Intentionality and normativity

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Received and accepted July 1997

The intentionality of virtually all thought that is distinctive of human beings is linguistically based and constitutively normative. Following Robert Brandom's Making it explicit: reasoning, representing and discursive commitment, this normativity is best understood as having its roots in social practices. Brandom, however, is wrong to insist that all intentionality is normative (thus denying genuine intentionality to nonhuman, nonlinguistic animals), for even the simple social practices which ground the most primitive norms presuppose robust nonnormative intentionality. Furthermore, Brandom's appeal to perception to supplement his inferential semantics with a view to avoiding complete indeterminacy of linguistic meaning is either ineffective or arbitrary and unjustified unless perceptual states are recognised as having nonnormative intentional contents which go way beyond the mere differential responsiveness which he allows them.

Robert Brandom's splendid book, *Making it explicit: reasoning, representing and discursive commitment* (Brandom 1994), is 'an attempt to explain the meanings of linguistic expressions in terms of their use' (Brandom 1997a: 53), and it offers a comprehensive articulation and defence of a philosophical account of language and intentionality which has its main roots in Kant (1933), the early Frege (1967, 1953), the later Wittgenstein (1953) and Wilfred Sellars (1963, 1980).[1] In this article I take up some important themes in Brandom's book, and argue against one central aspect of his position, viz., his view that intentionality, including all thought whatever, is constitutively normative.

It is easy to recognise the normativity of ordinary language, which is the outstanding public vehicle of intentionality, for every linguistic act is clearly subject to a variety of norms. In other words, it is liable to assessment as correct or incorrect, proper or improper, legitimate or illegitimate, with respect to a number of possible values, including in particular grammaticality, objectivity and (in the broadest sense) rationality. Furthermore, linguistic acts typically bring about normative or deontic statuses such as commitments and entitlements to both propositions and actions.

The normativity of language is inherited by all thought which depends upon language. This embraces a great deal of human thought – both theoretical and practical – including in particular virtually all thought that is distinctive of human beings as opposed to other animals. The linguistic dimension of such thought is in part due to the fact that much of it is directly or indirectly concerned with social and institutional realities whose existence presupposes language – which is itself the most central and pervasive of all human

institutions.[2] But it also goes way beyond this. For even when the realities towards which we direct our thinking, reasoning, deliberating and intending are independent of language, we typically still need language as a means, or medium, of thought.

This is most obvious in the case of highly theoretical thinking such as that characteristic of physics, mathematics or philosophy. But it applies also, I believe, to all thought involving logical operations such as negation, quantification and necessity; to tensed thought about the past and the future; to plans and intentions which go beyond the immediate future; to most of our classifications, predications and comparisons pertaining to the ordinary Aristotelian objects of everyday life; and to all explicit thought about mind and propositional attitudes. I am not going to argue for any of this, but any reader who disagrees owes us an account of how it is possible for a totally non-linguistic brute to think such thoughts.

It should at any rate be clear that the distinctive form of intentionality exemplified by articulate and reflective human judgments produced by what Kant called the faculty of understanding is thoroughly linguistic and therefore constitutively normative.[3] Such judgments fall within what Sellars describes as 'the space of reasons', which is constituted by the notable human practice of giving and asking for reasons for judgments, actions, states of affairs, behaviour, or whatever, as well as by the other evaluative and corrective practices which go with it (Sellars 1963: 169; see also McDowell 1994: 4–5).

Now, as Kurt Baier rightly insists, 'One cannot become fully rational except in the context of a social order that is also *an order of reason*' and, again, that 'A being's performance cannot be judged rational or irrational' outside such an order (Baier 1995: 51). An attractive feature of this position is the implication that human rationality, i.e., our status as rational (as opposed to non-rational) animals, requires not only the possibility of irrationality but also, in effect, its actual occurrence, for attributions of rationality to thought and action are completely empty in contexts in which nothing counts as irrational. This, incidentally, presents an important challenge to the common picture of irrationality as a philosophical embarrassment which cries out to be explained, or even explained away.

But to return to my main thread, although Baier does not cite his former colleague Sellars, it seems fair to construe his *order of reason* and Sellars's *space of reasons* simply as different aspects of the same pervasive general feature of human experience. If this is fair, then it turns out that our rationality, our linguistic intentionality and our capacity for judgment are completely inseparable, and that all three are fundamentally normative. Brandom is fully committed to this position even though he does not arrive at it in quite the same way as I have.

