

## Social Norms in Artefact Use: Proper Functions and Action Theory

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**Abstract:** The use of artefacts by human agents is subject to human standards or norms of conduct. Many of those norms are provided by the social context in which artefacts are used. Others are provided by the proper functions of the artefacts. This article argues for a general framework in which norms that are provided by proper functions are related to norms provided by the (more general) social context of use. Departing from the concept, developed by Joseph Raz, of “exclusionary reasons” it is argued that proper functions provide “institutional reasons” for use. Proper use of artefacts (use according to the proper function) is embedded in the normative structures of social institutions. These social normative structures are complementary to traditional norms of practical rationality and are a kind of second-order reasons: exclusionary reasons. It is argued that proper functions of artefacts provide institutional reasons, which are up to a certain extent similar to exclusionary reasons. The most notable difference concerns the fact that proper functions not so much exclude other types of use, but rather place that use (and the user) in particular social structures with particular rights and obligations. An institutional reason not only gives a reason for action, it also provides reasons for evaluating actions according to such reasons positively (and other negatively). The upshot of the analysis is that it provides an additional tool for understanding and evaluating the use of artefacts.

**Keywords:** proper function; normativity; exclusionary reason; institution

### 1. Introduction

This article is about the use of artefacts understood from an action theoretic perspective. Use is a kind of intentional action and is as such guided by norms. Just as with every-day action, people sometimes abide by those norms and sometimes they don't. Whatever the content of these norms are, they can help *understand* actions of people by making their reasons for action transparent. Norms are also used in the *evaluation* of action by making deliberated judgements possible about

these actions. These can be used for the assignment of responsibility when needed.

In this article I argue that in the case of artefact use a special kind of norm plays a role that has had little or no attention up to now, certainly not in this form. This norm is not the only norm guiding artefact use; it is additional to the usual types of norms that are said to guide action. This is a kind of second-order (or higher-order) norm that structures the decision-space of action, rather than being directly part of the decision space. It is inspired by Joseph Raz' idea of *exclusionary reasons*. These are reasons that are derived from second-order norms (or higher-order norms). The reasons and norms analysed in this article share some features with exclusionary reasons, but are not completely identical to them. I call the reasons that are derived from the relevant norms *institutional reasons*. The reason for this terminology will become clear below.

As I said, artefact use is a kind of intentional action and can be analysed with the tools of action theory. Here we need to analyse “*to use*”, rather than “*to do*”. Using something can involve several different types of actions and of norms involved. What ‘using’ involves becomes clear from the following example. I can use a standard electric drill in a number of ways and these different uses can have a number of different results. I can use it for drilling a hole in a normal wall. I can use it to drill a hole in a concrete wall. But I can also use it to place it on a stack of papers to prevent them from being blown away. In fact, the number of uses I can put the drill to is unlimited. The results of these possible actions can be of several kinds. My action can succeed or fail. In both cases my action can have (only) positive effects or (only) negative effects, such as damage or injury. Such effects can be intended or unintended side effects. In all cases there are different ways in which the action can be evaluated. I can evaluate the actions and intentions of the user; I can evaluate the outcome; or a combination of these.

The outcome of the evaluation depends on the norms I use in evaluation. Relevant for these norms is the proper function of the artefact, what the artefact *is for*. The notion of ‘proper function’ thus plays an important role in the analysis below. This article gives a philosophical analysis of relevant norms of use by combining the functions of artefacts with further action theoretical norms. An action theoretical analysis of artefact use and the norms applicable to this should take functions into account. An account of use should help the interpretation and evaluation of use by providing a normative framework that gives criteria for in-

terpretation and evaluation. In action theory the traditional standard normative framework is a framework of rationality: rational norms are used as constraints for action.

It has been argued in the past that rational norms are not sufficient to interpret action in general, because rational norms underdetermine action. Social norms should be added in order to create a complete interpretative and evaluative framework. Elsewhere I have argued that the proper functions of artefacts also should be understood as involving social norms, because the standard features that are said to determine the proper function underdetermine it (Scheele 2005a; 2006). The relation between the social norms pertaining to artefact functions and the social norms pertaining to artefact use will be investigated in this article.

