

**Review Essays: Thought, Norms, and Discursive Practice: Commentary on
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Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Sep., 1996), 699-717.

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Thought, Norms, and Discursive Practice: Commentary on Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit*

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What is meaning? We might start our search for an answer by scrutinizing the question itself: What are we asking when we ask what something means? And here is a possible strategy for tackling this metaquestion: Observe that in our everyday lives together, we *take* each other to mean things by what we say. Explain, then, what this "taking to mean" consists in, and we'd know what judgments of meaning are.

Now a *theorist* of meanings, we can imagine, stands outside the conversation to which she ascribes meanings. She may even stand outside the whole world of the conversation she's observing: she can run a thought experiment about meaning, taking as her subject a conversation she imagines. Still in ascribing meanings, we can say, she's doing the same thing conversants are doing. Explain how Jack and Jill regard each other as they take each other to mean "Let's fetch some water", and we've said how Thea the outside theorist regards them in ascribing this same meaning to their words.

These considerations point to a strategy for explaining the meaning of 'meaning'—for explaining what's at issue in the questions that theorists raise about meaning. The strategy is one I call *expressivist*.¹ To illustrate the strategy, imagine a prosaic case of a theorist's ascribing meaning: Young Hans uttered the words "Schnee ist weiss," and by his words, claims theorist Thea, Hans meant that snow is white. What does she mean by this? To say what she means, an expressivist proposes, explain what *state of mind* she expresses by her words. It won't be informative just to say that she expresses her belief that that's what Hans meant; we want something that will *explain* the content of her state of mind. An expressivist, then, explains the meaning of a statement by explaining the state of mind the statement expresses. In

¹ See Gibbard (1986, 1990). Blackburn (1984, 167–71) speaks of "expressive theories", but adopts the label "projectivism".

metaethics, emotivists are expressivists of one kind: they explain moral statements as expressing emotions, and reject the idea of explaining emotions as beliefs in a special kind of moral content. An expressivist for meaning uses a like strategy to explain what attributions of meaning mean.²

This is a strategy adopted by Robert Brandom in his long and richly elaborated book *Making It Explicit* (1994). Brandom's own term for the strategy is 'phenomenalist' (291–97). No term for this strategy will be entirely satisfactory, but 'phenomenalist' carries a special danger: it suggests what metaethical theorists would call not expressivism but a *subjectivism* about meaning. That a tree is in the quad, thinks the old-time phenomenalist, means that *were* I in certain circumstances, I *would* have certain kinds of sense data. A metaethical parallel is the ideal observer theory: 'X is good' means that *were* an observer in such-and-such conditions, he *would* approve. In the metatheory of meaning—the theory of what 'means' means—the corresponding theory would be this: Thea, recall, tells us that Hans, by his words, meant that snow is white. This means, says the subjectivist, that under such-and-such circumstances, an observer *would* regard Hans in a certain way. This meaning-metatheoretic subjectivism isn't Brandom's view: As I'd put it, when Thea ascribes meanings to Hans, then according to Brandom, she *expresses* her *own* state of mind, a state of regarding Hans in a certain way.

What, then, is this state of mind she expresses? What is this attitude she takes toward Hans that constitutes ascribing him meanings? It's the same attitude, I've been suggesting, as Hans's chum Jülchen takes toward him in their conversations when she regards him as meaning, say, that snow is white. Now this, Brandom tells us, is a *normative* attitude, a scorekeeping attitude. Jülchen regards Hans as *committing* himself to snow's being white, as *acknowledging* the commitment, and as *excluding* a claim that snow is red. Again, we explain the normative status of being "committed"—what she means when she says that he is so committed—by explaining the attitude that constitutes *regarding* him as committed. The attitude is one that outside theorist Thea and interactor Jülchen can share toward Hans (639).

You and I are now standing as metatheorists interpreting theorist Thea. As interpreters of her, we in turn are taking normative attitudes toward her. We're taking an overt act or a supposed inner event of hers as constituting the *taking on of a normative status*—as acquiring commitments and the like. The point iterates: Observers who treat us as metatheorists are in turn attributing normative statuses to us. In a way, as Brandom says, it is "norms all the way down," expressivism all the way down. In particular, "The distinction between normative and nonnormative vocabulary, claims, and facts is itself drawn in normative terms" (625). In this, Brandom's view of meanings differs from expressivist theories for other realms, for realms outside those of

² I explore some aspects of such a program in Gibbard (1994).

meaning and mental content: Expressivists for morals and the like might think themselves free to take the content of their own theories as not itself, in turn, to be explained expressivistically. If Brandom is right, though, expressivisms of *all* kinds—his own included—are to have their content explained expressivistically. The content of the theory is to be explained by explaining the configuration of normative attitudes that constitutes *holding* the theory. This expressivism for meaning applies to itself, and so iterates.

