

TOWARD A NORMATIVE THEORY OF RATIONALITY

A Thesis

by

PRESTON JOHN STOVALL

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2008

Major Subject: Philosophy

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Robert W. Burch
Committee Members,	Theodore George
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	Gil Rosenthal
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ABSTRACT

Toward a Normative Theory of Rationality. (May 2008)

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This project offers an articulation of rationality in terms of normativity—that what it means to be acting rationally, in thought or in deed, can be understood via a notion of being bound or *obliged* to certain behaviors given a prior structure that delimits what is rational to *assert* in a discourse or *perform* in a society. In the explicit articulation of the role of norms in limiting rationality, this project also emphasizes the opportunity and obligation to self-critically assess the value of the metalinguistic and metapractical standards that license rational assertions and behaviors.

After an introduction, section 2 examines the role of rational constraint in Kant's account of representation, concluding that the transcendental story his philosophy leaves us with impels us to look for an immanent socio-linguistic account of the normativity that obliges us to think and behave in certain ways, rather than lodging the force of normativity in transcendentalism. Section 3 then examines Robert Brandom's inferential semantics by addressing prominent responses to Brandom's program, making explicit two ways in which normativity operates in inferentialism—one at the level of object-language in the articulation of the propositional commitments and entitlements that

specify propositional content, the other at the level of the metalinguistic appraisal of the standards that drive object-language inferentialism.

Section 4 turns to the theoretical status of normativity and its role in practical behavior, where it is argued that a notion of normativity can underpin a theory of intentional states. Examining positions on naturalism, the author proposes that a causal account of intentionality, made explicit by the prescriptive nature of the theory advanced, provides a naturalist view of normativity for which *norms* are in explanations of *social* states as *laws* are in explanations of *physical* states. Hence the obligation to self-critically reflect on and revise the norms that delimit ethical behavior in social systems is understood as commensurate with the obligation to self-critically reflect on and revise the norms that delimit warranted assertions in epistemic discourse.

The conclusion offers some remarks on the prospects for rational revision in both a discipline's discourse and a society's standards of behavior.

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thereby enabling me to work toward a Certificate in Advanced International Affairs in tandem with my Master's study at A&M. Thanks also go to the Dean and tutors of St. Peter's College, Oxford, for two terms of study in philosophy and economics there, and especially to Mike Inwood of Trinity College, Oxford, for agreeing to a tutorial on Hegel during that time.

In addition I would like to thank two professors at Montana State University, my undergraduate *alma mater*: James Allard and Gordon Brittan, Jr. Professors Allard and Brittan first instilled in me the sense that Hegel and Kant have made important contributions to the intellectual development of the modern world, and to consider the relevance of their thought to some of our own concerns. They have also been a continuing source of encouragement and support since my leaving MSU, for which I am very grateful.

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1. INTRODUCTION: NORMATIVITY AND RATIONAL CONSTRAINT

This project grew out of a desire to understand normativity. More specifically, this project represents a desire to understand the role of normativity in the philosophical projects of the Pittsburgh philosophers Robert Brandom, John McDowell, and Wilfrid Sellars. The contemporary philosophical literature that forms the focus of the third section of this thesis makes use of normative terminology in ways that make it appear, *prima facie* at least, as though understanding the role of normativity in this literature will provide the student a good grasp of the Pittsburgh program in general. It is clear, furthermore, that there is a systematic program of some sort here. The work of Brandom, McDowell, and Sellars all adopt an approving tone toward the work of Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the latter figure especially not usually thought integral to an understanding of contemporary philosophical problems and their potential resolutions. One object of this thesis is to articulate—via an examination of normativity—one way Kant and Hegel can be understood to offer contemporary philosophy more to consider than is often currently supposed. For contemporary philosophy is marked by the concise examination of very particular issues, whereas Kant and Hegel were system-building philosophers of comprehensive scope.

This thesis follows the style of *The Review of Metaphysics*.

In the remainder of this introduction let us canvas a first approximation of the notion of normativity. The word itself refers to *rule-following* of some form or another. But rule-following itself is a comprehensive notion, apparently admitting of rather different applications. There is conventional rule-following, as represented by the rules of a game or rules as to whether or not we drive on the right or the left side of the road. There is linguistic rule-following, ensuring that by following the conventions of a form of discourse we are able to communicate with each other. There is logical rule-following as, perhaps, the necessary linguistic and conceptual relationships that ensure our utterances are sensible no matter what form of discourse in which they're used. There is ethical rule-following, as the prescriptions and prohibitions of a society encapsulated in the "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" of a moral or legal code. We also have aesthetic rule-following, represented by obeying the canons of value that delimit an artistic movement and the mediums that express it.¹

¹ In a lecture given at Harvard on April 30, 1903, later entitled *The Three Normative Sciences*, C.S. Peirce argued that logic (by which Peirce understood scientific methodology generally), ethics, and aesthetics are capable of an ordered definition beginning with aesthetics. *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Vol. 2 (1893-1913)*, edited by the Peirce Edition Project, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998): 196-207. Peirce's argument, roughly, comes down to the claim that *logic* is a form of *ethics* insofar as logical prescriptions are essentially prescriptions of behavior of a peculiar sort. As the only non-circular end that can be pursued in behavior is one that recommends itself as an "admirable ideal" (201), ethics itself is a pursuit of aesthetics. "If this line of thought be sound, the morally good will be the esthetically [sic] good specially determined by a peculiar superadded element; and the logically good will be the morally good specially determined by a special superadded element" (201). Without belaboring Peirce's argument, I think it is important to keep distinct the differences between ethics, aesthetics, and logic or epistemics. One advantage of bringing to bear the notion of normativity on this issue is that it provides us with a category able to subsume epistemics, ethics, and aesthetics without supposing they reduce to one or another subcategory. It seems reasonable to suppose, for instance, that the normative injunction "Graham Priest is wrong to deny the principle of non-contradiction" is different in kind from the normative injunction that "Hitler was wrong to pursue the Final Solution"; while we might be inclined to say that accepting the logical principle of non-contradiction comes down to an issue of aesthetics, it seems to do rather much disservice to our notion of ethics to say we censure Hitler's behavior ultimately because it was aesthetically displeasing.

One of the benefits offered by a focus on normativity is the chance to bridge the systematizing philosophies of Kant and Hegel with the particular philosophical commitments of the contemporary scene. If a sufficient specification of normativity can be provided within the confines of a theory of conceptual content or semantic meaning, as will be pursued in the third section of the current work, then the prospect opens for the application of this theory of meaning across different normative disciplines. It may be possible, in short, for us to specify what should be done, what should be believed, and what should be valued within one and the same theory of rational discourse—a rational discourse comprising ethics, epistemics, and aesthetics, goodness, truth, and beauty. It is in this attempt to specify rational discourse in terms of a notion of normativity that I have entitled this thesis ‘a normative theory of rationality’.

As a first approximation, therefore, we can understand normativity as a notion of *rational constraint*. Rational constraint itself operates as a function of the context that defines a discourse. The normative canons that rationally constrain judgments in aesthetics do not operate as canons rationally constraining judgments in epistemics. Similarly, a judgment within a particular discipline only bears normative force when it is constrained by the *reasons* that *license* that judgment as a judgment permitted by the norms of the discipline. So the judgments available to a critic of cubism will bear a *normative force* insofar as those judgments are couched in the language *rationally constrained* by the standards that delimit the discourse of artistic criticism of cubism. Our object in the third section will be to show not only how such normative standards

operate as rational constraints within a particular discourse, but to specify how such standards can themselves be made explicit and subject to higher-order appraisal.

For the idea of being bound to reasons seems to imply a degree of objectivity for reasons themselves. But if normativity is a function of the linguistic standards of a particular discourse there seems to be nothing to ensure us that our linguistic standards, our rational discourse, is sufficiently structured by extra-social, extra-subjective, constraints to make our standards *rational* ones and not merely *conventional*. Addressing this issue will form a key component of the discussion in section 3, where we examine the contemporary linguistic program on normativity. Before looking at this contemporary work we will first examine a historical antecedent to the contemporary linguistic normative program by focusing on the role of normativity in Kant.

In particular, our focus in section 2 will be on the role of normativity in Kant's account of representation. Here we will discuss the way Kant understood that the categorical structure of experience—a structure wholly determined by the *a priori* conditions of self-conscious experience—was nonetheless sufficiently rationally constrained so as to ensure objectivity. In spelling out the Kantian notions of normativity, we will come 1) to understand the way rational constraint in Kant is purchased on condition of necessitating a transcendental story, and 2) to motivate the view of linguistic normativity as an alternative to Kant's transcendentalism. This will lead us into section 3 where our focus will be on the role of normativity in Brandom's inferential semantics, integral in spelling out his theory of propositional or conceptual content. Finally, section 4 will endeavor to tell a story of how normativity, the rational

constraint imposed on our assertions and their propositional contents, can be extended beyond the linguistic realm into the domain of at least the higher animals. Rather than focusing on an account of conceptual content that stops at language-use, as Brandom does, this thesis is concerned to argue that conceptual content as so construed by Brandom can be extended to nonlinguistic animals. In section 4 we will examine the way conceptual content, though specified by language and rationally constrained by the normative standards of a particular discourse, nonetheless can be understood to exhibit dimensions of normativity that extend beyond language into the realm of self-conscious intentionality. The experience of self-conscious organisms *qua* evolutionary organisms in tension with an objective environment can be understood to offer its own conditions of rational constraint on actions, beliefs, and values.

2. THE NORMATIVE DIMENSIONS OF KANT'S ACCOUNT OF REPRESENTATION: EMPIRICAL, TRANSCENDENTAL, AND SEMANTIC CONCEPTIONS OF RATIONAL CONSTRAINT

2.1 Introduction: Kantian Normativity

Focusing on the normative dimensions of the *Critique of Pure Reason* requires us to specify how the categorical structure of a rational subject's experience of the world is understood by Kant to be a necessary structure. Sometimes phrased as the issue of Kant's theory of *representation*, the normative reading of Kant's philosophy focuses not on the fact that we merely happen to experience the world in particular ways—as if the categories and pure intuitions were just a Kantian descriptive inventory of experience, able to be filed on a shelf somewhere between Leibniz and Carnap. Rather, the normative reading of the Kantian program emphasizes that the categorical structure of human experience delimits how a human subject *must* experience the world, not how one merely *does*.²

While in the abstract a normative reading may seem an appealing way to talk about the necessary structure of human experiential knowledge, teasing out the particularities of the normative dimensions in Kant's philosophy is not so straightforward a task, and a variety of approaches have been proffered in the last few

² Kant in fact self-consciously restricts his discussion to human beings, and leaves open the possibility that other rational creatures might experience the world in different ways—especially if they were in possession of an intellectual intuition. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Norman Kemp Smith, trans. (Hong Kong: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1978), with reference to B139 p.157, A230-1/B283 pp.249-50, and A286-7/B342-3 pp.292-3.

years. The interlinked philosophical projects of Wilfrid Sellars, John McDowell, and Robert Brandom all share an interest in this side of Kant's philosophy, and their work forms a sort of locus for clarifying this endeavor in the literature. Though they develop this reading in slightly different ways (and it appears McDowell and Brandom in particular disagree about certain key ideas)³, their common aim lies in the supposition that the force of Kantian normativity sheds light on key areas of contemporary philosophy—especially in epistemology and semantics.⁴

But as one might imagine, not all are in agreement regarding a normative reading of Kant's philosophy. For one thing, it is not always clear where the Kantian exegesis ends and the peculiar philosophical commitments of the interpreters begin.⁵ But it should be just as valuable to consider extra-interpretative concerns about the role for Kant's thought in contemporary philosophy as it is to make sure we are reading Kant charitably. In fact, we might suppose that reading a figure charitably according to his or her intentions naturally develops into an extension of that reading to the fruitful application of his or her thought to our own concerns—especially in the figure of so

³ To be precise, whereas McDowell is content to discuss Kant's views in terms of representation, Brandom adopts Kant for the purposes of an inferentialist semantics, and thus sees the issue of representation to be subsumed under semantics. Brandom connects this point to the way Kant traces the categories of experience (representation) back onto the pure concepts of the understanding exhibited in the logical structure of the judgment (semantics). Toward the end of the current paper we will examine this semantic reading of Kant a little more closely.

⁴ Instances of this project can be found in Robert B. Brandom's "Kantian Lessons about Mind, Meaning, and Rationality," *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 44 (2006), Supplement:49-71, in John McDowell's *Mind and World*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), and in Wilfrid Sellars's "Some Remarks on Kant's Theory of Experience" *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 64, Number 20, Sixty-Fourth Annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division (October 26, 1967):633-647.

⁵ Brandom is explicit in "Kantian Lessons about Mind, Meaning, and Rationality" that his project has not been an exegetical one—it is a reading that "deserves to be controversial and is arguably tendentious" (page 71).

brilliant a philosopher as Kant. This being so, I will argue here that the normative reading of Kant's account of representation in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is largely in line with Kant's own aims, and to indicate in what ways this reading has relevant implications for contemporary philosophical work.

2.2 The Problem of Rational Constraint

A fundamental concern to address in examining the normative reading of Kant's theory of representation is the extent to which a conceptual structure, residing within the subject, can be incorporated within a philosophical account of representation that accommodates the sort of rational constraint necessary for representation to be objective. If the normative force of our representational account is attributed to the subject's necessary conceptual framework, we need some non-subjective constraint that ensures the subject's use of this conceptual framework in experience is suitably objective.

One of the more alluring prospects for objectivity comes from the suggestion that Kant's transcendental idealism leaves room for rational constraint in the form of transcendental objects, the noumena of the supersensible world, as the ultimate source of the content of representation. The problem with this approach is it seems to conflict with Kant's explicit prohibition against giving the noumena any positive role.⁶ Nonetheless, it has become a point of reflection for a number of philosophers working on this issue. Jennifer Mensch argues against the need for noumenal objects, instead attributing to Kant a coherence theory of truth, so that the criterion of success for our individual acts of representation is their intersubjective agreement, not their

⁶ See e.g. *Critique of Pure Reason*, B307-8, pp.267-70.

correspondence to transcendental objects.⁷ Brandom's account of rational constraint involves a similar gesture toward the need for social coherence. His approach is linguistic, however. In this he takes a cue from Sellars, who by 1967 was already discussing Kantian normativity in connection to a 'transcendental linguistics' meant to "construe the concepts of meaning, truth, and knowledge as metalinguistic concepts pertaining to linguistic behavior."⁸ Developing this Sellarsian program in connection with McDowell (and with no small debt to Hegel), Brandom suggests that the rational constraint on our representations is satisfied in virtue of the fact that we are not responsible for the conceptual *content* of the commitments we place ourselves under in making a judgment—this content is fixed by a society of language-users. While one normative dimension to my uttering the proposition "This paper addresses Kant's philosophy" is captured by the fact that in uttering it (if sincerely) I make myself responsible to the propositional implications that can be inferred from my assertion of it, this can be the case only because I am *not* responsible for the meaning of 'this paper', 'addresses', 'Kant', 'philosophy', and the meaning of the whole.⁹ These meanings are fixed by a community of language users, and my utterances are rationally constrained insofar as I constrain *myself* to the linguistic norms of the community I am talking to.¹⁰

⁷ Jennifer Mensch, "Kant on Truth." *Idealistic Studies*, Volume 34, Number 2 (Summer 2004):357-381, page 169.

⁸ Sellars, "Some Remarks on Kant's Theory of Experience," 646.

⁹ Brandom, "Kantian Lessons about Mind, Meaning, and Rationality," 62-4.

¹⁰ One can see in this reading a shade of Kant's theory of freedom and morality. According to Kant, as phenomenal entities we are always subject to the laws of causation and thus are completely determined as phenomenal creatures. Yet we can *take* ourselves as ends in ourselves and thereby bind ourselves to the rational law—only in so binding ourselves do we truly become free.

Should social coherence satisfy our need for rational constraint then we might be able to offer a reconstruction of Kant that clearly avoids any need for reference to transcendental objects. But it should be clear that such a reconstruction fails to represent Kant's philosophy on its own terms. It may be that the social element allows us to adopt a normative account of representation while satisfying rational constraint without appeal to a mythical Given or a noumenal object, but when discussing *Kant's* normative account, this picture shies away from the difficulties his view seems to leave us with. For this reason, it is better when considering Kant's philosophy to deal first with his difficulties directly. McDowell in *Mind and World* takes these difficulties head on, concluding that Kant seems committed to a role for the supersensible.¹¹ But by the time McDowell has given the Woodbridge Lectures (published in *The Journal of Philosophy* in September 1998) he has come to regret some of his earlier reading of Kant.¹² Once we clarify just what McDowell should rightly refute from his *Mind and World* characterization of Kant's transcendentalism, we can focus on the justifiable worries that remain.

In essence, McDowell's error was to allocate for the noumena—the transcendental things-in-themeselves—a positive role in accounting for experience in a way Kant explicitly prohibited. Compare, e.g., Kant's assertion that “The concept of a noumenon is thus a merely *limiting concept*, the function of which is to curb the pretensions of sensibility; and it is therefore only of negative employment...it cannot

¹¹ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 42.

¹² John McDowell, “Lecture I: Sellars on Perceptual Experience” in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 95, No. 9 (Sept. 1998): 431-450, page 446.

affirm anything positive beyond the field of sensibility”¹³ with McDowell in *Mind and World*: “In the transcendental perspective, receptivity figures as a susceptibility to the impact of a supersensible reality.”¹⁴ Later, Kant’s conception of experience is characterized as “a story about a transcendental affection of receptivity by a supersensible reality.”¹⁵ Kant is manifestly *not* committed to the idea that experience depends on some sort of input from the noumena, the “supersensible reality”, as McDowell in these passages (and a handful of others) appears to assert. Kant is, however, explicitly committed to a philosophical position wherein the notion of a noumenon is deduced as a logical consequent of the nature of phenomenal experience. Once we have made this distinction and distanced ourselves from the suggestion that Kant believed noumena played some sort of role in giving rise to phenomenal experience, we are left with a question as to whether or not the transcendental story Kant tells is one whose deduction of noumena is something we should be content with. In what follows I will spell out the worry regarding Kant’s transcendental story that remains in McDowell’s *Mind and World* once we have reminded ourselves of Kant’s rejection that the noumena played any positive role in his account to representation, a worry over the need for even a formal role for unknowable things-in-themselves.¹⁶

Even if we (correctly) do not read Kant’s role for the noumena as one of supersensible objects impacting our senses, there still seems a need for Kant to *posit* the

¹³ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A255/B310-11, p.272:

¹⁴ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 41.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 95.

¹⁶ I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for directing me to McDowell’s retraction of *Mind and World*’s supersensible reading of Kant, and to Robert Burch at A&M for suggesting I generally clarify my understanding of McDowell’s position.

noumena as something required by his system. The distinction of all objects into phenomena and noumena fulfills the requirement of ensuring *certainty* regarding the structure of experience *as appearance*. Given the way Kant sets up the relationship between sensibility and understanding in the Copernican turn, the basic structures of experience become a function of *our* cognition.¹⁷ But if the pure forms of intuition (space and time) and the pure concepts of the understanding (the categories) are knowable *a priori* as the necessary contributions of our capacity to represent a world, in what way are these faculties constrained by the objectivity of the world? “[H]ow can the empirical world be genuinely independent of us, if we are partly responsible for its fundamental structure?”¹⁸ That is, how can we be sure that our experiences of the world are *objective*, rationally constrained in a way necessary to warrant the title “knowledge”, if our experiences along the dimensions both of sensibility and understanding are essentially structured by the subject’s contribution?¹⁹ Kant accounts for this rational constraint by bifurcating objects into phenomena, which are the spatio-temporal-categorical objects of our experience, and noumena, which are beyond all possible experience. This leaves Kant with a position where the normative force of

¹⁷ Incidentally, I suppose this reading gives us one way of understanding the idea behind Kant’s metaphor of a “Copernican Revolution” in philosophy. Just as certain movements of the planets once understood as functions of the *planets* (their retrograde motion) became instead a function of *our contribution* on Copernicus’s heliocentric model, so too does Kant’s consciousness-centric model explain certain elements of experience as *our contributions* instead of being functions of the objects themselves.

¹⁸ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 42

¹⁹ Stephen Engstrom’s “Understanding and Sensibility” in *Inquiry*, Vol. 49, No.1, (February 2006):2-25 makes the case that Kant’s account of cognition requires that the spontaneity of the understanding be *unconstrained by*, though not *independent of*, the receptivity of sensibility. Thus, while the spontaneous application of the understanding’s pure concepts *is* spontaneous insofar as this application is not constrained by the content received by the intuitions of sensibility, nonetheless this application does *depend on* the presence of intuitive sensible content in order for the pure concepts to “get a grip”, so to speak, on experience.

representation—the fact that we are rationally obligated to characterize our knowing the world in spatio-temporal-categorical terms—obtains only because what we experience is a world of phenomena, “beyond” which must be posited noumena.

“Beyond” in the last sentence is in scare quotes for the reason that the noumena cannot bear any spatial relation to phenomena—indeed, they cannot bear *any* categorical relation to phenomena. The transcendental story in Kant is in many ways rather counterintuitive. Strictly speaking we cannot say of the noumena that they exist—for existence is one of the categories subsumed under the heading of Modality in the Table of the Categories, and thus has application only to phenomena. But nor can we say of the noumena that they *don't* exist, for non-existence is the correlate to the Category of existence. For the same reason, we cannot say of the noumena that they are possible, impossible, necessary, or contingent. To so characterize the noumena for Kant would, quite literally, be a category mistake. This leaves the noumena looking rather mysterious, even if we grant their purely formal role in Kant's system.²⁰ But without the transcendental postulate and the restriction of representation to mere appearances, the normative force of Kant's program will not go through. It is this *architectonic* or *formal* role for the noumena that motivates McDowell's worry over Kant's transcendental story.

²⁰ The transcendental story has been problematic since Kant first put it forth, and Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel were all driven to reconceive the force of Kant's philosophy in a way that did not rely on the bifurcation of the world into knowable appearances and unknowable things in themselves (much of this relied on the attempt to tease out a theory of intellectual intuition, a hypothetical faculty which will be discussed below). Hegel in the Introduction to the *Science of Logic* would remark: “[Kant's philosophy] is like attributing to someone a correct perception, with the rider that nevertheless he is incapable of perceiving what is true but only what is false. Absurd as this would be, it would not be more so than a true knowledge which did not know the object as it is in itself.” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Humanities Press 1976).

In *Mind and World* McDowell will argue that something like social “second nature” can ultimately save us from the need for a Kantian transcendental story explaining the normative force rationally obliging use to conceptualize the world in particular ways. Second nature for McDowell offers an account whereby the rational obligation to categorize our experience in the ways we do is grounded in the social conventions that give us determinate schemata for knowing—paradigmatically in learning to use a language—conventions that we are *naturally* raised up into as a function of social maturation, just as natural maturation allows us eventually to eat solid foods. But we can appeal to second nature as an alternative to the normativity purchased by Kant’s transcendental story only if we move beyond that dimension of the Kantian philosophy. Graham Bird thinks this reading of Kant is simply wrong,²¹ and argues that it turns on a traditionalist view of Kant that is mistaken.²² Instead, Bird defends a Kantian account of representation that, as with Mensch, rejects a positive role for the noumenal, while doing so without appeal to intersubjective social agreement.