The strategy is as follows. First I show how we should understand the proper function of artefacts when taking the social context of use into account (section 2). Then I describe how Raz conceives of the possibility of interpreting (certain) social norms as secondary reasons, supplementing rational norms of action (section 3). Then I argue that social norms pertaining to proper functions play a similar, but not identical role in the analysis of use. A somewhat different notion of secondary reasons needs to be introduced to understand the role of social norms in artefact use. I call these ‘institutional reasons’ (section 4).

## 2. The social factors partly determining the proper function

Artefact use can be seen as a category of intentional action; we use artefacts to achieve our goals. The physical capacities of these objects enable us to realise these goals. Each of the capacities that enable a possible use is called a *system function* and use according to such a function is called *effective use* or *rational use*. This type of use can be analysed within most standard action theoretical frameworks that involve means-end rationality. Effective use can be contrasted with use that is according to the *proper function* of an artefact and is called ‘proper use’. The proper function denotes that *which the artefact is for*, denoting a privileged way of using the artefact.<sup>1</sup> This latter type of use stands central in

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<sup>1</sup> This terminology follows Preston in her (Preston 1998). It is standard to read this notion in an ethically neutral sense. So it can be the proper function of a gun to shoot people with, although we may reject this use on other grounds.

this article because the proper function of artefacts provides the kind of norms I am interested in.

Proper functions differ from system functions due to their normative import. A normal functioning artefact has many system functions and one of them is the proper function.<sup>2</sup> In normal circumstances, therefore, there is no material distinction between a system function and a proper function. However, there *is* some distinction, which is most clearly seen when an artefact loses a function. If this function loss is of a mere system function, nothing else, besides the physical loss happens: the artefact simply can't be used for something it could be before. But if an artefact loses its proper function we say it *malfunctions*, which involves a normative judgement in addition.

A car, for example, that cannot move anymore, is said to malfunction, because its *proper* function is to ride and transport people and it has lost that particular capacity. However, if I put a cleaner engine in the car, the car loses its *system* function to help rapidly advance global heating, but doing that wasn't its proper function in the first place, so we cannot say it now malfunctions on that account. Adequately accounting for proper functions and for malfunctioning is an important challenge in function theory.

Philosophical attention for artefact functions is relatively recent and is only in the process of being separated from the notion of biological function, a notion that has been extensively researched in philosophy.<sup>3</sup> There are some similarities between biological functions and artefact functions. Restricting our attention to proper functions there are two central similarities. In the first place, biological function ascription, as well as artefact function ascription, takes the physical capacities of the object into account, although a qualification is added for the possibility of malfunction. In the second place the function, even in the absence of the right physical capacity, is justified in terms of the causal history of the item. In the case of biological functions the relevant causal history is determined by the item's *evolutionary history*. A modern classic is Karen Neander's definition:

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<sup>2</sup> Although an artefact may have several proper functions simultaneously I disregard this most of the time for the sake of simplicity

<sup>3</sup> A useful anthology of function theories is (Buller 1999). A survey of function theories that also pays attention to artefact functions is (Perlman 2004).

‘It is the/a proper function of an item ( $X$ ) of an organism ( $O$ ) to do that which items of  $X$ ’s type did to contribute to the inclusive fitness of  $O$ ’s ancestors, and which caused the genotype, of which  $X$  is the phenotypic expression, to be selected by natural selection.’ (Neander 1991: 174)

This definition uses a historical notion, natural selection. A proper function of an item is a function to do something, namely that what in the past was done by items of that type, which helped make the ancestors of the organism more fit. By definition, this is the ‘reason’ that the item was selected by natural selection and hence justifies the function ascription.

In the case of artefacts the *design history* is generally conceived of as the central determining factor, as opposed to the selection history. This means that the function the designer (and/or manufacturer) intended for the artefact determines its proper function. Sometimes, in addition to the designer’s intentions a kind of analogue to evolutionary history is introduced, in terms of the market mechanism which determines the success of the product (Preston 1998). So, although biological and artefact functions both refer to a causal history, the type of causal history referred to differs (cf. Millikan 1999).