Brandom is often extremely clear on this, and that is one of the delights of his book. Is this regress cause for alarm? I think not. Brandom doesn't take normative claims as second class, as needing a reduction to causal, non-normative claims. Nor need he: Causal claimings themselves, after all, need to be justified, and this work of justification is normative. Still, we can worry, doesn't the regress of normative attitudes leave meaning divorced from the causal world, the world of events? No, he can answer, for normative claims are often supported by causal facts. My thinking that Smith ought to pay Jones five dollars may rest on my knowing how Smith and Jones uttered certain words and how a greenish sheet of paper with special printing, construction, and provenance got from Jones' hand into Smith's. My normative claim as to what Smith ought to do goes beyond these causal facts of the case, but it rests on them heavily.³ Matters of meaning, on Brandom's view, rest similarly on causal goings-on. These causal events *constitute* agents' taking on commitments and the like. Such claims of constitution are normative: To accept such a claim is to come to have a normative attitude.⁴

This aspect of Brandom's project strikes me as highly promising. Whether it works in the end I won't for the most part try to assess. Rather, I want to explore its connection to other themes in the book. The norms that govern thought and discussion, Brandom tells us, are *implicit* in *discursive practice*. Discursive practice *institutes* the normative statuses that constitute meaning what one does by one's words. They even institute one's thinking the thoughts that one does. In an important sense, thought itself is essentially social: Truly sapient beings—"we"—must be *discursive scorekeepers*. "Simple intentional systems" that are not discursive scorekeepers exhibit only a *derivative* intentionality. In consequence, the right direction of explanation for meaning is from public practice to private content of thought, and not the other way around. We must reject the mode of explaining meaning that has prevailed among philosophers: explaining public meanings as arising from interactions of thinkers whose thoughts can be identified and understood independently of public practice (229–33).

These are strong claims and controversial. Some will find them touchstones of right thinking, as championed by Wittgenstein, Sellars, and David-

³ See Hare (1964), who argues this line against Searle.

⁴ See, for instance, pp. 156, 260, and 626 with its note 22.

son. Others would be astounded to find themselves convinced of such claims. It will be important to know, then, whether Brandom, in proceeding from his expressivistic starting point, discovers weighty reasons to be convinced of this cluster of theses that full-fledged thought must have a social background.

1. 'Original' and 'Derived' Intentionality

Why must intentionality without discursive scorekeeping be "derived"? In what way is it derived from the full-blown intentionality of discursive scorekeepers? Jack and Jill converse and keep score on themselves and each other. Their sayings and thinkings are *about* things in the fullest way—the pail, the hill—and many of the things they say hold independently of anyone's saying or thinking them. Outside theorist Thea ascribes them a scorekeeping intentionality, and in so doing, she does explicitly to them what they do implicitly to each other. Accept all this: Does it establish, we need to ask, that Jack, Jill, and Thea can't do the same with non-scorekeepers? A non-scorekeeper Sim can't, to be sure, think that Jack *is committed* to the claim that snow is white; to think any such thing would be to keep score. But why can't he nevertheless *think* that snow is white, or that planetary orbits are elliptical—and think this as fully and non-derivatively as can Jack or Jill. Attributing 'simple'⁵ intentionality to a thing, Brandom tells us, "does not involve treating it as a participant in the essentially social and linguistic game of giving and asking for reasons" (630). True enough, but the question is whether, if Sim's not in *that* game, this makes the intentionality of his thought on *other* matters somehow derivative.

Brandom has two official arguments that it does. One stems from his expressivism, and that's the one I'll take up first and return to later. To explain the meaning of meaning, we explain *ascribing* meaning, and explain this as keeping score. Thus we explain all intentionality—non-scorekeeping intentionality included—by appeal to features of scorekeeping intentionality.

True enough. But that's a characteristic of any expressivistic explanation of a concept—and it doesn't normally have any upshot of derivativeness. Take, for instance, being cute. What does it mean to call someone cute? An expressivist for cuteness might say this: We have a special reaction to typical babies and small children, a reaction that is understandable, biologically, as eliciting a special care and solicitude that human young need from their parents, other kin, and parents' friends. When I call something cute, I'm expressing that feeling.

Now babies are cute, but they are not ascribers of cuteness—that comes later on, as they grow up. Normal adults find babies cute but often aren't cute

⁵ Little 's's are used by Brandom as "scare quotes", and I'll sometimes follow his practice. I use single quotes to mention linguistic expressions, and double quotes for all other uses.

themselves. Some ascribers of cuteness are cute, I'll agree, namely those that share the right aspects of look and manner with typical babies or small children. Is it, then, *these* that have cuteness *originally*? Are babies cute only by courtesy? Are they cute only by assimilation to cute ascribers of cuteness? Or do the originally cute have to be something even more: Self-ascribers of cuteness? True, to understand what it means to *call* a baby cute, we'll need to understand the cuteness reaction, the "stance" of finding someone cute. But that doesn't make babies' cuteness in any way second class. In particular, it isn't "derivative" from the original cuteness of self- and other-ascribers of cuteness.

How is intentionality, expressivistically understood, any different? True, to be an ascriber of intentionality, one must oneself be intentional. This is in contrast to cuteness: ascribers of cuteness needn't be cute. Still, if non-score-keeping intentionality is in any way derived, it's in the same way as cuteness is ^sderived.^s Cuteness is in this sense ^sderived^s not from the cuteness of its ascribers, but from their intentionality. The general pattern for this strange sense of the term 'derived' is not "X-ness is derived from the X-ness of ascribers of X," but "X-ness is derived from the *intentionality* of ascribers of X." (And in this sense, moreover, scorekeeping intentionality itself is ^sderived^s.)

2. Representation and Shifts in Perspective

Brandom's has a second official argument that non-scorekeeping goings-on aren't in the full sense intentional. This one invokes *objectivity* and *representation*. Fully to represent a state affairs as objective, Brandom argues, I must conceive in practice how it would look from different perspectives. At ten o'clock Monday morning, I remark "I've had breakfast today". You make the same claim the next day—you agree with my claim—not by saying "I've had breakfast today" but by saying "By ten yesterday morning, Gibbard had had breakfast." The inferential significance of this single claim differs from your standpoint and from mine: If, say, you hold "Gibbard's philosophical views are hopeless" and I reject that claim of yours, then you but not I can infer "A proponent of hopeless philosophical views had had breakfast by ten yesterday morning." Keeping track of what a claim represents involves keeping track of how the claim shifts from perspective to perspective. That means being a discursive scorekeeper.

