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## Social Normativity: What's at Stake? [Swiss Philosophical Preprint Series.No-30]

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**Social Normativity: What's at Stake?**

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# Social Normativity: What's at Stake?

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that what is at stake in the debate over the nature of social normativity is the understanding of the significance of the tension between repetition (and reinforcement of it) and change (and openness to it). The first and second parts of the paper offer illustrations of the pervasiveness and tenacity of reinforcement, as well as the rarity, but also urgent need for, openness. The paper also argues that the most dominant reason as to why the above-mentioned tension has received little attention in the literature is because of the focus on the analysis of the nature and status of orders (composed of normative requirements), which are assumed or are posited to regulate or govern social life (and thereby reified). The paper argues that when we resist reification of normative orders and see these orders, instead, as projections that enable human beings to achieve certain aims, we open the door to understanding the above-mentioned tension and its significance. Further, when we see normative orders as projections, we can also understand that normative requirements are all capable of being distinguished only in degree, and not in kind. In other words, what we ordinarily think of as the normal and the normative form a continuum (rather than a gap) ranging from, on the one hand, that which we would be surprised or enraged to see as being doubted or undermined, to, on the other hand, that which is the subject of much debate and disagreement.

## **Introduction**

Human beings, both individually and collectively, project order onto the world so as to make it more simple, more manageable, more predictable (which means also in line with their predictive capacities), and more likely to be understood and mastered. There are very many different levels of orders and different ways in which these different levels overlap. These orders are very important for human beings. They perform many functions, including providing templates for understanding the past and planning for the future, which can be and are passed on to future generations. Some of these orders are relatively well defined, i.e., constituted by explicitly formulated rules one must obey in order to participate in those orders, e.g., games.<sup>1</sup> Others are less so (e.g., how to think about when human life begins).

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, games are a good example not only because of the well defined rules that constitute them (though even here there are occasionally problems with some of these constitutive rules), but also because games always leave, within those rules, room for the unpredictable (i.e., for chance as in many card games) and skill (e.g., as in chess and other sports). There are, then, realms of the unpredictable, but these are managed within a realm constituted by rules that can be controlled. Participation in games reinforces our reliance on orders.

Because these orders are so important, and so pervasive, and because human beings rely on them so much and so often, we are liable to believe that these orders exist, and not that they are simply projected by us in order to help us to achieve many different aims. The worry being expressed here is not a worry with respect to the existence of abstract objects, e.g., whether numbers exist, and thus, whether, say, the rules of chess exist. Rather, the worry is that so long as we continue to reify orders of these kinds – rather than, once again, thinking of them as projections that help us achieve numerous aims – then we will continue to miss, or at least be in danger of missing, something very important about what is at stake in debates over the nature of social normativity and, more generally, about what facilitates the well being of persons and communities.

In trying to offer an account of what makes social life fluid and stable (and what makes it collapse), theorists have traditionally turned to the analysis of orders of normative requirements, such as rules, and their properties, their relations, and associated problems with their articulation, application and use in guidance and evaluation. Indeed, as difficult as these problems are, it is at least as, if not more, difficult to get a grip on how social life could be normative without the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of actions being read off (or determined in advance by) normative requirements.

Nevertheless, there are theorists who have confronted the difficulties involved in trying to understand how social life could be normative without that normativity being capable of being read off (or determined by) normative requirements. In doing so, theorists have turned to such concepts as background abilities (see, Searle 1995, chapter six), absorbed coping (see, Dreyfus 1999), know-how (see, Ryle 1949), participation in forms of life (see, Wittgenstein 1953), and learning (and unlearning) what to anticipate.<sup>2</sup> Some theorists place more explanatory emphasis on these concepts than others, e.g., Searle places his background

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<sup>2</sup> I have attempted to sketch this possibility in ‘Social Normativity for Legal Philosophers.’

abilities in, precisely, the background, which is criticised by Dreyfus, who believes they are much more pervasive and prevalent (i.e., much more so in the foreground) than is allowed for by Searle.

What this paper argues is that what is at stake in these debates as to the nature of social normativity is the understanding of the significance of a tension without which the well being of persons and communities is endangered. The well being of persons and communities requires the maintenance of a tension between repetition on the one hand, which requires the reinforcement, sedimentation and conservation of orders, and, on the other hand, change, which requires adaptation, responsiveness, flexibility and openness. When we reify orders, and thus also tend to believe that the correctness or incorrectness, appropriateness or inappropriateness, goodness or badness, of actions can be read off (or determined in advance by) normative requirements (often going on to restrict questions of normativity to issues concerning motivation), we then risk not understanding the significance of the above-mentioned tension (and especially the second part of it, which emphasises change and openness to it).

Both persons and communities need a certain amount of stability. Stability requires, as noted above, the repetitions of orders. When orders are repeated, they are reinforced, such that it becomes very difficult to depart from them. As human beings learn to repeat them, they also become attached to them, come to anticipate them, and are embarrassed or ashamed when they judge themselves to breach them, and indignant, angry, scared or even violent when others are thought to do so. Human emotions and desires are shaped by, help transmit, and help strengthen these orders. When things are repeated often enough, human beings can begin to reflect upon them for various purposes (academic or otherwise). As they reflect upon them, they formalise them, e.g., expressly formulate them in language. When they formulate them, they tend to refer to them in the following different ways: patterns, standards, rules, norms,

conventions, laws, dogmas, principles, traditions, practices, forms of life, capacities, abilities, ways of doing, habits, and so on.

