

Making it Implicit: Brandom on Rule Following

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In *Making it Explicit*, Brandom aims to articulate an account of conceptual content that accommodates its normativity—a requirement on theories of content that Brandom traces to Wittgenstein's rule following considerations. It is widely held that the normativity requirement cannot be met, or at least not with ease, because theories of content face an intractable dilemma. Brandom proposes to evade the dilemma by adopting a middle road—one that uses normative vocabulary, but treats norms as implicit in practices. I argue that this proposal fails to evade the dilemma, as Brandom himself understands it. Despite his use of normative vocabulary, Brandom's theory fares no better than the reductionist theories he criticises. I consider some responses that Brandom might make to my charges, and finally conclude that his proposal founders on his own criteria.

Introduction

One of Robert Brandom's central projects in *Making it Explicit* is to account for conceptual content in a way that satisfies adequacy conditions drawn from Wittgenstein's later work. These conditions have to do with normativity. They have to do, that is, with explaining how beliefs and expressions can have contents that determine when they are applied correctly or incorrectly. Wittgenstein's 'rule following considerations'¹ purport to show that neither reductionist nor anti-reductionist strategies can adequately accommodate the normativity of content—reductionists are poorly placed to deal with normativity at all, and anti-reductionists are faced with a vicious regress. Wittgenstein, it is commonly held, had his own solution to the problem, though the

¹ At least on some interpretations. Cf. D. Bloor, *Wittgenstein: Rules and Institutions* (London: Routledge, 1997); S. Kripke, *Wittgenstein, Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); J. McDowell, 'Wittgenstein on Following a Rule' in A. W. Moore (ed.), *Meaning and Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); C. Wright, *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics* (London: Duckworth, 1980). The central passages of the rule following considerations are in §§ 143-242 of L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe (trans.) (London: Macmillan, 1953).

jury is out on its details.² At any rate, the dilemma has been so prominent in recent discussions that any purported solution to it should be of interest.³

Brandom claims to provide a solution. His manifest aim is to preserve content from the ravages of the rule following arguments by forging a path between the two extremes of reductionism and nonreductionism. His central suggestion is that we treat normative vocabulary as *irreducible*, but nevertheless *explicable* as instituted by what he calls 'practical deontic attitudes'. On the face of it, this is a promising middle way that boasts a number of popular features.⁴ My contention, however, is that Brandom's solution succumbs to the difficulties it purports to overcome.

I will start by presenting the Wittgensteinian dilemma, as Brandom understands it, and the main points of Brandom's solution. Next I argue that the proffered solution does not satisfy Wittgenstein's adequacy conditions, and finally I consider some responses that could be made on Brandom's behalf. It turns out that Brandom's explanation of content is inadequate by his own criteria.

The Wittgensteinian Dilemma: Gerrymandering Vs. Regress

Interpretations of Wittgenstein's rule following considerations are so thick on the ground, that it makes no sense to reproduce them here in any detail. All I seek is to establish that Brandom is committed to solving the Wittgensteinian dilemma and to say something about what he takes that dilemma to be. The first task is easily accomplished, since Brandom says, 'one of the projects pursued in the rest of this work is to come up with an account of norms implicit in practices that will satisfy the criteria of adequacy Wittgenstein's arguments have established.'⁵

² For a variety of 'Wittgensteinian' solutions see, for instance, Bloor 1997, *op. cit.* Kripke 1982, *op. cit.*, McDowell 1993, *op. cit.*, G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein, Rules, Grammar and Necessity*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), Wright, 1980, *op. cit.*

³ In addition to the articles cited above, some key contributions to the debate include G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Scepticism, Rules and Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984); S. Blackburn, 'The Individual Strikes Back, *Synthese* 58 (1984), 281-301; P. Boghossian, 'The Rule-Following Considerations' *Mind* 98 (1989) 507-549; S. Holtzman and C. Leich (eds.), *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981); C. McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁴ It has some similarities with, for instance, McDowell's account in McDowell, 1993 *op. cit.* The 'pragmatic' conception of rules implicit in practice is, of course, beyond reproach: any account of language that presupposes our following rules must treat them as implicit, or tacit, in order to avoid regress. See also M. Dummett, *The Seas of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Many people also share Brandom's idea that it is norms all the way down—i.e., that norms are in the 'bedrock'. Cf. McDowell 1993 *op. cit.* and M. Lance and J. O'Leary Hawthorne, *The Grammar of Meaning: Normativity and Semantic Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁵ R. Brandom, *Making it Explicit* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 29-30.