At this point the question of the nature of norms starts looming, especially as normativity in its own right is not included in the basic furniture of the non-human world of nature. Brandom's treatment of this issue in Chapter 1, where he develops and makes a great deal of sense of some of Wittgenstein's thoughts on rule-following, is exemplary.

He undermines what he calls *regulism* – i.e., Kant's view that all norms are explicit rules – by arguing that it leads to an infinite regress of rules. For any *application* of a rule can be judged correct or incorrect according to how the rule is interpreted; thus an application of a rule is subject to norms which go beyond the rule itself. The regress results if, in line with regulism, these further norms are also to be understood as rules. The upshot, in Brandom's words, is that

> norms that are *explicit* in the form of rules, principles or claims ... depend for their intelligibility ... on a more fundamental form of norms that are *implicit* in practice – in what is *done* rather than what is *said* (Brandom 1994: 62).

Brandom also undermines what he calls *regularism* about implicit norms – i.e., the view that they are to be understood as regularities of behaviour – by pointing out that 'any particular set of performances exhibits many regularities' (Brandom 1994: 28). Many of these will be natural or gerrymandered regularities which do not correspond to norms, and, since norms are not characteristically followed without exception, many norms will not correspond to regularities in the actual world. Furthermore, simple regularism does not provide a foothold for the important normative distinction between correct and incorrect performances. For, given an initial set of performances,

> Any further performance will count as regular with respect to some of the patterns exhibited by the original set and as irregular with respect to others (Brandom 1994: 28).

How, then, are we to make sense of implicit norms? Brandom's Wittgensteinian proposal, which I endorse, is that we should understand them in terms of *social practices*, and

> look not just at what is *done* – the performances that might or might not accord with a norm (be appropriate or inappropriate) – but also at *assessments* of propriety (Brandom 1994: 63).

Such assessments, being either correct or incorrect, are themselves normative, so some of them must be implicit rather than explicit on pain of re-introducing the regress of rules.

In order to explain how merely implicit assessment practices are possible without presupposing normativity, Brandom invokes the notion of positive and negative *sanctions*, i.e., rewards and punishments.[4] In the most basic case these can be

> understood [naturalistically] in terms of behavioral *reinforcement*, in the learning-theoretic sense. The advantage of ... [this] is that reinforcement is a purely functional-descriptive notion, definable in abstraction from the particular considerations about familiar animals, in virtue of which beating them with sticks is likely to function as negative reinforcement. (Brandom 1994: 34–35)

On the reasonable assumption that the relevant reinforcing behaviour is due to members of a community to which the animal in question belongs, I am inclined to think that this yields the germs of a plausible account of the natural basis of the most primitive norms.

Stepping back from Brandom's text, let us unleash our imaginations and reflect for a while on the hypothetical conditions which would have to be satisfied for us to ascribe rudimentary normativity to the behaviour of, say, a flock of geese. It's certainly not enough that they always fly in a V-formation, even if the position of each bird in the V is completely predictable. Let us, however, suppose that the pattern is not so regular, but that all very young birds and some older birds frequently get out of position, that often when this happens a bird flying near the front of the V (a part which is usually very well formed) leaves its own position, flies around behind the delinquent, honks at it raucously, pecks its back and butts it with its head, and otherwise harasses it back into position before returning to its own place. Suppose further that in the case of a young bird the

'policebird', as we may call it, usually gives a melodious honk (like the honks which mother birds reserve for their own chicks) when the delinquent returns to its position, but that further strident honking is much more likely in the case of a mature offender. Let us also assume that in general birds are less apt to break ranks as they become more mature, and that over time there is a tendency for those which are most successful at keeping position in the formation to move forward towards the apex, while those whose delinquency increases in old age are apt to move back. Imagine also that mature birds which are persistently delinquent are often attacked violently by two or more policebirds (or by other more-or-less conformist birds) after flights when they have been out of position a lot of the time, and that these attacks sometimes result in death or injury, or in the delinquent's leaving the flock permanently. Add further embellishments if you like, but in the sort of situation I have described I believe that we would have no difficulty in ascribing norms of flight-formation to our flock of geese. This is in line with the main thrust of Brandom's account of the natural basis of primitive norms, for the morally loaded vocabulary I have used for the sake of brevity and dramatic effect could easily be eliminated in favour of much more aseptic reinforcement talk.

So far I am at one with Brandom,[5] except on one important point. Before I get to that, let me illustrate the philosophical power of his approach by showing very schematically how clearly and simply it explains and underwrites three of the most significant theses in the philosophy of mind and language advanced during the last half century, viz., Wittgenstein's (1953) rejection of a completely private language, Quine's (1960) thesis of the indeterminacy of meaning and Davidson's (1980) rejection of psychophysical laws. I consider these *seriatim*.