But persons and communities cannot survive on stability alone. It is dangerous for persons and communities to become too attached to certain orders. Persons and communities need to grow and develop. They need to learn from the world and those around them. To do so, persons and communities need to be open enough to be able to change their orders. It is often very difficult to change. Reinforced repetitions are extraordinarily tenacious, and, as mentioned above, departures from them tend to disorient and dislocate persons and communities so much that they react with fear and respond with violence. But change does occur, and understanding how it does, and how persons and communities can benefit from being open to change, and thus sensitive to the inevitability of the limitations of the orders they tend to rely on (in varying degrees), is very important.

The first part of this paper, then, provides a brief analysis, with illustrations, of repetition, and its reinforcement, in social life. The second part, considers, again with illustrations, the phenomenon of change, and what facilitates it, in social life. The third part returns to some of the philosophical literature on normativity to understand why that literature tends to neglect the significance of the tension between repetition (and its reinforcement) and change (and openness to it).

## **I. The Reinforcement of Repetition**

All forms of order are repetitions. All such orders are, however, best understood as projections. By projecting them, and relying on them, we are able to achieve numerous aims. But they do not govern or regulate us in the sense in which we are their puppets. Sometimes, it can certainly seem as if we are, for the orders in question are very tenacious, precisely because we rely on them so often. But, as shall be discussed in the second part of the paper,

their tenaciousness does not mean we cannot change these orders; nor does it mean we cannot also learn to see their limitations.

Orders are composed of a long continuum of forms, ranging from patterns and standards, through to habits and ways of doing. Somewhere in between are dogmas, rules, norms, principles, conventions, laws, causes, practices, traditions, and abilities. These phenomena can and ought to be distinguished, but such a task is outside the scope of this paper. The important point to keep in mind for the purposes of this paper is that there are only differences in degree between these phenomena, not differences in kind. There are no doubt many more categories not included in the above list, and many more that we will use in the future. We construct such categories not only for theoretical (scholarly) purposes, but also for practical ones (e.g., explaining, justifying, expressing approval and disapproval, assigning credit and blame, making sense, and so on). We rely on some more than others, and we are also more confident about some than others. Understanding that one or more of these orders may be relevant at any one time, and that we can rely on it in orienting ourselves and performing the various other tasks we perform as we go about our daily life, is of vital importance (both in social life and for scholarship about it). The topic for this part of the paper, then, is exactly that: understanding how we rely on the projections of these orders; understanding how our reliance on them makes departures from them difficult; and understanding how often, and in what varying degrees, we rely on them.

The disciplining of one's body and mind is relentless in one's early years. One need only watch a parent in a public space with a young child to hear just how much the young child is bombarded with commandments, directions, praise and blame. 'Do that Casey', 'Don't do that Jack', and so on, form an easily recognisable chorus. Of course, praise and blame need not be expressed verbally: children often only need to see a frown, or a finger wagging from afar, or any other similar kind of bodily expression. When children are well-

behaved, parents act in a manner that expresses pride; when they misbehave, the comportment of parents bespeaks embarrassment, anger or shame. Children are usually very good – better than we sometimes tend to think – at recognising these emotional cues (not just as expressed by their parents, but even more so by their siblings and peers); as they grow and develop, children become better at expressing a wider and more subtle range of emotions and at manipulating that expression for various ends. Emotions, then, assist in the transmission of appropriateness and inappropriateness, as well as expressing approval and disapproval.

A lesson of critical importance learnt by children is that of paying attention to the same things that others regard as relevant, salient and important. Children first learn to touch, smell, taste, hear and (especially) see certain persons<sup>3</sup> and certain things as salient objects, and later learn that certain signs refer to certain objects. Language, not the only but certainly the most prominent of these systems of signs, begins to be used in order to learn common stories (which often evocatively warn of various dangers), as well as to ask for and give reasons for one's actions. Language also plays an important part in further sedimenting and enlarging the collection of recognisable objects. Later, language and other systems of signs, such as numerical and logical, enable the construction of much more complex theoretical methods and objects.