So, what does Brandom take these criteria of adequacy to be? To start with, he points out that the crucial assumption of the rule following considerations is the doctrine of the normativity of content. Content is normative in at least the following sense: if I mean something by an expression then there will be a host of truths about when my use of the expression is correct and when it is incorrect. For example, one standard of correctness might be referential: if I mean *green* by 'green', there will be many cases in which 'x is green' will be true—for any green x—and still more cases when it will be false.

The idea that there are standards to be met can be examined with the help of the notion of a rule, such that accordance with a rule provides an analogy for linguistic or semantic correctness. However, explaining how rules or standards determine the correctness of performances leads to a dilemma. First, if it is necessary for rule followers to keep the rules explicitly in mind, the result is a vicious regress. Alternatively, if explanations of rule following are restricted to facts about the way in which speakers *do* act, there seems to be no hope for an adequate account of correctness.

The infinite regress-of-rules argument goes as follows. If understanding the content of an expression requires grasping the rule for its use, we can always wonder what understanding of the *rule* consists in. For example, if I mean *green* by 'green', the rule for applying the concept *green* determines when it is correct to use the expression—that is, in reference to all and only green things. However, I could put a non-standard interpretation on the rule for applying 'green'—I could interpret it to mean that it is correct to apply 'green' to green things examined before tomorrow, when it becomes correct to apply it to blue things.⁶ Fans of Goodman will see that this is similar to the rule for applying the concept *grue*.⁷ But what makes the green-interpretation of the rule correct, but the grue-interpretation incorrect—what determines how the *rule* is to be understood? If understanding is to be uniformly cashed out in terms of rules, it seems that I will need a *further* rule to interpret the rule for applying the expression 'green'. In general, a rule has a content, so that if I need a rule for understanding 'green', I will need a further rule for understanding the rule for understanding 'green'. And so on, to infinity.

Brandom's response to the infinite regress problem is to account for conceptual rules as implicit in a practice. He says that 'the conclusion of the regress argument is that there is a need for a pragmatist conception of norms—a notion of primitive correctnesses of performance *implicit* in *practice* that precede and are presupposed by their *explicit* formulation in *rules* and

⁶ This kind of reasoning is familiar from Kripke's 1982, *op. cit.* elaboration of Wittgenstein's arguments.

⁷ N. Goodman, *Fact, Fiction and Forecast* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979). In Goodman 1979, 'the predicate "grue"... applies to all things examined before t just in case they are green but to other things just in case they are blue (74).'

principles.⁸ However, all practical conceptions of rules face another notorious difficulty—the second horn of Wittgenstein’s dilemma. If the rules are to be evinced by the way that speakers *do* behave, the normativity of content seems to be lost. The problem, to begin with, is that any finite sequence of behaviour is consistent with an infinite number of possible continuations of that behaviour and thus an infinite number of rules with which that behaviour might accord. You can’t just look at a finite sequence of behaviour and see what rule is being followed on the basis of it. This is what Brandom calls the ‘gerrymandering objection’. He says that ‘[t]here is simply no such thing as *the* pattern or regularity exhibited by a stretch of past behaviour, which can be appealed to in judging some candidate bit of future behavior as regular or irregular, and hence, on this line, as correct or incorrect.’⁹ The account of content in terms of regularities seems unable to supply a reason for privileging one continuation of the regularity over another.