This strikes me as a far more promising argument than the first. Perhaps intentionality in its fullness does require being able to keep track of how the same claim looks from different perspectives. I'll be arguing, though, two things: First, differences of perspective needn't involve different people. Second, even when they do, grasping the shifts—navigating through them in practice—might nor require any practice that is *discursive* and fully social.

Perspective shifts, in the first place, needn't be interpersonal. Individual memory too requires some mastery of them: Early in the morning, I experience myself eating breakfast; in mid-morning I conclude from memory not "I am eating breakfast," but that I ate breakfast a while ago. Orangutans have little sociability but fairly big brains, apparently in part to handle problems of optimal foraging. I don't know how orangutans do what they do, but we can imagine it might well involve keeping track of what stage of ripeness a fruit tree was at when last visited, and the import of this for when next to check out the tree. Such thinking handles temporal shifts in perspective and does so in complex ways: shifts from time remembered, to now, to future time of contemplated visit. A lone thinker, moreover, will need to cope with shifting perspectives if it is to engage hypotheticals: to understand, say, that had one not eaten breakfast today, one would now be hungry—and so come to realize that one has eaten. The orangutan might well have to consider alternative courses of action, and how things would be from the perspective of each.

Brandom's argument from perspective shifts extends over much of the book, and so I have no great confidence that I have identified all that ties the perspective shifts involved in sapience to the need for discursive practice. One theme, though, that Brandom develops extensively is that representation of concrete things requires anaphora, picking up aspects of content that hold fixed across shifts of perspective. Consider the pronoun 'it' in "What's that?" "It's an all-purpose household robot." The deixis of 'that' is repeatable only by anaphora; "No deixis without anaphora" is Brandom's slogan. So indispensable, though, is anaphora that it is hard to see how anaphora could require sociality. Won't the orangutan need a kind of mental anaphora to keep referring to the same fruit tree in successive thoughts? We ourselves, to be sure, would report the orangutan's thinking as a soliloquy expressed in public language with public anaphora—but we'll do likewise for a language user like the historic Brutus, and it isn't due to *us* that Brutus could think.

Now perhaps in fact, for all I know, the normal human ability to handle constancy over perspective shifts *does* require socializing and being initiated into discursive practices of scorekeeping. Brandom's thesis, though, appears not to be a contingent, etiological one about our species, but something deeper: it seems to say what a being has to be like to *count* as fully intentional. To be intentional in the fullest sense, one must *represent* the world in the fullest sense of the term—and this requires some mastery of the ways that what is represented can stay constant over shifts of perspective.

Now it is true enough that there is *one* dimension of perspective that one cannot keep track of without a concept that is interpersonal: the dimension of which *person* the perspective belongs to. One needs implicitly, at least, to conceive of distinct cognizers, and oneself as one among many possible cog-

nizers. Still, this, as I say, isn't needed for *all* keeping track of constancy over shifts of perspective: it leaves the temporal and hypothetical dimensions.

Suppose, though, one does conceive of oneself as a *self*, as one among many possible or actual cognizers. Suppose, even, that one must do so if one is to be sapient. Need this be based on a social *practice*? If it must, further argument is needed—and non-obvious argument at that. What, precisely, is the social practice thesis? Is it that for full-fledged, objective representation, one must engage in interpersonal discursive practice actually? Is it the weaker thesis that at least one must be able to *conceive* of a possible interpersonal discursive practice?

Even this doesn't seem immediately apparent: Set aside the possibility of confining oneself to temporal and hypothetical dimensions of perspective shift; what do I need if I am to handle, in my thoughts, shifts of perspective from one person to another? What's been said so far seems to allow that I could conceive of possible thoughts that others have—and even thoughts of others about the thoughts of still others, and so on—without a word passing anyone's lips.⁶ Could we all have concepts of thoughts (including thoughts about thoughts, and so on) without any concept of *saying*?

Thoughts about a person's thoughts, Brandom has told us, are thoughts about their commitments and the like. We know, though, that if there are commitments involved in thinking something, they can be away from social gaze. A secret can be locked away in the thoughts of a single person. What, then, must the relation be, if any, between the concept of someone else's commitments, on the one hand, and anything that deserves the name of a *social practice* of discursive scorekeeping?

Ethologists sensibly study species of apes and monkeys to discover whether they show signs of a "theory of mind". An ape would evidence a "theory of mind", for instance, if things he does were best explained as planned deceptions—as opposed, say, to acts of a kind that profit the ape by

⁶ Wittgenstein and many others, to be sure, would challenge the possibility of private thoughts outside public practice. But at this stage of our discussion, a successful "private language argument" remains to be offered. I don't think the philosophical literature shows an agreed interpretation of how the argument is supposed to go—or indeed that it offers *any* interpretation that has been established as a convincing argument, which can now serve as established background for further argument.