It falls outside the scope of this paper to discuss how remarkably early children manifest the ability to sense what is appropriate and inappropriate (see, Smith and Vonèche 2006). Theoretical recognition of the early development of this ability has suffered from a certain bias to a model that required a good deal of rational deliberation (i.e., of responsiveness to reasons), which is a model that is now being undermined from numerous

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<sup>3</sup> Freud famously illustrated this via the appearance and disappearance of a mother before a baby's crib. This appearance and disappearance provides pleasure and disappointment for the baby respectively.

directions.<sup>4</sup> Some who have studied this sense of appropriateness make a distinction between moral norms on the one hand, which are said to be seen (by those who are thereby said to have the capacity to exercise moral judgement) as non-contingent on rules, authority, existing practices and agreements, and social norms on the other hand, which are (see, for example, Nichols 2004). Once again, whereas tradition had it that the ability to make the above distinction did not develop till late childhood and or early adolescence (this was the position advocated by Piaget and Kohlberg), there is now strong evidence that much younger children manifest this ability (see, for example, Turiel 2006). Even when it comes to learning the most complicated and extensive of normative orders, i.e., the law, arguments have been made that theorists have been wrong to think that only legal experts acquire legal knowledge, and that, instead, there is a great deal of indirect learning of the law that takes place in childhood and adolescence (see, Engel 2008). For present purposes, the intricacies of these debates are not relevant. What is relevant here is that contemporary literature is tending towards the recognition that the sense of appropriateness develops early and only strengthens with time.

The tenacity of social normativity – or, put differently, the reinforcement of repetition – is, of course, visible in contexts outside of the obvious realms of child development and education. Indeed, the range of relevant scholarly literature here is immense. They include the psychological compliance and conformity literature (see, Cialdini and Goldstein 2004); the enormous literature on socialisation and the so-called internalisation of social norms; the anthropological and sociological literature on learning (i.e., on the production and reproduction of culture; see, for example, Pelissier 1991); the multi-disciplinary literature on the so-called moral and social emotions (see, for example, Tangney et al 2007 and Prinz 2007); the social psychological literature on deference to authority (see, for example, Milgram 1974); the ethnomethodological and sociological literature on the stable social structure of

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<sup>4</sup> To provide but one recent example of this trend (though its focus is general and not on early development), see Rietveld 2008. Rietveld urges us to accept a realm of embodied and unreflective exercise of the sense of appropriateness.

everyday activities (see, for example, Garfinkel 1967 and Goffman 1971); and the burgeoning literatures on motivated and unconscious social cognition (for the former, see, Kruglanski and Webster 1996 and Richter and Kruglanski 2004; for the latter, see, Hassin et al 2005). For example, motivated social cognition could be utilised to notice just how pervasive, in all domains of social life, is the reinforcement of psychological traits such as ‘dogmatism and intolerance of ambiguity, uncertainty avoidance, need for cognitive closure’ and so on (Jost et al 2003, 339). Jost et al (2003) themselves argue that motivated social cognition characterises political conservatism, though any observer of contemporary party politics in Western democracies will recognise the manifestation of the above-mentioned psychological traits in all political persuasions.

There is also a growing literature that points to the dangers of the tenacity of social normativity (or, as above, the danger of the reinforcement of repetition). For example, in the realm of legal philosophy, Veitch has recently discussed how the law’s endorsement of role responsibility allows persons to disavow their responsibilities by hiding behind the limited reach of performing their role well (see, Veitch 2007). Responsibility here functions not only to simplify what we need to take into account, but also allows us to distance ourselves from the consequences of our actions. Veitch illustrates how much pain and suffering becomes invisible when our sense of appropriateness becomes over-reliant on legally expressed norms (more generally, criteria of correctness and appropriateness available in advance) and associated social structures. Veitch himself acknowledges the pioneering work of Arendt in this respect, whose diagnosis of the banality of evil in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt 1964), and subsequent attempts at articulating the importance of thoughtfulness for moral life (see, Arendt 1971), will be returned to in the next part of the paper. Once again, however, the literature on the dangers of the maintenance of the repetition of order, and our reliance on it in public policy making, has received extensive discussion in, for example, the famous Frankfurt

school of critical philosophy, French critical sociology (see, Bourdieu 1999), and other lesser known sources, such as Farmer's anthropological approach to structural violence (see, Farmer 2004).

A proper discussion of all these and many other sources must be left for another time. For the remainder of this part of the paper, it will be of assistance to offer a number of examples, not necessarily discussed in the above-mentioned literature, that will further illustrate the reinforcement of the repetition of orders and our varying degrees of reliance on our projections of them.

I rely on my projection(s) of an order (or orders) every time I come to express approval or disapproval, or react (or come to react) in a way that communicates my evaluation of something as appropriate or inappropriate. When a notice an audience member chatting to a fellow member in a lecture I am giving, I may, especially if I am a teacher and the audience member is a student, stop and ask the student to pay attention. More subtly, I may simply pause and wait till the student notices that I am looking at her, and becomes aware that I am doing so because I disapprove of her behaviour. The student may very well blush in embarrassment and apologise, or, if she does not take seriously the topic of the lecture, the authority of the lecturer, or the learning of her fellow students, she may shrug her shoulders and wonder what all the fuss was about. I notice the student chatting, and regard that as saliently inappropriate, because it is at odds with what I have come to anticipate and expect from my students. This may be partly because (what I take to be) the aim of the activity of lecturing – let us say that of passing on of information from the lecturer to the student body – is placed in danger when others chat and are not only themselves not concentrating, but also impeding the hearing of others. But it may also be simply because I have to come to anticipate and expect that kind of behaviour amongst students during lectures, and I have never reflected much on any of the possible rationales behind the standard behaviour, nor on whether those

rationales are justified. Interestingly, were I to start considering what those rationales may be, and whether they are justified, I may come to realise that the matter is quite complicated and, if I think carefully enough about it, that there may be lots of debate and disagreement about, for example, how people learn and what kind of conduct in a lecture facilitates that learning. Indeed, I may very well come to the conclusion that some chatter amongst students relaxes them, and that this is beneficial for the learning process, which (I might come to think) is comprised not only, or even principally, of passing on information, but on social interaction amongst peers. Even this conclusion will be temporary: it will be defeasible by later reasoning I may engage in about the matter.