A popular solution to this problem invokes the dispositions of the speaker. On this view, a speaker’s disposition to use an expression in a particular way, on certain occasions, determines what she means by it.¹⁰ Brandom will have no truck with such an account, however, offering the familiar objection that dispositionalists cannot adequately accommodate error.¹¹ To be sure, Brandom is too quick to dismiss dispositionalism, but nevertheless, this is what he says:

Understanding the norms implicit in practice as descriptively adequate rules codifying regularities of disposition...loses the contrast between correct and mistaken performance that is of the essence of the sort of normative assessment being reconstructed. If whatever one is disposed to do counts for that reason as right, then the distinction of right and wrong, and so all normative force, has been lost. Thus the simple regularity view cannot be rescued from the gerrymandering objection by appealing to dispositions in order to single out or privilege a unique regularity.¹²

The upshot, then, is a dilemma, one horn of which is an infinite regress, while the other is the problem of gerrymandering. Meeting ‘Wittgenstein’s adequacy conditions’, for Brandom at any rate, amounts to avoiding this dilemma—i.e., accommodating the normativity of content without gerrymandering or becoming involved in an infinite regress. To Brandom, Wittgenstein’s problem suggests the need for a pragmatic conception of rules

⁸ Brandom 1994 *op. cit.*, 21. Emphasis in original.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 28. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰ For a discussion of dispositionalism see Boghossian, 1989, *op. cit.*, Blackburn 1994, *op. cit.*, Kripke 1982, *op. cit.*, A. Miller, *Philosophy of Language* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1998); C. B. Martin and J. Heil, ‘Rules and Powers’, *Philosophical Perspectives* 12 (1998), 283-312.

¹¹ Kripke 1982, *op. cit.*

¹² Brandom 1994, *op. cit.*, 29.

as implicit in a practice, yet one that treats normative vocabulary as irreducible to naturalistic terms.

Brandom's Solution

Brandom's repudiation of a reductionist strategy is a central feature of his explanation of content. 'No attempt is made', he says, 'to eliminate, in favor of nonnormative or naturalistic vocabulary, the normative vocabulary employed in specifying the practices that are the use of language.'¹³ By treating rules as implicit in practices, Brandom seeks to avoid the regress, by claiming that normativity cannot be reduced in favour of natural facts, he purports to avoid the gerrymandering objection. Thus, Brandom's idea is that it is norms all the way down; and that normative vocabulary will supply the necessary basis for an explanation of conceptual content.

Another of Brandom's central claims is that despite being irreducible, linguistic norms can be explained. In saying that it's norms all the way down, Brandom does not commit to a nonnatural realism about norms. On the contrary; according to Brandom we *make* the norms that govern conceptual content. 'Norms,' he says, 'are in some sense creatures of ours...discursive deontic statuses are *instituted* by the practices that govern score keeping with deontic attitudes'.¹⁴ More precisely, the explanation of normative status comes in three layers. First, Brandom claims that normative status is a function of *attributions* of that status; that *taking* some act to be correct or incorrect is prior to its *being* correct or incorrect. These attributions are, in turn, explained by our practical attitudes: 'the normative significances we take [things] to have, are products of our practical normative attitudes, as expressed in our activity of imposing those significances and acknowledging them in assessments.'¹⁵ Finally, our practical attitudes are explained in terms of sanction—the activity of imposing attributions of status. It is important for Brandom, moreover, that this process is *social*; normative status is instituted through the specifically social practice of treating actions as appropriate, correct, incorrect and so forth. The structure of the practices determines which conceptual contents the participants entertain.

Finally, though it is only marginally relevant to the issues raised in this paper, I should note Brandom's view that the norms of practice relevant to determining content are inferential. In particular, it is what he calls 'material inferences' that establish the content of expressions and beliefs, and it is these material inferences that need to be abided by in practice as a precondition for the possibility of meaning.¹⁶ For example, a material inference constitutive

¹³ Ibid., 2.

¹⁴ Ibid., 626. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵ Ibid., 49.

¹⁶ There are, of course, other important rules of combination and syntax that allow for the complex array of expressions and uses in a natural language. However, material infer-

of the meaning of 'red' might be expressed as follows: someone who says that x is red thereby undertakes a commitment to the claim that x is coloured, x is extended, x is not blue, and so on. This 'inferentialism' is marginal to our current concerns because Brandom does not present it as crucial to the solution of the Wittgensteinian dilemma. However, it is worth mentioning because the rule-following arguments are sometimes taken to imply the failure of representationalism, in which case it might seem that Brandom's inferentialism contributes to its potential success.¹⁷

Does Brandom Avoid the Dilemma?

Brandom begins the more detailed work of explaining conceptual content by way of a thought experiment.¹⁸ This involves imagining a pre-conceptual community, that is, one with a normative practice, but no concepts. Brandom says that his 'account of deontic scorekeeping on doxastic and practical commitments explains what one must interpret a community as doing in order for it to be *talking* that one is thereby taking them to be doing.'¹⁹ This is not an account that is answerable to the facts of human evolution, but is designed to pick out the features that a practice needs to have in order for its practitioners to be talking.²⁰

Nevertheless, it is unclear how Brandom's view differs from a straightforwardly naturalistic one. The starting point is supposed to be a proto-hominid community in which there are norms, but no concepts or contents—i.e., neither propositional attitudes, nor explicit thoughts. Brandom says, 'the account of norm-instituting social practices must appeal to capacities that are plausibly available in primitive prelinguistic cases, and yet provide raw materials adequate for the specification of sophisticated linguistic practices, including logical ones.'²¹ The key, according to Brandom, is to look at '*assessments of propriety*', at '*attitudes of taking or treating performances as correct or incorrect*'.²² And although Brandom uses normative vocabulary to say that the proto-hominids treat each other's performances as 'correct' or 'incorrect', he suggests that they do so by way of their purely *physical* behaviour and abilities.

The story to be told here assumes only that suitable social creatures can learn to distinguish in their practice between performances that are treated as correct by their fellows (itself a

ences are the most important starting point, according to Brandom, for fixing the semantic content of the kinds of expressions with which we are concerned.

¹⁷ Cf. G. Wilson, 'Semantic Realism and Kripke's Wittgenstein', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LVII, No. 1 (March 1998), 99-122.

¹⁸ Brandom builds on the thought experiment introduced by Haugeland in J. Haugeland, 'Heidegger on Being a Person', *Noûs* 16 (1982), 15-26.

¹⁹ Brandom 1994 *op. cit.*, 637. Emphasis in original.

²⁰ Cf. J. Haugeland.

²¹ Brandom, 1994, *op. cit.*, xxii.

²² Brandom 1994, *op. cit.*, 63.

responsive discrimination) and those that are not...it should be clear at each stage in the account that the abilities attributed to linguistic practitioners are not magical, mysterious or extraordinary. They are compounded out of reliable dispositions to respond differentially to linguistic and non-linguistic stimuli.²³

The capacity for responsive discrimination is just the reliable disposition to respond in different ways to different stimuli. So put, it appears as though Brandom is offering a dispositionalist account of the determination of correctness—since the starting point includes nothing more than behavioral dispositions. Moreover, when we come to his positive account of the structure of the social practices necessary for conceptual content, nothing is added that would distinguish the account from dispositionalism. The structure of practices productive of content are certainly specified in deontic vocabulary, but the practices that institute normative status presuppose only the propensity to perform various forms of sanction. It seems that even for Brandom, sanctioning—whether it is beating with sticks or social exclusion—constitutes or amounts to the attitude of taking someone as committed or entitled. He says,

The notion of a normative status, and of the significance of performances that alter normative status, is in turn to be understood in terms of the practical deontic *attitude* of taking or treating someone as committed or entitled. This is in the first instance *attributing* a commitment or entitlement. Adopting this practical attitude can be explained, to begin with, as consisting in the disposition or willingness to impose *sanctions*....What counts as punishment may...be specifiable in nonnormative terms, such as causing pain or otherwise negatively enforcing the punished behaviour. Or what counts as punishment with respect to a particular practice may be specifiable only in normative terms, by appeal to alterations in deontic status or attitude.²⁴

