nature and the socialities that focus on practice spawns. He attends to these challenges in turn. First, he considers how best to analytically consider the interrelations between those who participate in practices and the contexts – the sociomaterialities – of their participation. Second, Rouse elaborates that “a central issue for practice-based conceptions [is] how performances [enactments] belong to and are enabled by or conditioned by a practice, and how that belonging together is sustained in and through subsequent performances” (p. 32). The third form of challenge is, in Rouse’s opinion, central, if practice-based conceptions are to successfully challenge the dominant cognitivism in initiating and sustaining a major paradigm shift in philosophy and social sciences where “practices constitute a publicly accessible locus of meaning and understanding” (p. 32). In considering this third aspect, Rouse notes that there are alternative interpretations of where such public meaning-making and understanding is located:

“One strategy emphasizes flexible bodily skills for coping with situations, including participants’ embodied responses to one another’s performances. Alternative strategies take different approaches to language use as a public domain that enables making sense of and responding to one another’s performances in partially shared circumstances” (p. 32).

The substantive element of chapter one is an adumbration of the established means that theorists of practice-based approaches have developed in meeting these challenges. Having thus carefully listed and responded to challenges of the practice-based approach vis-à-vis the cognitivist, Rouse turns attention to those aspects in which it remains inadequate. He contends that these inadequacies lie in the social-theoretic form of conceptualising practice and of reading practices-in-practice. It is this formulation that is the target of Rouse’s critique.

The book sets out to elaborate how the inclusion of the biological in conceiving ‘a practice’ makes good on the deficiencies of the social-theoretic accounting both the concept of ‘a practice’ and the articulating of ‘practices-in-practice’. Prac-

tices-in-practice are actual enactments or performances of a practice generating meaning and understanding as a concept, which necessarily renders a particular account of the here-and-now, and simultaneously affords possibilities for judgements. Rouse proposes that the root difficulty with developing adequate conceptions of practice – as the basis of human nature and the forms of human sociality which that account of human nature precipitates – arises because the accounts offered are situated in an abstracted symbolic social realm. Practices have been ontologically separated out from the actualities of their biological significance in human ways of life.

As Rouse sees it, the challenge in conceptualizing a practice and appropriately reading practices-in-practice has two aspects. First, the social theoretic conceptualization of practice lacks a non-arbitrary basis for identifying temporally-extended and spatially-dispersed collective enactments as a practice-in-practice of this practice, and eventually this conceptualization of the world. Second, for that identification to be adequate, it needs to disclose the sources and expressions of the normative authority with which a practice both enables and influences emergent particular enactments, which might then be judged as good enough repetitions (p. 54).

With regard to the first aspect, he points out that practitioners need to be able to reliably specify why this enactment here-and-now counts (or does not) as practice bringing a particular concept to life – say a number. As a practice which has meaning as a particular concept, why does this enactment count as the concept of number, but not that enactment? In my experience, the difficulties Rouse is summarising here are real experienceable difficulties for the researcher who would use a practices-based method in inquiry. Rouse does not offer illustration of how these might be experienced, but for those for whom illustration helps grasp the problem, a vivid account of a researcher facing exactly this problem can be found in chapter one of my book *Science and an African Logic* (Verran, 2001). Accounted there too is experience of the second problem Rouse identifies with social-theoretic accounts of practice: the need to disclose the sources, and account expressions of, normative authority. I elaborate the

confusion and discomfort of experiencing exactly those tensions Rouse names as an aporia.

Rouse provides an account of the origins of institutional practice as biological, which affords the claim that human nature and the material socialities that emerge in its workings are ‘practices all the way down’. In doing so, it plugs a significant hole in the project of articulating a naturalist form of sociality. As I read the significance of the book, this is where Hume as antecedent comes in. Kant did a job on Hume’s ‘story’ concerning experience and human nature, rendering senses as enabling description and knowledge claims which afforded judgements as social norms, which in turn afforded the possibility of articulating practices

generating social goods. Rouse’s account of practices however turns Hume’s story inside out. After Rouse it can be seen how these steps might flow in the opposite direction. Practices of human ‘doings’, with their varied socialities and various situatedness, effect epistemic and moral norms. Participation (more or less competent) in those practices that effect epistemic and moral norms is what is experienced. The task of the researcher is to account participation, reflexively account the competence, and tease out the epistemic and the moral, in discerning, for example, those practices that inflict epistemic or moral harm, and how they do so.

References

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