Standards of behaviour in a classroom, then, are not always based on any rationales; nor are those rationales always the subject of justifications. In other words, sometimes what is appropriate or inappropriate is the result of my having learnt to anticipate or expect some behaviour in some context. I may not even realise that I come to anticipate or expect certain things unless those things do not occur. When they do occur, I may be puzzled, if not angry or disappointed, and may come to reflect on them. Indeed, they may come to be broken so often, that I will announce in the first class of every semester that students who wish to chatter ought to leave that for break times (in fact, I may institute the practice of having breaks precisely for that reason), or otherwise raise their hand if they wish to contribute something. The absence of rationales and justifications for much of the stability and fluidity of social life ought not to surprise us. Social life would be much too complicated if all, or even the majority, of its normativity depended on or demanded rationales and justifications.

But, importantly, what we notice when we examine the reasoning process involved in ascertaining potential and promising rationales and justifications for them, is that here too we have unspoken agreements, common assumptions, shared ways of beginning and ending something, universal habits or ways of doing. Again, any one of those may come to be

doubted, and we may not be so confident about relying on them in the future. Many will continue not subject to any doubt for a very long time. The undergraduate education of young persons, especially in Europe, continued for a long time to be taught in the form of the transmission of information by lectures, which were often read out by aging professors. Before anyone expressed any doubt about such a method of teaching and learning, that manner of education was taken for granted. Anyone who departed from it, even by accident (e.g., say a certain professor forgot his notes, and simply spoke from the podium ad lib for a change), might very well become the subject of shock, outrage and an outpouring of criticism directed at him, not only from the administration of the university in question (e.g., because it might be said the professor is not prepared), but also from the students (who might think, e.g., that the professor is wasting their time with these ‘anecdotes’). Even once challenged – by reference, for example, to questionable rationales or questionable justifications for those rationales – the practice of teaching in that manner may continue to be practised with much devotion, and those who disagree be ostracised and not allowed to teach. Over time, however, debate over those rationales and justifications may increase, and they may be relied on less and less in coming to certain judgements of what methods and modes of teaching and learning are appropriate and inappropriate.

This example shows how intimately individual assessments of appropriateness and inappropriateness and individual expressions of approval and disapproval are linked to social practices. When we criticise someone for not looking us in the eyes when they speak, we, i.e., those of us living at certain times and in certain parts of the world, we assume they have come to learn what we have learnt to do when one speaks to another person. When we discover that our interlocutor was raised in a place where, to the contrary of what we have learnt, it is offensive to look someone in the eye when you are speaking to them, then we may come to see the limitations of our projected order, or we also may, and unfortunately we tend to often,

react with indignation (perhaps because we are embarrassed of our ignorance) and insist that when in our place our visitor ought to conform to our projected orders.

There is a lot more to say about the individual expression and social organisation of the projection of orders of normative requirements and the varying levels of degree in which we rely on them. For example, things get very complicated indeed when we look at the different strategies and machinations of legal systems. Not only is the reinforcement of repetition taken to extraordinary lengths (e.g., misbehaviour in a court of law is a serious offence), but the manners in which stability in those contexts is created and maintained is often so peculiar so as to strike those unfamiliar with it as quaint (e.g., the wearing of robes and wigs amongst the judiciary and the legal profession). What is often most striking about those contexts, is how quickly and how strongly newcomers come to be attached to those things that first strike them as peculiar and outdated rituals. Human beings, particularly if they want to seek approval from already established participants, adapt quickly to the orders of normative requirements relied on in specialist contexts.

Whether one looks at laws or one looks at habits, norms or principles, reasons or rules, conventions or traditions, and many other such categories besides, human beings use normative requirements to orient themselves, and to evaluate and discipline each other, and for many other things. The array of devices and strategies, at both individual and social levels, for the maintenance, perpetuation, and reinforcement of these orders and our reliance on them is extraordinary. The marginalisation and punishment of those who are considered outsiders and non-conformists to what we have learnt to come to anticipate or expect is often very violent. Members of specialist communities, especially when such membership is linked to financial rewards (as is the case with professions such as law and medicine), tend to be particularly protective of their autonomy. The tendency of human beings to perpetuate what they have come to find familiar; to attempt to create other human beings in their own image;

and the many other ways in which human beings come to be attached to that which they repeat is striking. It is often necessary for the fluidity and stability of social life. But it is also dangerous. The well being of both persons and communities needs change and openness to it. It will be the task of the next part of the paper to discuss this need and how it can be facilitated.