Against lodging rational constraint in either a transcendental story or a social realm, Bird argues that Kant’s view is able to locate this constraint in the empirical realm of appearances. McDowell’s transcendental worries are supposedly overinflated. Kant has adequately accounted for rational constraint on the objectivity of our representations in requiring that the spontaneity of the pure concepts of the understanding meet with receptively-activated intuitions in sensibility—only through

²¹ “I shall suggest later that there is no good reason to suppose that he [Kant] did, or had to, appeal to the realm of the supersensible in the way that McDowell claims.” Graham Bird, “McDowell’s Kant: *Mind and World*,” *Philosophy*, Volume 71, Number 276 (April 1996):219-243, p.224.

²² *Ibid*, 226.

these intuitions do the concepts gain particular application, and it is this need for intuition that constrains our representations, occurring completely within the empirical world of appearances.²³ The noumenal realm plays only a formal role in Kant's epistemology, as a conceptual component of the architectonic machinery. Noumena do not play a material role for Kant in our knowing the world—the act of representation is not one whereby sensibility and the understanding 'act on' some noumenal material given to it.²⁴ On Bird's understanding, Kant draws the noumena/phenomena distinction *between* epistemology and morality—we make substantive use of the supersensible in taking ourselves to be objects of the moral law, but we cannot make such use of the supersensible in our representational endeavors. Bird criticizes McDowell and the traditional account as attempting to draw the noumena/phenomena distinction *inside* Kant's epistemology, as if there were some noumenal material available for representational use. Once we recognize that a deployment of the noumena as offering supersensible content acted on by our cognitive faculties cannot be a charitable reading of Kant, there still remains open the question as to what role the transcendental story plays as a formal requirement for rational constraint in Kant's account of representation.

To summarize and make our way toward Kant, one desideratum required to satisfy a normative reading of Kant's theory of representation concerns specifying the way our experiences of the world are constrained in a way necessary for those

²³ See Bird "McDowell's Kant," page 233, and on page 242: "For Kant they [references to 'a noumenal world'] have a role as conditions for the possibility of experience, including moral experience, but even in that moral context they still locate normativity in the world of appearances not in that of noumena."

²⁴ Ibid page 229, and on page 231: "Kant's vocabulary...indicates again a claim about the formal conditions presupposed by some aspect of experience, and not a material reference to some supersensible item which chronologically precedes it."

representations to merit the title ‘objective knowledge.’ Kant supposes that the forms of representation embodied in the categories and the pure forms of intuition are *a priori* elements of our understanding. They are not elements of our representational capacity that are discovered or acquired in experience. Rather, they are necessary conditions for the possibility of any experience to begin with. Were the categories and space and time acquired through empirical verification, our philosophical justification of them could only oscillate between dogmatism and metaphysical skepticism. Kant’s unique resolution to the dogmatism/skepticism dilemma rests on the normative status of the categories and space and time. Because they *condition* the very possibility of representational experience, they are forms of representation that we *must* accept in any experience whatsoever. The normative force of the categories and the pure intuitions, as what must be accepted if representation is to be possible, strikes a resolution between naïve realist dogmatism and Humean skepticism. Against dogmatism we recognize that because the categories condition all possible experience they are not merely selected ad hoc as a function of their proponent’s psychology. Against skepticism we understand that because no experience at all would be possible outside the bounds of the categories, then at least these core elements of our experience of the world are beyond doubt.

But now we run into an apparent problem of idealism, and it is here that the issue of constraint comes to the fore. Should we accept that the forms of representation are *a priori* conditions for any possible experience, what assurance do we have that their employment is constrained in a way necessary for knowledge of an objective external world? For our representations to be something more than pure constructions of the

subject, there must be some rational constraint placed on our employment of these *a priori* conditions in representation. They must be more than mere concepts spun in a void—they must have grip with some independent objects, which in being brought to bear on these objects, give our representational content objective status.

Kant was alive to these concerns. From the Second Edition's "Transition to the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories"

There are only two possible ways in which synthetic representations and their objects can establish connection, obtain necessary relation to one another, and, as it were, meet one another. Either the object alone must make the representation possible, or the representation alone must make the object possible. In the former case, this relation is only empirical, and the representation is never possible *a priori*... In the latter case, representation in itself does not produce its object in so far as *existence* is concerned, for we are not here speaking of its causality by means of the will.²⁵

Here Kant addresses the concerns of dogmatism/skepticism and mere idealism. Were the categorical structure of our representations justified in virtue of arising from the objects we meet with in experience (the first possibility), our adherence to these categories could be justified only through their empirical origin, and this opens us up to the problems of dogmatically clinging to them or skeptically doubting their justification. Kant's view is rather that our representations "alone make the object possible." The categories delimit any experience whatsoever, and because of this their application acquires a normative force they cannot have if derived from purely empirical acquisition. At the same time, we should not take this to mean that a representation "produce[s] its object in so far as *existence* is concerned"—objects must be independently given, in

²⁵ *Critique of Pure Reason* B124-125, page 125. Unless otherwise noted, all stylistic renderings of passages from *The Critique of Pure Reason* and all inserted remarks are preserved from the Norman Kemp Smith translation.

some sense. But in what sense? In the context of the discussion between Bird and McDowell, should we ground the independent existence of these objects in our experiencing them in intuition, that is empirically, as Bird suggests, or by appeal to the transcendental realm of noumena, as on McDowell's reading? One might wonder if this discussion as so framed delimits the only options available.

It is my contention that there are two primary dimensions of normativity in Kant's account of representation. Clarifying these two dimensions will allow us to see that the transcendental realm provides rational constraint on the objectivity of representation at the architectonic level of Kant's conception of representation, assuring certainty regarding the forms of appearances, while particular instances of rational constraint on representation are satisfied by empirical experience without the need for noumenal intervention. We will mark the distinction between rational constraint at the level of individual representations and rational constraint in terms of architectonic structure by focusing on two key sections of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*: the "Refutation of Idealism" and "The Ground of the Distinction of All Objects in General into Phenomena and Noumena". In the former Kant addresses accusations that his philosophy could be understood as representing objects as purely subjective constructions of the mind. This text will allow us to see that Kant accounts for the presence of permanent objects outside of the subject, and thus of rational constraint on our employment of the categories and intuitions, all from the standpoint of empirical appearances. The latter details the architectonic need for a notion of noumena. This section, together with references in the *Critique* to the certainty of our representations occurring only on condition of their being

indexed to objects as phenomena, indicates the way in which the normative force of the categories and intuitions is purchased by Kant at the cost of applying only to a phenomenal realm, set opposite a notion of unknowable things in themselves.

In what follows my aim will be to show that when we read Kant carefully there are in fact two equally important dimensions of rational constraint present in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. McDowell and Bird are not so much in disagreement as they are talking about these two different dimensions—the former from a consideration of the architectonic role of the noumena, and the latter from a consideration of the empirical role of phenomenal objects. In bringing McDowell and Bird into rapport I will show that Kant’s account of rational constraint (of the normative force of representational concept-use), while potentially offering important lessons regarding the role for normativity in contemporary philosophy, nonetheless on its own terms leaves us with an unsatisfying result—a transcendental realm cut off from human knowledge. From this I will suggest that the move from transcendental Kantian normativity to socio-linguistic normativity is not only a productive advance from Kant’s philosophy, but one that offers the prospect of preserving much of Kant’s insight.

2.3 On the “Refutation of Idealism”

One of the fundamental aspects of Kant’s philosophy is his argument that self-consciousness implies being conscious of a world. As Gordon Brittan Jr. puts it, “Kant teaches us there is no *I* without an *it*.”²⁶ On Kant’s understanding of what it means to be determinately self-aware, consciousness must be aware of determinate other things. The

²⁶ Professor at Montana State University, from a course on Kant.

idea seems to be along the following lines. If I am to know myself in certain determinate ways, I must define myself against what I am not, because it is only in determinately relating myself to other objects that I can understand how I am a determinate entity myself.²⁷ Hot things show me to be susceptible to burning sensations, to know myself as angry I reflect on the conditions that make this anger possible, I know myself as a student in virtue of my work, my identity as an American is structured by..., etc. Thus, to be conscious of my existence as determinate is to be conscious of my determinate relations to something independent of me.²⁸

Notice that this all operates on the level of the empirical world, the world of appearances. The objects I experience outside me, and the senses of myself determined by them, all subsist at the level of phenomena. This fact squares with Kant's condensed argument in the "Refutation of Idealism". In this portion of the *Critique*, however, Kant is driven to show not only that inner experience requires outer experience, but that this outer experience is real, as *things* independent of the subject.

The required proof [of an independent world] must...show that we have *experience*, and not merely imagination of outer things; and this, it would seem, cannot be achieved save by proof that even our inner experience,

²⁷ This point marks a central insight of Kant's philosophy—that tracing the presuppositions of self-consciousness back to their logical requirements provides an apodictic measure of a subject's knowledge of its objects. This was an insight thoroughly conceptualized by Hegel. See my "Hegel's Realism: The Implicit Metaphysics of Self-Knowledge," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 61 (September 2007): 81-117 for an in-depth treatment of this insight as central to Hegel's notion of Absolute Knowing, and of the way the Hegelian side of this program might be useful for contemporary philosophy.

²⁸ In an extended footnote at the end of the Second Edition's Preface, Kant makes essentially this point.

"[Being conscious of my existence in time] is identical with the *empirical consciousness of my existence*, which is determinable only through relation to something which, while bound up with my existence, is outside me. This consciousness of my existence in time is bound up in the way of identity with the consciousness of a relation to something outside me, and it is therefore experience not invention, sense not imagination, which inseparably connects this outside something with my inner sense." *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxl, page 35. Bracketed remarks inserted for clarity.

which for Descartes is indubitable, is possible only on the assumption of outer experience.²⁹

These things in outer existence are not taken at the level of transcendental objects or noumena, however, as Kant's formulation of the thesis makes clear: "The mere, but empirically determined, consciousness of my own existence proves the existence of objects in space outside me."³⁰ Space, after all, is a pure intuition of sensibility, a function of empirical representation, and thus objects in space are not objects in the transcendental realm. In the proof of this thesis Kant emphasizes that the empirical objects in space outside us must be understood as external things, and not our mere representations. "[P]erception of this permanent is possible only through a *thing* outside me and not through the mere *representation* of a thing outside me; and consequently the determination of my existence in time is possible only through the existence of actual things which I perceive outside me."³¹ The force of 'mere' and the emphasis on *representation* in this passage contrasts with 'a thing outside me'. If our representations of the world were 'mere representations', with no reference to a thing outside me, then the idealist wins the day. But if representations are possible only on the condition of an external thing outside my empirical consciousness, then the idealist position cannot be sustained.

The experience of things outside me is, from the side of the application of the categories, a *spontaneous act* of my understanding. But this spontaneous act cannot on its own lead to the experience of an external world. Experience depends on the

²⁹ Ibid, B275, page 244. Bracketed remarks inserted for clarity.

³⁰ Ibid, B275, page 245.

³¹ Ibid, B275-6, page 245.

application of the categories to the *impressions* received through the pure forms of intuition—space and time. These impressions occur via the receptive faculty of sensibility; and receiving an impression is not a spontaneous event as the application of the categories is. My self-awareness as a determinate empirical thing presupposes my capacity to represent to myself things outside me, and insofar as my representations are possible only on the dual activity of spontaneous concepts applied to sense-impressions received in experience, this representational capacity itself presupposes the existence of things independent of me.

But again, all of this has occurred at the level of phenomena, empirical experience, and not with reference to any noumenal or supersensible world. In this sense Bird is correct in defending an empirical source for rational constraint on the objectivity of our representations. Yet Kant also has an explicit commitment to a noumenal realm, and we must turn to this overarching commitment to understand the extent to which it provides a rational constraint on Kantian normativity in the way considered by McDowell.

2.4 On the Distinction between Phenomena and Noumena³²

The spontaneous use of the understanding's concepts are constrained in being applied to the data that come in intuition to the faculty of sensibility. For without this intuitional constraint, any supposed representation would 'mean nothing'. From both the

³² One of the more troubling aspects of Kant's section on "The Ground of the Distinction of all Objects in General into Phenomena and Noumena" is the extensive revision it went through for the Second Edition. In the following discussion I assume that the two versions share essentially equivalent ideas, Kant's reason for rewriting the section being for clarification purposes rather than to change the content. While I focus on the Second Edition's treatment, I take it that supplementation by First Edition passages is acceptable given this assumed continuity. Nonetheless, I will make explicit which edition individual quotes are from.

First and Second Editions: “We therefore demand that a bare concept be *made sensible*, that is, that an object corresponding to it be presented in intuition. Otherwise the concept would, as we say, be without *sense*, that is, without meaning.”³³ Because the pure concepts are given representational actuation only through the intuitions of sensibility, the scope of our knowledge of objects must be limited to things as phenomena—appearances that are structured by concepts and intuitions. But the understanding’s concepts have a scope of potential application that extends beyond the form of sensible intuitions, and because we have no corresponding intuition upon which to ground them, we must explicitly restrict the scope of their application to the world as appearance. The spontaneous application of the categories can conceivably extend beyond sensible intuition, though with no corresponding *intellectual* intuition to give content to this extended conceptual application, extrasensible concepts acquire no meaning—they are ‘without sense’. The understanding’s pure concepts can be actualized only in connection with the empirical intuitions of sensibility, and so they only have meaning with respect to possible intuition, that is, limited to the world as appearance.

This limitation directly results in the necessary separation of a world of knowable phenomena, structured by the concepts of the understanding and the intuitions of sensibility, from an unknowable world of noumena beyond the empirical conditions of sense and applied conceptuality. From the First Edition Kant is explicit in marking the noumenal/phenomenal distinction as integral to his philosophy.

³³ Ibid, A240/B299, page 260.

Now we must bear in mind that the concept of appearances, as limited by the Transcendental Aesthetic, already of itself establishes the objective reality of *noumena* and justifies the division of objects into *phenomena* and *noumena*, and so of the world into a world of the senses and a world of the understanding...For if the senses represent to us something merely *as it appears*, this something must also in itself be a thing, and an object of a non-sensible intuition, that is, of the understanding.³⁴

Our way of knowing noumenal objects would arise only if we had an intuition that could fill in some content for the formal application of the pure concepts.³⁵ Kant denies the human capacity for intellectual intuition, however, and this requires that we understand the noumena as something wholly unknowable.³⁶ While Kant denies any role for positive knowledge of noumena, limited as we are by our capacity for merely sensible intuition, he explicitly commits himself to a perspective that derives their possibility.³⁷

In this negative use the noumena serve only to restrict us from applying the pure

³⁴ Ibid, A249, page 266-7.

³⁵ Kant makes essentially the same point (that the restriction of representation to appearances implies a realm of things in themselves) in a passage inserted in the Second Edition, though its wording is more convoluted: “[I]f we entitle certain objects, as appearances, sensible entities (phenomena), then since we thus distinguish the mode in which we intuit them from the nature that belongs to them in themselves, it is implied in this distinction that we place the latter, considered in their own nature, although we do not so intuit them...in opposition to the former, and that in so doing we entitle them intelligible entities (noumena). The question then arises, whether our pure concepts of the understanding have meaning in respect of these latter, and so can be a way of knowing them.” Ibid, B306, pages 266-7.

³⁶ Comparing the four paragraphs that Kant inserted into the Second Edition from those portions he removed from the First Edition in this section, one notices an overall thematic unity. However, there is one concept from the First Edition that does not make a reappearance in the second—the idea of a ‘transcendental object’, a ‘something=X’. Kant is clear that this transcendental object is not a noumenon (A253, page 271), and its absence in the Second Edition may mark it as a concept Kant retracted his commitment to. Indeed, at the end of the last paragraph on A256/B312, page 273, Kant says the understanding ‘cannot know these noumena through any of the categories, and that it must therefore think them only under the title of an unknown something’. This ‘unknown something’ may be a shade of the ‘something=X’ that Kant removed in the Second Edition, though it is not entirely clear how exactly the relation between a ‘transcendental object’, a ‘something=X’, an ‘unknown something’, and a ‘noumenon’ should be understood. As it stands, the rest of our attention will be on passages either present in both editions or added to the Second, so we trust not to be troubled by any further incongruence between the two versions.

³⁷ “Doubtless, indeed, there are intelligible entities corresponding to the sensible entities...but our concepts of understanding, being mere forms of thought for our sensible intuition, would not in the least apply to them. That, therefore, which we entitle ‘noumenon’ must be understood as being such only in a *negative* sense.” Ibid, B308-9, page 270.

concepts of the understanding to areas where no possible corresponding intuition can give them content. From both editions of the *Critique*:

The concept of a noumenon is thus a merely *limiting concept*, the function of which is to curb the pretensions of sensibility; and it is therefore only of negative employment. At the same time it is no arbitrary invention; it is bound up with the limitation of sensibility, though it cannot affirm anything positive beyond the field of sensibility.³⁸

The sections on the “Refutation of Idealism” and the “The Ground of the Distinction of All Objects in General into Phenomena and Noumena” should motivate us to recognize two things in Kant’s notion of rational constraint on our representational capabilities. In the first place, the “Refutation of Idealism” makes clear that Kant believes the rational constraint placed on our ability to objectively represent objects through our subjective capacities is satisfied from within the empirical world. My empirical experience of my determinate self requires representation of an outer world, and this representation is possible only on condition of objects existent outside me—through “a *thing* outside me and not through the mere *representation* of a thing outside me”.³⁹ While this is all taken up at the level of the empirical world of appearances, structured by the *a priori* nature of the pure concepts of the understanding and the pure intuitions of sensibility, nevertheless the empirical operations of our cognitive faculties are rationally constrained in virtue of the fact that concepts are actualized only on acquiring content via intuition. Bird is correct to see the rational constraint on particular representations arising from within Kant’s phenomenal account.

³⁸ Ibid, A255/B310-11, page 272.

³⁹ Ibid, B275-6, page 245.

And yet, in the discussion of phenomena and noumena, we clearly saw that a supersensible world plays an integral role for Kant. Though they have only a negative use, curbing our tendencies to speculate beyond the bounds of possible experience, noumena are nonetheless ‘no arbitrary invention’, for ‘intelligible entities’ corresponding to our sensible impressions ‘doubtless exist’. What remains to be shown in Kant’s account is how the noumena play a metaconceptual role in fortifying the normative force of his theory of representation, ensuring certainty regarding the structure of our phenomenal experience of the world.

2.5 The Certainty of the Structure of Representation as Appearance

For Kant, so long as we recognize that the objects of our representations are known *only* as they appear to us, and that we have *no grasp* of what objects might be in themselves, we can be certain of the way they *must* appear. By limiting our representational capacity strictly to phenomena, with the concurrent postulation of noumenal things in themselves outside our reach, Kant can declare that the pure forms of intuition and pure concepts of the understanding have certain application with respect to phenomena—for they are the very conditions that make phenomenal experience possible. These conditions in their limited application allow Kant to claim our “synthetic representations and their objects can...obtain necessary relation to one another”.⁴⁰

This necessary relation obtains only in virtue of the transcendental status of the categories and the pure intuitions, as conditions that make possible any experience

⁴⁰ Ibid, B124, page 125

whatsoever. “For whence could experience derive its certainty, if all the rules, according to which it proceeds, were always themselves empirical, and therefore contingent?”⁴¹ Were the categories justified only through empirical acquisition, we could only be contingently sure of their objectivity—and so we would be faced with the oscillation between dogmatism and skepticism mentioned earlier. But because Kant grounds the categories in the transcendently necessary conditions for any possible experience, we can have certainty of the categorical structure of these experiences *as appearances*.⁴² At the same time, we must restrict our knowing capacity to what we experience as appearance, and while we posit a realm of noumena, we can have no knowledge of it. The Transcendental Deduction of the First Edition contains a clear argument for the connection between the transcendental status of the categories, their application to appearances, and the certainty this provides.⁴³ From the “Summary Representation of the Correctness of this Deduction of the pure Concepts of Understanding, and of its being the only Deduction possible”:

If the objects with which our knowledge has to deal were things in themselves, we could have no *a priori* concepts of them. For from what source could we obtain the concepts?...But if, on the other hand, we have to deal only with appearances, it is not merely possible, but necessary, that certain *a priori* concepts should precede empirical knowledge of objects.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ibid, B5, page 45.

⁴² “The objective validity of the categories as *a priori* concepts rests, therefore, on the fact that, so far as the form of thought is concerned, through them alone does experience become possible. They relate of necessity and *a priori* to objects of experience, for the reason that only by means of them can any object whatsoever of experience be thought.” Ibid, A93/B126, page 126.

⁴³ Although note that the passage quoted in footnote 37 above makes a similar point in a passage present in both editions.

⁴⁴ Ibid, A128, page 149.

At the end of the Second Edition's Transcendental Deduction Kant posits a third option, between representation making objects possible and objects making representation possible. Some might suppose the categories were supplied to minds by a divine Creator, who ensures their representational application to objects in the world. In discounting this option, Kant reiterates the point on certainty made in the First Edition quote above.

...there is this decisive objection against the suggested middle course, that the *necessity* of the categories, which belongs to their very conception, would then have to be sacrificed.⁴⁵

Were we to suppose that the categories matched objects in themselves by Divine Fiat, we lose the assurance that they have necessary application, and so we lose the certainty of our representational structure. What allows us to be certain of representations is the way they are structured by the transcendental conditions of experience, and this requires that we understand them as appearances, phenomena, set against the noumenal things in themselves. Kant's philosophy has purchased certainty for the categorical structure of our representations, but it has done so at the cost of applying them strictly to appearances, necessarily removed from things in themselves. Armed with this clarification of the role of normativity in Kant's account of representation, we can return to the discussion between Bird and McDowell in order to clarify at what levels their analyses of Kant are directed. Following this, we will examine what this reading of Kant offers for contemporary philosophy, and how we might be inclined to react to it.

⁴⁵ Ibid, B167-8, page 175.

2.6 Dimensions of Normativity

Bird's discussion of the misplaced focus on transcendental objects as the source of representational constraint suggests that the traditionalist account of Kantian constraint has tried to leverage noumena into a material element of Kant's philosophy, where really the noumena play only a formal and negative role for Kant.⁴⁶ On this characterization, the material role that noumena play for traditionalists is as a sort of 'transcendental matter' that is received in sensibility and acted on by the understanding. But this is just to give the noumena a positive role, attributing to it a power to 'cause' instances of representation that we can have no way of justifying.⁴⁷ Bird suggests that we see the noumena as playing a formal role for Kant—his talk of noumena is "a claim about the formal conditions presupposed by some aspect of experience, and not a material reference to some supersensible item..."⁴⁸ Bird instead encourages us to see rational constraint on representation satisfied at the phenomenal level. As we saw in "The Refutation of Idealism", Kant's account of the dual role of passive intuitions and spontaneous concepts allow the content given in sensible intuition sufficiently to structure the spontaneous activity of the understanding, and so to provide the rational constraint needed for objectivity without having to posit interaction with a supersensible world. In this way, Bird's reading avoids the sort of positive role for the noumenal that Kant himself was explicit in rejecting.

⁴⁶ Bird, "McDowell's Kant," page 229 and following.

⁴⁷ For cause, indeed, is one of the categories, and so has application *only* within the phenomenal realm.

⁴⁸ Ibid, page 231.

At the same time, we can now understand McDowell's concern not to be with individual instances of representation, but with the overall Kantian framework that gives certainty to the forms of representation *generally*. Because the categorical and intuitional forms of individual instances of representation are justified only by their transcendental role in delimiting what is possible as experience, Kant requires a hypothetical noumenal realm of which we can have no knowledge whatsoever. But in so doing Kant gives us *certainty* regarding the form of our knowledge of *phenomena*. It is this overall reliance on the noumenal, even at the purely formal level, that is at the center of McDowell's concern for rational constraint, and motivates his own view of an immanent "second nature" to replace the transcendental in Kant.

