To be sure, Gauthier's account is subject to another objection to contractarianism, to which I have already alluded: He supposes that the basic contract would be shaped by the relative bargaining power of the parties involved. Rawls's and Harsanyi's versions avoid this problem, for they insist that one must consider what persons would do when a decision must be reached under conditions of radical uncertainty (where one's relative power vis-à-vis others is unknown). A more convincing approach, perhaps, would be to argue, as this author does, that there would be significant negative long-range consequences for all if persons were to continually press whatever relative advantages they have over others.

Edward McClennen

See also Bargaining Theory; Collective Rationality; Common Goods; Conventions, Logic of; Cooperation/Coordination; Cost–Benefit Analysis; Law, Social Phenomenon of; Normativity; Promises and Agreements; Public Goods; Rational Expectations; Rationality and Social Explanation; Reflective Equilibrium; Social Choice Theory; Social Conventions; Social Norms; Social Rules

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Social Conventions

This entry reviews the major theoretical accounts of social conventions. It first introduces briefly their philosophical origin and then goes on to present the first contemporary systematic account of social conventions in terms of game theory. This is followed by an overview of some of the main theories and uses of social conventions in current work in the philosophy of social science.

Introduction

Many of our everyday social interactions are regulated by *conventions*. Eating manners, the kind of clothes we wear at the office, and the side of the road on which we drive are a few mundane examples. Roughly, a social convention is *a customary, arbitrary, and self-enforcing* rule of behavior that is generally followed and expected to be followed in a group or in a society at large. When a social convention is established, everybody behaves in a quasi-agreed-upon way, even if they did not in fact explicitly agree to do so. A social convention can thus be seen as a kind of *tacit* agreement that has evolved out of a history of previous interactions.

The study of social convention is relevant for the social sciences since much of social order can in fact be explained in terms of conventions and, thus, as social regularities that emerge and are sustained without the need of centralized planning and external enforcement by the state. In philosophy, the notion of social convention is appealing especially to those who aim to formulate naturalistic theories of normative phenomena in general (i.e., obligation, law) and of morality in particular.

Origin: David Hume

The 18th-century Scottish philosopher David Hume was the first to point to the relevance of conventional regularities to addressing both of these issues. Aiming in particular to demystify the nature of property and justice, Hume suggested that a convention corresponds to a pattern of mutually beneficial behavior that a group of agents follow when they know that such a pattern is mutually beneficial and that they expect each other to follow this pattern instead of another.

First Systematic Account: David Lewis

In modern times, the Humean approach to conventions has been revived by the philosopher David Lewis, whose theory clarifies the customary, arbitrary, and self-enforcing nature of conventions. Adopting a *game-theoretic* approach, Lewis proposed that a convention is a solution to a *coordination problem* arising in recurrent interactions. A coordination problem is considered as a situation characterized by at least two coordination equilibria. A coordination equilibrium is a combination of actions—one for each player—in which each player is strictly motivated to perform his component of the combination, conditional on his believing that the other players will perform theirs. Moreover, there exists at least one alternative combination of actions that has the same property. Finally, for each player, if a player performs his share of the combination, he prefers that the other players perform theirs. When an interaction contains at least two coordination equilibria and when coincidence of interests between the players prevails, the players are facing a coordination problem.

A classical example of a coordination problem is that of choosing the same side of the road in order to drive safely. If, in a society, a regularity in behavior in which each individual picks his share of a coordination equilibrium is established, then, according to Lewis's definition, this regularity is a convention. Since a conventional regularity is sustained if there is a system of concordant mutual expectations of conformity, a crucial component of any theory of convention is explaining the origins of these concordant mutual expectations. According to Lewis, the source of these mutual expectations is *precedent:* If the agents have a shared acquaintance with instances of successful coordination in a class of similar situations in the past, they will project this pattern into the future. Precedent is seen as a source of one kind of salience, which makes one coordination equilibrium a focal point and thus prominent with respect to any possible alternative.