## **II. Openness to Change**

When we reify orders, i.e., when we forget that they are but projections that help us achieve certain aims, we are then guilty of an inability to come to terms with the fact that we cannot foresee all that there is to foresee. In reifying order, we hark back to our attachment to being in control; to participating in a domain of rules that we can master. But becoming too attached to mastery, and too enamoured with control, is dangerous: it conveys an inability or unwillingness to learn and change.

A prominent example of the inability to come to terms with the fact that we cannot foresee all that there is to foresee is the idea that there are norms implicit in our practices. Articulated by Brandom (1994), this idea is an extension of the legal model that Brandom himself is so critical of. Brandom is right to be critical of the legal model, i.e., the idea that the correctness or incorrectness of actions is determined by explicit norms. But he is wrong to extend it by arguing that even when it comes to the practices thanks to which we somehow know how to go on, what enables that know-how are implicit norms. Like the legal model, the idea that there are such implicit norms attempts to hide the fact that orders of norms can only grow in hindsight, not in foresight. In other words, in arguing that correctness or incorrectness is somehow always and already wedged into our actions, the theory does not leave room for us to learn or to change. In so doing, Brandom's theory provides yet another example of how

difficult it is to not let one's theory be too determinative, i.e., to fail to make room for contingency.

The influence of the legal model can also be seen in Korsgaard's influential exposition of the source of normativity (see, Korsgaard 1996). Standards of conduct already exist; the remaining issues are their source and how they can motivate us. The resolution of each of these issues is interlinked: the solution to one helps the other. The very idea of a source, however, is a classically juridical one, as is the problem of motivation to standards already assumed to be correct (or, for some influential strands of jurisprudence, valid). Some of the problems that arise for this view are also age-old problems for legal systems, especially those that seek to reduce the exercise of judicial power to the 'application' of already agreed to rules. As is well known to legal professionals and legal theorists alike, the exercise of judicial power can rarely be, if it ever is, a matter of 'application.' Again, all this is part of attempts to render the authority of the norms or rules posited or agreed to in advance as impervious to doubt, and as loyally adhered to, as possible. Although this project may assist persons and communities in feeling more secure in their identities – and thus it is no surprise that this forms an important part of Korsgaard's overall argument – the danger is that this attachment to controlling a future that cannot be controlled will also make persons and communities less able to learn and change (often precisely when they need it most).

The questions that must be posed, then, are the following: how do we change the orders that we rely on so much and so often, and how do we come to recognise the inevitability of the limitations of these orders? But before we confront these questions, it will be useful to offer some illustrations of why there is a need for openness to change.

As Raban describes him, Entwistle was an 'ordinary 27-year-old Englishman with an honours degree from the University of York' at the time that he shot dead his American wife and their baby daughter (Raban 2008, 3). Indeed, as had become apparent to Raban on

trawling through Entwistle's many get-rich-quick online schemes, which were never anything more than imitations of other websites, and other features of his life (such as his joining a rowing club at York), Entwistle was 'ever the conformist' (Raban 2008, 5), a man 'so conspicuously lacking an authentic self' (Raban 2008, 6), a man whose life was riddled with 'strict adherence to convention' (Raban 2008, 5), and a man about whose crime the prosecutor had said, in answer to a question concerning Entwistle's possible motive: 'Sometimes you just don't know why... No "why" would really explain this. There is no why' (Raban 2008, 9).

Although this paper does not wish to endorse the idea that repetition, and its reinforcement, is the only or even a cause of crime, for readers familiar with Arendt's description of Eichmann (Arendt 1964), Raban's reading of Entwistle's character is eerily similar.<sup>5</sup> In her postscript to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which Arendt felt obliged to clarify that her characterisation of Eichmann's evil as banal was by no means suggestive of her absolution of his responsibility (on the contrary), Arendt provides the following helpful summary:

For when I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III "to prove a villain". Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realised what he was doing. It was precisely this lack of imagination which enabled him to sit for months on end facing a German Jew who was conducting the police interrogation, pouring out his heart to the man and explaining again and again how it was that he reached only the rank of lieutenant colonel in the SS and that it had not been his fault that he was not promoted. In principle he knew quite well what it was all about, and in his final statement to the court he spoke of the "revaluation of values prescribed by the Nazi government." He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. (Arendt 1964, 287-8)

For much of her career, Arendt confronted this danger of thoughtlessness and, equally, the importance of thoughtfulness for moral life. She did so particularly powerfully in her

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<sup>5</sup> To say this is not to attempt to compare their crimes, or to say that their crimes are commensurable.

famous essay, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' (Arendt 1971). In that essay, Arendt recalls with how much ease and eagerness Eichmann accepted 'an entirely different set of rules', i.e., the rules that were used by the court in Jerusalem to evaluate his conduct as the director of transport of Holocaust victims (Arendt 1971, 417). He added to his already 'rather limited supply of stock phrases', and he was 'utterly helpless only when he was confronted with a situation to which none of them would apply' (Arendt 1971, 417). Arendt claims that these stock phrases, as well as 'adherence to conventional, standardised codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognised function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence' (Arendt 1971, 418). She goes on to suggest that this ability to think is linked to the ability to tell right from wrong, and that if that is so, we should demand the exercise of the ability to think by 'every sane person no matter how erudite or ignorant, how intelligent or stupid he may prove to be' (Arendt 1971, 422).