The structure of Brandom's explanatory strategy is clearly evident here. Normative status is explained in terms of attributions of status, attributions are in turn explained in terms of practical attitudes—to take or treat something as having a certain status. Finally, these attitudes are explained in terms of dispositions to sanction, i.e. to respond in certain ways to certain behaviour. The participants of a communal practice treat one another as committed or entitled by imposing sanctions—by 'causing pain or otherwise negatively reinforcing the punished behavior'. Hence, treating someone as having a certain status requires only the ability to discriminate features of the environment by sanctioning differentially. Moreover, these dispositions are said to be sufficient for the adoption of attitudes: the disposition to impose sanctions amounts to the 'practical deontic attitude of taking or treating someone as committed or entitled'. To adopt a certain attitude is to take a stance, to attribute a normative status.

There is no doubt that Brandom uses conspicuously normative language to describe what it is that the practitioners are doing. He says, for instance, that

²³ Brandom, 1994 *op. cit.*, 155-156.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 166. Emphasis in original.

punishment alters the deontic statuses of the participants of a practice. However, he also suggests, in the passages leading up to the one cited above, that someone might be punished by being physically excluded from certain areas or social gatherings, or by being beaten about the head with sticks. Thus, despite the conspicuously normative vocabulary in which it is framed, Brandom's picture is still largely, or perhaps even entirely, founded on dispositions: normative statuses are derivative of normative attitudes, and the latter are explained in terms of responsive discrimination and propensities to impose physical sanction. Since these practices *institute* conceptual content, the ingredients are all assembled for the explanation of conceptual content. The lingering worry is this: how could Brandom's proposal possibly avoid the gerrymandering objection?

Indeed, this account cannot avoid the gerrymandering objection. Even though the dispositions of members of a community are described in normative terms, the normative vocabulary affords no purchase on the problem. The reason is that the one thing Brandom *cannot* assume is that the pre-conceptual abilities of creatures includes the ability to *think*, i.e., to entertain concepts. This is not just because they are supposed to have only pre-conceptual abilities, but also because, if it were necessary that they *think*, Brandom would face the problem of regress. Moreover, the leading idea of this work is that the rules that determine conceptual content are *implicit* in practices. The account of how a practice must be in order for it to institute conceptual content cannot presuppose that the participants of the practice can have explicit, contentful thoughts.

Without assuming the ability to think, however, the gerrymandering objection seems inevitable. Consider a face-to-face interaction between two members of the kind of community described by Brandom (call them John and Emma). John says to Emma, pointing, 'that's red'. We are supposed to imagine that John makes these sounds and gestures, and Emma, taking all of this in, attributes certain commitments and entitlements to John. This just means that Emma becomes disposed to sanction John—disposed, that is, to punish John under some circumstances but not under others. Imagine, further, that at some later time poor John *is* punished. The question is *what* has John been punished for? Has Emma attributed the commitment to say 'that's not blue', or has she attributed the commitment to say 'that's not grue'? Which of these commitments has John violated?

When Emma attributes a commitment to John, Emma cannot *think* to herself that *John has now committed himself to saying that that is not blue*. The reason is, simply, that for Emma to have *that* thought in mind, she must be able to think, and thinking contentful thoughts is not one of her abilities. Emma's abilities, as they have been described, are not sufficient for Emma to attribute an explicit commitment or entitlement to John. Similarly, John is

unable to undertake any explicit commitments and entitlements, insofar as that requires that he attribute them to himself. Given Brandom's rejection of dispositionalism, he can hardly maintain that Emma's disposition to behave determines that she attributes *these* commitments to John rather than *those*. As Brandom puts it, 'there is no such thing as *the* regularity that is being reinforced by a certain set of responses to responses, or even dispositions to respond to responses.'²⁵ Since there is no such thing as *the* regularity of Emma's sanctioning behaviour, there can be no such thing as *the* commitment she has attributed.