It should be emphasized that these readings are complimentary, each addressing the Kantian system from a different perspective. And normativity plays an important role on both readings of Kant's philosophy. On Bird's level of individual representations, the normative dimension operates via the way rational constraint is satisfied by the need for intuitional content to meet with the concepts of the understanding. On McDowell's overarching approach to Kant's account of representation, the normative force is satisfied by the bifurcation of objects into phenomena and noumena, with the strict provision that we limit our judgments to objects taken as phenomena. By recognizing the role intuitions play in supplying content to concepts at the level of phenomena, we preserve rational constraint on individual representation without the noumena playing a positive role. At the same time, by recognizing that Kant requires a conceptual role for noumena in satisfying his

architectonic concern to supply certainty for our representations restricted to phenomena, and so requires us to posit a realm of unknowable things in themselves, we spell out the worry that commentators like McDowell have had with Kant's transcendental story.⁴⁹

2.7 Looking Ahead

And so it does appear that the transcendental story is an ineluctable element of normative force in Kant's philosophy. Should we find the transcendental story worrisome, and if we're drawn to the notion of normativity as a means to ground the categories we apply in experience, we shall need some other account of the origin of their binding force on us. Preserving the normative force Kant's Copernican revolution offers, we may be inclined to reconceive the transcendental status of certain concepts as immanent in the social use of language, and in so doing make our way toward the later Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, Searle, Dummett, and one strand in the tradition of 20th century analytic philosophy. This would involve an attempt to give a socio-semantic account of the origin and status of the normative force binding us to concept-use. Divesting ourselves of transcendental story, we can nonetheless preserve a role for rational constraint on our use of concepts in the immanent social standards of a community of givers and askers of reasons.

⁴⁹ At the end of his article, Bird describes his endeavor as an attempt to shift Kant's commitment to the noumenal away from the traditional account, where the noumena serve as material for sensibility, and toward seeing the noumena as a formal requirement for his system. Bird likewise assents to the noumenal's role in establishing the normative dimension of Kant's philosophy. "It [Bird's view] represents Kant's commitment to noumena not as a material commitment to a supersensible world, but as a commitment to its conceivability. It claims that that conceivability is required if such features as normativity, even in the moral sphere, are to be properly located. The conception of the noumenal realm is needed as a condition of morality, but once that is conceded then normativity, in the shape, for example, of practical freedom, is itself located not in a noumenal world but in that of appearances." Bird, "McDowell's Kant," page 243. In this paper I hope to be in agreement with this reading, while indicating that McDowell is concerned with even this general commitment to a noumenal realm in Kant's normative epistemology.

Now a semantic reading of Kant's program is not too hard to justify, in that the *Critique of Pure Reason* defines the categories recursively with respect to the structure of judgments.⁵⁰ One prospect that an explicit semantic reading of Kant offers is to dispel straightaway certain epistemological worries about our representational capabilities, embodied in skeptical propositions that make use of the very categories supposed to be semantically necessary for any communication whatsoever. The skeptic's argument would thereby be undercut by the semantic necessity of the very structure of the propositions in which the argument is framed; of the isomorphic relationship between the structure of the proposition and the categories of experience supposedly called into question by that proposition.⁵¹ Even in asking her question the epistemological skeptic makes use of the propositional resources upon which the categories are grounded, and thereby obviates her ability to consistently question their application. Simply in asking the question the skeptic makes use of the resources she questions. It may be that she does not *realize* her inability to consistently question the categorical structure of her

⁵⁰ Kant's process of grounding the categories on the forms of judgment occurs in Book I of the *Transcendental Analytic*, the *Analytic of Concepts*, which Kant understands as the "*dissection of the faculty of understanding* itself, in order to investigate the possibility of concepts *a priori* by looking for them in the understanding alone... We shall therefore follow up the pure concepts to their first seeds and dispositions in the human understanding, in which they lie prepared, till at last, on the occasion of experience, they are developed..." *Critique of Pure Reason*, A65-6/B90-1, page 103. In Section 1 of *The Transcendental Clue to the Discovery of All Pure Concepts of the Understanding* Kant remarks "Now we can reduce all acts of the understanding to judgments, and the *understanding* may therefore be represented as a *faculty of judgment*... The functions of the understanding can, therefore, be discovered if we can give an exhaustive statement of the functions of unity in judgments." *Ibid.*, A69/B94, page 106. In Section 2 Kant identifies the "function of thought in judgment" under four headings, each of which has three members (so, for instance, the modal heading stipulates that all judgments are asserted as either possible, actual, or necessary). In Section 3 these 12 forms of judgment are correlated to the 12 pure concepts of the understanding or categories, divided likewise into four headings with three members each (so the modal character of *judgments* is correlated to the modal character of *objects of experience*—things are either possible/impossible, existent/nonexistent, or necessary/contingent). The importance of the recursive definition of the pure concepts of the categories from the forms of judgment is central to Kant's work.

⁵¹ This is a point Brandom makes in *Kantian Lessons about Mind, Meaning, and Rationality*, 51-3.

experience, but the insight here is that the very propositional structure of her doubts in this core region ensures their falsity.⁵² The semantic underpinning of this account gives Kant's normativity a remarkable appeal to contemporary Anglo-American analytic philosophers: in the first place, the normative force attributes a structure to experiential judgments that purports to be necessary—it is bound up in the very possibility of giving and asking for reasons; second, this structure is justified through identification with the structure of the judgment as a proposition. Certainty regarding the world achieved through an analysis of language—what a heaven for analytic philosophy!

Thus it may be that shifting from the transcendental story of normativity to an immanent socio-linguistic one is not only more palatable to contemporary interests, but is in some crucial sense congruent with Kant's own thought. Still, in jettisoning the transcendental story of normativity in favor of an immanent socio-linguistic one we have moved critically beyond Kant. Insofar as an appeal to the conditions of our social existence as an explanation for the licenses warranting our assertion of certain propositions thereby moves us toward Wittgenstein, Austin, and 20th century analytic philosophy generally, it would do well to realize that we are also making our way toward Hegel. Whether this should be reason enough to consider the whole project problematic I will leave for the reader to decide, though I suspect that 21st century philosophy in the English-speaking world will not be as colored by a repudiation of Hegel as its 20th

⁵² It would do well in this context to refer the reader to Barry Stroud's "Transcendental Arguments". Stroud provided an important contribution to the contemporary analytic investigation of Kant with his seminal 1968 paper. In it he argues that we can jettison Kant's transcendental idealism and instead ground his philosophy in a class of "privileged propositions", the truth of which being necessary for any sensible question whatsoever, ensures the impossibility of their falsity. Barry Stroud, "Transcendental Arguments," *Journal of Philosophy* 65, (1968): 241-256.

century counterpart was.⁵³ It is, however, beyond the limits of the current project to more than gesture toward how a socio-linguistic locus for normativity invokes a Hegelian reevaluation of Kant. Instead, our next aim will be to specify how socio-linguistic normativity preserves the rational constraint fought for by Kant.

For it would seem that if language and society were the ultimate standards of rational constraint, of the normative dimensions that prescribe and prohibit our assertions and actions, that the problem of objectivity returns full force. Kant ensured rational constraint via the requirement that concepts meet with intuitions in phenomenal experience, and more generally via the need for a transcendental story bifurcating phenomena from noumena. But to what extent can society be a non-subjective locus of rational constraint? Why is this not merely an extension of the problem of *one* subject's rational constraint to the problem of a *group* of subjects? It would seem to turn the notion of 'rational constraint' into an empty label if such constraint were ensured by the extent to which those around us either nodded their heads in agreement or shook them disapprovingly in response to our assertions.

The discussion comprising section 3 will spell out how socio-linguistic normativity preserves rational constraint in the prospect for meta-normative appraisals of the current standards of a discourse. These meta-normative appraisals are effected through the making explicit of current standards of a meta-language by articulating them as assertions within the object-language and criticizing them from the standpoint of

⁵³ One prospect for moving beyond both Kant's transcendental story and Hegel's absolutism lies in the articulation of a fallibilist epistemology that situates normativity in the socio-linguistic realm. We may be able to develop a theory of the normative dimensions of epistemic representation adequate to escape dogmatism, skepticism, and idealism, without appealing to a transcendental story, and without supposing we need to grasp an Absolute, unrevisable, thing in itself.

alternative formulations of the discourse. In the self-correcting enterprise of a community of critical language-users the prospect for rational constraint is preserved in the form of self-reflective appraisal. To understand how this prospect is offered we will focus on specifying the role of normativity in Brandom's inferential semantics. We will come to understand Brandom's semantics by addressing some of the criticisms recently brought to bear on Brandom's program, in the belief that by addressing these criticisms we can gain a grip on what it is Brandom's program offers.

3. NORMATIVITY AND INFERENTIALISM: ADDRESSING A NORMATIVE THEORY OF MEANING

3.1 Introduction: Normativity and Propositional Content

Let us begin by examining how the inferentialist account of meaning operates.⁵⁴

Suppose we are looking for an explanation of the meaning of the proposition “Richard is an accomplished pianist”. One way of specifying the meaning of this proposition is by specifying the meaning of its component parts, giving definitions for its words or perhaps by providing extensional accounts of what the words refer to. The meaning of “Richard is an accomplished pianist” could be effected by providing an extensional explanation of the name “Richard”, a definition of the logical operation of identity, and definitions of the predications “accomplished” and “pianist”, or, if we were intensionally phobic, we could account for these predications in terms of extensional set-memberships for all the objects to which these predications apply, one of which is the object “Richard”. This would be a subsentential approach to propositional meaning—the

⁵⁴ Brandom takes propositional content to be the paradigm case of conceptual content: Robert B. Brandom, *Making it Explicit*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) p. 152. In other words, getting a hold on propositional content will allow us to understand conceptual content more generally. Much of the discussion in this section of the thesis is focused on propositional content, but Brandom’s work focuses on conceptual content more generally, in that practical activity (specifically intentional action) is the sort of nonlinguistic behavior that nonetheless involves an implicit conceptual content. Part of the thrust of Brandom’s program lies in offering a single theory able inferentially to articulate the conceptual content both of propositions and of intentional actions, via the explicit assertions of propositions expressing the content of these prior actions and propositions. Throughout this paper I will use “propositional content” and “conceptual content” interchangeably, though usually adopting “propositional content” in the context of language users and “conceptual content” with respect to cognitive states more generally, whether linguistic or not—an issue that will not arise until the discussion of normativity and evolutionary development in section 4.

meaning of a whole sentence is specified in virtue of the meaning of its subsentential parts.

The inferentialist adopts another approach, explaining the meaning of propositions not from the meaning of component expressions but from the inferential relations a proposition has with other propositions in the language-game its user is engaged in. The inferentialist explains meaning in terms of proposition-proposition relations, not proposition-word relations. To say that “Richard is an accomplished pianist” is to say also that Richard can play the piano, can play it well, and has played it well in venues that confer on him a recognition that he plays the piano well. The inferentialist account works similarly for explaining the meaning of intentional states. The assertion that “I am angry at my sister” is to be explained by reference to the propositions that inferentially lead to it and from it. Asking why I am angry at my sister is asking for my *reasons* for being in this state. These reasons are specified in terms of the (explanatorily) prior propositions that license my being angry at my sister. To ask what it *means* to say I am angry at my sister is to ask what *other propositions* allow us to infer my being angry at my sister, and to ask what my being angry at her itself licenses us to further infer. Understanding what our propositions mean requires keeping *deontic score* on each other’s inferential commitments in the language game, and for the inferentialist this deontic scorekeeping is often nonmonotonic. To assert “It is 70 degrees in the shade right now” tells us that *if* you leave your ice cream outside it will melt. But if you respond “I have an outside freezer on the patio” then the truth-value of “your ice cream will melt if you leave it outside” will have changed in the context of the

further propositions you have brought to bear in this conversation, viz., that you have an outside freezer. If our interlocutor responds with the assertion that the outside freezer has been unplugged, then once again (if true) the truth value of your propositional commitments will have changed, and so will have changed your practical commitments (assuming your aim is to keep your ice cream from melting and assuming you are rational in behaving so as to achieve your aims).

The inferentialist theory of meaning is therefore *holistic*—the meaning of a proposition depends on that proposition’s relations to other propositions in the language. Articulating the inferential relations that obtain between a given proposition and those implicitly consequent from it serves to specify the meaning of that proposition. In so describing this process we can understand why Robert Brandom chose the titles he did for the two major works detailing an inferentialist theory of meaning—*Making it Explicit* and *Articulating Reasons*. Inferentialism is a method of specifying meaning by *making explicit* the propositional commitments consequent on the assertion of a particular proposition, *articulating the reasons* why we hold that proposition.

The inference itself is a paradigmatically normative concept. To hold A and to infer from A that B is to be obliged to hold B.⁵⁵ But inferentialism as a theory of meaning admits of different normative (or *deontic*) statuses. Inferentialism is a *normative* theory of meaning because the specification of a proposition’s inferential relations makes explicit the further propositions we are *entitled* and *committed* to consequent on it. Entitlement and commitment both express an obligation of some sort, but the

⁵⁵ Brandom prefers the use of “entitlement” and “commitment” instead of “permission” and “obligation”, insofar as the latter terms imply a degree of external authority. See *Making it Explicit*, 160.

normativity of entitlement and the normativity of commitment critically differ. One can be *entitled* to something without being *committed* to it, as when I am entitled by the rules of my employer to take a lunch break without being forced to do so.⁵⁶ But commitment is a stronger form of obligation—if I am committed to a behavior or to the assertion of a consequent proposition I am not merely being offered an entitlement to it; I am *bound* to it in some stronger form. To say that Richard is an accomplished pianist is to be entitled to the proposition that he has performed at Wigmore Hall in London *without* being committed to it. However, to say that Richard is an accomplished pianist *is* to be committed to *some* proposition that specifies his accomplishment with regard to an appropriate venue. Brandom spells this out in Chapter 3 of *Making it Explicit*:

The fundamental normative concept required is *commitment*. Being committed is a normative status—more specifically a *deontic* status. The project of the central sections of this chapter is to introduce a notion of *discursive commitment* as a species of deontic status that can do much of the explanatory theoretical work that is normally assigned to the notion of intentional state. But deontic statuses come in two flavors. Coordinate with the notion of *commitment* is that of *entitlement*. Doing what one is committed to do is appropriate in one sense, while doing what one is entitled to do is appropriate in another. The model of linguistic practice described here elaborates on the Dummettian bipartite pragmatics by distinguishing on the side of consequences, for instance, what a particular speech act commits one to from what it entitles one to.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Rather than a downstream question about what propositions an individual assertion entitles one to assert, entitlement can be taken to be an upstream question about what warrant an individual has to assert a particular proposition to begin with—what *entitles* them to assert a given proposition. See Robert B. Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 192 and following. In subsection 4.7 of the current work we will examine the difference between entitlement and commitment with respect to self-reflective critical assessments of social norms of behavior, and there our concern will be on the upstream notion of entitlement rather than the downstream notion discussed here.

⁵⁷ *Making it Explicit*, 159.

At the end of *Articulating Reasons*, written initially as a series of lectures used to help instruct courses being taught with *Making it Explicit*, Brandom spells out the relationship he takes to obtain between normativity and meaning more generally:

...we can understand making a claim as taking up a particular sort of normative stance toward an inferentially articulated content. It is *endorsing* it, taking *responsibility* for it, *committing* oneself to it. The difference between treating something as a claiming and treating it just as a brute sounding-off, treating it as making a move in the assertional game and treating it as an idle performance, is just whether one treats it as the undertaking of a commitment that is suitably articulated by its consequential relations to other commitments. These are *rational* relations, whereby undertaking one commitment *rationally* obliges one to undertake others, related to it as its inferential consequences. These relations articulate the *content* of the commitment or responsibility one undertakes by asserting a sentence. Apart from such relations, there is no content, hence no assertion.⁵⁸

This provides us at least a sketch of the inferentialist program—articulate propositional content by specifying a proposition’s inferential relations within the language game it is deployed in; a sentence-level account of meaning rather than a subsentential one; holistic rather than atomic; with the notion of deontic scorekeeping, normative judgments as to the entitlements and commitments consequent from and implicit in the assertion of particular propositions, playing a critical role in explaining propositional content. With this general picture before us we can begin to examine some criticisms of the inferentialist program. Our examination will begin with a detailed analysis of Jeff Speaks’s concern with the role propositional attitudes have in determining standards of assessment. Following this analysis we will look at criticisms from Gideon Rosen and Jerry Fodor and Ernie Lepore. Beginning with Speaks our aim is to answer the criticisms brought to bear on inferentialism and in so doing get a better

⁵⁸ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 192. Emphasis in the original.

grip on how the inferentialist program operates, especially with regard to the notion of normativity.

3.2 Sketching Speaks's Criticism

Jeff Speaks has raised a criticism of the semantic role played by normativity in Brandom's theory of propositional content.⁵⁹ If this criticism goes through it would substantially undercut the viability of Brandom's program. By beginning with Speaks's criticism we will sketch in outline the contours of Brandom's inferentialist semantics and address straightaway the most potentially damaging critique. Following this discussion we will consider more general critiques of Brandom's program, from articles by Gideon Rosen and Jerry Fodor and Ernie Lepore.

The locus of Speaks's concern are comments Brandom makes in "Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality" about the normativity of propositional content.⁶⁰ In this article Brandom defends the idea that propositional content fixes standards of assessment, in that the meaning of a proposition is essentially related to a dimension of its appropriate use. When I assert "Y" in consequence of your asking me why I have previously asserted "X", Y is intended to stand as a *reason* for the assertion of X. Whether Y is an *appropriate* reason for X depends on the content of Y and X. If I've asserted that "I am unhappy with this assignment" you may ask me "Why?". If my response is "Because it displeases me", the propositional content of this *reason* may not be sufficient to license the initial assertion, especially in the case where I am your

⁵⁹ See Jeff Speaks, "The normativity of content and 'the Frege point,'" unpublished paper available at <http://www.nd.edu/~jspeaks/papers/normativity-frege.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Robert B. Brandom, "Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 63, No. 3. (November 2001): 587-609.

employee. If, however, my response takes the form of an explication of my displeasure, then the *propositional content* of this response may be said to determine a standard of assessment *appropriate* to the context. The appropriateness of an utterance is therefore a function of the content of the utterance.⁶¹ “...anything recognizable as an intentional state (for present purposes, we can think of these as propositional [sic] contentful states or as conceptually contentful representations) must underwrite normative assessments as to whether things are as they *ought* to be, according to that state...”⁶² Propositional content determines normative assessment.

But Speaks’s paper hopes to show, in a manner similar to Geach’s attack on ascriptivism, that the same propositional content can be subject to different normative assessments depending on *propositional attitude*. If this is true then it would seem to indicate that propositional content cannot determine a standard of assessment—for one and the same propositional content will be subject to different standards of assessment depending on propositional attitude. Geach argues brilliantly in “Ascriptivism” and more broadly in “Assertion” the Fregean point that a proposition’s content must remain constant under different propositional attitudes, else we blatantly engage in equivocation whenever we appeal to *modus ponens*. If propositional content is determined by propositional attitude, then the premise (1) “A” asserted by itself does not have the same content, is not the same proposition, as “A” when it appears unasserted in the (itself asserted) conditional (2) “A→B”. If the asserted proposition differs in content from the

⁶¹ This appears to be the idea behind Brandom’s claims in “Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality” pages 589-90 (discussed below).

⁶² Brandom, “Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality,” 589.

unasserted proposition, we cannot conclude (3) “B” from (1) & (2) without equivocation. Given the widespread use and apparently ineliminable status of *modus ponens*, a clearer *reductio ad absurdum* against the idea that propositional attitude determines propositional content can hardly be imagined.

After this fashion Speaks argues that normative assessment cannot arise as a function of content—for a single propositional content can give rise to different normative assessments depending on the propositional attitude with which that content is expressed. To avoid an equivocation on content when propositions are variously held under different propositional attitudes, propositional content cannot determine standards of assessment.

Speaks makes his case by asking the reader to consider one and the same proposition under two different propositional attitudes. The example he gives us involves considering a particular proposition as a daydream. Suppose I am standing at my living room window in December in College Station, daydreaming about the snow on the ground in Bozeman, Montana. Under what condition would the content of this daydream be subject to an assessment of whether it was the “right” one to have? It appears patently absurd to expect that standing at my window daydreaming of snow is appropriate, but daydreaming of the beach is not. And daydreaming is not the only propositional attitude that appears to obviate Brandom’s claims that propositional content determines the standard of assessment. “[C]onsider entertaining the thought that p , wondering whether it is possible that p , assuming for the sake of argument that p . These are all propositional attitudes, and none of them are governed by normative

standards of correctness of the sort which govern judgement and belief.”⁶³ Speaks argues that propositional content cannot determine normative standards without ignoring the Frege point argued by Geach—that the same propositional content must appear within a variety of propositional attitudes else we equivocate in *modus ponens*. But it does not make sense to suppose that the content of the proposition expressing my being in Bozeman surrounded by snow should have any sort of invariant standard of assessment—for at one time I may be daydreaming this content and at another I may be assert it, and clearly the standards that count for (or against) the asserted proposition are different from the standards that count for (or against) the proposition as daydreamed. If we accept the Frege Point that propositional content must be constant across propositional attitudes, and also accept that the standards of assessment which govern a proposition as judgement are different from the standards that govern the same proposition as a daydream, then it appears that propositional content cannot determine standards of assessment.

Finally, Speaks asks us to consider the related claim that linguistic meaning is likewise governed by normative standards.⁶⁴ Suppose we are watching a play in which an actor utters the sentence “My father was killed in Vietnam.” Surely the normative assessment, the “standards of correctness”, for this sentence would be different from the normative assessment brought to bear if I uttered it sincerely. An actor can get away with saying a number of things that you or I, in sincere conversation, cannot. Yet the

⁶³ Speaks, “The normativity of content and ‘the Frege point,’” 5.

⁶⁴ It’s not clear to me what difference Speaks thinks obtains between propositional content and linguistic meaning, but the examples he brings to bear are important regardless.

meaning of these different propositions seems invariant. Similarly with sentences used in joking—we assess them differently without taking their meaning to vary from those same sentences if sincerely asserted. The impression Speaks leaves us with is that Brandom’s focus on propositional content as the determinant of normative assessment will not do—propositional *attitude* is in some cases just as important as *content* in determining standards of assessment.

Surely this is true. The meaning of a proposition remains the same despite being uttered with different propositional attitudes. This is the fundamental point Geach makes with his Fregean exegesis regarding assertion, first in “Ascriptivism” and then more fully in “Assertion”. But the reader may wonder whether this argument reconstructs the role for “normative assessment” Brandom has in mind for the inferential semantics made use of by his program. Brandom, after all, is very familiar with Geach’s argument.⁶⁵ Has he made such an elementary mistake?

