The Normativity of Doxastic and Discursive Updating

In chapter 4 of *Between Saying and Doing*, Robert Brandom takes up Sellars's claim from *Inference and Meaning* that "the language of modality is a 'transposed' language of norms" and develops what he calls a *modal Kant-Sellars thesis* and a *normative Kant-Sellars thesis*. The idea behind these two versions of the Kant-Sellars thesis is to get to a deeper understanding of the complex pragmatically mediated semantic relations between modal and normative vocabulary and, as Brandom puts it, to supply "the raw materials for filling out and developing Sellars's suggestive claim that modal vocabulary is a 'transposed' language of norms." (Brandom 2008: 116).

The aim of the paper is to take a closer look at the raw material Brandom provides to undertake this further development of Sellars's claim, of Sellars's "distinction between what is *said* by the use of some vocabulary, and what is *conveyed* by its use" (Ibid.: 100).

The complex relations between modal and normative vocabulary that Brandom suggests become specifically clear if one takes a closer look at what he calls the "updating argument". Linking the updating argument with modal as well as with normative vocabulary, the global updating ability that Brandom postulates comes in two flavors: doxastic updating and discursive updating. Although differences between doxastic updating and discursive updatin*g* exist, the core function of these updating processes is to remove incompatibilities.

In Brandom's view, the practice of *doxastic updating* is the practice of "adjusting one's other beliefs in response to a change of belief, paradigmatically the addition of a new belief" (Ibid.: 79). *Discursive updating*, on the other hand, aims "at the material inferential completeness and compatibility of one's commitments, in the normative sense that insofar as one falls short of those ideals, one is normatively obliged to *do* something about it, to repair the failure." (Ibid.: 187).

In the course of this argument, Brandom differentiates between two – related – senses of incompatibility: an objective modal sense of incompatibility ("a matter of what states of affairs and properties of *objects* actually are incompatible with what others" (Ibid: 191) and a subjective normative sense of incompatibility (that concerns *commitments* on the part of knowing-and-acting *subjects*). Brandom's argument leads to the key point that what relates these two senses of incompatibility is a "*process*, a practice, the exercise of an ability, a kind of practical doing: what discursive subjects are obliged to *do* when they find themselves acknowledging incompatible commitments" (Ibid.: 193). This obligation to exercise what is characterized as

updating ability, this level of discursive responsibility to exercise an updating practice, constitutes the deeply intertwined relation between incompatibility in the modal sense and incompatibility in the normative sense: By "engaging in the practice of rectifying commitments, subjects are at once *both* taking or treating the *commitments* involved as incompatible in the *normative* sense of obliging them to do something about that collision, *and* taking or treating two *states of affairs* regarding *objects* as incompatible in the *modal* sense that it is impossible for both to obtain" (Ibid.: 193). What is made explicit in the objective sense of incompatibility by modal vocabulary and in the subjective sense by deontic normative vocabulary are, as Brandom puts it, "essentially complementary aspects", "connecting knowing and acting *subjects* with the *objects* they know about and act on" (Ibid.: 196).

As discursive practitioners, we operate, as Sellars puts it, within a framework of living rules. Normativity lies at the heart of our discursive engagement. Language-users are obliged to use linguistic expressions in certain ways. This responsibility is challenged in cases in which a discursive practitioner is faced with an updating problem. As Brandom puts it: "Every change of belief, no matter how small, is *potentially* relevant to the justification of every prior belief. Acquiring a new belief means acquiring what, for any material inference the believer endorses and relies upon for justification, might possibly turn out to be a defeasor. And giving up any belief means giving up not only a premise that might previously have been relied upon in justification, but also a potential counter-defeasor" (Ibid.: 108).

What is challenged here is not only what is said by the use of a vocabulary, but what is conveyed by its use. Therefore, a closer look at the constellation Brandom describes as "updating problem" and the resulting obligation to exercise the two distinct, but complementary practices of doxastic and discursive updating may serve as a starting point for a deeper understanding of the relation between the modal Kant-Sellars thesis and the normative Kant-Sellars thesis and Brandom's way "of filling in and following out Sellars's dark but suggestive remark that 'the language of modality is a 'transposed' language of norms.' " (Ibid.: 184).

The paper, thus, explores the distinct but complementary functions of doxastic and discursive updating and points out how they contribute to the normative structure of discursive practices.