⁷ Brandom contrasts saying with "claiming", which he tells us is roughly the same as "holding" something to be the case. Claiming needn't involve an overt act of speech, but to claim one must be *disposed* to assert on query (539–42). I'm puzzled where secrets fit this schema: Something one's keeping secret from all the world, come what may, won't be elicited discursively, and so it isn't something one "claims". Secret knowledge or opinion, though, can explain one's actions. Brandom presumably holds that having a secret is somehow parasitic on practices of claiming and saying—but that's just the thesis for which I'm trying to find a basis.

misleading others, but which the ape first happened on fortuitously and then repeated because he experienced its pleasing results.⁸

We humans keep intentional “score” on each other for two chief kinds of purposes: to converse, and to predict, explain, and cope with others. Strategic interactions of agents involve the latter cluster: We interact *strategically* if we each act on predictions of others that rest on ascribing them thoughts about the states of mind of everyone else. This is something that game theorists try to analyze; they depict it as involving thoughts about thoughts about thoughts, and so on. This needn’t involve communication—though one can analyze how communication arises from game theoretic situations. What’s pictured by game theory, then, seems to involve ascriptions of intentionality-ascribing intentionality, without, at the outset, any discursive practice. Each player must appreciate what the practical commitments of others might be, and what interpretive and cause-ascribing commitments might lie behind their plans, without words’ being exchanged.

Now granted, real humans may depart, in important ways, from the schematized “rational agents” of game theory. Still, is the game theorist’s picture an impossible one? Or are the game theorists’ “rational agents” not really ascribing score-keeping intentionality? Or are game theorists covertly picturing talk in the background, even before they derive the possibility of “signaling”? I’m not clear what Brandom should say to this. From game theory it looks at first blush as if intentionality-ascribing intentionality is possible without discursive practice—in principle at least. Strategic beings must recognize the many perspectives of many agents, with their many commitments in thought and plan, but still might not *talk* from one perspective to another.⁹ Considerations of perspectival attribution won’t by themselves, then, take us to discursive practice.

Manifestly, though, *we* normal human adults are discursive beings—and have been since early childhood. Even if not all conceivable sapience is rooted in discursive practice, is *human* sapience?

This, I think, has to be a rich and subtle empirical issue—difficult conceptually, to be sure, but far from purely conceptual. In the development of human children, do social practices of scorekeeping underlie an individual’s capacity to keep interpersonal score? Probably so, but we’ll need evidence. The young child’s “theory of mind”, for all we could know at the outset, might be pretty much “wired in”. If so, its etiology might have been social in evolutionary time: the evolution of this adaptation, in its last stages at least,

⁸ Cheney and Seyfarth (1990).

⁹ Brandom, to be sure, issues copious denials of such a possibility: “The contentfulness of the states attributed as part of a simple intentional interpretation of an individual consists in a sort of inferential articulation that is not intelligible solely in terms of the role those states play in practical reasoning” (158). I am asking after the basis of these denials.

might well have taken place among proto-humans who kept public score—and this public score might have figured crucially in the generation of the selection pressures that shaped this adaptation. Human capacities for sapience, then, would be biologically *for* participation in public scorekeeping practices, though not requiring current scorekeeping for their development in the child.

The perspectival scorekeeping capacities of a normal human adult, moreover, may not come in a unitary package. They may need to be subdivided and distinguished, with different stories for different aspects of human discursive competence. Children younger than four do fantastically at some aspects of conversation, but fail tests for the concept of a belief that might be false. Autistic adults converse in a way, and can do quite well on IQ tests, though also failing tests for conceiving of minds.¹⁰ Complex questions must be asked, of a kind that developmental psychologists must address, as to what kinds of conceptualizing are needed to explain what kinds of performance.

Brandom's own philosophical theses, I'll agree, might in principle be separable from these empirical questions. Still, a test of adequacy for Brandom's taxonomy of intellectual capacities would be whether it can be employed to distinguish actual human and animal capacities at various stages of development, in normal and defective states. The pure philosophical job that Brandom attempts may be too hard to handle by pure philosophical methods, by methods that do not look to tests of empirical adequacy. Brandom himself focuses his claims of contrast sometimes on thermostats, and sometimes on dumb animals taken quite generally. There may be a richer range of examples whose exploration would pay off by enhancing our understanding of the issues Brandom so richly airs.

3. Instituting Meanings

The concept of cuteness is best explained in terms of an observer's reaction of finding-cute. It doesn't follow, I've argued, that the "finding-cute" variety of intentionality 'institutes' the cuteness of babies. Some small dinosaurs were cute, I'd judge, but we weren't there to institute anything among the dinosaurs. If a dinosaur was cute, then it would have been cute whether or not humans later came along to appreciate a critter like it as cute.¹¹

Meanings, though, are different: it seems far more plausible that *they* are instituted. If they are, moreover, it's not by outside theorists, but by the peo-

¹⁰ See articles in Baron-Cohen, S., Tager-Flusberg, H., and Cohen, D. (1993). Dan Sperber pointed this line of considerations out to me.

¹¹ A museum, I suppose, might institute a classification of dinosaurs as "cute" or not. Is *this* the analogy to pursue? What we want to know about thought is not how schools, foundations, and the like institute it, but how most adequately to think about it. Everyday practice might "institute" thought in a sense that plausibly extends the way a museum could institute the cuteness of dinosaurs—but if this makes a bigger difference to thought than museums have made to the department of dinosaurs, that needs to be shown.

ple who talk to each other and mean what they do by their words. That the content of thoughts is likewise instituted seems wilder—but perhaps a sufficiently deep philosophical sagacity will allow us to ascertain that even this exciting possibility obtains.