The purpose of Brandom’s “Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality” is to argue that inasmuch as modality, once philosophically mysterious, gained a measure of respectability through the formalization of different modal systems in the middle of the 20th century, we can now begin to get a grip on a non-mysterious account of intentionality if we think of intentionality as a fundamentally normative endeavor, with normativity itself perhaps understood in modal terms. This will allow us to reconstruct a view of intentionality via normativity understood in modal terms. The passage Speaks

⁶⁵ His 1983 paper “Asserting” opens with a discussion of Geach and the Frege Point, and in this paper we can locate some of the first seeds of Brandom’s work on normativity in an inferentialist semantics. Robert B. Brandom, “Asserting,” *Noûs* 17, No. 4 (November, 1983): 637-650.

highlights for discussion fairly well indicates the concern he has with Brandom's use of normativity assessment with regard to propositional content:

The core idea [in the trend of philosophical development that Brandom is focusing on] is that anything recognizable as an intentional state (for present purposes, we can think of these as propositional [sic] contentful states or as conceptually contentful representations) must underwrite normative assessments as to whether things are as they *ought* to be, according to that state—whether the state is *correct* or *successful* according to the standards determined by its content.⁶⁶

Brandom appears committed here to the idea that propositional content determines normative standards. And this is not an isolated passage for Brandom, a mere slip of the pen we could forgive him for. This position on content as the criterion for determining normative assessment is at the center of his inferential semantics—it has in fact been central to his philosophical investigations for some time. In his 1993 paper “The Social Anatomy of Inference” Brandom remarks “The conceptual content of one’s beliefs and claims determines what one is *committed* to and what would *entitle* one to those commitments [emphasis in original].”⁶⁷ But Speaks has exhibited a problem with the view that conceptual content determines the normative character of a proposition. If one and the same proposition can be now believed-true, now daydreamed, and thus be subject to different normative assessments *without* the content of these propositions changing, it appears untenable to hold that propositional content determines the standards of assessment for a proposition.

⁶⁶ Brandom, “Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality” 589.

⁶⁷ Robert B. Brandom, “The Social Anatomy of Inference,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (September 1993): 661-666, page 666.

Another way to frame this issue, and in doing so to gain a broader sense of the conceptual landscape, is via the question “Whence propositional content?” or equivalently “Whence normativity?” From one approach we have normative assessment as explanandum, accounted for by propositional content. This is the approach we have been thus far considering—that there is something independently intelligible about the idea of propositional content which will allow us to get a grip on the idea of normativity. But an alternative method of explanation is possible. For we can within the work on normativity discern a position that takes normative assessment to be an explanans accounting for propositional content. In this latter approach normative assessment is appealed to as something that allows us to understand propositional content—in the idea that what a proposition means is to be understood in terms of what inferences a proposition commits and entitles us to. Speaks claims to be critiquing only the first position, taking the normativity of content to be an explanandum in need of a propositional explanans—he professes to be silent on a position that takes the normativity of propositional content as an explanans useful in some other explanatory account.⁶⁸ Critically, however, he argues that—whatever role it might play—normativity cannot be appealed to as an explanans made to account for normativity of propositional content—for then normativity is being asked to play the Herculean role of explaining itself. The bogeyman of this circular explanatory account arises, for Speaks, through the false supposition that there is something normative about propositional

⁶⁸ Speaks, “The normativity of content and ‘the Frege point,’” p.3.

content in need of explanation. “And in this sense, I [Speaks] will argue, there’s no such thing as the normativity of meaning.”⁶⁹

My argument in this portion of the thesis will focus on three related responses in defense of Brandom, and in doing so flesh out Brandom’s program in preparation for more pointed criticism from Rosen and Fodor and Lepore. The first defense centers on a clarification regarding how normativity as explanans plays a role in explaining meaning in terms of inferentially articulating the commitments/entitlements an assertion binds us to, the second from thematic considerations of Brandom’s views on normativity with respect to “metalinguistic deontic scorekeeping”, and finally from the role of assertion in his theory.

The first defense will be directed toward explicating the precise way Brandom sees normativity playing its role in his semantics—via the inferential linkages that the use of one concept implicitly invokes, and how in the overlay of these (material) inferences individual concepts acquire determinate meaning. The second defense involves marking a distinction between the *metalinguistic role of normative assessment* in the formalization of Brandom’s inferential semantics, as the means for fixing meaning within a complex of entitlements and commitments abstractly conceived, and normative assessment as a stage of the *linguistic game of giving and asking for reasons* that relies on an implicit grasp of meaning (however initially vague) already at hand.⁷⁰ In doing so

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Brandom understands this initial grasp of conceptual content in terms of social education. A human being is come to have some comprehension of the meaning of the terms he or she uses in virtue of having learned a language, but the contents of this initial stage of development then become open to self-conscious reflection through the reflexive game of giving and asking for reasons that constitutes his theory of inferential semantics.

we will have to address the apparent circularity this dual role for normativity invokes. The third defense will put forward the claim that, on Brandom's account, believing-true is a *fundamental propositional attitude* that the normative assessments of inferential articulation implicitly rely upon to explicate the meaning of a proposition. While Brandom focuses on the speech act of *assertion* as the locus of inferential articulation, we will argue that the speech act of assertion needs to be understood via the propositional attitude of believing-true. It is via our supposing that a proposition is believed, in consequence taking it to be asserted, and therefore only after we know (at least vaguely) what the proposition means, that we can begin to examine its possible uses under different propositional attitudes.

3.3 Inferential Articulation, Propositional Content, and Normativity

In Brandom's inferentialism, the material inferences implicit in our use of particular concepts can be appealed to in giving a holistic rendering of the meaning of our propositions, paradigmatically by the explicit use of the conditional in explicating the inferential connections between different propositional contents. In explaining this inferential semantics we will begin by situating normativity within Brandom's program as *explanans*—as the normative endeavor of explicating material inferences is an activity that explains and accounts for propositional content. At the same time however, normativity as *explanans* will be seen to presuppose a prior normative foundation resident within the social standards that serve to indicate the paths for particular inferential articulations. This will lead us to an examination of the social origin of conceptual normativity and the prospect for metalinguistic normative assessment, in so

doing helping to clarify the specific way in which the normative is taken to be explanandum in Brandom's program.

To begin with, a word or two of architectonic theme may be in order. Brandom's theory is meant to provide an account of what it means to be a member of a linguistic community—specifically, what it means to be engaged in (or to be in a position to be engaged in) the process of rationally discoursing within such a community. As with so much else in this program, Brandom looks to a Sellarsian idea for motivation—in particular, the idea of rational discourse as the game of “giving and asking for reasons”. Brandom's inferential semantics is intended to account for this practice by beginning from the notion of conceptually contentful propositions—the paradigmatic elements of rational discourse. Thereafter his theory must provide answers to two questions: 1) what it means to say a proposition has content; that is, he must provide an account of the meaningfulness of propositions, and he must answer the question as to 2) how meaningful propositions are variously asserted in contexts that allow them to stand as the essential elements of rational discourse; that is, Brandom must provide an account of how meaningful propositions play the role they do in the game of giving and asking for reasons. It is in the notion of normativity that this structure is knit together.

The meaning of a proposition in Brandom's theory is accounted for by specifying the inferential links that proposition has to other propositions that, in asserting the first, an individual must assent to. “For if the conceptual content expressed by each sentence or word is understood as essentially consisting in its inferential relations (broadly construed) or articulated by its inferential relations (narrowly construed), *then one must*

grasp many such contents in order to grasp any.”⁷¹ Brandom defends this idea by developing an inferential semantics whose role in the game of giving and asking for reasons serves to make explicit the content of our propositions, by showing that the assertion of one propositional content implicitly involves the assertion of various others. Brandom’s contention is that we can get a grip on the conceptual content of an individual proposition via the inferential linkages that proposition has to others its assertion commits and/or entitles us to.

The key to Brandom's inferential articulation of meaning lies in his incorporation of *material inference* as distinct from merely formal inference. If the inferential connections one proposition had to others were merely formal then the content of those propositions would play no role in explicating their truth, and thus there would be no account of *meaning* derived from exhibiting inferential connections. Only when the truth of an inference depends on the content of the component propositions can an explication of inferential relation suffice to specify meaning. Propositional content plays no role in a purely formal system of inference, and thus propositional content cannot be accounted for by the inferential commitments exhibited in a formal system of inference. Make use of whatever propositions you choose—the mere form of their relation is sufficient to ensure the correctness (or lack thereof) of an inference from one to another.

⁷¹ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 29 (emphasis added). This idea is defended in Sellars’s *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, §19 p.45: “...there is an important sense in which one has *no* concepts pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects in Space and Time unless one has them all—and, indeed, as we shall see, a great deal more besides” and §36 p.75 “...one couldn’t have observational knowledge of *any* fact unless one knew many *other* things as well” (emphasis in the original). On the next page Sellars connects this idea to the claim that knowledge is an essentially normative endeavor: “The essential point is that in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.” Ibid (emphasis in the original). Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Only when the authority of an inference depends integrally on the content of its constitutive propositions, only, that is, via *material* in addition to formal inference, can meaning be exhibited in the inferential interplay of the system.

Sellars argued in “Inference and Meaning” that any language making use of the subjunctive conditional (sometimes called “counterfactual conditional”) must include the notion of a material inference⁷², but the decision to make use of the material inference Brandom appears to consider optional.⁷³ In the fourth section we will discuss the broader implications of taking the material conditional to be an optional tool in the modeling of natural language semantics. For now, let us ensure that we understand the

⁷² Sellars’s “Inference and Meaning” argues for many of the positions that Brandom adopts, including the role for material inferential relations in addition to purely formal ones. *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 62, No. 247. (July 1953): 313-338. This article offers a careful critique of Carnap’s *Logical Syntax of Language*, which professes to model natural language, complete with descriptions of the world, through inferences all ultimately formal in character. Sellars’s driving point is that any attempt to formalize the subjunctive conditional either results in the loss of the subjunctive sense or in the implicit adoption of material rules of inference either in the object language or the metalanguage (pages 323-6). In arguing for the inclusion of material inferences in any language containing counterfactual conditionals, Sellars is careful to reject an empiricist account where the meaning of descriptive terms is “given” from the world (a position Sellars will concertedly critique in his *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* a few years later). In doing so Sellars argues that all meaning is ultimately linguistic, that there are no “basic descriptive terms [that] acquire extra-linguistic meaning” (335). In recognition of the danger of appearing thereby to oscillate into idealism, Sellars gestures toward the environment as a check against our conceptual development in the evolution of our species, and finishes the paper by outlining the way, even though we are ineluctably locked within the contours of a language and its rules, “we recognize there are an indefinite number of possible conceptual structures (languages) or systems of formal and material rules, each one of which can be regarded as a candidate for adoption by the animal which recognizes rules, and no one of which has an intuitable hallmark of royalty. They must compete in the market place of practice for employment by language users, and be content to be adopted haltingly and schematically” (337). Sellars thus sees his work as a form of *rationalism*, a characterization that Brandom likewise adopts (*Articulating Reasons* page 22 and following.). In this vein of connecting Brandom’s work to Sellars, the reader might find it interesting to compare the title of Brandom’s paper addressed by Speaks (“Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality”) with the claim made by Sellars in “Inference and Meaning” that “In short, modal terms, normative terms and psychological terms are mutually irreducible” (333).

⁷³ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 86. While Brandom, characteristically modest in articulating his otherwise grand ambitions, seems to view the adoption of material inferences as optional, Sellars argues this move is not optional for any system that wishes to model natural language, replete as it is with subjunctive conditionals. To my knowledge Brandom does not address the argument Sellars uses in “Inference and Meaning” for the necessity of material inference in a language with subjunctive conditionals—he merely admits his particular use is one among others and grants that a formal account of natural language might be possible.

role it plays in the inferential articulation of propositional content in Brandom's semantics.

Consider the inference “the streets will be wet” from the proposition “it is raining.” On the *formal inference* account, there is a suppressed premise here which makes this inference valid; namely, “if it is raining the streets will be wet”. But now the meaning of these propositions is irrelevant to the truth of the whole inference—for we have a simple case of *modus ponens*, a valid argument structure. If the premises are true, then the conclusion follows, with no recourse to the meaning of the propositions involved.

On the *material inference* account, however, the validity of the inference “it is raining, so the streets will be wet” is a function of the meaning of the propositions involved, with no further (suppressed) premises needed. Formalized as originally phrased, this inference would be of the form “A, therefore B”. Clearly this is not a valid argument form. Yet the original inference—from the fact that it is raining to the conclusion that the streets will be wet—seems to be acceptable (at least, it is one we would consider, *ceteris paribus*, rational to assent to). For the original inference to be acceptable there must be something more going on here than the mere form of the inference and the truth-values of the component propositions. Their *meaning* must play a crucial role in the authority of the inference.

Formally valid inference cannot play the role of explanans in an inferentialist account of meaning. A formal inference is true strictly in virtue of the form of the inference and the truth-values of the component propositions. Their propositional

content carries no force in determining the validity or soundness of the inference. Semantics enters into consideration only as a stipulation of truth-values. But the correctness of a material inference depends critically on the meaning of its propositions. The crucial idea here is that the authority of a material inference depends on the meaning of its component propositions, whereas a formal inference can be specified as valid and sound strictly in terms of form (validity) and truth-value (soundness).

Grant, then, a set of material inferences taken to be true, and we have on board an account of linguistic meaning, propositional content, that now only has to be unpacked by making explicit the various inferential linkages that constitutes the material inferences we implicitly assent to in uttering one proposition within the field of others inferentially connected to it. The inferentialist semantic position is therefore holistic, in the sense that (as mentioned earlier) “if the conceptual content expressed by each sentence or word is understood as essentially consisting in its inferential relations (broadly construed) or articulated by its inferential relations (narrowly construed), then one must grasp many such contents in order to grasp any.”⁷⁴ What this means is that Brandom views semantics, understanding a language, as a holistic affair.

Turning back to Speaks’s criticism about the normativity of propositional content, we can begin to see just where normativity first enters as an account of meaning in Brandom’s inferentialist semantics. Speaks was careful to distinguish his position as a criticism of the idea that normativity is something that is *explained by* propositional content (normativity as explanandum) from the position that normativity might be

⁷⁴ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 29.

something that *explains* propositional content (normativity as explanans). Upon examining Brandom's inferentialism we discover an initial account that makes use of normativity as explanans in the non-threatening way that Speaks explicitly does not criticize. But now we are left with the problem of how to account for Brandom's claim that there are normative "standards determined by [a proposition's] content".⁷⁵ For in addition to the fact that we have yet to address the way this claim appears to invoke normativity as explanandum explained by the explanans of propositional content in the way Speaks criticizes, we appear to be in a realm of circular reasoning given the fact that Brandom has via his inferentialism has already appealed to *propositional content* as the explanandum explained by the explanans of *normativity*. How can Brandom's inferentialist semantics appeal to the normative dimension of implicit inferential conceptual commitment as an explanation for propositional content, while also appealing to propositional content as something that determines the standards of a proposition's assessment? How can normativity both *explain* propositional content via inferentialism and then be *explained by* propositional content? And what can this latter explanation involve? In the face of Speaks's Geachean criticism, what can it mean to say that propositional content accounts for a proposition's standards of assessment?

The following two subsections will address these issues. In the first place, we will have to make a distinction between the normative dimension that explains *propositional content* via inferential articulation, and the metalinguistic normativity that in turn explains *inferential articulation* via the standards accepted by the society in which a

⁷⁵ Brandom, "Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality" 589.

language is being used. What we discover is an initial normativity that operates *within* inferential articulation as the specification of propositional content, and a metalinguistic social normativity that explains the normativity licensed by inferential articulation. This distinction will allow us to view more clearly the dual role of 1) normativity as an explanation for propositional content inferentially articulated, and 2) normativity as it is explained in terms of the social conventions that dictate what inferences are licensed from and obliged upon the assertion of different propositions. This clarification will result in a picture of normativity in its dual role with respect to propositional content, not as a 2 dimensional circular reasoning, but as a 3 dimensional spiraling process of ever-developing appeal to normative (inferential) articulation and social reflection on the authority of these inferential licensings/obligations.⁷⁶

Finally, with this developed account of the relationship between propositional content and normativity, we will be able to address Speaks's criticism about the apparent impossibility of invariant normative assessment across the same propositional content with different propositional attitude. We will do so by arguing for the *assertion* as a fundamental propositional attitude which serves to stipulate the initial level of inferential articulation necessary for the stipulation of propositional content, and upon which different propositional attitudes will be seen as parasitic.

⁷⁶ Or entitlements/commitments. In the fourth section of this thesis the spiraling relationship between normativity at the level of inferential articulation and normativity with respect to metalinguistic social standards of assessment will open the door for an indication of the larger cultural role this theory of language offers philosophy in its role as rational discourse.

3.4 Implicit Normativity, Explicit Normativity, and Metanormativity

To clarify where we are in the dialectic let us summarize the relationship between normative assessment and propositional content at play in an inferentialist semantics. Determining the content of a proposition through inferential articulation involves specifying the further propositional commitments and entitlements we commit ourselves to when we assert an individual proposition. For the inference is a fundamentally normative endeavor—it specifies, in the form of a rule, what we are further committed and entitled to in consequence of our previous assertions. This is a role for the normativity of propositional content as explanans—the normative implications of a given proposition, spelled out via the material inferential linkages that proposition has with respect to other propositions, play the role of explaining propositional content. At the same time, however, the inferential relationships of a given proposition must be explicated with respect to the content of that proposition—else how would we know where to look for its consequences?

And now it looks like the normative chain loops back in on itself. For if the meaning of a proposition is spelled out in terms of the inferential linkages implicit in its content, then explicating these linkages must already presuppose the existence of their content. If the meaning of a proposition is to be explained by specifying the further propositions materially-inferentially related to it, then inferential articulation seems to *presuppose* propositional content, not *explain* it. Yet the point of inferential articulation was to provide an account of propositional content! We resolve this problem by recognizing the social constitution of the content of concepts, by appealing to the social

nature of propositional content, and in doing so point the way toward an explication of the dual nature of the normativity inherent in inferential articulation.

Like all language users, we come to the table with certain presuppositions about the meaning of our terms. To be competent enough to begin the game of giving and asking for reasons, to engage in the process of making explicit our commitments and checking them for their content, we must have at least a practical capability to utter the appropriate responses when the context calls for them, even if we don't fully know what they mean. This appropriateness is a function of the linguistic standards of the community—for minimally we begin to learn a language because we are educated by others, or we turn to a dictionary. While Brandom takes for granted that the origin of propositional normativity resides in a community of language users, “no attempt will be made to show how the linguistic enterprise might have gotten off the ground in the first place.”⁷⁷ This does not, however, imply that Brandom takes our understanding of propositional content to jump fully formed from our brains.⁷⁸ Indeed, part of Brandom's program serves to explain how it is we can come to be acquainted with the inferential articulations of the propositions we assent to, and thus to understand their content. The fact that the content of these propositions is already fixed by the linguistic standards of the community is incidental to an individual speaker's familiarity with them. In the

⁷⁷ Brandom, *Making it Explicit*, 155. In section 4 we will examine the value in tracing normativity back beyond the social realm of linguistic discourse.

⁷⁸ For competently making an assertion (deploying a concept the inferential implications of which we have a competent grasp of) may still involve further commitments of which we are unaware. Concept use often outstrips full conceptual understanding, and even though conceptual understanding is measured by inferentially articulated competence of use, this competence is not a binary process. Rather, our competence admits of degrees, and correspondingly so does our understanding. It is a more-or-less affair, not an all-or-nothing one. See “Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality” pages 590 and 608 for Brandom's recognition of this: “the commitments one undertakes by making a move in a language game may well outrun what the one undertaking the commitment appreciates.”

course of asserting a given proposition, even though we don't know what it means in the sense of being aware of all the inferential connections it has with other propositions in our language, our discourse within a linguistic community will serve to acquaint us with the meaning of that proposition by explicitly drawing out the inferential commitments and entitlements that our use of it binds us to.⁷⁹

This only appears viciously circular if we take a narrow view of language use over time. Surely we cannot explain propositional content via inferential articulation if this very articulation depends upon propositional content already established by a community. At best all we've done is push the explanation back, at worst we've involved ourselves in a circle. The grip of this apparent circularity arises from a rigid account of the authority a community of language-users is thought to have on stipulating propositional content. If we accept this authority as a brute fact then we're locked into a vicious circle. But the authority of a community in stipulating the inferential linkages between propositional contents, in fixing the meaning of our concepts, is *itself* something subject to assessment by members of the community. For language use changes, whether because of conceptual clarification, empirical discovery, or cultural drift, and it is via this fact of inevitable change and the consequent duty to reflect on the inferential connections currently endorsed that the two-dimensional vicious circle

⁷⁹ If we're learning to speak a new language this discourse will probably periodically translate from an understood tongue to the new one, to help facilitate comprehension. Notice this is not required, however—for each of us first came to understand a language without having another tongue to translate into. There are important differences between learning to use a language as an infant (being first raised up into the game of giving and asking for reasons), and being introduced to a new form of the game (perhaps by learning a different language or by learning a discipline foreign to us—as biology or Talmudic studies). Critically, learning a new language when we already have one to converse in often allows us to translate propositions from one game to another, whereas the infant does not have this ability. But whether it be the learning of our first language or the learning of another, in the absence of translatability we don't understand what one proposition means until we understand what most of them mean.

becomes a three-dimensional ascending spiral. Close examination of concepts can lead to conceptual revision (as with Russell's Paradox), and so can new empirical investigations (cf. the notions of space and time) or socio-historic change (ideas of women's rights or human equality). As a result of this revision new inferences will be licensed and the licenses of old ones revoked. No proposition need be fundamentally beyond revision in a language game, and the history of intellectual development during the 20th century exhibits that everything from mathematical logic to physics has been subject to substantial revision of foundation.

As a matter of fact any community of language-users will have a set of propositional contents and (which is the same thing) inferential relationships endorsed by members of that community. But these inferential relationships are subject to change as the licenses for endorsement periodically come up for review by members competent enough to investigate their inferential relationships and metalinguistically reflect on their value (whether logical, empirical, or social). Depending on the discipline in question (replete with its peculiar methods of investigation, justification, and scope of its claims) these endorsements will be revised and rejected more or less frequently.⁸⁰ Despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that we come to linguistic competence within a community that adopts particular standards of propositional commitment and entitlement, in virtue of our ability self-reflectively to criticize these standards (after we have come to understand what they mean) we can revise these standards and so come to license new

⁸⁰ Though it is outside the bounds of the current enquiry, we can note that the frequency of revision for a discipline's discourse is not merely a function of its methodology or scope. Disciplinary revision always occurs, to a greater or lesser extent, through the existence of visionary thinkers—individuals whose intellectual acumen and rhetorical force enable them to encourage other thinkers within the discipline to revise the inferential relationships of their discourse.

commitments and entitlements.⁸¹ Any discipline whatsoever, no matter what its claims for authority, is potentially revisable in the face of new information. The normative theory of rationality makes this potential explicit, and exhibits it as a duty incumbent upon those familiar enough with the discipline self-reflectively to critique it.⁸² From Sellars’s “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind:” “For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once.”⁸³

The claim that there is a preexisting realm of socio-linguistic meaning is not a foundationalist claim which the existence of the normativity of propositional content circularly both supports and is derived from. Rather, the claim’s truth is simply something that as socio-historic language users we must come to terms with in understanding what we are effectively saying by uttering such propositions as, for instance, “I am a staunch German nationalist” or “falling objects move in a straight line”. But once we understand (enough of) the current inferential constitution of our propositional system we can begin the second-order normative appraisal of these inferences themselves.

⁸¹ I take this capacity for self-conscious revision of a discipline’s standards to be one implication consequent upon the position Hegel arrives at in *Absolute Knowing* at the end of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. At another time I would like to follow up this idea more thoroughly.

