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On Knowledge and Convention

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ON KNOWLEDGE AND CONVENTION¹

LANGUAGE, we all agree, is conventional. By this we mean partly that some linguistic practices are arbitrary: except for historical accident, they could have been otherwise to roughly the same purposes. Which linguistic and other social practices are arbitrary in this sense is a matter of dispute. Some of the early disputants claimed as nonconventional certain practices which we now consider obvious cases of convention. And such mistakes sometimes held vague but widespread popular sway, owing to provincial or religious prejudices.² Whereas it is easy to spot errors of our predecessors, it remains an open question whether some of our own activities are conventional or “natural.” In short, people sometimes enter into a convention without knowing that it is conventional—even doubting its conventionality.

A principal defect of David Lewis’ generally illuminating account of convention is that it controverts these judgments.³ Lewis defines ‘convention’ thus:

A regularity *R*, in action or in action and belief, is a *convention* in a population *P* if and only if, within *P*, the following six conditions hold:

- (1) Almost everyone conforms to *R*.
- (2) Almost everyone believes that the others conform to *R*.
- (3) This belief that the others conform to *R* gives almost everyone a good and decisive reason to conform to *R* himself.
- (4) There is a general preference for general conformity to *R* rather than slightly-less-than-general conformity—in particular, rather than conformity by all but any one.
- (5) There is at least one alternative *R'* to *R* such that the belief that the others conformed to *R'* would give almost everyone a good and decisive practical or epistemic reason to conform to *R'* likewise; such that there is a general preference for general conformity to *R'* rather than slightly-less-than-

¹ I am grateful to John Collier and David Lewis for comments.

² Cf. e.g., John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (London, 1968), pp. 4-6; R. H. Robins, *A Short History of Linguistics* (London, 1967), pp. 18 ff.

³ David K. Lewis, *Convention: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969). Page references in the text are to this work. See also Lewis, “Language and Languages” (1972) to appear in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. VII or VIII, ed. by K. Gunderson. The definition given below is from this latter, but the changes from the original definition in the book are not crucial to present considerations.

general conformity to R' ; and such that there is normally no way of conforming to R and R' both.

(6) (1)-(5) are matters of *common knowledge*. (Cf. p. 78.)

On ordinary construals of 'convention' and 'common knowledge' such a definition cannot be right. For participants in a conventional regularity need not know it to be arbitrary. (5) need not be a matter of common knowledge.⁴

To take the most radical case, imagine a small, isolated, unenterprising linguistic community none of whose members ever heard of anyone's speaking differently. It would not be surprising if there were a few such communities in the world today. It would be amazing if there never had been. Such a community would not know—or perhaps even have reason to believe—that there are humanly possible alternatives to speaking their language. If they were sufficiently ignorant of human learning, they might believe that their principal linguistic regularities were immutably determined by natural law. Yet we have no inclination to deny that their language is conventional. They are simply ignorant or wrong about the nature of their activities.

A similar point may be made about more sophisticated naturalists. Kant held that his and Newton's practice of using Euclidean geometry to map physical space was nonconventional (partly) because it had no possible acceptable alternatives. At the time, no one had reason to believe otherwise. Later Poincaré claimed that, in view of Riemannian and other geometries, Kant was mistaken and that the use of Euclidean geometry to map physical space was a convention. It would be strange to cite the lack of common knowledge of alternative geometries in the 18th century as evidence that Poincaré was wrong in calling Newton's practice a convention. (This, regardless of whether Poincaré was in fact right or wrong.) Of course, one might say that the practice became conventional, if at all, only after the alternatives became commonly known. But this would be to use 'conventional' unconventionally.⁵

⁴ Lewis' definition of 'common knowledge' in *Convention*, pp. 52-53, 56, implies that \emptyset could be common knowledge and yet be both false and universally disbelieved. The error is implicitly corrected in "Language and Languages," *op. cit.*, where 'common knowledge' is taken as a primitive.

⁵ There is a similar question—suggested by Quine's view that ordinary translation schemes and ordinary linguistic theories are indeterminate—as to whether or not choosing the ordinary schemes and theories (as opposed to nonequivalent ones) is conventional. Choice of schemes or theories (specifically, choice of analytical hypotheses) is not shown nonconventional simply by the fact that most translators and language theorists think that their choices do not have equally good, nonequivalent alternatives.