What, then, does talk of “institution” suggest? The makers of a constitution and those who approve it *institute* a system of government, we’d say. When we say this about our own system, we may be saying something normative: that *we ought* to do certain things because of what the founding fathers and their fellow citizens did, as they acted in order to bring it about that people subsequently ought to follow the rules they chose. (This is rough, of course, but I won’t try for refinements.) Baseball is likewise instituted by those who govern the leagues. Brandom extends this sense of ‘institute’, stressing Wittgensteinian regress arguments to motivate the extension. Rules aren’t mere inscriptions, and even when the rules are inscribed, those inscriptions get their life from a *practice* that can’t just consist of a regress of inscriptions. Like considerations apply to utterances of rules, in voice and in thought, and to diagrams on paper and in the head. Baseball is instituted, in this extended sense, not just by the rule book and rituals of adopting those rules, but by what people do with the rule book and without it. In pick-up games, the implicit rules can lose their ties to any ceremonies of instituting whatsoever, apart from routine play and the upshot of rhubarbs.

Still, in this extended sense of ‘institute’, we retain the suggestion that what players *ought* to do depends, somehow, on what players, umpires, owners, boards, and the like *do*. This clearly extends to language: That *‘deux fois plus que’* in French means twice *as much* as (and not two times *more* than) depends on how speakers of French use the phrase in practice. The Académie Française may pronounce, but what its pronouncements have to do with correctness depends too on the practices of the French. The cuteness of small dinosaurs didn’t depend on anyone’s practices, but the proprieties of the French language do—and on the practices of its speakers, not on ours.

What, then, of the contents of thinking, and the cogency of explaining discursive practice in a way that Brandom rejects: As emerging from the interactions of individuals whose intentions can be characterized without having already explained a social practice? To get to these matters, we’ll have to press harder on the sense in which linguistic practice is plausibly “instituted” by its practitioners.

Outside observer Thea regards Hans, Jülchen, and their fellows as *instituting* the proprieties of German usage by their practices. This means that in judging what’s proper or not in German, she *defers* to practitioners of German. Hans says to Jülchen, “Du musst nicht sprechen.” Thea opines to herself, “It’s all right for Jülchen to speak, but she doesn’t have to.” She thereby agrees with what Hans says, even though she’d disagree if he had said in En-

glish "You must not speak." She defers to the practice of German speakers: even though she thinks that 'musst' means *must* and 'nicht' means *not*, she doesn't think that 'musst nicht' means *must not*. That's because speakers of German treat these words in practice as meaning *don't have to*.

All this is linguistic truism—but the point to note is that a reasonable outsider's interpretation requires a kind of deference: Thea reasonably treats Hans and Jülchen as having a voice in the meaning of 'musst nicht', but herself as having no such voice. Of course Hans and Jülchen must defer too, since they are only two German speakers of many tens of millions, but their reactions and attitudes count in this regard, and Thea's don't.

Now our original question, recall, was this: What is outside theorist Thea doing when she ascribes meanings to the words of Hans and Jülchen? Something normative, the answer was, and indeed the same normative thing as Hans and Jülchen do as they implicitly interpret each other in conversation. Now, though, we're finding an important asymmetry between Jülchen and Thea as they interpret Hans's words: Thea defers to practitioners, whereas Jülchen is a practitioner.

Jülchen, we might say, simply *hears* Hans as telling her that she doesn't have to speak. According to Brandom, her hearing Hans as saying this consists in her taking certain normative attitudes toward him, such as regarding Hans as *committed* to her not having to speak. She may now also come to think other things in consequence: say, that he *ought* not to beat her with a stick if she stays silent. This in turn could involve standing ready to beat him in return if he does. But, Brandom stresses, there will be a looseness to these further implications; the inferential potential, from her standpoint, of regarding him as committed will depend on the "auxiliary hypotheses" that she accepts in practice. She may well think that Hans ought not to beat her whatever his commitments, or she may take a pacifistic view of resisting attacks by force, or she may regard retaliation as imprudent even though within her rights.

However Jülchen's attitudes are best described, German being what it is *consists* in the normative attitudes Hans, Jülchen, and other speakers of German take. There's a kind of interpreting that consists in taking normative attitudes toward a speaker—let's agree with this for now, for the sake of inquiry. Is taking such attitudes, then, what the outside theorist too is doing? Is Thea likewise taking a normative stance toward Hans in interpreting his words? Is it the same stance as Jülchen takes in giving the same interpretation to his same words? I've supposed so far that it is; now I pursue some doubts.

Thea, remember, interprets Hans's words 'Du musst nicht sprechen' by interpreting Hans, Jülchen, and other Germans as taking certain normative stances toward utterances around them—their own included. If she's speaking

and thinking as a theorist, though (and not just “going native”, coming to share the linguistic reactions of Germans through exposure to their doings, linguistic rehearsal, and the like), she’s doing something that at least is more complex than what Hans and Jülchen have to be doing. Jülchen can, of course, come to engage in more complex thoughts too: She can wonder whether she’s misunderstanding Hans, and she might even end up reasoning as Thea should in resolving the matter. Normally, though, she just hears Hans *as* saying the things he does without raising any question of what basis she might have. There’s basis to be found in her experience, but she doesn’t for the most part take experiences she remembers as *data*; rather, her past experience has done its work on her, so that she now has come to hear German utterances as she does. Thea *qua* theorist, in contrast, is in the business of inferring meanings from data.

Is the stance, then, that she arrives at inferentially and explicitly from her data the same as that Jülchen comes to as a non-inferential result of native exposure and uptake? If Jülchen’s attitudes are normative, are Thea’s normative in the same way? I think perhaps not.