(1) The impossibility of a private language

In order for a set of events or performances to instantiate a *language*, those events or performances must be subject to normative assessment. In order for a supposed language to qualify as completely *private*, the relevant norms cannot be framed in a public language (for this would yield no more than a secret *code*), or be constituted by *social* practices, which are essentially public. But there is no other possible basis for a norm. Thus there cannot be a private language.

(2) The indeterminacy of meaning

It should I think be clear that no typically complex implicit norm which supervenes on social practices will be fully determinate in the sense that *any* possible piece of behaviour is either definitely permissible or definitely impermissible in terms of that norm. After all, even where an implicit norm applies clearly and sharply in circumstances like those in which it usually operates, its application in very different circumstances may be impossible to project. Furthermore, there may be no clear fact of the matter as to whether or not a set of practices at a given time and place are to be counted as exemplifying the same implicit norm as a partly similar set of practices at a different time or place, and either alternative may be as good as the other. Now, as Brandom's arguments imply, linguistic meaning depends ultimately on implicit norms constituted by social practices. It is therefore to be expected that meaning will inherit the indeterminacy of such norms.

(3) The impossibility of psychophysical laws

If we construe the psychological as the domain of distinctively human intentionality, which is clearly in line with Davidson's position, then the psychological is constitutively normative. But the physical is essentially nonnormative. If, therefore, these domains were linked by ties as strong as (exceptionless) psychophysical laws, then the normativity of the psychological would contaminate the physical, or the nonnormativity of the physical would compromise the normativity of the psychological (cf. Kim 1993). Thus there cannot be psychophysical laws.

This brings me to my disagreement with Brandom, which concerns his view that *all* genuine intentionality is normative, or, in other words, that the only fully-fledged thought which there could be is the normative and linguistic thought of rational animals. Brandom is of course aware that we ascribe thought to nonhuman, nonlinguistic animals, and he explicitly allows that 'There clearly is a sense in which nonlinguistic animals can be said to have beliefs' (Brandom 1994: 155). However, he insists that our ascriptions of thoughts to nonlinguistic animals are merely *analogical* and that they presuppose linguistic intentionality, for

> simple, nonlinguistic, instrumental intentionality can *not* be made fully intelligible apart from consideration of the linguistic practices that make available to the interpreter (but *not* the interpreted animal) a grasp of the propositional contents attributed in such intentional interpretations (Brandom 1994: 155).

If this is correct, then nonlinguistic animals are not subject to intentionality in their own right, and in the absence of normative intentionality all other intentionality evaporates.

I am strongly inclined to disagree, especially as there is reason to believe that normativity itself presupposes prenormative intentionality. Furthermore, I believe that this is something that will fall out of Brandom's naturalistic account of the possibility of primitive implicit normativity if one shakes the tree enough. I cannot hope to pull this off decisively in a short article, but it seems to me that the plausibility of that account depends crucially on the background assumption that it is to be applied to a *community* of *animals* which *perceive*, which have and exercise a capacity for *spontaneous movement* and primitive *action*, which are able in some rudimentary sense to *recognise* and *respond* differentially to one another and to various features of their environment, which have animal *expectations* (that are perhaps describable in purely associationist terms), which are subject to simple *pleasures* and *pains*, and which have *desires* and biological *needs* which their behaviour is apt to serve. Note, however, that there is absolutely no suggestion that they require a capacity for *decision* and *judgment*, which go way beyond mere desire and expectation, and are inseparably bound to the space of reasons. And, by the same token, there is no suggestion that they should possess the *freedom* which comes with the capacity for decision and judgment in rational animals.

My guess is that these remarks about the intentional prerequisites of primitive normativity merely make explicit what was tacitly taken for granted by most readers who were persuaded that my flock of geese had norms; and that they would quickly change their minds on discovering that they were not really *geese* with the sort of simple intentionality that I have now described, but immensely complicated inanimate machines with appropriate reinforcable dispositions, so that they would satisfy Brandom's requirements

precisely. Furthermore, I do not think that I loaded the dice by the evaluative vocabulary I used to describe the behaviour of the geese, for, as I see it, an aseptic description in pure reinforcement terms would simply have increased the need to assume they were subject to simple intentionality. Thus implicit normativity, it would appear, presupposes robust nonnormative intentionality.

In a personal communication Brandom, however, responds as follows:

> Your conformist geese ... seem to me to institute at least proto-norms by behaving as they do. The issue of their internal constitution, whether it turns out to be clanking hardware or biological wetware, seems to me to be perfectly beside the point.