In building up to her discussion of Socrates as a model thinker, Arendt laments that 'few thinkers ever told us what made them think and even fewer have cared to describe and examine their thinking experience' (Arendt 1971, 427). In expressing this lament, Arendt also articulates an important challenge for contemporary scholarship: to consider the veracity of this statement by looking into the writings of past thinkers, and to reflect upon their own propensities and abilities to think. Arendt's own answer, which cannot be examined in detail here, calls on learning from the ways in which Socrates infected others with a perplexity he is said to have felt himself (Arendt 1971, 431); the ways in which he aroused others to examine themselves (and thereby resembled a gadfly; see Arendt 1971, 432); the ways in which he was like a midwife, ridding people of 'what was bad in them, their opinions, without however making them good, giving them truth' (Arendt 1971, 433); and the ways in which he acted like an electric ray, paralysing people, stopping them in their tracks, interrupting their

activities (Arendt 1971, 433-4). Practiced in this way, added Arendt, thinking ‘is equally dangerous to all creeds and, by itself, does not bring forth any new creed’ (Arendt 1971, 435).

There are several other resources we can use to meet Arendt’s challenge. Thus, we have, for example, Weil’s suggestion that we exercise ‘attention.’ Attention, said Weil, ‘consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object’ (Weil 2005, 8). ‘It means,’ she continued, ‘holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of’ (Weil 2005, 8). We can also, in this context, consider the work of other iconoclastic thinkers, such as Nietzsche (according to whom we should philosophise with a hammer) and Wittgenstein (according to whom we should walk as slowly as we can, not talking, but looking around). However, although we can learn much from literature on the art of thinking, we should be wary about limiting the notion of openness to change to it.<sup>6</sup> To the extent, for example, that we think about thinking as a matter of attaining a certain amount of coherence and consistency among our beliefs, or as a matter of achieving a certain control or mastery of some domain, or reaching some fictional (and, nightmarish) destination in which nothing can be doubted and in which we always know where are going to end up, then thinking will be the very opposite of openness. Arendt may very well oppose such a characterisation of ‘real’ thoughtfulness, but we ought to be careful, for there are important and legitimate roles to be played by, for example, the ambition for consistency and coherence, which we may, for good reasons, want to call ‘thinking.’

In not limiting ourselves to the ‘art of thinking’, we can, and ought to, extent our inquiry into openness by considering, for example, the writings of those who speak of the importance of moral particularity (e.g., see, Hooker and Little 2000), situation ethics (e.g., see, Fletcher 1966), the moral imagination (e.g., see, Fesmire 2003 and Nussbaum 1990),

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<sup>6</sup> For some criticisms of limiting the notion of the ethical to philosophical self-reflection, see, Williams 2006. This paper does not endorse Williams’ criticisms, but neither can they be discussed at any length.

moral perception (e.g., see, Blum 1994), moral vision (e.g., see, Murdoch 1970), the power of love (e.g., see, Bankowski 2001 and Gaita 2000), and the naked face of the other (e.g., see, Levinas 1969). We can, and ought, to widen our inquiry to include the psychological literature on mindfulness (e.g., see, Langer 1989); the literature on creativity (e.g., for a psychological view see, Runco 2006; for an art-historical, a classic beginning is Gombrich 2006; for an overview of some of the socio-philosophical, see, e.g., Joas and Kilpinen 2006); the architectural and urban design literature on the values of disorder (e.g., see, Sennett 1970); as well as the sizeable sociological and historical literature on innovation, inventions, epistemological breaks (see, Bachelard 2002) and paradigm shifts (see, Kuhn 1962).<sup>7</sup> Finally, we should not ignore writings on the historical value of that which was classified, in its time, as heresy, lies and provocation, but which later came to be identified as noble and much necessary widening of the moral circle (e.g., consider some of the assessment of statements by persons who recognised the unjustifiable claims to superiority by Christians, men, white people, and heterosexuals).<sup>8</sup>

As with the previous part of the paper, this part cannot afford to discuss any of these contributions at any length. However, and again as with the previous part, it will be useful to discuss some examples that may help to identify, even if only roughly, the notion of the importance of change and openness to it (as well as the relative rarity and difficulty of it).

Openness to change requires a great deal of energy and, in some cases, is extremely difficult. This can be witnessed by anyone who, for example, attempts to draw unrecognisable shapes. When one tries to draw an unrecognisable shape, i.e., a shape one has not seen before, one finds that one what one does, more often than not, is to reproduce recognisable shapes not

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<sup>7</sup> For a more recent view, see Latour's (2004) discussion of the views of Stengers and Despret, who are said to advise social scientists to devise their inquiries so that they maximise the recalcitrance of those they interrogate.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, right now we are moving ever closer to widening our moral circle to that of animals, and it is not a stretch to suggest that in some years, perhaps fewer than we imagine, we shall all be vegetarians and wonder how previous generations could have been so cruel as to eat fellow animals. As an example of a growing literature, see Cavell et al 2008.