For a parallel, return to other kinds of institutions, and ask what happens when an outside observer rejects the norms of insiders. An outsider’s view of what’s instituted, we might argue, can be quite distinct from his normative views on the matter. Decent Dennis studies a vicious forced labor camp as an outside observer, and finds that when prisoners falter they are “selected for liquidation”. These prisoners, Dennis agrees, then occupy a certain institutional status: they ought, according to institutional practice, to be forced to their deaths. Is Dennis, in finding this, taking a normative stance? He isn’t favoring mass murder.¹² Guards, if they are true practitioners and not just acting to save their hides, their comfort, and the like, take the “selection” to provide *reason* for treating the selected prisoners in certain brutal ways. That is to say, they take whatever process they regard as selection—call it *S*—as providing them reason to force everyone in a set *D* to their deaths. Does Dennis? In one clear sense he doesn’t. He’ll reject the imperative, “If I’m a guard,

¹² Sometimes Brandom speaks as if an attribution counts as “normative” if it describes the norms of a practice. He speaks as if the phrase ‘ought according to their practice’ counts as normative without further argument: “What a scorekeeper or interpreter has attributed counts as a *practice* in this sense...only if it is specified in explicitly normative terms—in terms of what, **according to the practice**, it is *correct* or *proper* to do, what one *ought* to do, what one becomes *committed* or *entitled* to by a certain sort of performance, and so on” (625, bold print mine). On this reading, his claim that to say what a practice is is to say something normative is trivial, so long as we accept that according to any practice, certain things ought to be done. I take it, though, that Brandom thinks characterizations of a practice to be normative in a strict sense: “To talk of practices is to talk of *proprieties* of performance; ... it is to prescribe rather than describe” (159). If Dennis admits, then, that according to the practice certain people ought to be shot, must he be, according to Brandom, in some sense *prescribing* the shooting?

let me take *S* as weighing in favor of forcing all people in set *D* to their death." He doesn't commit himself to accepting, given "I'm a guard", the practical conclusion "Let me force them to their death," and acting on this conclusion. To attribute an institutional status isn't to *accept* the norms that, according to institutional practice, govern that status.

Return briefly, then, to Thea, attributing a discursive practice to speakers of German. Isn't she, in effect, treating this discursive practice like an institution? If so, then in treating Hans as saying that Jülchen doesn't have to speak, and doing this by attributing to Hans, Jülchen, and others in Germany a set of normative attitudes toward themselves and each other, she isn't herself coming to *share* the attitudes she attributes. Perhaps she's doing something else—and the theorist's attribution of meanings doesn't have the same content as the practitioner's. Must Thea defer to Jülchen and her fellows in forming her normative attitudes, in a way that Dennis needn't defer to camp guards, officials, and the like in forming his? Or is Thea in the business of attributing institutional practices—though innocent ones, perhaps—in just the same way as is Dennis?

An example that Brandom himself gives might help clarify the situation; it raises doubts about Brandom's treatment, and yet suggests a way out. The practice of the British Royal Navy, in the old days, was that a man who "took the Queen's shilling" was deemed to have consented to enlistment, and was thence subject to Naval discipline. Recruiters in seaport taverns offered shillings to men who were drunk and out of money for more—and who had no idea what the import of taking the shilling would be held to be. Now this case parallels Dennis and the death camp: Billy has taken the shilling into his hand, has later escaped and been captured. Now he is sentenced to be flogged. I might agree that *according to the practice*, he is to be flogged. This is in no obvious way for me to prescribe the flogging—any more than observer Dennis prescribed the shooting of faltering captives.

Still, what am I saying when I admit that *according to the practice*, Billy is to be flogged? Another outside observer might dispute this claim of mine: the flogging, Ophelia might claim, is a *corruption* of the practice. Suppose she does: Taking the shilling when no indication has been offered that it has anything to do with joining the Navy, she claims, wasn't to count as joining the Navy, even though corrupt officials so treated it. A metatheorist can now raise the question: What is at issue between Ophelia and me—both of us outside observers? Not what the regularities were: Men in Billy's situation were regularly flogged, however irregular this was if Ophelia is right. Neither of us prescribes the flogging: I say that according to the practice he had to be flogged, but that the practice was unfair; she says that even if the practice itself was fair enough, it was regularly travestied.

This suggests a possible reply on Brandom's part: There's *one* kind of normative attitude, he can agree, that Dennis doesn't take on: one that simply echoes, from a different perspective, the attitudes of guards and officials. Couldn't Dennis, though, be taking some *other* sort of normative attitude? Such a diagnosis might explain how Ophelia and I differ about Billy: Neither she nor I share all the attitudes of the officers who ordered the flogging. Neither of us favors the flogging. But perhaps there's some *other* normative attitude toward the case in which Ophelia and I differ. And this is the attitude that explains how Ophelia and I differ on what Naval practice was.

Perhaps this is right, but this diagnosis isn't obvious. *Prima facie*, we should take the view of Stevenson, Hare, and others: It's one thing to share in an attitude and another to ascribe it—with this Brandom would agree—and moreover, ascriptions of normative attitudes are themselves non-normative. Stevenson, who counted "attitudes" and "beliefs" as distinct, spoke of "disagreement in belief about attitudes", which was not a form of "disagreement in attitude".¹³ Brandom, to be sure, denies that ascriptions of normative attitudes are non-normative, causal/explanatory statements—but our question is how he establishes this.

Can we find a clear argument, then, that in describing the labor camp as an ongoing institution, Dennis is taking *some* normative stance or other? Perhaps it's some kind of "rational ought" which is not a moral one. This strikes me as doubtful: Why need he think it rational for the guards to obey such orders if they can evade them?

Brandom does, though, hold one central thesis that *would*, if true, yield the result we're seeking: that Dennis, in treating the doings of death camp guards as a practice, must thereby be taking normative stances of *some* kind. Practices are constituted in part by attitudes of their practitioners. Suppose, then, we can show that to attribute an attitude is to say something normative. It will follow that to characterize something as a practice is to say something normative. To call it a practice is to characterize attitudes, and to characterize attitudes is to speak normatively.

