

Reconstructing Intersubjective Norms

According to Brandom's (1994) "normative pragmatics", we can think of the way in which our dialogical interactions take place against a background of norms regarding acceptable linguistic activity, the use and application of terms, the inferential associations between our terms, and so on. Yet, it is in these interactions that it is possible to modify that practice, since the processes of speaking together alters those norms. Such norms are not externally imposed, rather they are constructed, reinforced, and modified in and through our interactions with each other. Brandom takes this view to be corrective to *regulism*, in which the possibility of grounding norms in explicit rules yields to a vicious regress. Norms of reasoning are "instituted" through social practices in which certain rules of reasoning implicit in those practices may be made explicit through their public expression in language games. Brandom also argues against *regularism*, which in this case, would say that implicit rules could simply be "read-off" from regularities in practice. One problem with regularism is that we could force a finite set of practices to conform to several distinct rules, and for any "deviant" form of practice, it can be made to cohere with some rule or other. Brandom attempts to deal with this sort of problem by arguing that social norms can be identified by the way we *sanction* each other in ordinary linguistic practice. But, as Brandom notes, sanctioning cannot itself be a matter of regularity, since that would simply reintroduce the problem of regularism at the level of sanctions. As such, sanctions must themselves be normative, so we have "norms all the way down" (Brandom, 1994, p. 44). That is, Brandom effectively *postulates* the existence of proprieties of practice as normatively primitive, which determine our abilities to evaluate and sanction, each other. Whether or not this avoids the problems of regulism and regularism, is now reliant upon giving a decent account of this activity of sanctioning that is non-circular. As such, the view faces a number of hurdles, particularly when it comes to providing a non-circular account of the norms of practice, from within those practices themselves.

I argue that Brandom's account of "scorekeeping" abilities, where agents keep track of each other's commitments and entitlements, leads to a view of norms, not as emerging from reciprocal interrelations and interactions between agents, but through a kind of checking-mechanism in the form of a detached observer. It is at the level of the community of scorekeepers, on Brandom's view, that meanings are determined, and norms instituted. So, sanctioning practices are inextricably related to the social attitudes defined on the basis of membership in a specific community, where membership in a community may also be

understood to be normatively defined by means of those practices. This is both worryingly conservative, and asymmetric from the point of view of agents' ability to disagree and dissent from communal practices and sanctions. So, Brandom fails to provide an account of intersubjective norms, and, in the process illuminates the inherent conservatism of social norms insofar as their circular construction is obfuscated.

I develop an alternative, more thoroughly intersubjective, account of norms grounded in action coordination. This begins by developing Brandom's account in the context of interactional linguistics, which argues that, contra Brandom, linguistic interaction may be understood in terms of non-intentional coordination, underlying cooperative activities. Gregoromichelaki and Kempson (2013) argue that communication does not require the manipulation of propositional intentions, since agents often express "incomplete" thoughts without planning or aim regarding what they intend to "say", "expecting feedback to fully ground the significance of their utterance, to fully specify their intentions" (p. 72). This kind of coordination is often sub-personal, involving mechanisms by which agents "synchronise" together prior to the level of communicative intention. In making utterances in interaction, we may "start off without fixed intentions, contribute without completing any fixed propositional content, and rely on others to complete the initiated structure, and so on" (Gregoromichelaki and Kempson, 2013, p. 80). As such, meaning can be understood in terms of intentionally underspecified, yet incrementally goal-directed, dialogue.

By thinking of interaction as a form of action coordination, it is possible to see how our dispositions to make assessments of each other's actions may refer *to each other*, and are therefore also involved in the reinforcing and construction of meaningful dialogue. So, for example, our linguistic expressions, which are mutually and incrementally forged into meaningful statements through our ongoing conversations, are subject to feedback mechanisms determining appropriateness of response at a sub-intentional level. It is through the interaction of our practical attitudes with each other in continuous feedback and adjustment that normative assessments become instituted and implicated within those very mechanisms. Our linguistic dispositions signal and shape the appropriateness of each other's responses, and so our talk *about* meaning, or *about* the norms shaping our interaction, may also be understood to exhibit dispositions that affect those meanings or norms. Norms, therefore, become sedimented through our interactions, and the cases in which explicit normative talk is required to keep our interactions coherent with each other are decreased over time by the convergence of our

practices. As Kiesselbach puts it, this gives us a way of understanding “normative talk as essentially calibrational” (Kiesselbach, 2012, p. 123).

I go on to discuss the ways in which this account gives us a very different approach to community and communal norms than Brandom’s. By embedding norms in intersubjective interactions, we need not rely upon a notion of a stable “community”, preferring instead to think of relatively stable groups, across which there are multiple and intersecting relationships. As such, the “harmonious” nature of much linguistic interaction may be understood to be an effect of the sedimentation of norms through the sanctioning of linguistic practice. In these settings, whilst it is certainly the case that there are relative points of stability maintained through reinforcement and feedback through adjustment, calibration, and sanctioning (where required), even the activity of sanctioning would give rise to the possibility of *revising* local norms by explicitly reconstructing those norms in our interactions. As such, interactions always have potential to construct new forms of activity that begin to construct new *norms* of practice.

References

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