directly at the forefront of one's mind (e.g., a cross or a medal when one is thinking of shapes such as squares and triangles) or to produce new shapes but only in the process of combining recognisable ones. Similarly, in philosophical work, it is very difficult not to rely on the authority of certain old masters, or on the usual ways of making a contribution to the philosophical debate, e.g., via a paper, such as this one, written in a certain kind of language, such as the one here utilised, and thanks to a certain kind of method, such as the one employed here.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, many aspiring writers discover that when they finally sit down to write their 'masterpiece' they simply repeat the style of the book they most recently read.<sup>10</sup>

For an altogether different example, one could do much worse than the one provided by Gombrich in *The Little History of the World* (Gombrich 2008). There, in the chapter describing the history of the Egyptian empire (see chapter three), Gombrich recalls the case of King Akhenaton who lived around 1370 BC and who, amongst other things (including rebelling against the local religions), had the walls of his palace painted in an entirely new style. What makes him remarkable is that he was the only example (at least that we know of) of an attempt to introduce change in the 3,000 years of repetition, and its reinforcement, that characterised the Egyptian empire (the most successful empire so far).

Everyone can add to these examples many of their own attempts to introduce change in numerous domains. Many of us will have experienced the painful experience of discussing with someone who cannot be surprised, and for whom everything one says reminds them of something they have already heard. All of us use short cuts and most of us will know how difficult it is to leave something one finds familiar, especially when one is good at it, and is handsomely rewarded for being good at it. We also know the pleasure to be gained from the sense of mastery and control of some limited domain, some order. But time and time again,

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<sup>9</sup> I have sought to examine these difficulties more carefully in a paper entitled 'Creativity and Imagination in the Practice of Philosophy.'

<sup>10</sup> In this respect, Calvino's (1998) effort in reproducing ten very different styles in ten beginnings of imaginary novels, all the while meeting certain complex constraints from the structural semantics of Greimas, is most impressive. Equally, if not more, impressive in this respect is Queneau's *Exercises in Style* (1981).

the world has shown, though only often much later (to future embarrassed generations), how dangerous is this attachment to that which is repeated. Hence the need, the urgent need, for not forgetting the lesson of the importance of change and openness to it.

### **III. Revisiting the Normal and the Normative**

There is no difference in kind between the natural (or normal) and the normative. There is only a difference in degree. The realm of the normal is that which is taken for granted; indeed, more strongly, it is that which has not yet even been identified as normal.<sup>11</sup> As soon something occurs that we are surprised by; that constitutes a break in our expectations; but that we do not want to endorse as a practice to be repeated, then that which we have identified as previously having taken for granted emerges into the realm of the normative. Once in the realm of the normative, it forms part of a projected order of normative phenomena that we use to help us achieve a variety of aims, including disciplining each other, maintaining personal and/or community identity, and many other things besides.

When theorists begin to reify orders, and to focus on their nature and status, instead of thinking of those orders as projections that help us achieve a variety of aims, a gap between the normal and the normative is created. The creation of this gap brings it with it many problems that occupy theorists and that make it difficult to see that what is stake in debates over the nature of normativity (generally, but also social normativity more specifically) is an understanding of the significance of there being a tension between repetition (and its reinforcement) and change (and openness to it).

An important part of the argument of this paper, then, is that we need to relinquish the idea that orders are real and more or less determinative (in advance) of what is correct or incorrect, appropriate or inappropriate, good or bad. Our beginning point, in thinking about

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<sup>11</sup> I attempt to make room for, and understand, this sense of the not-yet-identified-as-normal in 'Making Room for the Silence of Social Normativity.'

the nature of social normativity, has to be that orders are projections that function to stabilise social life and thereby enable us to achieve numerous aims. By thinking of orders as projections, we allow ourselves to see that rather than a gap, there is a continuum, and thus also something that binds together, the phenomena that compose orders, including patterns, standards, rules, norms, conventions, laws, causes, dogmas, principles, traditions, practices, forms of life, capacities, abilities, and ways of doing. This continuum ranges from, on the one hand, that which we would be surprised or enraged to see as being doubted or undermined, to, on the other hand, that which is the subject of much debate and disagreement. The previous two parts of the paper have illustrated these extremes, and some of what falls in between. In short, we need to replace the search for a distinction in kind between the normal and the normative with an attempt to understand how the normative requirements that compose the orders we project form a continuum. Understanding that, in turn, may help us understand the significance of the tension between repetition and change.

This paper cannot examine in detail the arguments made by philosophers for the reality of orders (e.g., of patterns, as argued for by Dennett 1991), for the reality of following of following components of orders (such as, most notoriously, rules; e.g., see, Pettit 1990), or for the ability to read off or determine in advance what is appropriate or inappropriate, correct or incorrect, good or bad from a list of normative requirements (for an example from legal philosophy, see, Finnis 1981). As has been stressed throughout this paper, what such an approach to normativity makes difficult is leaving room for change and openness to it; for learning; for the ways in which we tend to exercise and camouflage the exercise of hindsight; and for the ways in which we tend to be unable and unwilling to come to terms with the fact that we cannot foresee all there is to foresee.