Why hold, then, that ascriptions of attitudes are normative? Brandom's reasons are reasons for holding that *all* attributions of states of mind with content are normative—whether the state of mind is an attitude, a straight factual belief, or something else. This brings us, then, away from words and their meanings, and inward to states of mind and their contents. Is being in a certain state of mind a normative status? Are attributions of states of mind somehow normative prescriptions?

¹³ Stevenson (1944, 2–8).

4. The Normativity of Mental Content

Private thinking seems at first blush quite different from public saying: less social—and perhaps more clearly normative. With the public meanings of words and utterances, talk of being “instituted” in social practice seems plausible. Thinking, to the naïve eye, will look far less social than words. Now I argued above that to characterize a practice is not to say anything normative—at least so far as arguments we’ve examined show. There’s a difference, I stressed, between describing something as a normative practice and *sharing* in the practice, and so sharing the norms that one describes. With thinking, in contrast, it may be more plausible that the theorist who ascribes from outside does just what insiders do: that the theorist, in ascribing mental content, does what other conversants do in ascribing that same content. When outsider Thea concludes “Jack thinks that Jill has the pail,” she’s holding the same thing as does Jack’s discursive partner Jill when she speaks the same words. If Jill’s ascribing this thought to Jack consists in her coming to have a normative attitude toward him, then so, perhaps, does Thea’s own thinking this same interpretive thought. Thinking that Jill has the pail would then be a normative status—whether or not this status is “socially instituted”.¹⁴

Why, then, suppose this? According to Thea, Jack thinks that Jill has the pail. How, in thinking this, is she thinking an *ought*? How is Jack’s thinking that Jill has the pail a matter of what Jack *ought* to do?

One of Brandom’s strategies is, of course, to attack the alternative. His target is “regularism”: the view that meaning facts are non-normative, causal facts. They are, on this view, the facts of some regularity in causal dispositions of an individual or a society. Now concepts of mental content have proved stubbornly resistant to analysis in straight causal/explanatory terms. If attributions of mental content are normative statements, this might explain the recalcitrance—because normative statements aren’t perhaps themselves pure ascriptions of causal regularities.

How, then, confirm this diagnosis? Before I reach more plausible grounds, a couple of false starts:

In attributing thoughts, Brandom tells us at the outset, we are “placing ourselves and each other in the space of reasons, by giving and asking for reasons for our attitudes and performances” (5). This may be promising, but Brandom shortly after says, “One is treating something as sapient insofar as one explains its behavior by attributing to it intentional states such as belief and desire as constituting reasons for that behavior” (5).

This last is no grounds for a normativity thesis. The term ‘a reason’, as is often pointed out, can have two distinct senses. Suppose I call the health ef-

¹⁴ Brandom himself, to be sure, maintains that the right direction of explanation is from public statuses to private thought. We can’t, though, yet take this as proven; our problem is how Brandom could convince us of his claims.

fects of smoking “a strong reason to quit”. I thereby endorse the health effects as a consideration to weigh heavily in favor of quitting. This use of the term is clearly normative: I’m saying, in effect, “Weigh the health effects of smoking strongly against continuing.” I’m thereby advising. Suppose, though, I say “His reason for quitting smoking was that such a substantial proportion of smokers these days are women.” I’m not, in saying this, endorsing any such thing as a consideration. Now to be sure, to have a desire not to do as women do is, in a way, for him to *see* this as a reason in the first sense. It is also to *have* it as his reason—at least if he acts on it—in a second sense. But the desire doesn’t *constitute* a reason in the first sense, and it’s this sense that is clearly normative. In attributing the desire, I’m not in any way endorsing the kind of sexism I attribute. In “playing the game of giving and asking for reasons”, we demand reasons in the normative sense: we ask not just “Why *do* you say that?” but “Why *say* that?”. This isn’t the sense that figures directly in attributing beliefs and desires: talk of reasons there isn’t directly prescriptive.

Here is another false start: “What sets off the intentional is its liability to assessments of correctness” (9). Table settings too can be assessed as correct or not; that doesn’t make a description of the positions of fork, knife, and the like *normative* in the sense that to describe it is somehow to prescribe.

Return, then, to better reasons for holding that mental content is normative. Thinking a thought does seem to commit one. If Jack thinks that violets are blue, he is committed to thinking that something is blue, if the question arises. He is committed to thinking that violets have color. When we attribute to him the thought that violets are blue, we are attributing such commitments to him—and in doing so, we are saying things that are genuinely normative. (Or in any case, we are *committed* to such attributions, whether we make them or not.) Claims as to what Jack is thinking are thus normative claims, and concepts of mental content are normative concepts.

To fill out this line of thought, we need to identify the sense in which thinking a thought does *commit* one to other conclusions. Normativity, in Sellars’ phrase, is being “fraught with ought”; can we then cash out talk of commitments with talk of “ought”s? Are Jill’s commitments a matter of what she *ought* to do or think? Not directly: If she thinks that roses are red and so are violets, perhaps what she *ought* to do is not to think that roses and violets are the same color, but to reconsider her views. (The same goes for the commitments of unalienated guards at a death camp: what they *ought* to do is to change their minds.)

We can look to R. M. Hare for part of what’s involved: It’s true that *if* Jill ought to think that both roses and violets are red, then she ought to think that they are the same color. *Oughts* figure, then, in attributions of content, but in a special form: here an *ought* appears in the consequent of a condi-

tional that has an *ought* in its antecedent.¹⁵ Another part is a prohibition: "Don't accept *p* and withhold accepting *q*." In particular, we can tell Jill, "Don't accept that both roses and violets are red and yet withhold accepting that they are both the same color.