⁸² It will be the burden of the third portion of this thesis to argue that the normative theory of rationality offers a conception of rational discourse that is fundamentally the same across all disciplines—that as the propositions within ethics, science, and aesthetics (to list three categories) are all subject to the game of giving and asking for reasons, a normative game, the normative theory of rationality offers philosophy the prospect for single theory of rational discourse capable of application to the realms of goodness, truth, and beauty.

⁸³ Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* §38 page 79. Emphasis in the original.

We have before us now two complementary levels of normativity regarding propositional content. On the one hand we understand propositional content by explicating the inferential relationships linking different propositions. This is a normative game of giving and asking for reasons, and it relies on the current constitution of the social discourse within which the conversation occurs. Given the assertion that ‘P’, as a matter of the way this culture does in fact speak, then ‘Q, R, and S’ are the inferences that follow (they tell us what it *means* to utter ‘P’), the commitments and entitlements the speaker is bound to, the norms of use that guide us with respect to that assertion. This inferential articulation proceeds by recourse to the socially constituted standards of meaning. The use of one proposition in a community of language users implicitly commits a speaker to a variety of others, whether the speaker is aware of this or not. The inferential articulation of the inferential-relationships between various propositions makes explicit these commitments and in doing so helps develop for us a sense of the meaning of our propositions. This is the first type of deontic scorekeeping—the inferential articulation, the making explicit, of the various propositional commitments implicit in the assertion of an initial (set of) proposition(s). Thus it is an account via this scorekeeping of what our propositions mean.

But once the inferential overlay of our propositional contents, socially stipulated, are explicit as assertions themselves standing in need of inferential justification, they are subject to open criticism, and the prospect for a second type of deontic scorekeeping presents itself. For the use of a given concept, in committing us to the use of others we may not be inclined to commit ourselves to, opens up the possibility for self-reflective

social discourse about the various standards we take to be present in the ways we look at the world.⁸⁴ Even more, this metalinguistic or socially reflective normative discourse offers us the possibility of rationally critiquing not only the conceptual commitments exhibited in the inferential relationships between the different concepts our society uses, but in assessing the types of behaviors that tend to follow from the propositional contents we assent to. Pointed discussion of the prospects offered by this metanormative rational discourse will be postponed until the fourth section.⁸⁵ For now we will turn to a consideration of the way assertion plays the fundamental role in assessing inferential connections between different propositional contents, before taking the picture outlined in this discussion back to our consideration of Speaks's criticisms.

⁸⁴ Again, the standards for revision will be expected to vary from discipline to discipline—between what is acceptable reason for revision in Talmudic studies versus biology versus theories of nationalist identity, for instance. But on the normative theory of rationality this is a difference of degree, not kind; or *if* a difference of kind, it is one that determines different species within a common genus—the genus being the normative game of giving and asking for reasons.

⁸⁵ It may be worthwhile at this point to remark that this metalinguistic normative assessment is an aspect of the normative theory of rationality put forward both by Bob Brandom and John McDowell, though to my knowledge neither man argues for it as forcefully as I intend to in my 4th section. McDowell, for instance, views our initiation into language as initiation into “a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what. The tradition is subject to reflective modification by each generation that inherits it. Indeed, a standing obligation to engage in critical reflection is itself part of the inheritance” (McDowell, *Mind and World*, 126). And in teasing out the implications of his inferentialist program Brandom comes to a similar conclusion. “Critical thinkers, or merely fastidious ones, must examine their idioms to be sure that they are prepared to endorse and so defend the appropriateness of the material inferential transitions implicit in the concepts they employ. In Reason's fight against thought debased by prejudice and propaganda, the first rule is that potentially controversial material inferential commitments should be made explicit as claims, exposing them both as vulnerable to reasoned challenge and as in need of reasoned defense. They must not be allowed to remain curled up inside loaded phrases such as ‘enemy of the people’ or ‘law and order’.” (*Articulating Reasons*, 70). Firmly wed to Brandom's theoretical semantics (no less than to the conceptual space argued for by McDowell) is the suggestion that theory must be put to use “in the form of an investigation of the ongoing elucidative process [of our societal concepts/norms and their commitments], of the ‘Socratic method’ of discovering and repairing discordant concepts...” (Ibid., 75). “It is in the context of these ideas [set forth in *Articulating Reasons*] that I have sought to present an *expressive* view of the role of logic and its relation to the practices constitutive of rationality. That view holds out the hope of recovering for the study of *logic* a direct significance for projects that have been at the core of *philosophy* since its Socratic inception.” (Ibid., 77).

3.5 Belief, Assertion, and Inferential Articulation

Brandom makes the claim in a number of places throughout his work that assertion is a fundamental speech act in the inferential articulation of propositional content. The opening sentences of Brandom's 1983 paper "Asserting" claim "No sort of speech act is as important for philosophers to understand as assertion. Assertion of declarative sentences is the form of cognitive discourse, and is the fundamental activity in which linguistic meaningfulness is manifested."⁸⁶ Chapter 3 of *Making it Explicit* develops the relationship between the assertion of a proposition and the propositional content the assertion asserts. A series of quotes from this chapter may be helpful in illustrating the central role in Brandom's semantics for the speech act of assertion. Our task will then be to show that the inferential articulation of propositional *content* made possible by the speech act of assertion depends on an assumption of the propositional *attitude* of believing-true, and that therefore Speaks's concern for different standards of assessment according to different propositional attitudes must already presume a propositional content determined under the act of assertion and the attitude of believing-true.

In the opening paragraph of *Making it Explicit*, Chapter 3, Brandom writes "...propositional contentfulness must be understood in terms of practices of giving and asking for *reasons*...The fundamental sort of move in the game of giving and asking for reasons is making a *claim*...The basic explanatory challenge faced by the model [i.e., Brandom's inferential semantics] is to say what structure a set of social practices must

⁸⁶ Brandom, *Asserting*, 637.

exhibit in order properly to be understood as including practical attitudes of taking or treating performances as having the significance of claims or assertions.”⁸⁷ In the next two paragraphs this idea is developed with respect to the socially constituted normative statuses we have been discussing.

According to the model, to treat a performance as an assertion is to treat it as the undertaking or acknowledging of a certain kind of *commitment*—what will be called a ‘doxastic’, or ‘assertional’, commitment. To be doxastically committed is to have a certain social status. Doxastic commitments are normative, more specifically *deontic*, statuses...Competent linguistic practitioners keep track of their own and each other’s commitments and entitlements. They are (we are) *deontic scorekeepers*. Speech acts, paradigmatically assertions, alter the deontic score; they change what commitments and entitlements it is appropriate to attribute...⁸⁸

A few pages later we find Brandom stating his position that “The only sort of inferential practice that is socially articulated in the way that turns out to be required for the conferral of *propositional* content, in the form of objective truth conditions, is *assertional*, and therefore *linguistic* practice.”⁸⁹ And on page 157 Brandom writes:

The leading idea of the account to be presented here is that belief can be modeled on the kind of inferentially articulated commitment that is undertaken or acknowledged by making an assertion...The role of propositional contents marks off discursive practice, and the role of sentential expression of such contents is distinctive of linguistic social practice. In this way, everything comes down to being able to say what it is for what practitioners are doing to deserve to count as adopting a practical attitude of acknowledging the assertional significance of a performance: taking or treating is an assertion. *It is in terms of such attitudes that the pragmatic significance of assertional speech acts, the normative status of assertional commitments, and the possession or expression of propositional semantic contents are to be understood.*⁹⁰

⁸⁷ *Making it Explicit* pages 141-2. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 142. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 153. Emphasis in original. For now we are merely laying Brandom’s commitments out on the table—in a moment we will turn to an assessment of them.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 157. Emphasis my own.

For an assertion to stand as a link in the game of giving and asking for reasons it must be attributed a propositional attitude correlate to the speech act of assertion—the assertion must obtain a “pragmatic significance” sufficient for it to count as a premise or conclusion in inferential articulation. What are the attitudes whose “pragmatic significance” stipulates the assessment criteria, the normative statuses, of the propositional content of our utterances? They are the attitudes of *believing-true* and of *taking someone to have asserted a proposition believed-true*. In order to begin to assess the meaning of what someone has said we must adopt the attitude of taking them to have asserted something, and this requires that we attribute to them the attitude of believing their assertion to be true. In endeavoring to understand what they mean by their assertion we question them regarding their inferential licenses, asking to see the propositional warrants that entitle them to the assertion in question. When the task is taken up an individual offers further assertions that spell out the inferential connections licensing one to assert what they do.

The act of assertion is the eternally recurring primordial act in the game of giving and asking for reasons. At each stage of the game the assertion plays the role of developing an inferential specification that serves to make explicit the propositional commitments and entitlements constituting the meaning of our propositions. Before we can begin to understand what it means to daydream a propositional content we must first understand what it means to assert it, and it is in the act of *assertion* that the two levels of deontic scorekeeping—inferential articulation and metalinguistic social critique—occur.

Suppose I assert “Honor obliges no duty that tarnishes character”. An interlocutor might ask me what is meant by this assertion. In explaining its meaning I will offer an account of the relationship between duty and honor supposed to explain why anything obliged by honor cannot be such as to besmirch the character of an individual so obliged. Insofar as assertion is the primordial speech act in the game of giving and asking for reasons, we default attribute the propositional attitude of believing-true when playing that game. Even if it were the case that I did not assert the original proposition under the attitude of believing-true (suppose I was daydreaming or rehearsing a line from a play), when questioned as to the *meaning* of this statement I can only articulate its inferential connections if I and the others engaged in conversation so adopt the believing-true attitude. In fact my belief-attitude with respect to the original proposition might be other than what is necessary to articulate its meaning (I may have been convinced by the tension in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, for instance); I may assert it in jest while in practice believing it false.

Now it may be important to distinguish believing-true and supposing true in some cases, but when asked to produce the warrants licensing this proposition in the game of inferential articulation, spelling out its propositional content, I must adopt an attitude of believing-true. Let us quickly look at the importance of distinguishing between believing-true and supposing-true. In the practice of *reduction ad absurdum* a proposition is offered under the speech act of assertion while the propositional attitude may not be that of believing-true. Especially if the asserter has run through the proof before, strictly speaking the assertion of the first premise in a *reduction ad absurdum* is

not uttered under the attitude of believing-true, for the asserter *knows* that this assertion will in the end lead to a contradiction and thus the assertion will have to be rejected. From this we see that the first premise of a *reductio* is offered under the attitude of *supposing-true*, not believing-true. In the practice of inferential articulation this distinction between believing-true and supposing-true may make sense of the attitudes necessary to articulate the propositional content of an assertion uttered as a jest or in play-speak, as it may explain the inferential articulation of an assertion uttered in a philosophy course where the instructor is required to explain a view she does not agree with. I assume that for the purposes of responding to Speaks's criticism from the problem of daydreamed propositions that we will not have to make so fine a distinction. It is enough to show that with assertion as the primordial speech act in the normative game of inferential articulation, an attitude of believing- or supposing-true is equally important for the normative articulation of propositional content, and is an attitude therefore significantly upstream from any assessments that may occur when a proposition is uttered as a daydream. The question of the normative assessments of propositions uttered under etiolated propositional attitudes can only occur after we have established propositional content, which itself requires the speech act of *assertion* and the propositional attitude of *believing-true*.⁹¹

⁹¹ In *How to do things with Words* Austin makes a similar point in discussing the ways a language game can break down if it occurs that a token uttered was done so in a play-setting: a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy...Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language.” J.L. Austin, *How to do things with Words*, 2nd Edition, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p.22.

The normativity at issue in Brandom's inferentialist account of meaning depends fundamentally on the speech act of assertion, as it is only via an asserted proposition that the meaning-constitutive inferential connections between the proposition and its commitments and entitlements become explicit. Assertions in turn are given the default propositional attitude of believing- or supposing-true. Propositional contents expressed under the attitude of daydreaming or play-speak do not carry with them the same inferential commitments, the same normative implications, that these propositional contents do when asserted under the attitude of believing-true. And of course they should not. For it would be absurd to suppose that the inferentialist theory of meaning implied that the meaning of "My father was killed in Vietnam" uttered during a play had the same inferential consequences of my uttering it sincerely. But this triviality should not obscure the fact that when we are questioning the *meaning* of "My father was killed in Vietnam" we must take the assertion as one at least *supposed-true*.

There is a subtle distinction here that turns on a heteronym. When in play-speak I claim my father died in Vietnam, or when I stand by the window and utter my daydream, an observer might ask what I *mean*. But this is very different from asking whether I *mean* what it is I've said. Only in the former case do we begin the process of inferentially articulating the content of the proposition in order to explain what it means. The latter question, whether what is said is *meant*, is a question of *propositional attitude* and it is a question that presupposes a grasp of *meaning*. Knowing that someone means what they said is worthless unless we know what they said *means*. The key issue to recognize is that the connection between inferential articulation and propositional

content depends on propositions considered under the attitude of believing- or supposing-true *assertion*, because inferential explanations of meaning depend on asserted propositions. Equipped with this expanded appreciation of the normativity invoked in Brandom's account of propositional content, we can return to Speaks's criticism regarding the variability of normative assessment across different propositional attitudes.

3.6 Returning to Speaks

Consider again my standing at the window of my apartment in December in College Station, Texas and daydreaming that I am surrounded by snow in Bozeman, Montana. There are two ways we can understand my daydreaming as operating in the game of giving and asking for reasons, and as therefore potentially standing in need of assessment in the way Brandom's program allows. In the first place we can ask for the inferential articulation of the meaning of the terms used (snowing, Bozeman, December, etc.). This would involve considering the propositional content of the daydream independent of the propositional attitude of daydreaming, viewing it instead as an assertion—considering “I am in Bozeman watching the snow fall around me in December” as a proposition the content of which implicitly commits and entitles us to other propositions. To be in Bozeman is to be in Montana, an inferential commitment the exhibition of which makes explicit the fact that Bozeman is in Montana, and thus helps clarify the meaning of my utterance of “Bozeman”. From the assertion that it is snowing we can infer that the temperature is below freezing. It being December and Montana being in the northern hemisphere, we know that the sun is up during the day

shorter than it is down during the night, etc., etc. The normative assessments that are determined by propositional content become explicit, and are meaning-constitutive, only when the proposition is considered from the attitude of assertion. If the proposition is uttered to me as a daydream but we are concerned to bring to bear on it the sorts of normative assessments invoked in an inferential semantics, in making explicit the meaning of the proposition whether uttered as a daydream or an assertion, we need to consider the proposition *as an assertion* and disregard the derivative status it has as a daydream. Before we can understand what it means to daydream this proposition we have to know what it means when asserted. To be able to understand an answer as to why a particular proposition is daydreamed is to already understand what that proposition means when asserted.

But as a statement whose propositional content has been antecedently agreed upon, we can ask for reasons as to why it currently obtains the propositional attitude of a daydream. In other words, we could ask why it is that I am daydreaming *this* proposition. Notice that doing so does not presume that my daydreaming is *right* or *wrong* in this context—that kind of normative assessment (appealed to by Speaks in his paper) is irrelevant to inferentialism, which is focused on normativity as it explains the content of concepts in terms of inferential commitments and entitlements. In this case we frame the daydreamed proposition as an assertion where the *daydreaming attitude itself becomes explicit* (something like the assertion “I am daydreaming that I am in Bozeman watching the snow fall around me in December”), and we ask for an account of why it is that I find this daydream appealing—we ask for an inferential overlay of

why I am indulging in this daydream with respect to the broader propositional commitments I assent to—commitments such as my longing to be with my family, the contrast between my struggle to appreciate an east Texas winter and my recollection of the beauty of pine-covered mountains blanketed in snow, and so on. This second assessment, regarding the rationale behind why it is I am daydreaming this proposition, can only occur if we already understand what it means to *assert* this proposition. Furthermore, this new level of normative assessment, where the daydreaming attitude is explicitly brought out into the content of the proposition as a new assertion, thereby *changes* the propositional content (because it changes the proposition) from the initial proposition simply as a daydream that “I am in Bozeman watching the snow fall around me in December” to a proposition where the daydreaming attitude is explicit, viz., “I am daydreaming that I am in Bozeman watching the snow fall around me in December”.

At first blush it may appear that the difference in propositional content between a proposition uttered in the attitude of a daydream and a proposition *asserted* as an explicit daydream provides a problem for the inferentialist account of meaning. But the change of content would be a problem (indeed, it would be another equivocation) only if the normative assessments at work in the inferentialist semantics were unable to make explicit the propositional attitude as a component of a new proposition, and thus were unable to clearly distinguish between the content of the two propositions. But Brandom’s semantics depends on the notion of *making explicit* these subtle shifts in meaning by characterizing them in the language we are discoursing in, and so there should be no worry of equivocation here.

Once the meaning of the proposition is clear, the reasons I proffer to explain why I am daydreaming are ones that must license this daydream as something I would indulge in, and it is only within the context of these other assertions that we can assess how and whether the daydream is appropriate. These reasons are ones that help flesh out my broader propositional commitments. This is the sort of normative assessment that Brandom has in mind—it is a normativity that in explaining propositional content makes explicit the resources to begin to raise second-order assessments of entitlement, not one that antecedently stipulates second-order assessment from the beginning.

The normativity at issue in Brandom’s inferentialist account of meaning depends fundamentally on the speech act of assertion, as it is only via an asserted proposition that the meaning-constitutive inferential connections between the proposition and its commitments and entitlements become explicit. In playing the role required of it for inferential articulation, the speech act of assertion must itself be taken under the attitude of believing- or supposing-true. Propositional contents expressed under the attitude of daydreaming do not carry with them the same inferential commitments, the same normative implications, that these propositional contents do when asserted as true, and so we can understand a proposition uttered as a daydream only if we already understand its propositional content uttered as an assertion believed- or supposed-true. The assertion is the primordial speech act, the “fundamental activity in which linguistic meaningfulness is manifested” as Brandom remarked in 1983,⁹² and the successful deployment of a constant propositional content uttered under different propositional

⁹² Brandom, “Asserting”, 637.

attitudes is parasitic on the successful uptake of a given propositional content under the attitude-and-act of a believed-true assertion.⁹³

Speaks's concern for constant propositional content considered under varying propositional attitudes, and the Geachean criticism that this variability would seem to imply if content determines standard of assessment irrespective of attitude, runs too quickly past the fact that propositional content is only inferentially articulated (and thus a proposition can only have a settled meaning) when that proposition is taken as an assertion (sincerely believed or not). The tension that Speaks perceives in Brandom's semantics, a tension between the claim that propositional content *alone* determines standards of assessment and the fact that standards of assessment can vary with propositional *attitude* without varying propositional *content*, fails to recognize the primordial status of assertion as the speech act necessary for explicating propositional content in the first place, and of the correlated primordially of believing- or supposing-true. In effect, Speaks's daydreaming counter-example can only get its grip on our intuitions if the propositional content of the daydream has already been settled upon, in which case the normative assessments in play are not the content-explicating inferentialist assessments the Brandom is concerned with. But when the normative assessments integral to Brandom's semantics *are* under consideration, then the proposition in question must be taken as asserted. Once this content is inferentially

⁹³ Again with the necessary caveat of belief and supposition being sometimes important attitudes to distinguish. It is important also to distinguish here what is first in order of explanation and what is (or may be) first in order of existence. The inferentialist is committed to the position that the assertion is primary in explanation, but this is entirely compatible with the position that as a matter of fact humans learned to dissemble before they learned to assert with sincerity, as it seems deceit is an important part of the behavior of many social animals.

articulated and thus made explicit, any further “standards of assessment” that might vary between attitudes of believing and daydreaming are operating at a stage of the game quite removed from Brandom’s inferential semantics, and thus cannot maneuver into position to offer a critique of his semantics.⁹⁴

In summarizing the discussion we can now be seen to have accomplished five tasks. 1) In the first place we have outlined the normative dimensions of Brandom’s semantic theory: in the first regard as explanans at the linguistic level explaining inferential articulation, and with this inferential articulation itself become an explanandum explained by the metalinguistic socio-historical context within which propositions are measured as meaningful. 2) We have explained that the metalinguistic field of social meaning is itself capable of self-reflective assessment and change. 3) In doing so we have also allayed the concern expressed by Speaks that normativity cannot act both as explanandum for and as explanans of propositional content, by making explicit that the hierarchical nature of normative assessment explains the relation between inferential articulation and metalinguistic critique. 4) By addressing Speaks’s criticism regarding the apparent variability of assessment with respect to the same propositional content adopted under different propositional attitudes we have clarified

⁹⁴ There are two notes worth mentioning at this stage. To be fair, Brandom fairly clearly asserts in the passage of “Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality” addressed by Speaks the very claim that Speaks competently criticizes. That is, it’s difficult to treat by itself Brandom’s claim on page 589 that “anything recognizable as...a propositional contentful state...must underwrite normative assessments as to whether things are as they *ought* to be, according to that state—whether the state is *correct* or *successful* according to the standards determined by its content” in any way other than Speaks does in his paper. Taken by itself, this passage seems to leave open just the sort of Geachean criticism that Speaks raises. But it is just as fair to remark that this passage should *not* be taken by itself. For once we broaden our focus and consider Brandom’s program in its entirety, the full implication of the normativity at issue here, its two-tiered nature and its relationship to asserted propositions and the inferential linkages they invoke, then Speaks’s criticism appears rather cursory. In short, Brandom appears to have been rather incautious in his wording here, but Speaks appears to have been a little hasty in his assessment.

the way in which assertions stand as the fundamental speech act and believing- or supposing-true as the fundamental propositional attitude necessary for the inferential articulation of propositional content, and thus of how believing- or supposing-true operates for Brandom as the only propositional attitude capable of bearing the content-constitutive normative assessments necessary for an inferentialist account of meaning. With this outline of Brandom's program on board and 5) with Speaks's threateningly damning criticism met and rejected, we can now turn to more pointed assessments of the inferential semantics of the normative theory of rationality.

3.7 Rosen: Constitution and Entailment

Up until this point our discussion of inferentialist semantics has been rather large-scale and thematic, using Speaks's criticism of a passage from Brandom's "Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality" as an entry-point into the broader philosophical enterprise Brandom is taking part in. Having a large-scale picture of his work before us, we can now focus more narrowly and precisely on criticisms of Brandom's work. In particular, because Gideon Rosen's critique of Brandom addresses the "Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality" article in detail, it is time to return to that piece and consider its content more thoroughly.

Brandom's aim in this paper is primarily directed at understanding a "philosophical landscape" within which to situate an account for normativity as a non-mysterious philosophical tool capable of explaining intentionality.⁹⁵ The account hopes to confer on normativity a non-mysterious character in virtue of drawing an analogical

⁹⁵ "Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality" p.609.

correspondence between normativity and the rehabilitation of the concept of modality as modal semantic theory was developed in the 20th century. Quinean concerns for the lingering mysteries of modal notions notwithstanding, Brandom sees the formalization of modality on a many-worlds semantic structure as a project that freed philosophers of the worry that modality was not sufficiently rigorous to be put to philosophical use, in particular in the explanation of intentionality. “I think it is worthwhile reminding ourselves how surprised philosophers who lived and moved and had their being in this [early 20th century modally-skeptic] milieu would have been to discover that by the end of the century, when their successors found the intensional and normative character of intentional idioms problematic, their first impulse and dominant strategy would be to appeal to modal notions to explain them.”⁹⁶ Brandom’s article is intended to help motivate a reconception of the current views on normativity, and to suggest that the notion of the normative is sufficiently capable of rigorous formulation as to perform on its own the work sometimes supposed to be better handled by reduction to naturalistic modal notions.⁹⁷

Brandom’s assessment of the philosophical tenability of normativity, modeled on the tenability of modality, proceeds along two dimensions. In the first place the development of formal characterizations of modal notions gave a systematic method for putting them to theoretical use. In the second, an empiricist position that argued we must either reduce modal notions to nonmodal ones or simply do without them all

⁹⁶ Ibid, p.596.