However, if we include more in our picture—particularly if we allow ourselves to allude to facts about the correctness of attributions—we run into problems of regress. To see this, consider the possibility that commitments and entitlements are determined by the attribution of them, i.e. that the participants of our little community attribute determinate deontic statuses at will. So when Emma attributes a deontic status to John, she is actually making a contentful evaluation or characterisation of John's behaviour. This means that she attributes certain commitments and entitlements on the basis of what John has said or done, and she sanctions in the ways that she does *in virtue of* the entitlements and commitments she has attributed. Thus, in order for Emma to attribute a particular set of commitments and entitlements, her attribution of those deontic statuses must be subject to standards—in particular, the correctness conditions supplied by the rules of material inference. But how can her behaviour be subject to these rules? Whatever it is that determines the proper application of the rules, it cannot be the regularity that Emma in fact adheres to—on pain of renewing the gerrymandering objection. In the absence of any obvious bypass, the only alternative seems to be to suppose that she has them in mind, that she *grasps* the requisite rules. But if this is the answer, then we can ask whether she has grasped the rules correctly, and a further rule needs to be invoked. And so on, to infinity.

A Response

Brandom frequently insists that he does not want to reduce norms to nature, but in my characterisation of the pre-conceptual community, I accused him of doing just that. It seemed as if Brandom had forgotten about the correctness and incorrectness of *attributions* of normative status. Hence, it is worth considering whether the addition of normative vocabulary at the right point might help his case.

One way to include normative vocabulary at the level of attributions, would be to suppose that one of the things that pre-conceptual creatures are able to discern is normative status. To assume this, however, implies a fairly robust realism about norms. If pre-conceptual creatures discern normative

²⁵ Ibid., 36.

statuses, then the statuses themselves must be there to be discerned. But this is clearly not an assumption that Brandom is likely to embrace. For one thing, such abilities would probably count as mysterious by his lights. Moreover, Brandom's concern was to show how norms were, in some sense, of our making, how we *institute* them through our normative attitudes. So, plugging in normative vocabulary here will not help, or at least, it will not help in a way that Brandom would accept.

Another way Brandom might try to evade these problems is by adverting to his claim that it is norms all the way down, and that attributions of normative status—*taking as* correct or incorrect—are always prior. He sometimes suggests that *we* attribute the deontic statuses of the behaviour of the members of another community, when we, at the *meta-level*, come to say that they have a normative practice.²⁶ That is, he suggests that the *interpreter* attributes normative status and thus conceptual content to the members of the community being *interpreted*:

The key to the account is that an interpretation of this sort must interpret community members as taking or treating each other in practice as adopting intentionally contentful commitments and other normative statuses. If the practices attributed to the community by the theorist have the right structure, then according to that interpretation, the community members' practical attitudes institute normative statuses and confer intentional content on them; according to the interpretation, the intentional contentfulness of their states and performances is the product of their own activity, not that of the theorist interpreting that activity.²⁷

The idea seems to be that the normative status of the actions of the proto-hominids is a function of *our* attribution of that status: *we*, so to speak, make it possible for them to institute their norms by attributing to them the ability to attribute correctly or incorrectly. So one more level of explanation needs to be added to Brandom's picture. As it is, we had normative status explained in terms of attributions of normative status, attributions explained in terms of practical deontic attitudes, and these attitudes explained in terms of dispositions to sanction. Now, we need to explain the practical deontic attitudes in terms, not just of the natural abilities of the members of the community, but *also*, in terms of normative statuses *attributed* explicitly by us, the interpreters in this exercise.

²⁶ These points touch on the issue of Brandom's 'phenomenalism' about norms, which has been criticized by Gideon Rosen in 'Who Makes the Rules around Here?', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LVII, No. 1 (March 1997), 163-171. Rosen argues that there is no sensible way to understand the claim that attributing a normative status (taking something to be correct) could be prior and institutive of its having that normative status. Of course, this sort of self-reflexive institution *does* make sense for 'social kinds' such as money. However, in accounts of the social constitution of money, psychological attitudes provide a resource for analysis. In this case, it is the content of psychological attitudes itself that is at stake.