Contemporary Approaches

The focus of Lewis's theory is mainly on how conventions, once established, reproduce themselves. A compatible but complementary approach addresses the problem of how conventional regularities emerge in the first place. Combining insights coming from theoretical biology, Robert Sugden, for instance, has employed *evolutionary game theory* to study the origins of conventions. The most general mechanism that has been suggested to explain their evolution is that of *symmetry breaking*. Avoiding collisions at a crossroad, for instance, requires a rule that specifies who is supposed to stop and who is supposed to move forward. Since, however, in the absence of any convention the positions of all the drivers are symmetrical, by observing each other's behavior, the evolutionary dynamics cannot converge on one of the coordination equilibria. However, if the players can also discriminate among contextual features of their situation, they might exploit an arbitrary symmetry to solve this problem. For instance, if drivers condition their behavior on who is coming from the right, they might evolve a convention that assigns priority to those coming from that side of the road. Thus, arbitrary cues can boost the evolution of arbitrary regularities.

Though the importance of conventions in solving coordination problems has been exploited in many areas of the social sciences (from economics to linguistics and law), limiting the role of conventions only to situations in which the interests of the players coincide is indeed an undue restriction. Actually, theoretical models in biology, economics, and philosophy have shown that together with conventions of coordination, conventions of *partial conflict* can also emerge and stabilize. Robert Sugden and Brian Skyrms have shown, for instance, that a convention of partial conflict in which property rights are assigned to the first person to take possession of a previously unowned item can evolve by exploiting the same symmetry-breaking mechanism sketched above.

Finally, even if a social convention is often regarded as a mere regularity in behavior, it has often been suggested that it also has a *normative* force. Margaret Gilbert, for instance, has argued that a social convention has an intrinsic normativity that can be accounted for only in terms of a holistic approach that appeals to social concepts not reducible to what the individuals are personally committed to do. In contrast, for other authors, like Robert Sugden and Ken Binmore, for instance, beliefs that one ought to conform to the prevailing conventions develop on top of such regularities and recruit natural human sentiments. In this naturalistic perspective, moral norms develop out of mere social conventions.

Luca Tummolini

See also Common Knowledge; Conventions, Logic of; Cooperation/Coordination; Evolutionary Game Theory and Sociality; Social Institutions; Social Norms; Social Ontology, Recent Theories of; Social Rules; Spontaneous Order

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Social Epistemology

In simplest terms, social epistemology is the normative study of knowledge as a social product. It is a cross-disciplinary nomad, equally at home in philosophy and policy. There is disagreement over whether it is meant to be a branch of epistemology or sociology, or rather the entirety of one or the other or both of these disciplines. This entry begins by discussing three types of social epistemology that canvass these possibilities, followed by an extended discussion of the most ambitious form of social epistemology, which attempts to bridge the analytic/continental divide within contemporary philosophy, while providing an account of the social construction of intellectual progress.

Three Types of Social Epistemology

Social epistemology may be regarded in one of three ways: (1) as a branch of sociology, (2) as a branch of epistemology, or (3) as a field that transcends the difference between (1) and (2). Let us take each in turn.

1. As a branch of sociology, social epistemology asserts that social relations can be organized in terms of the differential, often hierarchical, access that a society's members have to a common reality. Plato originally advanced a static version of this thesis in the *Republic.* There, each level of human understanding—from the ideal to the base—corresponded to a stratum in a myth-based caste system. A more dynamic version, based on the stages of human intellectual progress, was advanced more than 2,000 years later by Auguste Comte in his positivist polity. In this context, earlier religious and metaphysical forms of epistemic authority served atavistic class–like functions in a science-led social order. The general idea continues to fascinate philosophers, as it raises the prospect of nonviolent, large-scale social control by deference to expertise, also known as "division of cognitive labor." Indeed, such knowledge-based politics is arguably the most Machiavellian of all, as it delegates the application of force to individuals, whose willed compliance is socially rewarded with the assignment of rationality. The history of medicine probably provides the clearest traces of this issue.

2. As a branch of epistemology, social epistemology asserts that an adequate grasp of the state of knowledge in society requires more than generalizing from what a single ideal (Cartesian) or average (Humean) mind knows. It requires recognizing the distributed nature of knowledge, either emergent on specific forms of life (i.e., folkways) or divided according to some overarching rational plan (e.g., science). But in both cases, the whole knowledge system is much more—and even other—than