⁹⁷ Indeed, on page 592 Brandom suggests we can view intentionality as a species of the genus normativity, and on page 602-3 he adopts a similar position with respect to modality as a species of the normative.

together came by some to be understood as a false dichotomy.⁹⁸ The first issue Brandom takes to be a legitimate concern—it was reasonable to suppose that modality required systematic formalization before it could be put to concerted philosophical use. The second, however, he views as a false dichotomy. In drawing the analogy between normativity and modality, Brandom suggests that there are similarly two issues at stake in contemporary debates about the philosophical role of normative notions in theories of intentionality. A legitimate issue regarding systematic formalization of normativity, capable of doing sustained philosophical work in a theory of the intentional, and an illegitimate dichotomy suggesting we must either reduce the normative to nonnormative notions or do without it all together.⁹⁹

The central argument here for the ineliminable character of normativity turns on a transcendental argument regarding the character of descriptive discourse. Integral to the ability meaningfully to utter a descriptive claim about the world is recognition by the utterer that the truth of this claim depends on other facts about the world not explicitly expressed in the descriptive utterance. To be said to have meaningfully asserted “this oak leaf is green” I must be capable of asserting or assenting to certain other propositions that are entailed by that initial assertion—as for instance that the leaf is not also blue (in the same region) and that it is not also a maple leaf (genetic manipulation to the side). The difference between my *meaningful* assertion that “this oak leaf is green” and the *meaningless* utterance that would come from a computer program or a non-English speaker who parrots the sound is the extent to which I recognize my

⁹⁸ Ibid, 599-602.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 602.

commitment to other assertions consequent upon and inferentially related to the first. As we saw earlier, the inferential relationships between my descriptive assertion and the rest of what I am committed to may not all be explicit for me when I make the first assertion, but I can only be said to have meaningfully have made the assertion, to have consciously asserted a particular propositional content, to the extent that I am also prepared to assert (at least some of) the inferential commitments consequent upon this assertion. The idea, then, that we could have a purely descriptive language of discourse fails to account for the fundamentally normative character of even descriptive propositional content.

Treating one descriptive predicate as applicable in a particular case *obliges* one to consider others (suitably inferentially related to it) as applicable, (normatively) *precludes* one from applying others, and *licenses* one to apply others. Since this essential dimension of the *use* of even ordinary, descriptive, nonnormative concepts (in belief and judgment no less than in linguistic assertion) is what is made explicit by normative vocabulary, it cannot be that ordinary empirical descriptive concepts are coherent and intelligible in principle, but normative concepts are incoherent and unintelligible in principle.¹⁰⁰

With this sketch of “Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality” on the table we can now turn to Rosen’s criticisms in “Brandom on Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality”.¹⁰¹ We will first summarize the main points of Rosen’s position and then assess them individually.

To begin with Rosen makes a claim about what criteria must be met for the use of a concept as an “explanatory primitive”. “It must be intelligible in the absence of definition, and it must be ‘explanatorily prior’ to the idiom we seek to explain by means

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 604-5.

¹⁰¹ Gideon Rosen, “Brandom on Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 63, No. 3. (November 2001): 611-623.

of it.”¹⁰² Rosen then goes on to discuss theories of meaning, and that with the collapse of the empiricist position on meaning the acceptance of modality went hand in hand with the development of a use-theory of meaning. “On a view of this sort, all it takes to establish the ‘intelligibility’ of a modal idiom is to point out that most of us already know how to use it well enough.”¹⁰³ The use-theory of meaning provides an “out” for concerns about explanatory primitiveness—for in the absence of a defeating argument showing that we really do not understand how to use a notion in critical cases, it can be said that we understand the expression despite not being able to explain it in more primitive terms. So while the use-theory of meaning may allay concerns for explanatory reduction, it provides its own criterion to show the inadequacy of certain concepts—namely, we do not understand a concept if it can be shown that there are certain critical cases where we do not know how to apply it appropriately. This criterion then becomes the focus for Rosen’s attack on Brandom’s notion of normativity. “[W]e should ask...”What does it *mean* to attribute (implicit) normativity to a class of claims? How well do we understand the central notion in terms of which Brandom frames his discussion?”¹⁰⁴ Rosen’s claim will be that we *don’t* suitably understand how to use the notion of normativity to be said to have a competent theory of its meaning.

Rosen then goes on to frame what he takes to be conception of normativity made use of by Brandom. “A claim...counts as *implicitly normative* if and only if its truth is *constituted in part* by the truth of a paradigmatically normative claim...On a view of this

¹⁰² Ibid, 611.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 614.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 615.

sort, to say that belief is a normative notion is to say that belief facts are constituted by paradigmatically normative facts.”¹⁰⁵ With this characterization in hand Rosen begins to assess Brandom’s normativity thesis in terms of its ability to explain “constitution”, and whether such constitution is normative in character (as it would have to be for the normativity thesis to hold). Rosen understands “constitution” via “correctness”, and comes to conclude that while there is a sense in which correctness is a normative notion, in the relevant sense for belief-attitudes it will not play the role Brandom requires.

Tracking back through Rosen’s discussion a few clarificatory points with respect to Brandom’s program are in order. To begin with, the notion of “explanatory primitive”, while perhaps playing a role in traditionally foundational accounts of language, cannot be understood in the same way for the holistic inferentialism that marks Brandom’s semantics. While normativity is an integral notion to his theory of meaning, it plays the role of an arch’s keystone more than it does a building’s foundation. That is, though normativity is the keystone to the inferential semantics Brandom advocates, it does need not be imagined that the idea of normativity could subsist free-floating independent of the surrounding conceptual material within which normativity plays its role.

Second, the methodological support culled from the use-theory of meaning’s criterion of intelligibility—that we be able to decide how to use a concept in all critical cases of its employment—only partially offers an attack on Brandom’s use of normativity in his inferentialist semantics. For the fact that we may not always be sure

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 617.

of the commitments we have implicitly invoked in the assertion of a given propositional content could only count against our knowing what it is we have said, of having a grasp on the propositional content we have asserted, if meaning were an all-or-nothing affair. But this is not way to understand the holism of an inferential semantics. “According [to the account of conceptual norms developed in *Making it Explicit*], the commitments one undertakes by making a move in a language game may well outrun what the one undertaking the commitment appreciates.”¹⁰⁶ From the fact that we are not able inferentially to articulate all the implications consequent on our assertion of a proposition, it does not follow that we do not have a grasp on or understand that proposition’s meaning. Now in the case of the sort of keystone conceptual content that normativity is supposed to play for Brandom’s system a critical (series of) argument(s) for the inability to suitably distinguish instances of appropriate use would certainly count against the sort of systematic formulation that Brandom hopes normativity can acquire (as modality has in the last few decades). But the existence of ambiguous cases of application should not by themselves count against the possibility that this formulation would be forthcoming, and one of the virtues of Brandom’s semantics is that it can allow for these cases of imperfect understanding without denying the intelligibility of the concept at issue.

The next comment on Rosen’s reconstruction develops out of this consideration of clarity. It is somewhat surprising that, given the emphasis on conceptual clarity and the problems of ambiguity of use that Rosen should characterize his understanding of

¹⁰⁶ Brandom, “Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality,” 608.

Brandom's position on the implicit normativity of an assertion in terms of being "constituted in part by the truth of a paradigmatically normative claim" when in the next sentence he remarks that "[t]he idiom of constitution that figures in this formulation is of course another unexplained technical idiom".¹⁰⁷ Rosen goes on to say that he believes the idea of being "constituted in part" is "clear enough and should suffice for present purposes", but the issue here seems to be whether a concept being "clear enough for present purposes" is *good enough* to play the sort of philosophical role necessary for an adequate account of intentionality. Now it may be argued that the burden of clarity falls on the shoulders of the one constructing the theory, and that a degree of imprecision is permitted the deconstructionist that is impractical to grant the theorist. Far less precision is required to wield a wrecking ball than is necessary for erecting a skyscraper. As it is I will aim to show that Rosen's notion of constitution is insufficient on its own terms, so its' initial imprecision will not be of further concern to us. But it may be telling to reflect on the disparity between one view and the other.

Rosen's idea of implicit normativity being "constituted by" paradigmatically normative claims subtly blurs the distinction between the foundationalist picture of "explanatory primitives" and the inferentialist account of holistic relation. The inferentialist characterization of the relationship between the implicitly normative and the paradigmatically normative, between an intention and its normative characteristics, is more properly phrased as an *inferentialt-relation*, not a constitution relation. But we don't want to beg any questions by simply *calling* this relation an inferential one—we'll

¹⁰⁷ Rosen, "Brandom on Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality," 617.

have to examine why this is so. We can come to appreciate this subtle difference more fully if we consider Rosen's discussion of correctness.

Rosen remarks that two conditions must be met if we are to defend the normativity thesis via the notion of correctness: "First, 'correct' must pick out a genuinely normative feature..., and second, the connection between belief and correctness must be constitutive."¹⁰⁸ Notice that if we were to characterize the relationship between belief and correctness as entailment rather than constitution then this issue would be solved, but again, we don't want to beg any questions. The burden is to show that it is appropriate to so characterize the relationship.

What does it mean to call an intention (a belief or an action) "correct"? It seems to involve characterizing holding that belief or acting with that intention in such a way as to elicit certain consequences (whether other belief or effects in the world) that are expected by the intentional agent, given the content of the initial belief or action. In other words, we call an intention correct insofar as it is appropriately related to the expectations of the individual—that holding that intention *entails* certain other intentions, whether with regard to the rest of their beliefs or to events in the world. Intentionality is normative via the notion of correctness not because correctness *constitutes* intentionality, but because intentionality is something (normatively) assessed with respect to the correctness of the propositional content of an intention as it relates to other intentional states or facts about the world.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 619.

Rosen's discussion of correctness purports to show that normativity cannot be inherent in the notion of correctness insofar as there are often times we think it appropriate to do something patently *incorrect*. The examples he gives involve cases where, to assuage the feelings of someone we are with, we intentionally perform an action incorrectly. Suppose I am teaching a student to play the piano and the student becomes frustrated at not being able to play the notes properly. In this case I might intentionally play a piece ineptly in the attempt to cheer him/her up. Rosen thinks that this fact shows the impotence of judgments of correctness in assessing intentions, insofar as I *knew* that playing the piece in that way was incorrect and yet I chose to do so anyway.

But this is clearly a case where a new appraisal of correctness has come into play, not one where no notion of correctness is in operation at all. *Ceteris paribus* it is correct to play a Mozart composition in a certain way, but if I see that misplaying the piece would bring joy to someone who is frustrated, then a new action becomes correct because the intention has changed. Here the intention assessed with respect to issues of correctness is not the intention of playing a piece of music appropriately but the intention of cheering a friend. On the account of entailment-relation between intention and correctness given above, the issue of correctness is resolved with respect to the entailments assessed according to my intention of playing the piece poorly to cheer up a friend, not with respect to the entailments of a less-valued intention of playing Mozart correctly.

It would be a mistake to view normative assessments of behavior or language used in one situation as binding on us in all cases. All normative notions are indexed to particular contexts of assessment. The inherent contextuality of assessment is as much a factor for the correctness of beliefs about the world (water should boil at 100 degrees Centigrade *at sea level on earth*) as it is about the correctness of moral issues (I should play a musical score improperly *if I can cheer up a friend*) as it is about the correctness of convention in sports-games (I should kick a field-goal *if it's the fourth-down at the 13 yard line, there is 8 seconds to go in the game, and we're down by 2 points*). The normative theory of rationality allows for a many-faceted view of the relationship between a given intention and the standards that determine its appropriateness. Simply because there is no one standard of assessment, it does not follow that we cannot systematically relate particular standards to each other and determine in given contexts what is appropriate to believe or do, in much the same way we talk about the relative distances between objects in space without relying on the notion of a theory of absolute space to explain them. Furthermore, with the relationship between the first-order inferential articulation of propositional content and higher-order metalinguistic socially-reflective normative assessment, the normative theory of rationality provides room to make explicit the current hierarchical structure of our patterns of assessment and bring them out into the game of giving and asking for reasons themselves, thus making them subject to revision. Rosen's concern for the mutability of standards of correctness should not be seen as a problem for the normative theory of rationality or the inferential

semantics it makes use of, for the theory accounts for this mutability in the ever-ascending nature of self-reflective conceptual assessment.

But it should not be supposed that Rosen's critique of Brandom is altogether misguided, for his article competently addresses the relationship between proposed candidates for theoretical formalization and the criteria of clarity they must meet in order to play concrete roles in a theory of meaning. He finishes his paper by discussing his hunches and what intuitively persuades him, closing with a remark that "until the relevant notions of nature and constitution have been clarified, it seems to me that the issue should strike us as obscure—perhaps to the point of intractability."¹⁰⁹ Were Rosen's comments about constitution and correctness unanswerable we might be inclined to agree with his assessment. But in clarifying Rosen's discussion of constitution in terms of the *entailments* implicit in the successful adoption of an intentional belief or action, and defending the notion of *success* against critiques of ambiguity, we should come to see that the notion of normativity at least withstands the criticisms put forth in Rosen's article.

To close out this discussion of Brandom's inferentialism I will address some of Fodor and Lepore's concerns about inferentialist accounts of meaning.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 623. Rosen remarks insightfully on the relationship between characterizations of normativity as purported *descriptions* of the facts about intentionality and characterizations of normativity as *stipulations* about how to understand intentionality. "Which is the right conception of normativity? In my view, this is more a matter of stipulation than for discovery..." (ibid, 621). This is an important distinction, and in the fourth section of the current work I intend to take up this idea and argue that the normative theory of rationality is better seen, not as an attempt to *describe* an antecedently existent state of affairs about language use and rational discourse, but to *prescribe* a particular way to go about refining a project that is only partially begun and still exists in rough contour—that the project is not so much describing a statue already carved, but in taking the roughly-hewn figure, complete with the characteristics heretofore useful but imprecise, and actively sharpening its features in the attempt to make it *more* useful in the future.

3.8 Inferentialism and Compositionality

Fodor and Lepore have been sharing a conversation with Brandom on the viability of using an inferential semantics since the beginning of the decade. In “Brandom’s Burdens” Fodor and Lepore fired their first volley at Brandom’s program, addressing the relationship of inference to reference in the inferentialist theory of meaning, criticizing the extent to which inferentialism can properly account for extra-linguistic checks from the world, and suggesting that Brandom’s attempts to account for productivity (the ability to create novel sentences) and compositionality (the composition of sentential meaning from the meaning of subsentential components) fails.¹¹⁰ In 2007 Brandom published a response in “Inferentialism and some of its Challenges”.¹¹¹ In an unpublished paper entitled “Brandom Beleaguered” Fodor and Lepore offer a rejoinder.¹¹² In this subsection we will identify some of the key points of contention in this conversation and endeavor to reach some conclusions.

At times it seems that Brandom and Fodor and Lepore are talking past each other. One key dimension in which this occurs seems to be the way Fodor and Lepore group the *explanatory* priority of inferential connection in a theory of meaning with the *ontological* or *metaphysical* priority of inference (in a theory of mind?).¹¹³ In spelling

¹¹⁰ Jerry Fodor and Ernie Lepore, “Brandom’s Burdens: Compositionality and Inferentialism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (September 2001): 465-481.

¹¹¹ Robert Brandom, “Inferentialism and Some of Its Challenges,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 74, No. 3 (May 2007): 651-676.

¹¹² Jerry Fodor and Ernie Lepore, “Brandom Beleaguered,” unpublished paper available online at <http://ruecs.rutgers.edu/faculty/lepore/brandomreply.pdf>.

¹¹³ [the inferentialist] is committed to the metaphysical and explanatory priority of *judgments* to other mental acts”, Fodor and Lepore, “Brandom’s Burdens,” 472. Cf. also “Brandom Beleaguered” page 1: “...we would have thought that explanatory priority is of more than heuristic interest only if it reflects a priority of *some other kind*: ontological, semantical, psychological or whatever.” On the next page Fodor

out their notion of ontological priority Fodor and Lepore claim that they hold their principle in a “very strong form; on the one hand, the meaning of a sentence S in a language L must be *computable by algorithm* from the meanings of its constituents on pain of L being unproductive or S being idiomatic. On the other hand, we know of no reason why it should be possible (algorithmically or otherwise) to recover the meanings of the constituents of S from the meaning of S.”¹¹⁴ Fodor and Lepore hold that the meaning of sentences are ‘ontologically dependent’ upon the meaning of subsentential components, and—this being so—the only way to account for sentential meaning (they claim) is via a theory that takes subsentential meaning to be explanatorily prior to sentential meaning. On the inferentialist account, where a sentential judgment is the fundamental datum of meaning, subsentential components cannot play the role of meaning-constitution they do for Fodor and Lepore.

Now Fodor and Lepore have in mind an essentially representationalist theory of meaning for subsentential components—where sentences mean what they do because their subsentential components refer to objects in the world, together with whatever rules of syntax, anaphoric replacement, and etc. are necessary to build up a theory of sentential meaning from subsentential reference. Here is where the distinction between explanatory and ontological priority comes to be critical.

For the inferentialist may be committed to the explanatory priority of an inference used to explain propositional content *without* denying that subsentential

and Lepore remark that they advocate a view where “the meaning of a sentence is *ontologically dependent* on the meaning of its subsentential constituents.” Emphasis in the original.

¹¹⁴ Fodor and Lepore “Brandom Beleaguered,” 2.

reference is equiprimordial on the level of ontology or metaphysics (whatever that is supposed to mean).¹¹⁵ Conflating explanatory priority with ontological priority runs the risk of confusing just what the inferentialist theory of meaning is committed to. Fodor and Lepore argue that subsentential reference must be used to explain sentential meaning, and at the level of explanatory priority this is clearly in disagreement with the inferentialist, who holds the order of explanation runs the other way. But the explanatory priority of the sentence need not commit the inferentialist to the ontological priority of sentences—to the “metaphysical...priority of *judgments* to other mental acts.”¹¹⁶ To do so would be to confuse the distinction, running at least back to Aristotle, between what is first in the order of explanation and what is first in the order of existence. The inferentialist claims that we need to make use of the notion of propositional content to understand subsentential content, not that propositional content is ever found independent of subsentential content. With this clarification in mind we can now address some more pointed criticisms offered by Fodor and Lepore.

In “Brandom’s Burdens: Compositionality and Inferentialism” Fodor and Lepore identify two requirements that must be met by inferentialist accounts of meaning to be

¹¹⁵ On page 477 of “Brandom’s Burdens” Fodor and Lepore remark “even if content supervenes on inferential role it doesn’t follow that inferential role is metaphysically prior to content. For that matter, even if you assume that its inferential role is an *essential property* of a concept, it patently doesn’t follow that concepts are, metaphysically speaking, constructions out of their inferential roles.” Emphasis in the original. To be honest I cannot make out what ‘metaphysically speaking’ and ‘metaphysically prior’ is supposed to mean here. Inferentialism is not a claim about the ontological status of concepts and propositions—it’s a thesis about how to understand propositional content. This being so the inferentialist need only be committed to the explanatory priority of the inference as a sentential judgment over the reference of subsentential terms. This does not, as we will see later, require the inferentialist to hold that inferential role is possible without subsentential reference—it only indicates the direction of explanation taken in an inferentialist semantics.

¹¹⁶ Fodor and Lepore, “Brandom’s Burdens”, 472.

philosophically viable: first, the inferentialist must explain which inferences are meaning-constitutive, and second she must explain the compositionality of meaning.¹¹⁷

Meeting the first demand requires specifying, in a way Fodor and Lepore don't see Brandom capable of doing, precisely *which* inferences are to be meaning-constitutive in the inferentialist account of propositional content. Representationalist accounts of meaning clearly do not have this problem. Propositional content is explained fundamentally in terms of the word-world relations that form the center of representational meaning. Paradigmatically, what a word means is what it refers to in the world, and if further conditions of meaning are accounted for in the representationalist picture (say by embedding inferences within the account), these conditions are parasitic upon the paradigm cases of representation. But Brandom is committed to another order of explanation, where inference is fundamental and representation is derivative.

Against Brandom's suggestion that Frege and Kant can be understood as inferentialist, Lepore and Fodor argue that in fact Kant and Frege, while explaining propositional content via an appeal to inferential role, in turn explained inferential role in terms of specifically analytic inferences.¹¹⁸ "Since analyticity is *truth* in virtue of *meaning*, this makes these semantic properties of a concept prior to its inferential role. Kant and Frege were good Semantic Cartesians after all."¹¹⁹ Kantian and Fregean appeals to a role for inferential accounts of propositional content ultimately come down

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 468.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 467-8.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 468. Italics preserved from original.

to analyticity, inferences whose meaning is presupposed “prior to its inferential role.”¹²⁰ “For the content of a concept to supervene on its role in *analytic* inferences is thus for the inferential role of that concept to supervene on its semantics.”¹²¹ From where do these *analytic meanings* derive Fodor and Lepore offer no story, but presumably with their gesture toward “Semantic Cartesianism” they read Kant and Frege as representationalists. But, at least in the case of Kant, this reading seems to ignore the central role of *synthetic a priori* propositions as ones whose meanings are not analytically defined and *cannot* be traced back to representational input received from experience, but rather whose truth is a precondition for and provide the *a priori* structure to any experience whatsoever. As Fodor and Lepore make no more reference to an adequate interpretation of Kant or Frege, and because Brandom’s inferentialism is able to account for an inferentialist account of meaning on its own terms, we will no further be concerned with their reading of Kant.

“So, then, what *is* Brandom’s answer to ‘which inferences?’ ...as far as we can tell, Brandom is committed to holding that at least some of the *material* inferences in which an expression is implicated, are constitutive of its content.”¹²² So claim Fodor and Lepore, and to this point they are correct. Brandom’s program is explicitly committed to semantic holism “[f]or if the conceptual content expressed by each sentence or word is understood as essentially consisting in its inferential relations...then

¹²⁰ Ibid, 469.

¹²¹ Ibid. Italics preserved from original.

¹²² Ibid, 469-70. Italics preserved from original.

one must grasp many such contents in order to grasp any.”¹²³ Fodor and Lepore have two problems with this response—first, it still does not address *which inferences* are constitutive in their strict sense of “which”, and second they claim it provides no way to ground the meaning of terms outside conventions of language: “‘Analytic ethics’ and ‘analytic metaphysics’ and the like were quite bad enough; the prospect of an analytic meteorology is really more than we can bear.”¹²⁴

To address the first of these concerns, that semantic holism still does not adequately specify which inferences are meaning-constitutive, we will examine a slight shift in emphasis in the way Fodor and Lepore have phrased the issue. Once we free ourselves from the pretheoretic suggestion that the meaning of a word, or more critically a complex idea, should be exhaustively stipulated by a set of conditions available for appeal by all those who are said to understand the word or idea, then semantic holism can be leveraged to account for the very different suggestion that in most cases we understand a word or complex idea’s meaning only imperfectly, are able to articulate its inferential roles to a greater-or-lesser extent, and require recourse to the greater store of cultural knowledge that forms the basis of our linguistic practices in order to flesh out our meaning.¹²⁵ To address the second of these concerns, that inferential semantic holism has no truck with an objective world whose structure shapes our words’ meanings, we will have to delve a little deeper into the inferentialist program.