²⁷ Brandom 1994, *op. cit.*, 61.

It might help to think of this picture as somewhat similar to the Davidsonian view that we employ a principle of charity when interpreting others.²⁸ For both Davidson and Brandom, we apply *our* standards to others when we interpret their behaviour as, for instance, linguistic. Indeed, this kind of picture makes a lot of sense when we imagine an anthropologist or a radical interpreter struggling to understand the doings of a far-flung community.²⁹ Clearly *some* standards need to be employed by the interpreter, because the purely natural features of behaviour of speakers to be interpreted will radically underdetermine the norms. So why not invoke *our* standards?

While some level of ethnocentrism might make cross-cultural interpretation possible, it hardly makes sense of the case we were considering—that of the pre-conceptual, proto-hominids. I take it that we were not meant to imagine the proto-hominids as an as yet undiscovered group of primates living in a distant and isolated land. The proto-hominids were a fiction; a model designed to show what it is that a community must be like in order for it to develop conceptual contents. If our attribution of status is necessary to discriminate *which* commitments and entitlements are being undertaken or attributed by the fictional proto-hominids, then it will turn out that *explicit* attribution of normative status (by us) is necessary for the *implicit* practice to be one capable of mere normative sanction. But this has Brandom's order of explanation back to front. Of course, we need to use our explicit vocabulary to talk about the proto-hominids, but that talk cannot be a *necessary* condition for practices to implicitly institute norms. This conflicts with Brandom's manifest commitment to the suggestion that an implicitly normative practice is prior to one in which deontic status can be made explicit:

...I am indeed committed to the possibility of norms implicit in prelinguistic (and so nonconceptual) practices. Such implicitly normative practices are prior in the order of explanation... The picture is that what proto-hominids could do before they could talk is to take or treat each other's performances as correct or incorrect by practically sanctioning them, e.g. by beating each other with sticks as punishment.³⁰

But given the Wittgensteinian dilemma—as Brandom presents it—there is no sense to be made of the idea that a) the proto-hominids are pre-linguistic and pre-conceptual and that b) they can attribute deontic status—i.e., take or treat each other's performances as correct or incorrect—merely by sanctioning. Without invoking the ability to talk and think, the proto-hominids cannot be said to confer deontic status at all when they practically sanction one

²⁸ D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

²⁹ For a discussion of the 'anthropological' point, see J. Rosenberg, 'Brandom's *Making it Explicit*: A First Encounter', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LVII, No. 1 (March 1997), 181-189.

³⁰ Brandom, 'Replies', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LVII, No. 1 (March 1997) 191-207, p. 201.

another's behaviour, on pain of succumbing to the gerrymandering objection. For their treatment of one another to amount to the attribution of specific deontic statuses, they must be able to entertain concepts; if their practice does not amount to the attribution of specific norms, then the deontic vocabulary turns out to be another way of describing behavioral dispositions. That is, given the way that the dilemma was initially set up by Brandom, a) and b) just don't hang together.

In defense of Brandom, one might still wish to argue that I am reading him uncharitably. Maybe Brandom simply does not hope to provide an account of how the proto-hominids can bootstrap themselves from a state of nature to a state of norms. Moreover, this might not lead him to a nonnatural realism about norms, but rather to a kind of quietism. He might, that is, just assume norms to be 'in the bedrock', so to speak, without aiming to explain them. His project, then, could be to provide a detailed account of inferentially articulated conceptual content that is built from the starting point of an already normative practice. And indeed, this alternative project is extensively carried out in the better part of *Making it Explicit*. Why saddle him with the problems of accounting for normativity, when he simply takes norms to be primitive?