Another difference, which is more important for our purposes, is the way in which the proper function is related to *using* the artefact. This difference is directly relevant to our discussion, because now we leave the domain of ‘function theory’ and enter that of ‘action theory’ and thus the study of norms for action. In general, although all organs may be *useful* for the creature that has them, the creature does not *use* all of them. With biological organs the proper function refers to the contribution to fitness an item has, whereas with artefacts the proper function refers to the proper use of the artefact, in combination with the way the artefact is supposed to work. We can say that in function theory the central analysandum for artefact functions differs from that for biological functions. Artefact functions directly involve intentional action.

It may be noted here that the distinction between “being used for” and “being useful for” does not coincide with the distinction between biological organs and artefacts. Biological organs *can* be used (by their owner) whereas artefacts, when functioning properly, are not always used intentionally (or consciously). Agents often *do* use their hands. And agents also generally *don’t* use the CPU of their computer consciously for a specific goal. Also think of artificial hearts in this respect. These examples should be analysed carefully with respect to the question

whether some item is merely useful or also (intentionally) used by an agent. “Being used” and “merely being useful for” certainly has vague boundaries. For purposes of this article I need not analyse these cases in detail and I concentrate on the cases for which proper use *is* clearly associated with the proper function (cf. Houkes and Vermaas 2004; Scheele 2005a).

This difference between artefacts and biological organs should be taken into account in the analysis of artefact functions and use. The analysis of artefact functions should take this aspect of *use* into account. I have argued elsewhere that proper functions of artefacts are partly determined in terms of the social environment in which the artefact is used. The social environment partly provides the norms of use and hence partly determines the proper use. In brief the point is as follows.<sup>4</sup> Although in most cases the proper functions of artefacts are determined by the designer or manufacturer this is not necessarily the case. An artefact that is used by everyone in a way alternative to the intentions of the designer will very soon change its proper function, due to the fact that this new use will become generally accepted. The reason for this is, roughly, that the socially accepted use will have changed, i.e. the relevant social norms will have changed and thus have overruled the original function ascription. This argument can be made general and shows that the original function determination also is, in part, socially determined: the designer and/or manufacturer has been assigned authority for this determination, which is a social category. The conclusion is that proper functions are partly constituted by the social acceptance of the use by a relevant community of users.<sup>5</sup>

However, invoking reference to ‘social facts’ or ‘social acceptance’ is still vague and does not make clear the (social) normative import that proper functions have. For the purposes of this article we are interested in this normative import. The relevant social aspects can be understood in terms of the *institutionalisation* of artefact use. The notion of ‘institution’ is generally used in the social sciences to indicate *enduring social structures*. The tendency is to treat it as a social scientific equivalent of ‘substance’. It is used in many different disciplines and in

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<sup>4</sup> For the details of the analysis and the arguments (cf. Scheele 2005a; 2006).

<sup>5</sup> This implies that identical artefacts( with regard to their physical structure as well as their production history) can have different proper functions in different social groups. These different groups thus have different norms concerning the use of that artefact.

various ways. From an action theoretic point of view institutions can be defined as ‘stable patterns of action that are socially enforced’.<sup>6</sup>

This definition has two components. On the one hand a stable pattern of action has to be in place; in our case we focus on patterns of use. An artefact that is never used by someone for a certain purpose will not have that proper function.<sup>7</sup> But actual patterns of action are not sufficient to establish the normative force of a proper function. Take for instance the fact that we routinely use chairs to stand on. This does not make it into a proper function. Beth Preston calls this kind of secondary use, use according to a system function, ‘(culturally standardized) *on-going system functions*’ (Preston 2000: 31-33). The point is that this type of use has no normative implications that are special to the use of that artefact. Only general norms, such as the standards of rationality or other (social or moral) norms apply. If we compare this with a regular proper function, the difference is apparent. The normative implications of failed use differ strongly. If my car doesn’t start, I have no reason to blame myself, but may blame the manufacturer (or the mechanic who repaired my car recently) (cf. Franssen 2006). Here I assume that the car is used properly, in the sense that it is used according to its proper function and in the proper way. If I fall off my chair, however (for instance because it was a swivel chair) I have no one else to blame but myself. I cannot invoke any further norm.