He accordingly goes on to suggest that the most primitive norms or proto-norms do not presuppose any form of intentionality, but only the kind of differential responding that, e.g., machinery can easily exhibit. In the face of this I remain confident that most readers will be disposed to accept my intuition that non-intentional machinery cannot in its own right exhibit even proto-normativity. But to say this is merely to point to a standoff and not to settle the issue.

Let us therefore turn to another absolutely central theme of Brandom's book which also, I believe, points ironically in the direction of the robust nonlinguistic, nonnormative intentionality which he rejects.[6] This concerns his *inferential semantics*, an impressive version of conceptual-role semantics which seeks to account for intentional content in general in terms of the normative inferential links between sentences which are implicit in the social practices constituting the space of reasons. Following Frege's *Grundlagen*, Brandom treats sentences as primary and handles the semantics of a crucial selection of subsentential expressions by means of a very impressive display of Fregean substitutional techniques.[7]

For my purposes the details are not important, but it's good to know that they are there. What really matters is that, even if (like Brandom) one operates with an extremely rich notion of legitimate inference, it is clear that the totality of inferential relations between sentences leaves the contents of individual sentences and subsentential expressions completely indeterminate.[8] Brandom is well aware of this, and rightly invokes the perceptual inputs and behavioural outputs of the system to take up the slack, and in doing this he appeals in particular to the differential responsiveness of perceptual states to circumstances in the environment. I believe that at this point he is tacitly presupposing that perceptual states are subject to nonnormative intentional contents which ground the *conceptual* contents of full-blown perceptual judgments,[9] but that he fails to notice this because of his overt tendency to assimilate perception downwards to the simple sort of differential responsiveness which iron displays merely by rusting in the presence of oxygen.

To appreciate the problem I am driving at, notice that all that mere differential responsiveness buys us is a *correlation* between external circumstances and various sentences in the system which is (let us assume) sufficient to pin down the contents of all items in the system given the inferential relations between them. There are, however, *other* external correlations with the potential to do this in other incompatible ways. For example, there are no doubt numerous partial correlations between sentences and brain states, sentences and sensory states, and sentences and distributions of elementary particles, and many of

these might suffice to fix linguistic contents, but in a variety of different ways, some of which we might regard as completely unacceptable.[10] Furthermore, it is plausible that many such correlations will not fix linguistic contents in the same way as Brandom's preferred correlation between certain sentences and the salient environmental circumstances to which they are linked by perception. How, then, can one justify choosing this alternative over the others? It seems to me that there is only one way to do so, viz., by recognising that perceptual states are special in so far as they have *contents*, and that it is these contents which link them to the appropriate environmental circumstances much more strongly than any mere external correlation or differential response. In a nutshell, then, my argument is that Brandom's choice of perception to pin down linguistic meaning is arbitrary and unjustified unless he is willing to recognise that perceptual states are subject to nonnormative intentional content which goes way beyond mere differential responsiveness, and that it is this which especially fits them to perform the task at hand.

At the most abstract level Brandom's reason for rejecting nonnormative intentionality is that the inferential account of propositional contents can be applied only 'in the context of *linguistic* social practices' (Brandom 1994: 155). This raises the question of whether we actually need the inferential account. My position is that we do – providing it is appropriately pinned down at the edges by non-inferential factors – for it is only by invoking inferential relations that we can hope to do full justice to the exquisitely fine-grained content of judgmental and linguistic intentionality.[11] But this does not mean that we cannot *also* recognise a coarser, nonnormative form of intentionality which can reasonably be ascribed to the brutes, and which we must (as I have argued) ascribe to our own perceptual states if we wish to give a satisfactory account of normative intentional contents.

This coarser form of intentionality could be accommodated by the sort of content-functionalism which is popular in current mainstream analytical philosophy of mind[12] (supplemented, perhaps, by something like Peackocke's 1992 apparatus for describing sensory content and by possible-world semantics à la Stalnaker 1984). For it seems to me that this sort of behavioural functionalism applies quite well to animal intentionality, including that exemplified by human perception at its most basic level. So my objection to this form of functionalism is not that it doesn't apply to anything at all, but that it doesn't apply to what is distinctive of human minds, about which we can learn far more from Kant, Sellars and Brandom.

However, the mere assertion that there are two forms of intentionality which must be accommodated in different ways is not enough. It is necessary also to say something about the connections between them, if any, which entitle us to regard both as instances of a single, unified and unambiguous notion of *intentionality*. To be brief, it seems to me that some of the most important factors here are as follows.