¹²³ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 29. Brandom also here addressed problems of communication, touched on by Fodor and Lepore.

¹²⁴ Fodor and Lepore, “Brandom’s Burdens,” 471.

¹²⁵ Most simply by turning to a dictionary.

Fodor and Lepore resist the semantic holist account for the reason that it seems not to stipulate *which* inferences are carrying the weight of meaning-constitution. But as a semantic *holist*, the proper response here would be to deny that any proper subset of inferential relations ever of necessity fulfills the role of meaning-fixation. Rather, it takes the whole batch of inferential commitments and entitlements bound up in a particular assertion to fully explain what that assertion means. One gets the impression that the advocate of an atomist perspective on meaning is enamored of the possibility of explaining content in necessary and sufficient terms. If a word's meaning is what it represents then we have a clear criterion for verifying whether an individual understands what it means—viz., does she know what it refers to? The holist, however, is committed to the position that meaning is a more-or-less, not an all-or-nothing affair. Only when an individual knows *all* a proposition's inferential roles does she understand fully what the proposition means—grasping each and every one of a proposition's inferential roles is the necessary and sufficient condition for understanding the full meaning of a proposition on the holist's perspective. In the absence of such an omniscient grasp, and without jettisoning the idea that we can grasp meaning, the semantic holist is left defending the position that knowing a proper subset of all a proposition's inferential roles allows us to know what a proposition means without knowing what it *fully* means. But is this a problem? Does not the semantic holist better account for the way we do in fact speak and act?

I may not be able to articulate every inferential role consequent on a use of the word "tellurium" in our language, or the complex idea "Marx's theory of capital", but

that alone should hardly count against the fact that I am able to understand, at least minimally, what the word or the idea means. If anything, these counter-examples indicate the need to build into our theory of meaning the possibility of imperfect grasp of conceptual content, something inferentialism quite nicely accomplishes, *without* supposing that none of us are talking about the same subjects simply because we don't agree on all and the same inferential roles we take our propositions to play. With the stipulation that the normative dimensions of inferential roles are explained via the broader social sphere within which a language game is played, this theory suggests we think of meaning as something understood in degrees commensurate with an individual's ability to offer the appropriate inferential articulations, in contrast with the suggestion that meaning is an all-or-nothing affair satisfied only when an individual can produce all the proper word-world relationships. In place of the binary picture suggested by the representationalist account of meaning, inferentialism offers us a grasp of conceptual content that is asymptotic, with the limit being, perhaps, the entire holistic structure of a community's language.

But there remains to be discussed the issue of objectivity, of words meaning what they do in virtue of *more* than a community's mere stipulation. In this we see a return to the issue of *rational constraint* that at the end of section 2 we saw would threaten a socio-linguistic account for normativity. Ultimately Brandom wants to invoke "Quine's strategy of appealing to what is talked or thought about to secure an account of the nature of communication."¹²⁶ That is to say, though you and I may differ about what

¹²⁶ Brandom, "Inferentialism and Some of Its Challenges," 664.

inferential commitments we take to be consequent on our assertions regarding lightning (perhaps because we have different understandings of electromagnetism and meteorology), and so we may be asserting propositions with (when fully articulated) different propositional contents, we can still be sure we are communicating with each other because our word “lightning” refers to the same phenomenon in the world. Our language is not spun in a void, and the world in fact plays an integral part in determining what inferences we are licensed to make. The metallurgist clarifies our understanding of tellurium because she is familiar with the material.

Specifying the role of reference as a means to ensure communication despite differences in the inferential role of different speakers’ assertions, and so different propositional contents among them, will also give us a grip on the way inferentialism accounts for the *representational* dimension of propositional content. Coming to understand the relationship between inferentialism, reference, and representation will require some familiarity with the Fregean dimensions of Brandom’s program, to which we now turn.

Brandom asserts that his inferentialism is not the reductive variety for which

First that there can *be* expressions or intentional states standing in inferential relations and playing inferential roles, hence having conceptual content, without yet standing in representational ones, and second, that one can then *build* representational relations and roles, and so content, out of those inferential ones.¹²⁷

In contrast, Brandom’s inferentialism holds that inferences are explanatorily primary, not ontologically primary. What is needed to secure this view then is a theoretical

¹²⁷ Ibid, 659. Emphasis in original.

machinery that can “underwrite assessments of the *representational* content of expressions”, for this content is not to be eliminated and so must be accounted for by the inferentialist.¹²⁸ On the following page of this article Brandom sketches in outline how this is to proceed

Expressive inferentialism, by contrast [with reductive inferentialism], is a claim about *understanding* inferential and representational relations. It is at the level of the *senses* of the concepts inference and representation, rather than at the level of their *referents*. The expressive inferentialist acknowledges that nothing can stand in genuinely *inferential* relations unless it also has *representational* content. There is no inference without reference. But it is claimed nonetheless that one can specify sufficient conditions for expressions to be used so as to possess conceptual content (of *both* sorts) in a purely *inferential* metalanguage.¹²⁹

Understanding the commitments being made here will require us to turn to a fundamental distinction Frege makes in *Sense and Reference* between ordinary discourse, direct discourse, and indirect discourse.

Frege reminds us, to begin with, that words and names have not only referents but senses or—if you like—connotations. So while ‘Mark Twain’ and ‘Samuel Clemens’ as a matter of fact denote or *refer to* the same object in the world, they do not connote or *mean* the same thing. They have the same reference but differ in sense. Frege extends this analysis to entire sentences, concluding that sentences have both senses and referents. A sentence denotes or refers to a truth-value, but a sentence connotes or means the thought it expresses. So the sentence “Mark Twain wrote *Tom Sawyer*” refers to the object ‘the true’, while its sense (what it means) is the thought that “Mark Twain wrote *Tom Sawyer*”. And with the inclusion of a ‘that’ clause prefacing

¹²⁸ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 660. Emphasis in original.

this analysis of sense we have broached another critical distinction for Frege, and the one that will allow us to clarify Brandom's passage quoted above.

Frege distinguishes three ways in which we can talk about sentences or words. In ordinary discourse a sentence or word, as a (series of) character(s) (verbal or otherwise), *expresses* a sense which is its thought or meaning, and *designates* a referent which is the object it refers to. In ordinary discourse, then, the sign "Mark Twain" refers to or denotes the human being named by that sign. In ordinary discourse this sign expresses the sense that Frege believes is the property of a "common store of thoughts which is transmitted from one generation to another."¹³⁰ What we have implicitly been doing, however, is speaking about the sign "Mark Twain", not the object Mark Twain. This sort of discourse Frege calls *direct discourse*, where the referent of what we are discussing is not the object referred to by the sign in its ordinary use. Rather, the referent of the sign "Mark Twain" in direct discourse is instead the sign itself (the letters M-a-r-k etc.) as they are used in ordinary discourse. We mark off this distinction grammatically by putting the sign in quotation marks, to indicate that we are not denoting the object of the sign as it's ordinarily used but are rather denoting the sign itself.

Similarly for whole sentences, we can assert "Mark Twain wrote *Tom Sawyer*" in ordinary discourse, in which case the sign *expresses* the thought or sense of the sentence and *designates* its object or referent. In the case of sentences, as was just said, Frege thinks the referent is a truth value, which in the case of the ordinary discourse use of

¹³⁰ Gottlob Frege, "Sense and Reference," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 57, No. 3, (May 1948): 209-230; page 212.

“Mark Twain wrote *Tom Sawyer*” implies that the sentence refers to the object ‘the true’. But again, as we’ve just done by putting the sentence in quotation marks, we can talk about “Mark Twain wrote *Tom Sawyer*” in direct discourse, where the designatum is the sign itself (the letters M-a-r-k etc.). But there is a third way in which Frege is interested in how we speak about language.

Sometimes we are interested in what Frege calls *indirect discourse*. Here what is designated is the ordinary sense of an expression. In this way we are able to talk directly about—that is, refer to or denote—*meaning*. In ordinary discourse meaning is presupposed, for what is *talked about* is either an object (in the case of terms or names) or truth values (in the case of whole sentences). But knowing the truth-value of a sentence is, by itself, practically useless. We need to know what that sentence *means*, what the propositional content, the *sense* of that sentence is in order to be informed by it. Just so, the sense or thought of a sentence alone is equally useless—we need to know if the thought is *true*.

If now the truth value of a sentence is its referent, then on the one hand all true sentences have the same referent and so, on the other hand, do all false sentences. From this we see that in the referent of the sentence all that is specific is obliterated. We can never be concerned only with the referent of a sentence; but again the mere thought alone yields no knowledge, but only the thought together with its referent, i.e., its truth value.¹³¹

We might say that, for Frege, truth without proposition is empty, while propositions without truth are blind. What is critical for our story is the way indirect discourse lets us explicitly address the sense or meaning of an ordinary discourse locution. Grammatically

¹³¹ Ibid, 217.

this sort of discourse is usually marked off by prefacing the ordinary discourse expression with a ‘that’ clause.

Perhaps an example will help clarify the relationship between ordinary, direct, and indirect discourse. Suppose you and I are attending a dinner party and overhear a conversation across the room where a conversant has just uttered “Schnee ist weiss”. You have heard the utterance, and understanding German, know that the proposition uttered (the meaning of the German sentence when translated into English) is “snow is white.” I, however, both did not clearly hear what was said and do not understand German. The sentence as used by the original utterer was used in *ordinary discourse*, where its *sense/meaning* is the proposition “snow is white” and its *reference* is to “the true” or “truth”. But suppose you and I begin to enquire into what was said. Turning to you I ask “What did he just say?” If you assumed I understood German your first response might be “He said “Schnee ist weiss””. Here you have used the sentence in *direct discourse* (stylistically rendered by the use of quotation marks) where the *reference* of this token (the phrase in quotes) as you have uttered it is to the *ordinary discourse* utterance that the original conversant uttered. In saying “He said “Schnee ist weiss”” you are using the quoted phrase in direct discourse to refer to the original ordinary discourse utterance. Direct discourse allows us to use words to refer to other words. The ordinary/direct discourse distinction for Frege marks the same boundary as the more common use/mention distinction. In ordinary discourse we *use* an utterance to *express* an idea, while in *direct* discourse we *mention* an utterance to refer to (one of) that utterance’s ordinary discourse token(s).

Returning to our dialogue, however, it is clear that I was looking for something other than a direct discourse reference to the utterance of the original conversant.

Because I do not speak German, it will not suffice in this context to simply repeat (to *mention*) what it was the original conversant uttered. My response to you might be: “Oh, I suspected he was speaking a different language. What does “Schnee ist weiss” mean?” To which you reply, “He said that snow is white”. And here we have an instance of indirect discourse, marked off stylistically by prefacing the explanation with a “that” clause.¹³² With indirect discourse we are able to *refer to the sense or meaning* of an expression as it occurs in ordinary discourse. Recall that “Schnee ist weiss” refers to “the true” and expresses the sense (has the meaning) of the proposition “snow is white”. When in indirect discourse you say “He said that snow is white” you are referring to the propositional content, the *meaning*, of “Schness ist weiss”. It is with indirect discourse that we can refer to the meaning of utterances as they are used in ordinary discourse.

And so returning to our discussion above, the sentence “Mark Twain wrote *Tom Sawyer*” refers to the object ‘the true’ (ordinary discourse), while it means the thought *that* “Mark Twain wrote *Tom Sawyer*” (indirect discourse). Indirect discourse lets us *refer to the meaning of a sentence expressed by its sense in ordinary use*, and so the expressive inferentialist, as Brandom characterizes himself, is concerned with marking this distinction and adopting a theoretical metalanguage at the level of indirect discourse that allows us to account for the *meaning* of propositions in the object-language of

¹³² In *How to do things with Words*, 70-71, Austin remarks that that-clauses do not always mark off indirect discourse. In performatives such as “I promise that I will pay you \$20 next Tuesday” the that-clause serves as part of the performative role, not as an indirect discourse explication of the meaning of the phrase following the clause.

ordinary discourse by talking about, referring to, their *senses*. The inferentialist quite happily admits that expressions in ordinary discourse have representational dimensions in terms of their reference to objects in the world, but the metalanguage that characterizes the inferentialist theory of meaning is a language of indirect discourse, where what is referred to are not objects in the world but *thoughts* or *meanings*; senses.¹³³ Indirect discourse as the primary linguistic tool in an inferentialist account of meaning preserves a role for reference.

Consider the sentence “I saw a unicorn last night”. There are many ways this sentence might be read, many thoughts or senses it might express—perhaps its utterer really means she saw a unicorn last night, but perhaps she meant that she had a vivid dream of a unicorn and we who overheard her missed the context. The *referent* of this sentence considered in indirect discourse is its *sense* or *meaning* in ordinary discourse, whatever we decide was meant by the individual who has asserted they saw a unicorn last night. Adopting the standpoint of indirect discourse will allow us to understand how to spell out a sentence’s meaning, for what is referred to in indirect discourse, what is *talked about*, is the sense or connotation of that sentence as it is used in ordinary discourse. Now for the inferentialist this sentence’s *sense*, its’ *meaning*, in ordinary discourse depends on the other assertions its utterer is prepared to commit to—whether the utterer would assert that she dreamt of a unicorn last night or whether in a variety of situations she makes other claims that indicate she believes in the existence of unicorns,

¹³³ Of course, for Frege, reference in indirect discourse *is* in a sense to objects in the world, because the thoughts that indirect discourse refers to are pseudo-platonic objects subsisting in a “third realm” that is neither the world of space and time nor the world of psychologistic mental events.

for instance. Thus while the inferentialist is committed to the need for an ordinary discourse account of the assertion “I saw a unicorn last night” to specify whether or not “unicorn” is meant to refer, the reference of the indirect discourse assertion is specified with respect to its ordinary discourse *sense*, itself cashed out in terms of inferential articulation. This is what allows the inferentialist explanation to be an explanation of *meaning*. The inferentialist accounts for the meaning (the sense) of an ordinary discourse assertion by focusing on it in indirect discourse where reference is not an issue of representation. Instead, the *referent* of an expression in indirect discourse is its *sense* in ordinary discourse. Thus the indirect discourse *explanation of meaning* for “I saw a unicorn last night” depends on the *sense* that assertion has in ordinary discourse, which as we saw depends on its inferential connections to the other assertions its’ utterer is committed to. These assertions themselves will, ordinarily considered, invoke referential relations between words and objects, but no such referents need be included in the semantic machinery of the metalanguage, the machinery that explains meaning via inferential role. This is because reference does not directly contribute to the sense of a sentence.

The ordinary discourse sense of “I saw a unicorn last night” remains the same whether or not unicorn refers—all that the reference of the term determines is the referent of the whole sentence, which is its truth value. The referent of the sentence in indirect discourse is its sense in ordinary discourse, and so this sentence maintains a common indirect discourse referent regardless of whether its ordinary discourse terms refer. The only thing affecting the indirect referent of this assertion—its sense in

ordinary discourse—is the inferential relations surrounding it in the language game within which it is employed. For the expressive inferentialist, representational reference plays a subsidiary role in accounting for propositional content. This does not require that representation plays *no* role, as the reductive inferentialist would hold. Rather, the expressive inferentialist adopts a metalanguage of indirect discourse within which the *reference* of an expression is to the *sense* of that expression in the object-language of ordinary discourse, not to the object-language's representational referents.

This is precisely what an inferentialist account of meaning would be expected to offer—a distinction between the object-language of ordinary assertion where the meaning of terms (and their referents) are taken for granted as they are deployed in language games, and the same sentences considered in the theoretical metalanguage of indirect discourse where focus is on the *senses* or *meanings* these sentences have in their ordinary uses, which senses are specified with respect to the inferential relationships invoked by those sentences within the larger corpus of their utterers' commitments. Reference and representation have not dropped out of this explanation—for a sentence considered in indirect discourse *refers to* the sense that sentence has in ordinary discourse, and this sense itself presupposes an ordinary discourse sentence whose subsentential terms (perhaps) purport to refer to or represent objects in the world. The key idea is that the reference of the inferentialists' theoretical metalanguage of indirect discourse is to the *senses* of sentences and not to their representational dimensions, while the locus of representational reference, reference to objects in the world, occurs within

the object-language of ordinary discourse and not within the inferentialist metalanguage.¹³⁴

It is in this way I propose we understand Brandom's remark that "It is at the level of the *senses* of the concepts inference and representation, rather than at the level of their *referents* [that the expressive inferentialist proposes we understand these concepts]. The expressive inferentialist acknowledges that nothing can stand in genuinely *inferential* relations unless it also has *representational* content...But it is claimed nonetheless that one can specify sufficient conditions for expressions to be used so as to possess conceptual content (of *both* sorts) in a purely *inferential* metalanguage."¹³⁵

So what are we to make of the problem of compositionality and productivity—can inferentialism account for these desiderata of Fodor and Lepore? They certainly form a key and recurring theme in their criticism of Brandom.¹³⁶ "It's important—we think it's *centrally* important—whether an inferentialist can tell a convincing story about the compositionality of natural languages."¹³⁷ Brandom has offered some indication of how to understand subsentential meaning in virtue of substitution relations.¹³⁸ It remains to be seen whether the approach he has outlined there can be sufficiently developed to account for the subsentential meaning relations necessary to account for the productivity of novel sentences and the compositionality of sentence-meaning from subsentential

¹³⁴ My appreciation extends to Robert Burch for making clear the relationships between ordinary, indirect, and direct discourse in Frege's *Sense and Reference*. Any extent to which I've butchered those relationships in applying them to inferentialism is entirely my own fault.

¹³⁵ Brandom, "Inferentialism and Some of Its Challenges," 660. Emphasis in original. Notice that by prefacing this quote with a 'that' clause we are referring to its sense, its meaning, in ordinary discourse.

¹³⁶ See, e.g., Fodor and Lepore, "Brandom Beleaguered," page 12 and following.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12, emphasis in original.

¹³⁸ See Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, Ch. 4 "What Are Singular Terms, and Why Are There Any?"

meaning as Fodor and Lepore require. But more pressing is the question of whether this approach should concern the inferentialist. Certainly Fodor and Lepore think this is “centrally important”, but need the inferentialist?

I do not want to step on the toes of any philosophical interests here, but the intuition that underlies the emphasis on compositionality seems so connected to the intuition that drives a representationalist theory of meaning that one wonders whether the two intuitions could be separated, and so the concern for compositionality imported by an inferentialist, without enervating the notion of compositionality altogether. Indeed, Fodor and Lepore have remarked “...we sometimes rather doubt that Brandom means by ‘compositionality’ anything like what we have in mind.”¹³⁹ The question is, *should* Brandom be expected to have in mind anything like what Fodor and Lepore do? Is, for instance, our use of language to express new thoughts by conjoining words into sentences that have often never before been encountered by an audience, and indeed often never expressed before at all (as, for instance, is likely the case with this sentence) an issue of semantics? Why is it not a psychological phenomena? As a matter of learning a language most people learn individual words and are taught methods of combining them to create whole sentences. But a theorist should be careful to distinguish what is of practical value and what is theoretically viable as an explanation of that practice. It may be that the issue of compositionality is of more value for the practical linguist or psychologist than it is the philosopher of meaning.

¹³⁹ Fodor and Lepore, “Brandom Beleaguered,” 13.

Finally, one might make the case that with their emphasis on representation Fodor and Lepore are focusing on a fundamentally different datum of explanation for compositionality, one that obscures any sense in which Brandom *could* be thought to provide an account of intentionality satisfiable to their theoretical tastes. In Fregean terms Fodor and Lepore are focusing on the *references* of words to give an account of compositionality, not on their *senses*. But of course the expressive inferentialist is going to argue that we understand the sentence above “Is, for instance, our use of language to express new thoughts...” in terms of an expression of sense instead of representation. There seems to be something to this supposition. I’ve seen much the same thought as the above quoted sentence expressed by Brandom twice, once in discussion and once in *Articulating Reasons*.¹⁴⁰ Yet all three sentences use different signs to convey this thought. Why should an inferentialist account be expected to focus on compositionality, itself connected to a notion of decomposition and recomposition at the level of subsentential representation, when what interests the inferentialist is an account of whole sentential *thoughts* or judgments?

Fodor and Lepore are looking for a back-tracking account of semantics, deconstructing propositional meaning into subsentential terms and clauses that have content in virtue of, paradigmatically, representation. From this a reconstructional account of compositionality can hopefully proceed. But Brandom’s perspective is a bit different. The inferentialist proposes that we approach meaning with the recognition that our feet are already wet—that we’re confronted with all sorts of propositional

¹⁴⁰ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 126-7.

commitments the meanings of which while ultimately lodged in the linguistic standards of the tradition in which we're raised, are nonetheless capable of inferential articulation in the course of criticizing those standards (socially, scientifically, logically, etc.) and so self-consciously engaging in the rational revision and development of it. If Fodor and Lepore are interested in a deconstructive semantic picture capable of accounting for the reconstruction of individual propositions, Brandom is rather concerned to show that the inferential relationships of propositional content supply us with a method for projecting not the construction of new propositions but the criticism of the methodologies that underpin what counts as a warranted proposition within a particular discipline. What should motivate a predilection for one of these research programs over the other? Insofar as both are capable of meeting the criticisms supplied by the other, why not suppose we pursue both programs and see which offer the best results for the purposes they're being put to use for?

This is a thorny issue and I do not suppose to have resolved it. Of all the critiques of inferentialism we've canvassed in section 3 it seems that the problem of compositionality is the most difficult to meet, but I suspect it is also the most misguided. Without presuming to have settled the issue I propose that we follow Quine's advice, given in a similar discussion about the theoretical specification of linguistic and metalinguistic ontologies, and suggest "tolerance and an experimental spirit."¹⁴¹ It may be the case that inferentialism proves capable of accounting for the compositionality and productivity of natural languages. On the other hand it may be that a knock-down

¹⁴¹ Willard Van Orman Quine, "On What there Is" in *From a Logical Point of View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953): 1-19, page 19.

argument showing both the necessary centrality of compositionality in a theory of meaning and the inability of inferentialism to meet this requirement will be offered. In the absence of either of these conditions being met research should be encouraged in whatever directions inroads along other problems can be made. For it may be that this is one problem not so much to be solved as it is to be dissolved.

What is critical to reflect on at the end of this section, however, is the more obvious criticisms that the inferentialist program has met and repulsed. The literature on this subject is profuse, but a representative sample has been arrayed here and the main problems addressed. On the condition that inferentialism offers a viable theory of conceptual or propositional content, making explicit the role of normativity both in the inferential articulation of propositional content and in the metalinguistic reflection on the normative standards implicit in the judgments articulation of this content, the next section will focus on addressing the ways in which this theory of meaning, and more specifically the notion of normativity, can be connected to a naturalistic account of human existence.

4. WHENCE NORMATIVITY?

NORMATIVITY AND NATURALISM

4.1 Introduction: Returning to Rational Constraint

We have been motivating the view that we can deploy the notion of normativity as one of *rational constraint*. In section 3 our focus was rational constraint on linguistic behavior as an explanation for semantic content, insofar as the propositional commitments implicit in the assertion of a given proposition can be inferentially articulated as a method of explaining that proposition's meaning. But linguistic behavior is not the only sort of behavior capable of being characterized via normativity. Part of the appeal of a normative theory of rationality lies in the suggestion that the notion of normativity gives us a theory of rational behavior across a range of activities—ethics as what we should do, epistemics as what we should believe, and aesthetics as what we should value. Though an extension of the notion of normativity to the treatment of rational behavior in these disparate areas of human life would be a valuable contribution to an understanding of ourselves and our activities, so bold a project will have to wait for another day. Instead, our task here will be to endeavor to prepare the foundation for such a future treatment by offering an account by which normativity can be understood as a natural phenomenon. In section 3 we argued for a theory of linguistic meaning that took normativity to be a fundamental explanans in accounting for propositional content; now it is time to see if this theoretical postulate is one we are in general licensed to make use of.