The normative component is added to this pattern of action with the introduction of ‘social enforcement’. This stands for all sorts of social consequences and sanctions that are relevant to the use of artefacts and of the consequences of a particular use. If we look at the examples given above we notice the following. If I use a car properly, i.e. in accordance with its proper function, I am justified on those grounds in my expectation that the car will bring me somewhere. I enter into an institution in which I have certain rights and expectations. And if the car doesn’t work, if it malfunctions, then I have several rights. The counterparts of these rights are obligations of others. This can mean that I can hold the manufacturer (or reseller) liable for damage to me or to others. This is the kind of social en-

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<sup>6</sup> A more detailed analysis of this institutional view can be found in (Scheele 2005a; 2005b).

<sup>7</sup> This is a rough statement, of course: archaeological artefacts, for example, are *no more* used in their original way. We might want to maintain that these artefacts still have their original proper function. We discover this often by studying the society in which the artefact apparently played a role.

forcement that is connected to institutions and in that sense to proper functions; their (justified) ascription creates obligations. This is not the case with system functions. Rather the reverse: if I intend to use an artefact ‘improperly’ this can be fine, if it is effective, that is. But if something goes wrong, I cannot transfer any responsibility.<sup>8</sup> Normal standards of rationality will apply here and not living up to those standards will be the user’s responsibility.

### 3. Raz on second-order reasons

Reasons drive our actions; in so far as these actions are intentional. Understanding and evaluating artefact use thus involves understanding the intentions of the user, but also the physical environment in which an artefact is used, and the proper function of the artefact. In the previous section I gave an account of these proper functions that can be summarised as follows. The proper function of an artefact is that *what the artefact is for*. This can be analysed by identifying various conditions for the justified ascription of the proper function. These conditions should involve the physical structure of the artefact, although with some qualifications due to the possibility of malfunction. These conditions also involve various forms of intentionality. The most general way to state the relevant intentions determining proper functions is by saying that they create the institutionalised use of artefacts. The proper function of an artefact is thus partly determined by social institutions within the group of its users. It is possible that an artefact (or an artefact-type) has different proper functions amongst different groups of users.

The question here is how these social norms determining the proper function can help us understand and evaluate the use of artefacts by agents, knowing that we need to combine them somehow with other types of norms, such as rational norms, which are relevant to understanding and evaluating artefact use as well. Thinking of reasons for actions in connection with these norms will help in this matter.

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<sup>8</sup> The situation is generally somewhat more complex than this. It might be the case that a kind of alternative use of an artefact should have been possible. The physical structure that enables its proper function can justify the thought that it enables some other system function and the impossibility of using an artefact according to some system function can justify the thought that it cannot be used in its proper way as well (e.g. if I can’t use a chair to stand on anymore, I’ll probably be unable to sit on it as well). It is not clear beforehand where the responsibility might lie in such cases. Social factors will play a role as well, but not social factors that directly determine the proper function, which I am interested in here.



I propose to view these norms as second-order norms in the sense of Joseph Raz' analysis of norms in action. These norms do not function directly in the deliberation about some action, e.g. by changing the preferences of certain means-ends combinations, but they rather change the decision situation by changing or limiting the allowed options for choice. To see this point we may understand it as follows in a preliminary way. Understanding an action involves understanding the situation an agent is in, or actually, understanding the situation an agent *believes* he or she is in.<sup>9</sup> In a given situation an agent may observe (or think up etc.) a number of alternatives for action. In standard rational reconstructions of actions these alternatives get assigned a preference and an action is said to be rational if the action conforms to the highest preference.<sup>10</sup> However, a second-order reason does not change the preference(s) of opportunities of action, but rather influences the allowable alternatives of choice. It changes the decision situation, because the allowable, as opposed to the preferred options are limited.<sup>11</sup> Raz calls these types of second-order reasons, *exclusionary reasons*: they exclude certain options from the decision matrix: 'An exclusionary reason is a second-order reason to refrain from acting for some reason.' (Raz 1975: 39). As we shall see, the case is slightly different with respect to proper functions. I will extend the analysis to cover these cases, however.

