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HOW MEANING IS LIKE VALUE.  
BRANDOMIAN THOUGHTS ON THE  
INSTITUTION OF NORMATIVE STATUSES

ABSTRACT

Robert Brandom has famously claimed that the notion of a *normative status*, i.e. the notion that an agent is bound to a norm, so that some aspects of her conduct count as appropriate (or correct) and others as inappropriate (or incorrect), can be elucidated in terms of *practical attitudes*. The idea is that if different agents take practical attitudes towards one another, the totality of the ensuing practice can, under appropriate circumstances, come to be correctly interpreted as featuring normative statuses.

This idea is commonly criticised as facing a dilemma: either the practical attitudes and their interactions are specified in purely non-normative terms, or normative terms are allowed into the account. In the first case, the approach falls short of yielding determinate normative statuses because there are infinitely many norms consistent with the given data; while in the second case, the account becomes viciously circular.

Brandom himself has argued that allowing normative terms into the account of the emergence of normative statuses from practical attitudes need not result in vicious circularity. When the theorist of the emergence of normative statuses faces multiple agents' practical attitudes, she may recognise them as *appropriately* or *inappropriately undertaken*. Since doing so amounts to nothing less than displaying practical attitudes herself, the theorist turns out to partake of the system within which different agents and their attitudes interact with one another – the system about which she theorises. With respect to the charge of vicious circularity, one could now say that since on Brandom's model, the circularity is a feature of the social system of which she is a part, it is no longer vicious. Vicious circularity only attaches to explanations; if there is circularity in human transactions, then that it just what the social world is like.

However, the idea of a system of reciprocal recognition of recognition-manoeuvres as appropriate or inappropriate provokes worries about the missing "anchor" of the system. As Wittgenstein has stressed, there must be a difference between *holding* oneself to be committed to some particular action, and *being actually* so committed. To this worry, Brandom responds with an elaborate story, in the eight chapter of his *Making It Explicit*, which discusses how singular terms can come to have determinate representational content, so that speakers can make wrong assertions about objects, rather than referring to (slightly) different objects. Thus, Brandom suggests that the causally effective outside world can provide the seemingly needed "anchor".

I want to provide friendly criticism to Brandom's account of the institution of normative statuses by practical attitudes. I want to stress that the demand for outside constraints is ill-conceived, at least in its present form, and that Brandom's account would be strengthened if it were accepted that the determinacy of normative statuses has nothing to do with representation at all. In fact, it can be argued that Brandom's story of representational content (of singular terms, but also of pronouns and mental

states) is a distraction from the essence of his elucidation of normativity, including the determinateness of normative statuses.

The basic ingredients of the proper account of the institution of normative statuses from practical attitudes are twofold. Firstly, practical attitudes of the appropriate sort interact with one another in *converging feedback-loops*. Secondly, any statement *about* the appropriateness or inappropriateness of some practical attitude itself exhibits their authors' own practical attitudes and is hence *implicated* in the feedback-loops, even in the case where the statement is made by a theorist, e.g. by us. This is sufficient for all the determinateness which we can legitimately ask of a theory of normative statuses.

We can show this by way of a very simple pragmatic system featuring the appropriate interaction of practical attitudes – the exchange of paper money, where multiple agents' *exchanging dispositions* give rise to *value*. We can then show that the story's main aspects are also present – in exact analogy – in the exchange of linguistic signs, where multiple agents' *linguistic dispositions* give rise to *meaning*.

In the case of paper money, the value of a note resides in one's ability to buy from others, using the note in exchange, and to sell to others, getting equals of the note. The same is true, of course, for the other agents just mentioned. Once multiple agents are present and equipped with the appropriate exchanging dispositions regarding the relevant notes, so that a converging feedback-loop is formed, it becomes meaningful for each of the agents to speak of the *value* of the note(s). Crucially, a statement *about* the value of some note or object must itself be read not *only* as a statement purporting to adhere to speaker-transcendent standards of correctness, but *also* as exhibiting its own author's relevant exchanging dispositions. As such, it *influences* the system of interacting exchanging dispositions: if the author's dispositions differ from those of the other members to the system, these others will seek to trade with the author, from which results a *shift* in the value towards the figure as the author represented it. The statement, in other words, *contributes to making itself correct*. Our standpoint, when attributing this correctness, is – importantly – also that of a participant in the system.

An exactly analogous story can be told with respect to linguistic dispositions and meaning. Meaning claims are not only to be read as statements purporting to adhere to speaker-transcendent standards, but also as exhibiting their author's inferential, non-inferential and substitutional linguistic dispositions. In doing so, their effect is to contribute (defeasibly) to making themselves correct. This can be shown with particular clarity in contexts of unexpected divergences between different speakers' linguistic dispositions.

This way of elucidating normative statuses is capable of dissolving philosophical worries about the determinateness of normative statuses, and of doing so without appealing to *representation*. In fact, we can also get a positive lesson out of the sketched account. What it shows is that (and how) normative vocabulary, including the term “rule” and its cognates, serves to enable the *calibration* of our reactive attitudes against those of other agents, thereby making possible the smooth running of our complex schemes of social co-operation. We use normative vocabulary to get the dispositions of others into line with ours, so that we can then employ them to meaningfully confront the world of things we trade (using money) or do other things with (using language).

As I will try to show in my talk, the sketched account can be extended to respond to a number of worries, including the seeming inability of a “circular” story to embrace the findings of semantic externalists, and its seeming inability to deal with the infinitary nature (Boghossian) of norms (e.g. meanings).