There is something to be said for this interpretation of Brandom. For the most part, his book is devoted to a richly detailed and remarkably subtle account of conceptual content that starts with inferentially articulated norms. However, the suggested interpretation is also, in another sense, highly uncharitable to him. If the above project is attributed to Brandom, it makes no sense to suppose that he in any way sets out to solve the Wittgensteinian dilemma, or to meet the conditions of adequacy that it establishes.

However, implicit in Brandom's claim that he does wish to satisfy the conditions of adequacy Wittgenstein established, cited above, is the idea that they *ought* to be satisfied, that they are legitimate conditions. To be a quietist, in any reasonable sense, is to decide that no account needs to be given—because the adequacy conditions are illegitimate or unacceptable for one reason or another. This, for instance, is the strategy adopted by McDowell, who argues that the infinite regress of rules can be evaded if we realize that it illicitly treats thoughts as if they just 'stand there', in need of further interpretation. Thus McDowell seeks to avoid the Wittgensteinian dilemma by rejecting the premises that allegedly give rise to it.³¹ Brandom, however,

³¹ Cf. J. McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998). Unfortunately, McDowell's arguments do not provide a solution to the difficulty as Brandom presents it. This is because Brandom makes the far less controversial assumption that all thoughts or expressions are contentful in virtue of some standards for their correct application. The infinite regress arises, then, not because thoughts require interpretations, but because thinkers need to be rule-followers. To follow a rule one needs to understand the rule, and this is what raises the spectre of regress.

offers no such argument. And if one's quietism is not principled in some such way, then it just amounts to a refusal to deal with the problem—which is fine, of course, so long as it is not combined with a claim to be doing just that. Since Brandom says quite clearly that he sets out to meet the 'Wittgensteinian adequacy conditions', he could hardly be a quietist in anything but the most pernicious sense.

Finally, even if we just interpreted Brandom as refusing to engage with the issues, this would make no sense of his repeated suggestions that norms can be *explained* in terms of practical attitudes and that practical attitudes can be understood in terms of propensity to sanction. To me this sounds like an account of how normative status can be grounded in practice, how we can elaborate a pragmatic conception of norms. Moreover, he goes to some length to explain normative status in terms of attributions of status, attributions in terms of attitudes and attitudes in terms of dispositions to sanction. All of this talk makes little sense if Brandom really were just dodging the issue. And if he is not just dodging the issue, then my worry still holds: plausible though his triple layer explanation might be, it is at best a sophisticated dispositionalism which, by Brandom's own lights, is inadequate.

Conclusion

The upshot is that if Brandom sticks to the bare bones of dispositions, punishment, responsive discrimination and behaviour—regardless of the vocabulary he uses—he just does not have enough to go on to evade the gerrymandering objection. But if he tries to include more into the picture—if he expects status attributions to determine *specific* deontic statuses—he is involved in a regress. Though he purports to avoid both gerrymandering and infinite regress, it turns out that he cannot.

There is a constructive moral to this story, however. Brandom's explanation of conceptual content has some very plausible sounding features—for instance, the idea that rules are implicit in practice, and the idea that the only abilities we can assume at the outset are dispositions to discriminate responsively. Since these ideas all point towards dispositionalism, the key to explaining content is bound to lie in a re-assessment of the dispositional theory and its alleged failure to meet the Wittgensteinian demands.³² If it can be shown that dispositionalism meets these demands, there will be an ample foundation for Brandom's more elaborate inferentialist theory of content.³³

³² I discuss a dispositionalist solution to the dilemma in *Content Scepticism: Normativity, Rules and Understanding*, doctoral dissertation, Trinity College, Cambridge, unpublished.

³³ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Philosophy Graduate Conference, at the Department of History and Philosophy of Science, Cambridge. Thanks to the audience at that conference, especially Martin Kusch and Neil Manson, who suggested challenging responses on Brandom's behalf. Thanks also to Krister Bykvist, Jagdish Hatiangadi, Peter Lipton and anonymous referees for many helpful comments and suggestions. Any errors that remain are, of course, mine.