The idea of these second order reasons is as follows. Justification of action forms a central component of the idea of practical rationality. This can be formulated in terms of a 'practical principle: P1. It is always the case that one ought, all things considered, to do whatever one ought to do on the balance of reasons' (Raz 1975: 36). This is one possible formulation of many that have been given in this field of

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<sup>9</sup> I use a simple model of action in terms of (rational) belief/desire psychology. Beliefs about the situation (in combination with the desires an agent has) are motivating factors for action, not knowledge or 'the real world' per sé.

<sup>10</sup> I disregard all sorts of details about the preference formation and analysis, but those details are not relevant for my main argument. The formulation used here uses a maximising approach to practical rationality, but it is not difficult to fit it with a satisficing analysis, for instance.

<sup>11</sup> One note. It might be argued that the options that are excluded in this way are simply assigned preference *zero*. This might be the case and also a good way to model it mathematically in a decision-theoretic analysis. However, this does not help in understanding the way agents come to their decisions and what the right reasons and motivations are for this particular preference assignment. Therefore that strategy is not at all useful for us. The distinction between allowable and preferable is a real distinction.

research. For our purposes it is interesting how the author adds exclusionary reasons to this idea. Exclusionary reasons are not part of this ‘balance of reasons’, but are used in a second principle: ‘P2. One ought not to act on the balance of reasons if the reasons tipping the balance are excluded by an undefeated exclusionary reason.’ (Raz 1975: 40).<sup>12</sup>

This type of reason may overrule rational actions in certain contexts and be itself of a social (or moral) nature. An example Raz gives is of a soldier who is commanded by his officer to appropriate a van that belongs to a citizen. The authority of the officer is an exclusionary reason that overrides much of the deliberation of ‘the balance of reasons’ that belongs to a full justification of the action, e.g. that you are not normally supposed to take away someone’s property. This authority is a social authority (and a legal authority). This reason is not a ‘rational’ reason in itself, but it does structure the options of choice of the soldier. It is important to see that an exclusionary reason is not absolutely overriding, but only conditionally overriding (it concerns an ‘*undefeated* exclusionary reason’) (Raz 1975: 38 & 40). The soldier might, for instance, have an even ‘higher order’ reason *not* to obey the officer. This theory gives us a framework for the evaluation of action in specific social contexts.

This analysis of social norms fits well with the view on institutions briefly described above. Social institutions are the general social structures, which are formed, *inter alia*, by the norms that prevail in society. These norms can be of different kinds, as we saw in the example of the soldier: social, ethical, authoritative etc.

The secondary exclusionary reason need not be a direct order. It can be a standing practice in society and/or be embedded in the legal system. Take the following example in (Dutch) contract law. I can make a deal with someone, which brings a contract into existence. There are different ways in which this contract can be brought into existence or be materialised. I can have a spoken agreement with someone, but I can also write the contract down and both parties can sign it. There are different reasons to choose for one or the other option. If I buy a standard item in a shop it is not necessary and impractical to draw up a complete con-

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<sup>12</sup> P1 calls for a universal observance of the balance of reasons, whereas P2 gives a condition under which this should *not* be done. Under that formulation this leads to a contradiction and calls for modification of the first principle: ‘P3. It is always the case that one ought, all things considered, to act for an undefeated reason.’ (Raz 1975: 40).

tract. For other types of agreements I might want to have a written contract, though, for purposes of administration or for future evidence of the contract, e.g. in the case of problems. These reasons are all first order reasons, i.e. they are part of the balance of reasons in Raz' terminology.

However, take a look at the following example. If I want to buy a house (in the Netherlands) I agree to buy a house and thus make up a contract with the owner. In this case, though, there are strict rules pertaining to the form of the contract that have to be observed. In addition, purchases of this kind and ownership of houses have to be registered in special registers. These (legal) rules exclude other ways of buying and selling houses, even if other ways and forms are possible. In that sense these rules are exclusionary reasons, because they determine or influence the allowed set of options in a given case.