Attributions of mental content entail these patterns of *oughts*—and so in this sense, to think any thought is to occupy a normative status. This, I'll take it, is Brandom's normativity thesis. Though it calls for more discussion than I can give it here, I'll accept it as plausible, and ask where it might lead.

5. Sapience, Scorekeeping, and Sociality

To be truly sapient, one must be a discursive scorekeeper. This is Brandom's sociality thesis. Now that we have reasoned our way to normativity, can we reason along the same lines to sociality? I'll claim to glimpse how we might get part way and establish scorekeeping: the thesis that a truly sapient being must keep score. I'll remain baffled, though, as to why the scorekeeping must be social.

A genuinely sapient being, Brandom tells us, not only becomes committed. He *takes on* commitments and *acknowledges* them. Acknowledging Brandom pairs with attributing: both, he tells us, are needed to institute the deontic statuses that figure in a discursive practice (630). To *say* or assert something is to acknowledge publicly a commitment to what one says. To think something explicitly might likewise be to acknowledge a commitment, but privately: to acknowledge it to oneself. Perhaps, then, what full-fledged sapience requires is *acknowledging commitments*, at least to oneself.

For Jack fully to be thinking the thought he does, must he somehow acknowledge that that's what he's doing? Not as a separate mental act: If part of his thinking a thought is somehow to "acknowledge" that he's so doing, then this acknowledgment just *is* his having the thought he does—or at least it is an aspect of his having the thought. If he comes to realize that he is being stalked by a tiger, he'd better not tarry on a separate thought, "I hereby acknowledge thinking that I'm being stalked by a tiger." Perhaps, though, "implicitly in practice", he does somehow keep track of his thinking and his commitments. It seems plausible, indeed, that he *must* somehow do so if he's to count, in any full-fledged way, as *sapient* that he's being stalked by a tiger. His realizing what he does involves, in some sense, "claiming to himself" that he's being stalked by a tiger and keeping track of this claiming.

To do this, we might now argue, he must implicitly conceive of himself as acting to alter a "score" of his commitments, acknowledgments, and the like. Sapience requires acknowledging what one is thinking, and this acknowledging involves keeping score on oneself. To be sapient, one must navigate the space of reasons; one must be able to *present p* to oneself as a

¹⁵ Hare (1971) analyzes hypothetical imperatives on this pattern.

reason for q and then to *treat* p as reason for q . This much of understanding “what it is to give a reason”, I’ll agree, might well be required for the goings-on in Jack’s head to deserve the name sapience. To be sapient, let’s try agreeing, Jack must be able to think, at least implicitly, things like “I’m being stalked by a tiger, and so I’m in danger.” Sapience involves some ability to keep track of these *oughts*, some implicit keeping score on oneself.

If all this is right, we have in hand a *scorekeeping thesis*: that sapience requires keeping score on oneself. Sociality, though, is another matter: we haven’t established that this scorekeeping must be in any way social. It needn’t, for anything we have shown, be *discursive* scorekeeping, with two or more people discussing.

Why, then, think that Jack’s scorekeeping must be in some way discursive? Perhaps the idea is this: To be sapient, one must “claim” things to oneself, keep score on oneself. And this “claiming to oneself” must be understood by reference to claiming things to others. The “score” in question must be in the first instance social: it figures in a social practice, as does the “score” that characterizes the point we’ve reached in a game of baseball.

It is hard to see, though, how to take these steps. True, there are ample parallels between discursive claimings and “claiming to oneself”, between the “score” one keeps on oneself and the “score” kept by a group in conversation. How do we establish, though, that social claimings and social “scores” explain their counterparts in soliloquy, and not the other way around? Does sapience require treating anything as a reason *in talk*? Why can’t it involve just *regarding* one thing as a reason for another as one thinks? For Jack to be sapient, we’ve agreed, he must be able to infer: he must be able to think, at least implicitly, things like “I’m being stalked by a tiger, and so I’m in danger.” Why, though, must full-fledged mental inferences—thoughts joined with an implicit “so”—require mastery of *sayings* joined by an implicit “so”?

A non-social thinker, imagine, has the thought that violets are blue. Is there anything in the *oughts* with which his so doing is fraught that reduces to absurdity the stipulation that he is non-social? If he ought to think this, he ought, if the question arises for him, to think that *something* is blue—but no obvious wedge for refuting non-sociality comes with this. He ought not to think the one and reject the other—again this seems consistent with non-sociality. He must have implicit track of these matters if he is to be fully sapient in his thinking, keeping a kind of score on himself. Again, though, it’s not clear why this couldn’t obtain for a non-social thinker.

Brandom’s book is long, rich, and complex, and so perhaps I am misinterpreting him, or perhaps I am missing a more successful train of argument. The main social practice arguments I’ve identified, though, seem not to work. Human thought and human discursive practice are tightly linked. Whether this shows that, in any important sense, sapience *requires* social practice, that

social practice somehow “institutes” our thinking the thoughts we do, remains, to my mind, to be shown.¹⁶

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¹⁶ I very much thank participants in a seminar we devoted to Brandom’s book: Laura Bugge, Eric Lormand, Christoph Lumer, Ian Rumfitt, Stephen Schulz, Lawrence Sklar, Dan Sperber, and others. I owe far more to these people than I can keep track of. I have also benefited greatly from conversation with Brandom on some of these matters.