We do not need to believe in the reality of patterns, for example, *pace* Dennett (1991), in order to recognise our reliance on them in making social life more manageable, predictable,

stable and fluid. Indeed, given how much and how often we rely on the orders we project, and on how often and how much we analyse them, and play with them and within them, we must be particularly careful not to value them too highly. Our representations of the world, and of each other, are extraordinary: they allow us to do so many things, alone and together. However, they are only representations: they do not touch reality the way a hand can touch another hand.

Unfortunately, it is rare to see any acknowledgement of the tension between repetition and change that this paper argues is at stake in our debates over the nature of normativity (social or otherwise). One recently popular strand in the literature on normativity is that of finding a fundamental concept of the realm of the normative. Thus, for example, Broome (2006) argues that the ‘central normative concept is ought’ (or, more correctly, a certain kind of ought he calls an ‘owned ought’), and Skorupski argues that ‘the concept of a reason is the fundamental normative concept’ (see, Skorupski 2007). It is unclear why we need a central or fundamental normative concept. Although an appropriately respectful argument cannot be made here in full, it would be in line with the arguments made in this paper that such a pursuit clouds the fact that we have an entire range of normative concepts, which can and ought to be distinguished, and the distinction of which can help us realise the differing degrees of agreement and reliance on projected orders in social life (and in other more specialised domains).

There is also much discussion in the philosophical literature on normativity about the best articulation of the notion of normative force, which, it is argued, ought not be one that does results in our being unable to choose otherwise (and thus, not characterised such as to leave no room for our freedom, and for the making of mistakes). Some, like Railton, have sought to provide a model of (coming to accept) the authority of norms such that their normative force does not become so compelling as to be determinative of action (see, Railton

1999). Sometimes, as is the case with Railton and others (e.g., see, Blackburn 2001), these approaches rest on a vague notion of disposition. The use of a notion such as a disposition becomes necessary because of the gap created between conduct and the order (or orders) of normative requirements. However, as argued throughout, creating such a gap is a mistake that can be avoided if we do not succumb to the temptation to reify such orders, but treat them, instead, as projections that we agree to (sometimes) and rely on to various degrees and for various aims. The advantage of the latter approach is that, unlike the former, it does not separate action and normative requirements, but already incorporates appropriateness and inappropriateness into the concept of human behaviour, leaving room, moreover, not only for recognition of the varying degrees of reliance and agreement on a large range of normative requirements, but also for change and the significance of openness to it.

There is, however, at least one exception to the above criticism that the contemporary literature on normativity does not recognise, at least not sufficiently, that what is at stake in our debate over the nature of normativity is the tension between repetition and change. That exception is a paper by Eldridge, in which it is argued that the ‘philosophical debate about our practices comes to consist in disputes between those who enter appeals to what is normal or traditional (somewhere, if not in one’s home culture, then in another, or in the culture of one’s imagination) and those who criticise appeals to tradition’ (Eldridge 1986, 555). Even so, there are problems with Eldridge’s approach, such as his claim that the critical side of the above-mentioned divide is at one with the search ‘for culture-neutral ways of formulating and defending principles for the assessment of practices’ (Eldridge 1986, 555). It is unclear whether openness to change, as discussed here, needs to always be resolved with the pronouncement of a new overlapping consensus, or undertaken with the aim in view to reaching new agreements. The search for such consensus and agreement, and its at least temporary satisfaction, is important, but we ought to be careful about it, as too much emphasis

on it may diminish the critical, arousing, and innovative power of that kind of thinking that characterised Arendt's Socrates, i.e., its gadfly-, midwife- and electric-ray –qualities.

On the whole, however, Eldridge is right to point to the importance of the invention of the alternative, the hypothetical, the possible, the imaginary, the doing-otherwise, and the suffering and alienation that sometimes has to accompany it. We need more of that, and less of the ceaseless push for how to motivate so-called anarchists and sceptics (and others regarded wayward and in need of discipline), all in the name of creating an empire of ourselves (or at least, of our image of ourselves).

## **Conclusion**

The well being of persons and communities needs much less stability than we tend to think it does. Of course, we should not confuse stability with the need for basic needs and for the facilitation of capabilities required for a minimally decent life. More often than not, and as is the case in our contemporary world, it is precisely change in forms of ownership of scarce resources and global principles of distributive justice that is required in order to help advance the desperately low standards of life amongst the majority of the world's population. What is stopping the rich pockets of the world from recognising the need for change? Exactly that which stops any kind of change: reliance on the familiar, and fear of the loss of that which has been hard won or that which one has come to believe one is entitled to.

Change and openness to it is rare, difficult and urgently needed. Now more than ever we need to learn to live together in a world ever more intimately connected, where peoples embedded in so many different ways of living are interacting daily. If we become scared of being changed by such interactions, we will miss the great opportunity of the modern age; we will miss the opportunity to learn from exactly those exchanges whose consequences are the hardest to predict, whose outcomes are the hardest to evaluate in advance. But if we fail, we

will fall ever further inside ourselves, into our own images, and exhaust ourselves, individually and collectively, from echoes of the same, from the dark comfort of repetition and its reinforcement.

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