It should be realised that the point is not that it is *impossible* to buy or sell a house in a different way, nor is it, necessarily, a reason that simply changes the balance of reasons, i.e. is part of the calculus in preference formation. A kind of contract that does not conform to the rules given in the law can be valid or can become valid (if it is not explicitly nullified in time). There are several reasons to abide by this rule: you are supposed to observe the law *simpliciter*, but it can also be practically troublesome not to follow this rule.

This is another example of a rule that provides an exclusionary reason, namely by excluding other forms of contracts from the set of allowable actions in buying a house. It does not do this by making it actually impossible, but also not by simply changing the preferences of an action; it comes before these preferences, as it were, and it works differently from means-ends calculus.

An analysis in terms of secondary reasons, and more in particular exclusionary reasons, provides a tool for a more differentiated and thorough understanding of action. It also provides a tool for a more differentiated way of evaluating actions. Following and ignoring exclusionary reasons provides different types of culpability and exculpations. Ignoring the command of an officer has different consequences from not behaving in a rational way (or the most rational way); if only because different 'authorities' will evaluate your case. Although blindly following orders does not exculpate you automatically, it does provide reasons for shifting the responsibility for actions on someone else. These are some of the consequences of Raz' analysis.

#### 4. Extension to *use* of artefacts

Supposing that Raz' analysis sheds light on action in general we can try to extend the analysis to deal with the special case of artefact use. As was said above, much of the relevant norms in this case are provided by the proper functions of artefacts, which are partly socially determined. Do proper functions also provide exclusionary reasons?

I will argue that up to a certain extent they do, but some modifications need to be made. As we shall see the notion of 'exclusionary reasons' should be understood in less strict terms, rather as (second order) *enabling* reasons, which I shall call *institutional reasons*, in the spirit of my view on proper functions explained briefly above.

The ascription of proper functions in terms of institutions shows how social norms are relevant to artefact use. On the one hand an artefact has many ways that it can be used for rationally: these are its system functions. Artefacts are indeed generally used for many different things: this may be one-off use (quickly using your mobile phone as a paperweight to prevent papers being blown away); this may be an accepted (stable) pattern of use (using a chair as a step ladder), but there is no special normative force connected with these uses. The normative force comes into play when we add the institutionalisation of this use, whatever the source of the institution may be. In normal cases, i.e. in cases where the reason is not defeated, this institution forms a reason to use the artefact in that particular (proper) way. If the artefact malfunctions (and if this is known), we can say that the reason is defeated.

The way in which a second order reason, in this case through the institutionalisation of use, works here is by providing a natural or standard way for doing some job. If we want to have a hole for a screw in a wall, we shall immediately think of a power drill, because that is what those things are for. The proper function of a power drill thus helps structure the decision space in this case. In addition this institutional reason also helps judging failed use. If I use the drill in a correct way but the drill fails to do the job there is reason, on the grounds of the proper function of the drill, to blame the manufacturer, designer or reseller. The proper function of an artefact makes that I can have justified expectations about the operation of the object. These expectations are based on certain social norms that are associated with the proper function of the object. These social norms, part of the institution, form second order reasons for performing actions.

So far, the analysis of proper functions provides norms very similar to those that provide exclusionary reasons. However, an important difference with Raz' analysis that is connected to viewing proper functions as institutional reasons concerns the fact that proper functions in fact are not simply *excluding* reasons. The social institution does not really exclude other uses, but it rather gives reasons for performing an action one way, rather than another. In contrast to exclusionary reasons, there is no real (social) problem with use according to system functions (barring irrational use). Especially creative alternative uses are often judged positively. Strictly seen, exclusionary reasons only allow for such normative freedom if they are *defeated* (because of some other, overriding norm), but for many cases of alternative use this needs not be the case. What the proper function *does*, among other things, is structure the *consequences* of use, most notably in cases of failure. The consequences of failure in cases of proper use differ from the consequences in cases of improper or alternative use.