The point is applicable to our present situation. Linguists are currently fond of claiming that certain rather abstractly described regularities (or certain rules governing the regularities) are necessary to any humanly possible language. Some of these claims are likely to be mistaken, although perhaps we have no sufficient reason to think them so now. The fact that we currently lack reason to believe (or even disbelieve) that a given regularity is a convention does not preclude us from deciding later that it is and was such.

It is worth noting that the preceding examples do not depend on whether 'common knowledge' is construed *in sensu composito* or *in sensu diviso* (pp. 64-68). We can imagine participants in a convention who have formulated the mistaken view that their practice per se has no genuine, viable alternative (thus lacking the relevant knowledge *in sensu composito*). We can equally well imagine that the participants mistakenly believe of each instance of their practice that there is no genuine, viable alternative to it (thus lacking the relevant knowledge *in sensu diviso*).

The simplest reason why (5) need not be a matter of common knowledge then is that anti-conventionalists may mistakenly (and not unreasonably) believe that there *is* no genuine, humanly possible alternative to their practice. But there are other reasons. And these reasons cast doubt not only on (6) as applied to (5), but on (5) itself.

Members of primitive communities with strong beliefs about the religious power of their words might concede the advantages of human reciprocity but insist that they would retain "the gods' language" even if the others went astray. Further, they might refuse to entertain the possibility that the gods might switch languages, insisting that nothing could persuade them that this had happened. Although this behavior would probably be unreasonable, the belief that it would be acted upon might not be. Given the inductive standards, background information, and values of such a community, it would not be common knowledge that everyone would have decisive reason to conform to alternative *R'* if the others did—or that everyone prefers to conform to *R'* if the others were to. It would not even be *true* that everyone prefers to conform to *R'* if the others were to. The language of such people, however, would be nonetheless conventional. Thus the second clause in (5) is implausible.

Of course, the preferences of our primitives might be based on mistaken judgments as to what they would do under such bizarre, "switching" circumstances. Indeed, we might expect that if most people in the community were suddenly to speak in strange tongues, they

would be conceived by the rest as divinely inspired. But it is not even clear that such *de facto* (as opposed to self-conceived) adaptability is necessary for a practice to be a convention. (Contrast p. 75.) If the primitives were disposed to stand on the principle that giving up human communication is better than giving up divine communication, it is hard to see why this would affect the conventional character of their actual linguistic practices. Since conventions are arbitrary, they are a poor sort of thing to die for. But stranger choices have been made.

Or consider the mellow example of the sentimental hat tipplers. The convention of tipping one's hat to a passing stranger becomes a national trademark. The citizens are sentimentally attached to this mode of greeting and its associations with their culture, to the extent that each would rather fight for the traditional greeting, or give up greeting strangers altogether, than switch to another one, even if the others were to switch. Contrary to (5), and perhaps to (3), this strong traditionalism does not seem to affect the conventionality of the actual practice.

The term 'decisive' in conditions (3) and (5) is multiply ambiguous. If it is taken to bear on motivational efficacy (as distinguished from rational sufficiency), then the examples of the two preceding paragraphs refute the first two clauses of (5). (I return to the "rational sufficiency" interpretation below.) If 'decisive' in (3) and (5) is meant to imply that belief in others' conformity must give one a reason that is necessary to (as well as efficient in) the agent's motivation, condition (3) falls as well.

What is the picture that led Lewis to a definition that has these difficulties? It is that of a continuing assembly ("convention") of rational agents intent on coordinating, by whatever means, to achieve a recognized end—an end whose achievement they recognize to depend on their coordination. The picture has the advantage of illuminating why it is often reasonable to participate in a convention. But concentrating on the rational underpinnings of conventions carries the dangers as well as advantages of idealization. The "rational assembly" picture nurtures a feeling that if the parties to a convention were irrational in their actual motives, overly insistent on a particular means, or insufficiently intent on the recognized end, there would be no convention. Such a feeling exaggerates the rationality of human assemblies. (Cf. certain political conventions.) But as applied to social conventions the feeling is even less appropriate. Parties to a convention are frequently confused about the relevant ends (the social functions of their practice); they are often brought up achieving them and do not know the origin of their means; and they sometimes disagree over

whether another means is possible or simply fail to consider the question. In such situations, the reasonable basis for participation may be misconceived; motives may be mixed; and the conventional regularity may be misvalued in relation to its social functions. The stability of conventions is safeguarded not only by enlightened self-interest, but by inertia, superstition, and ignorance. In so far as these latter play a role, they prevent the arbitrariness of conventional practices from being represented in the beliefs and preferences of the participants.