First, both forms of intentionality are crucially important for the explanation of the behaviour of the animals to which they are ascribed. In the case of human beings, both of them can be involved in a single course of action, as when one is driving a car or eating a meal partly on autopilot and partly through conscious decision-making. Furthermore, they can come into conflict in some cases of irrationality and weak-willed behaviour just as different normative intentional states can come into conflict with one another.

Second, both forms of intentionality are subject to traditional semantic properties such

as representation, reference, truth and falsity, and the perceptual roots of these properties are common to both. They are also both subject to logical relations such as implication and joint inconsistency, which can cut across the boundary between them.

Finally, on the picture I am proposing there are other crucially important continuities between them, for wherever normative intentionality exists, it is a bootstrap product of nonnormative intentionality operating through the medium of social practice.[13] And, for reasons at which I have merely hinted, social practice itself depends upon nonnormative intentionality. Brandom could only add to the immense riches of his work by recognising this.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Annual Conference of the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa, Rand Afrikaans University, January 1996. I am grateful to my audience for their questions and comments on that occasion. I owe special thanks to Robert Brandom for his generous and extremely useful feedback on the draft I sent him. I would also like to acknowledge the financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development. Opinions expressed in this article and conclusions arrived at are not necessarily to be attributed to the Centre for Science Development.

Notes

1. A useful symposium on Brandom's book has recently appeared in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. The relevant articles are Brandom 1997a, McDowell 1997, Rosen 1997, Rorty 1997, Rosenberg 1997 and Brandom 1997b. Recent reviews of the book include Kroon 1996 and Stout 1997.
2. For a recent attempt to make sense of the nature of social and institutional reality see Searle 1995.
3. This is not to imply or suggest that all reflective human judgments have normative *contents* (like, e.g., moral judgments), which is clearly false. The point, rather, is that, whatever the nature of their contents, such judgments are all *manifestations* of normativity, and are all subject to normative *evaluation*.
4. He here adapts and develops some interesting thoughts about the nature of 'conforming communities' advanced in Haugeland 1982: 15–16.
5. This represents a substantial advance in my thinking about intentionality. In Pendlebury 1987, e.g., I don't give nearly enough recognition to the essentially linguistic intentionality of much human thought. The dawn begins to break in Pendlebury 1995, which begins to recognise the linguistic nature of distinctively human judgments of the understanding and the full-blown concepts which they involve. The irony is that this happens mainly to make room for Kantian schemata construed as primitive, preconceptual recognitional capacities that are nonetheless genuinely intentional (which is how I still think they are best understood). The significance of the space of reasons first shows in Pendlebury 1996 and Pendlebury 1998, in which the normativity of judgment also flickers faintly for a moment. I certainly would not have appreciated its full significance without reading Brandom. These developments have not changed the substance of the views on perceptual content put forward in, e.g., Pendlebury 1990 and 1994, but these views must now be imbedded

within the new framework which begins to emerge in Pendlebury 1998 and the present article.

6. This is, to be fair, a bit of an overstatement, as is evident from the following remark by Brandom (personal communication).

   I was certainly aware that I was going way out on a limb trying to work with only two categories (mere differential responders and full-fledged talkers) rather than three (adding an intermediate category of things that perceive and pursue goals, but do not judge). It is not that I am convinced that there is no useful work to be done by delineating such an intermediate category. It is rather that in the spirit of Popperian methodology, I want to be shown what it is that I cannot account for in the sparer terms.

7. The principles, foundations and applications of inferential semantics are developed in detail in Chapters 2–8, which constitute the bulk of Brandom 1994, but these chapters are also chock-full of other philosophically enlightening material on a wide variety of topics.
8. There are shades here of what David Lewis 1984 describes as 'Putnam's Paradox', i.e., Putnam's 1978 model-theoretic argument against metaphysical realism.
9. For some thoughts on the relationship between conceptual and perceptual contents, see Pendlebury 1998.
10. This would apply, e.g., to any account in terms of which the meaning of 'Pass me that beer' is that the speaker is the subject of a specified brain state.
11. Consider, e.g., that on a purely truth-conditional account of meaning, the meanings of '~(~p v ~q) v ~(q v ~p)' and 'p' are identical. It is, however, easy to treat their meanings as distinct if we recognise their different inferential roles as partly constitutive of those meanings.
12. See, e.g., Dretske 1988 and 1995 as well as Pendlebury 1994.
13. Furthermore, it seems to me that we should not rule out the possibility of rudimentary forms of normative intentionality amongst, e.g., apes.

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