An important additional difference between exclusionary and institutional reasons concerns the possibility of holding some party responsible or liable in the case of alternative use (which is especially important if an accident happens, of course). If an artefact is used according to its proper function, there is reason to suppose that the producer of the artefact is responsible for negative (side) effects or accidents occurring when using the artefact.<sup>13</sup> If I misuse an artefact or use it 'improperly' there is every reason to blame me for failed use and/or accidents. This is the kind of difference that is relevant for the way proper functions have normative force, as institutional reasons. These different results are also, for instance, institutionalised in the form of laws in a country or warranty certificates that come with products.

Our analysis of reasons should deal with cases of failure. Proper functions structure the decision situation. They don't do this directly, but by changing the risks (of failure of use). I would say that these are second order reasons as well, but differently from exclusionary reasons. For that reason I introduced the term '*in-*

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<sup>13</sup> This should be qualified. If I have an accident with a car when driving it, it very much depends on the circumstances whether I can blame the manufacturer (if all else is in working order). The same is true for using a gun. Cf. the NRA slogan "Guns don't kill, people do" in its campaign to keep gun possession legal and to prevent gun-producers to be held liable for killings and accidents with guns. Opinions differ about the consequences of accepting this statement, of course.

*stitutional reasons*' for the normativity that is introduced by proper functions. By using an artefact you become part of an institution and you also *reaffirm* the institution. The opposite can also be the case. By using an artefact in an alternative way you place yourself outside the relevant institution and it can even be a means to undermine the institution and be a force in a process of institutional change.

Different types of second order reasons now may be seen to interact in different ways, sometimes mutually enhancing each other's norms, sometimes conflicting. Take for instance the second order reason to use an object for a certain purpose, e.g. a gun is properly used to shoot with and in that sense you make yourself part of a certain institution with its institutional norms. On the other hand it is deemed immoral to use guns to shoot people in most contexts. This can be interpreted as a social exclusionary reason *not* to use the gun in that way. This causes a conflict of norms. Norms of rationality may come into play again, for it might be or might not be rational to conform to some social institution. And this norm of rationality may again be thought to be overruled by some higher social norm. This is not the place to investigate all these levels of normativity, because they no longer concern artefact use in a strict sense. The example only serves to indicate that the concepts of exclusionary reasons and institutional reasons as secondary reasons serves an important analytical purpose in the investigation of artefact use.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article I have argued the following. The social aspects of proper functions can be understood in terms of institutions. Use of artefacts according to the proper function is termed proper use. Proper use, in turn, is embedded in the normative structure of social institutions, i.e. those that help determine the proper functions of artefacts. These social normative structures are complementary to traditional standards of practical rationality and are a kind of *second-order* reasons, similar to so-called exclusionary reasons. Proper functions provide *institutional reasons*, which are in some respects different to these exclusionary reasons. The most notable difference concerns the fact that proper functions not so much exclude other types of use, but rather place that use (and the user) in different social structures with different rights and obligations. An institutional reason not only gives a reason for action, it also provides reasons for evaluating actions according to such reasons positively.

The upshot of this analysis is that it gives us an additional tool to understand and evaluate the use of artefacts. This tool provides for a more differentiated and

thorough *understanding* of artefact use. It also provides a tool for a more differentiated way of *evaluating* actions. We can use artefacts according to their proper functions, and we usually do, but we need not do this. Proper functions provide second order reasons for a certain kind of behaviour, but they do not force this behaviour.

Institutional reasons show how there are differences between proper use and other kinds of use. These differences become most clear when some action goes wrong. As is the case with exclusionary reasons, acting in accordance with a proper function, and thus in accordance with an institutional reason, can work exculpatory when something goes wrong. This means that we can or should evaluate such actions differently from use that is not done for an institutional reason. The analysis is not just relevant for the evaluation of use, it is also relevant for understanding use: i.e. use is not just done “on the balance of reasons”, but rather because some artefact simply is supposed to be used in such and such a way.<sup>14</sup>

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