Thus the arbitrariness of conventions resides somehow in the “logic of the situation” rather than in the participants’ psychological life. But what, more precisely, is it for conventions to be arbitrary? One might be inclined to say that there must be an incompatible alternative regularity R' such that the belief that the others conformed to R' would give almost everyone a rationally sufficient practical or epistemic reason to conform to R' likewise. But this formulation still assumes too much about the participants’ preferences. For it is not clear that the sentimental hat tippers would be *irrational* in preferring not to enter into a new way of greeting strangers if everyone else were to switch. (This suggests that the first clause of (5) is vulnerable even if ‘decisive’ is interpreted in terms of rational sufficiency rather than motivational efficacy.) A less vulnerable formulation would result from conditioning the rationality of conforming to an alternative on willingness to continue to participate in a communal practice that serves substantially the same social functions as the original one.⁶

But this formulation still does not fully explicate the intuition that conventions are arbitrary. The primary hitch is that the alternative regularity (or regularities), though sufficient to fulfill the social functions of the actual practice, may be a significantly inferior means of doing so. In such a case our formulation might be satisfied, but the actual practice would not be arbitrary in the relevant sense. Lewis

⁶ Of course, such willingness need not involve an ability to describe the social functions of the practice. I understand the term “social function” as follows: F is a social function of regularity R in population P iff (1) F results from the mutually expected conformity of almost everyone in P to R , and (2) F fulfills certain needs of most of the members of P . For example, in some groups, shaking hands when being introduced to a stranger might have the social function of reducing the slight apprehension or awkwardness commonly felt in such situations. I shall not worry here over whether the frankly sociological term “social function” can be replaced by psychological terms. In any case, I do not believe that one need quantify over social functions. But avoiding such quantification is inconvenient for present purposes.

tries to handle an analogous problem for (5) by invoking his requirement that (5) be common knowledge (pp. 73-74). But as we have seen, this requirement is unattractive on other grounds.

A second difficulty with the formulation is that it presupposes that the participants in a convention *could* switch to an alternative if they believed that the others had done so. But in the case of relatively complicated conventions, the participants might be too set in their ways to learn alternative regularities. For example, the members of a community of old people might be unable to learn alternatives to some of the more complicated conventions of their language.

A requirement that meets these difficulties may be phrased as follows. As a matter of fact—whatever the participants may believe—it is within the power of the participants to have learned an incompatible regularity that would have served substantially the same social functions without demanding significantly greater effort on the part of the participants.⁷ This condition does not explicitly mention rationality, nor does it appeal to people's reactions to counterfactual "switching" circumstances. But it does indicate why we regard it as rational for a participant who is capable of switching to try to do so, given that he believes that the others conform to an alternative regularity (qua alternative regularity), given that he is not too ignorant of the consequences of the alternative, and given that his preferences remain in accord with the primary social functions of the actual practice.

On our view then the arbitrariness of conventions has two aspects. In the first place, conventions are not determined by biological, psychological or sociological law: the conventions a given person learns are "historically accidental." In the second, conventions are not uniquely the best means of fulfilling their social functions: other, incompatible means would have done as well.

Lewis has succeeded in freeing the notion of convention from that of explicit agreement, a notion which itself gained purchase from over-literal application of the "rational assembly" picture. But his account still takes too little note of the extent of the unconscious element in

⁷ The counterfactual, of course, introduces a certain vagueness into the analysis—a vagueness matched by the notion of convention. I assume it as understood, however, that in considering what a community might have learned, we rule out of consideration extensive knowledge or technological aid that is not available to the community. A similar restriction applies to questions regarding the degree of effort required to carry out alternative practices.

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many conventions—and the possibility of their being essentially misconceived or misvalued. The shortcomings stem, I think, from overzealousness in distinguishing human rational systems from mere regularities of nature. Since Descartes, a principle tool in making this important distinction has been the appeal to some psychological element of self-reference in the rational system. (Thus the slogans “Experience implies self-consciousness,” “Knowing implies knowing that one knows,” “Following rules implies tacit knowledge of the rules.”) I do not advocate dispensing with such a tool, for I think it has its uses. But overuse of it leads to an exaggerated view of our present self-understanding.

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