From this point forward the discussion will proceed on the supposition that the most pressing worries over an inferentialist theory of meaning, as canvassed in section 3, are either misplaced or less important than their advocates suppose. The articles to be discussed in section 4 therefore fall into the category of those generally in agreement with Brandom's program, but whose authors have specific concerns for situating normativity in a broader naturalistic account of the world.¹⁴² Specifically our concern here will be to address some of the worries regarding Brandom's explanatory account for the *existence* of the norms appealed to in the inferentialist theory of meaning. Brandom makes clear that he is concerned with conceptual content, and so normativity, fundamentally as it obtains in linguistic practices, and this makes society the locus of original normativity.¹⁴³ Daniel Dennett and Ruth Millikan, on the other hand, are interested in giving an account of how norms can be understood to extend beyond society into the natural realm of evolutionary development. Their concern is to show that in appealing to norms we are not merely appealing to a realm of normativity that leaps like Athena fully-formed into existence, but that by providing an account of rule-following that extends beyond linguistic behavior into evolution we can, in Dennett's

¹⁴² See, e.g., Daniel Dennett, "The Evolution of "Why?""": Essay on Robert B. Brandom, *Making it Explicit*", available at ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/Brandom.pdf, "Brandom and I are on the same page about many issues that divide the profession", p.1, and Ruth Millikan "The Son and the Daughter: On Sellars, Brandom, and Millikan" available at www.philosophy.uconn.edu/department/millikan/daughter.pdf, appearing also in *Pragmatics and Cognition*, 13.1, (2005): 59-72, "Let me end by noting a very deep theme that is common to Brandom's work and mine, binding us together and setting us apart from others currently writing about language and thought", p.18 (online version).

¹⁴³ See for example Brandom, *Articulating Reasons* pages 14-15 and 23.

words, “go some way to removing the suspicious residue of magic that purports to ground meaning in community and then, having done that, declares victory.”¹⁴⁴

In the first regard we might remark that there are methodological reasons for lodging conceptual content, and so normativity, in the socio-linguistic realm. Doing so will give us clear conditions for determining whether or not an entity is making use of conceptual content, and ways for determining what that content is. We can engage in conversation with the entity and see what he or she tells us. We obviously cannot do this with nonlinguistic animals, or with our suppositions about how conceptual content may have developed in prehistoric human groups. One might suppose that sticking to this clear criterion is reason enough to restrict our examination on the origin of normativity to the ways in which language-users are acculturated within particular socio-linguistic systems and leave unanalyzed the murky issue of where societies as a whole acquire their norms and the conceptual content they delimit.

But I share Dennett and Millikan’s intuitions—while there will be problems of where to draw fine-grained distinctions for conceptual content, and how to determine what that content is when all we have to go on is behavior and physiological similarity, I propose that connecting an account of the origin of norms to the naturalistic explanations of the physical sciences, especially evolutionary biology, is crucial in motivating the view that a normative theory of rationality is capable of application across ethical, epistemic, and aesthetic disciplines.

¹⁴⁴ Dennett, “The Evolution of “Why?”” 13.

It furthermore seems entirely plausible that the biological explanations we have for the behaviors we engage in are just as important for an analysis of what norms we adopt in our approaches toward the world as it is to recognize that we are not *merely* a collection of biological impulses. For language is not the only source of the norms that we bring to bear in the world. Behavior exhibits implicit normativity as well, and the evolutionary origin of self-consciousness requires we be willing to consider the ancestral analogues of our current norms, the more so because evolutionary forces have fitted us with all sorts of automatic circuitry that disposes us to behave in ways that instantiate norms we may not want to endorse self-reflectively. Anyone who's been in a romantic relationship must know this by heart. In short, I propose that it is just as important for the *application* of a theory of human norms that we connect normativity to evolutionary biology, and so let our theory be informed by the research being done in biology, as it is important that we establish this connection in such a way that the theory can be deemed *acceptable* as something amenable to naturalistic accounts of human existence.

In this we are following a suggestion made by Sellars in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. In that work Sellars reminds us that the entities posited by a theory operate at two levels of consideration—on the one hand, internal to the theory itself, these entities are purely theoretical, postulated to make sense of the observations the theory wishes to explain. On the other, theoretical entities deserve a place within the larger picture of the world currently in play.

We have, in effect, been distinguishing between two dimensions of the logic (or 'methodologic') of theoretical terms: (a) their role in explaining the selected phenomena of which the theory is a theory; (b) their role as candidates for integration in what we have called the "total picture"... What we *can* say is that

the less a scientist is in a position to conjecture about the way in which a certain theory can be expected to integrate with other specialities, the more the concepts of his theory approximate to the status of pure theoretical concepts.¹⁴⁵

This sets before us a bilateral program; on the one side to posit norms, values, intentions as theoretical entities invoked to explain certain human activities and articulated by a theoretical machinery able to systematically put these entities to use. On the other, to provide an account of the status of these theoretical entities within the larger domain of our understanding of the world. As I see it, this is just the program that Robert Brandom and John McDowell have inherited from Wilfrid Sellars, and it represents an attempt to reconcile, within one picture of the world, the normativity of human thought with the naturalistic events that form the subject of the physical sciences.¹⁴⁶ Brandom and McDowell can productively be seen as working toward the two Sellarsian desiderata of this program—McDowell in motivating an overall conception of the logical space within

¹⁴⁵Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, §55, pages 101-2.

¹⁴⁶McDowell in *Mind and World* suggests we view the concepts we bring to the world as part and parcel of the world itself, with no unreduced remainder, no non-conceptual component, left presupposed beyond our concepts. In step with Sellars's critique of the Myth of the Given in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, McDowell fleshes out a picture of the world amenable to conceptualization all the way out. The galvanizing insight in McDowell's argument is the need for experience to be thoroughly conceptualized, brought up into the normative space of reasons, if it is to stand in the rational relations necessary to count as justification for our beliefs. McDowell argues that we can bridge the natural world with the world of human normativity by coming to see that being human involves being culturally indoctrinated; that is, we can see our use of concepts and norms is a part of our *second nature*. McDowell points to the rise of modern science as yielding the modern pathos of separation between normativity and factuality, and urges a return to a sort of "Aristotelian innocence" able to regard humankind as *naturally* rational. John McDowell, *Mind and World*, page 108 and following. Doing so allows us on McDowell's suggestion to view concepts and norms through a "naturalized platonism," in contrast with hypostatizing them in a transcendent realm, as in a "rampant platonism" where "the rational structure within which meaning comes into view is independent of anything merely human, so that the capacity of our minds to resonate to it looks occult or magical" (92). Instead, McDowell encourages us to see the norms and concepts of our second nature, "the dictates of reason [as] there anyway, whether or not one's eyes are opened to them; that is what happens in a proper upbringing. We need not try to understand the thought that the dictates of reason are objects of an enlightened awareness, except from within the way of thinking such an upbringing initiates one into: a way of thinking that constitutes a standpoint from which those dictates are already in view" (91-2). To help link the conceptual space argued for in *Mind and World* with Brandom's semantic project, note that McDowell ends with a discussion on the importance of language as the focal point for our cultural initiation (126).

which to ground this reconciled view of the natural and normative, and Brandom in articulating a theoretical machinery able to work in this space.¹⁴⁷

So now the question becomes, what constitutes a “naturalistic account”? As it is the literature on naturalism is incredibly diverse in its characterization of what exactly “naturalism” is supposed to be. In part this is because many people want to ensure their views aren’t accused of “non-naturalism”, an accusation which seems to bear a resemblance to the accusation of being a mysterian. As Jeffrey W. Roland recently put the point in a presentation given at Texas A&M (on January 17, 2008), “Given the default status of naturalism in contemporary philosophy (i.e., when naturalistic and non-naturalistic views compete for our confidence, *ceteris paribus* the naturalistic view wins), there is considerable rhetorical weight attached to the identification of a position as naturalistic.”¹⁴⁸ Our focus here will be first to characterize some naturalistic positions representative of the options, to stipulate which approach will be ours, and then by these lights to provide a naturalistic account of normativity.

4.2 Varieties of Naturalism

It may be helpful to think of the naturalist debate along two dimensions—linguistic and ontological. Along both these dimensions there are grades of commitment

¹⁴⁷ This was a point I made in the paper “Pragmatism and the Normative Theory of Rationality” presented at the Western Canadian Philosophical Association’s 44th Annual Meeting, University of Saskatchewan, October 2007, from which this paragraph originates. In that paper I defend Brandom’s normative reading of Kant against historical criticisms made by Frederick Beiser regarding the problem of relating the world of facts with the realm of norms. I defend the normative reading of Kant by connecting Brandom’s view on norms to the philosophical work of John Dewey, for whom the very notion of an ideal was something that could be *made real* through human activity. I am grateful for comments on this paper provided by Eric Dayton of the University of Saskatchewan, and especially for his suggestion that the first prong of this project could be seen as satisfied by the work of Ruth Millikan rather than John McDowell.

¹⁴⁸ From “Foundations of Epistemological Naturalism”, handout accompanying the talk. Parenthetical remark preserved from Roland’s handout.

running from puritanism to hedonism. At the puritanical linguistic and ontological corner lies someone like Quine—refrain from hypostasizing ontology from language and posit only those entities necessary for the pursuit of physical science. To do otherwise is to run the risk of multiplying ontology *ad infinitum*. At the diagonal corner lies someone like Larry Laudan, who holds that we can understand normativity as playing a role not only in our ontological accounts of human existence but in the metatheory that characterizes the sorts of discourse leveraged to explain that existence.¹⁴⁹ Linguistically puritanical but ontologically hedonistic, David Papineau has defended a truth-functional account of meaning that does not rely on normativity in linguistic content, yet allows for the naturalistic presence of norms as the ends we hold personally valuable.¹⁵⁰ Conversely, someone like Bart Streumer holds that normative properties are linguistically necessary but ontologically eliminable.¹⁵¹ We see that the notion of naturalism with respect to normativity covers the spectrum of ontological and linguistic commitments to both hedonism and puritanism.

Now while I am sympathetic to Quine’s concern that we do not allow the hypostasization of linguistic forms to swell our ontology, and with his worry that once we begin it is difficult to know when to stop, I am perhaps more suspicious of a claim

¹⁴⁹ Larry Laudan, “Normative Naturalism,” *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 57, No.1 (March, 1990): 44-59. From page 45: “[Some philosophers], like myself, who understand science to involve a much broader range of argumentative strategies than Quine ever allowed, have a rather less Spartan view of the modes of justification permissible in a naturalistic theory of knowledge.” And from page 46: “In several publications...I have been propounding the idea that epistemology can be thoroughly “naturalized” whilst retaining a prescriptive dimension.”

¹⁵⁰ David Papineau, “Normativity and Judgement,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume*, Vol. 73 (1999): 17-43.

¹⁵¹ Bart Streumer, “Are there Irreducibly Normative Properties?” in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, forthcoming, available currently at www.personal.rdg.ac.uk/~lds05bs/NormativeProperties.pdf.

that entities are linguistically necessary but ontologically eliminable (Streumer's position). For all the difficulties potential in the former approach, the latter strikes me as a repeat of the transcendentalism that in section 2 we saw left Kant's notion of normativity unpalatable. If we can avoid being committed to accepting as necessary for a theory of language a particular class of entities while at the same time denying that class in our theory of the world, I propose that we are advised to do so, if only for our own cognitive harmony. Furthermore, as will become clear in the course of our discussion, I think there are important implications to be drawn from treating norms as entities capable of examination and revision. Insofar as section 3 showed us a way to conceive of a linguistic role for normativity, we are with this view already committed to linguistic hedonism about the status of norms. To avoid the dangers of slipping into a Kantian transcendentalism if we allow hedonism linguistically but deny it ontologically, the naturalism defended here will be in the vein of Laudan's approach. The articulation of this defense will show that the linguistic reliance on normativity in an inferential semantics can be supported by an account of the existence of norms as naturalistic entities.¹⁵² First, however, it may be useful to canvas Laudan's role for normativity in scientific explanation.

Laudan suggests we can understand normative rules as hypothetical imperatives linking means to ends, put to use in a theory empirically sensitive to whether or not these hypothetical imperatives function successfully as the means to acquire the desired ends.

¹⁵² Millikan asserts on page 6 of "The Son and the Daughter" that "...on Sellars's view the presence of normative rules in the natural world appears in the end as just one more level of fact in that world."

“[S]o construed, epistemic norms or rules are grounded on *theories* about how to conduct inquiry, and those rules behave functionally within the system of knowledge in precisely the same way that other theories (for example, straightforward scientific ones) do.”¹⁵³ Insofar as the ends toward which we deploy a theory often change given a perceived need to initiate revision consequent on the discovery of new data, Laudan argues that “the rules guiding theory choice in the natural sciences have changed and evolved in response to new information in the same ways in which scientific theories have shifted in the face of new evidence.”¹⁵⁴ In so conceiving norms Laudan concludes “epistemic doctrines or rules are fallible posits or conjectures, exactly on a par with all the other elements of scientific knowledge.”¹⁵⁵ Laudan’s characterization of naturalized normativity gives prescription a role in critiquing the relative value of different scientific theories by taking norms to be the “hypothetical imperatives” against which a theory’s application is checked by measuring whether that theory is a successful means to achieve the ends its’ users put it to. Insofar as a theory is *not* useful in achieving the ends it is supposed to be a means toward, scientists make the normative injunction that it is not a good (or the right, or the best) theory. “From which it follows,” Laudan asserts, “that a thoroughly naturalistic approach to inquiry can, in perfectly good conscience, countenance prescriptive epistemology, provided of course that the prescriptions in question are understood as empirically defeasible.”¹⁵⁶ This takes us some way toward

¹⁵³ Laudan, “Normative Naturalism,” 46.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

understanding a theoretical role for normativity beyond its use in explaining meaning in a theory of language.

So what role is there for normativity in a naturalistic account of the world? Following a suggestion made by Roland in discussion after his talk this January, I will take for granted that norms are *natural* theoretical entities if they play a *causal role* in explaining the phenomena for which the theory is a theory. But human behavior is not usually thought of as being caused by norms *per se*. One might adopt a Davidsonian approach here and characterize norms as *reasons* appealed to by actors, with the argument being that “rationalization is a species of ordinary causal explanation.”¹⁵⁷ Our approach will be a little more detailed, however, insofar as our desire is not merely to give a causal account of norms as natural but to also be able to tell a story of how we can understand norms as subsisting within a natural conception of the world. Toward this end we will characterize human behavior as something to be understood in terms of *intentionality*. Thus to characterize Jane as having walked to school because she wanted exercise is to say that her *desire* for exercise was the *cause* of her behavior.¹⁵⁸

But now it may look like we have traded one mystery for another. For intentionality seems as difficult to characterize in natural terms as does normativity. This trade, however, turns on an assumption regarding the plausibility of our intuitions. We characterize other people as having intentions, we often behave as if animals do, and the explanatory account offered in the next subsection is put forth as a theory by which

¹⁵⁷ Donald Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 60, No. 23, American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division, Sixtieth Annual Meeting (November 7, 1963): 685-700, page 685.

¹⁵⁸ At this point we might distinguish between Aristotelian notions of material, efficient, formal, and final causes, but at the level of the following discussion it will not be necessary to do so.

we can clarify just what it is we are doing when we say that we or others intentional—we are essentially following rules we, our society, or our biology has prescribed for us. It aims to eliminate the mysteriousness of both normativity and intentionality, not to trade one mystery for another. In order to do so and be considered naturalistic the theory must both offer a causal account of the theoretical entities it posits, and its theoretical entities must be capable of integration within the larger corpus of our understanding of the world.

Our task in the next subsection is to explain the relationship between intentions as causes of behavior and norms as theoretical entities used to explain intention. Following this, in subsection 4.4 we will explain how to model norms on laws, and so to provide an explanation of norms and intentions as natural developments among natural entities within the universe. Subsection 4.5 will offer a clarification of the relationship between the normative explanation of intentionality developed in subsections 4.3 and 4.4 and the self-reflective norms of sociality. In subsection 4.6 we will return to the literature on normativity and naturalism and see if our case can be made to cohere with the research of others in this area. Subsection 4.7 will conclude with some assessments about the practical consequences of this view in terms of its implications for the rational revision of social and individual norms.

4.3 A Normative Theory of Intentionality

In *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* Sellars characterized his approach toward positing the attribution of intentional states as “methodological behaviorism”.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ Sections 53ff, p.98ff.

In “The Structure of Knowledge” Sellars describes his position as “verbal behaviorism”.¹⁶⁰ What this view involves is the attribution of intentionality in virtue of the behavior, paradigmatically verbal behavior, of the entities to which intentionality is attributed. Based on the way Frank behaves during his lunch break we attribute to him the intention of being hungry, and of desiring to satiate his hunger. Mary’s telling us she is terrified of spiders is a criterion by which we attribute to her the intention of terror in the presence of spiders, further supported by the fact that she is invariably startled, with an increase in heart rate, breath rate, release of adrenalin, etc. whenever in the presence of spiders. But behavior, whether verbal or physical, provide only a *methodological* basis for the *attribution* of intentional states—behavior does not provide an *explanatory reduction* for intentionality. What the methodological or verbal behaviorist proposes is that we understand an entity’s behavior as a criterion upon which we can ground the attribution of intentionality, and further that these intentional states are to be modeled on the semantic categories of linguistic behavior, *without* supposing that intentions reduce to dispositions to either speak or behave. As Sellars says in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, one of his aims is to “see if I can reconcile the classical idea of thoughts as inner episodes which are neither overt behavior nor verbal imagery and which are properly referred to in terms of the vocabulary of intentionality, with the idea that the categories of intentionality are, at bottom, semantical categories pertaining to overt verbal performances.”¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Wilfrid Sellars, “The Structure of Knowledge,” *Action, Knowledge, and Reality: Studies in Honor of Wilfrid Sellars*, Hector-Neri Castañeda, ed., (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975): 295-347.

¹⁶¹ Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, § 50, page 94.

Intentional terms are introduced in explanatory accounts on the basis of behavioral (sometimes verbal) considerations, but for this very reason intentionality explains behavior—it is not explained by it. Intentionality is therefore seen as a theoretical entity posited to explain the behavior of self-conscious organisms. One problem to be addressed in this portion of the thesis is how to understand the attribution of intentional states to nonlinguistic organisms. Verbal behavior offers the most direct criterion for the attribution of intentionality—an individual gives us a teleological answer to a question as to why they behaved as they did. This criterion is clearly not available in our characterization of nonlinguistic animals, and so our reliance on the complexity of behavior (and on empirical studies of behavior) will be more important. Physiological correlations between the neurochemistry of human beings and other supposedly intentional animals may play a critical role as well, in this case affecting behavioral studies that aim to determine whether an animal is capable of self-conscious behavior.

The view that self-consciousness is to be characterized in terms of intentionality goes back to the medieval scholastics, but its role in contemporary thought is owed to the work of Brentano. Including a place for intentionality in naturalistic accounts of the world has been difficult for some philosophers to countenance, however. As mentioned the current account proceeds on the supposition that any theoretical entity postulated as having a causal role in explaining phenomena is a *natural* entity. If intentions are appealed to as causes in explaining behavior, intentions are by this light naturalistic.

Our task now is to explain how to understand intentionality in terms of normativity where this causal role is made explicit.

We must give a theoretical account of what it is we are doing when we attribute an *intention* to an organism. The theory to be offered runs as follows: An *intention* is understood as a quadruple relation between an *actor*, a *prescription*, a *behavior*, and an *event* or *state of affairs* in the world. The *actor* is the entity in question to which the attribution of intentionality is applied. The *behavior* is understood as causally effected by the actor. The *event* is understood *descriptively* as the characterization of a particular state of affairs in the world to be *caused* by the behavior. The *prescription* is a *normative characterization* that indexes the *actor* as *cause of the behavior* to the *event* as the *hypothetical end* to be *caused by the behavior*. On this account, to say “A intends to ψ ”, where ψ is a complex description of an *event* or *state of affairs* x and a *behavior* ϕ , is thus to be understood as “A should ϕ to cause x .” Ascribing an intention in casual discourse is theoretically explained as the prescription of a behavior causally connected to an event. The prescription is therefore ascribed on the basis of the causal efficacy of the behavior as it relates to the event as a hypothetical end. To say that “A should ϕ to cause x ”, translated back into the language of intentionality, is to say that *if* A desires x *then* A should ϕ .

Equivalently from the subject’s perspective, “to intend ψ ” is to be understood as “to prescribe for oneself ϕ to cause x ”, exhibiting the self-conscious component of

intentionality—to intend something is to prescribe *for oneself* a behavior.¹⁶² To say “I desire ψ ” is by this theory to be explained as “I should ϕ to cause x .” The intentional characterization “Frank intends to eat the sandwich” is to be understood through the causal, descriptive, and prescriptive characterization “Frank should eat the sandwich to cause his hunger to abate.”¹⁶³ In doing so we explain intentions as *normative relations* between *actors* and *events* linked causally by *behavior*. The explicitly causal/prescriptive explanation of an attribution of intentionality allows us to attribute intentions to systems without supposing that in doing so we are attributing a mysterious non-natural state.

The analysis of apparently non-behavioral intentions is handled similarly, and the analysis exhibits something important about the causal efficacy of intentions. To handle intentions such as “A hopes that ψ ” or “A wants that ψ ”, we have to lean heavily on our understanding of the physiological composition of intentional entities and the situations in which they are. An antelope making zig-zagging motions in a field to draw attention from a wolf after inducing her fawn to lie down in the tall grass can be said to “hope that the wolf won’t find her fawn.”¹⁶⁴ But the intention of “hope” in this context is an

¹⁶² Strictly speaking therefore, to say that I desire end x but I do not think I should act so as to acquire it is to say that I have another desire which trumps the first, and so I do not *intend* to see x realized.

¹⁶³ Equivalently, if the intentional characterization is phrased “Frank intends to abate his hunger by eating the sandwich” (of the form “A intends x by ϕ ing”) the normative explanation will still run “A should eat the sandwich to cause his hunger to abate” (A should ϕ to x). We see therefore that even if there is room at the level of intentional attribution to offer different intentional characterizations (whether Frank’s intention is characterized as eating the sandwich or abating his hunger), the theoretical account is constant. Regardless of whether we characterize the intention as directed toward the sandwich or toward the end-state to be realized, the theoretical account indexing the actor, the behavior, the prescription, and the event remains the same.

¹⁶⁴ This example is taken from Gordon G. Brittan Jr.’s “The Secrets of Antelope,” *Erkenntnis* Vol. 51 (1999): 59-77.

indirect intention, insofar as it is not connected directly with the behavior the antelope is engaging in. Instead, the direct intention explaining the antelope's behavior is the intention of leading the wolf away from her fawn. The normative explanation of our attribution of the intention "hopes that" relies on the substitution of indirect intentions of the form "hopes that" with direct intentions that make explicit the subject's causal-behavioral relation to the event the intention is directed toward. "The antelope hopes that the wolf will not find her fawn" is to be analyzed first into a directly intentional assertion that "the antelope intends that the wolf won't find her fawn" which, as above, is to be understood as "the antelope should ϕ to prevent the wolf from finding her fawn."¹⁶⁵

What this indicates is that an intention not connected to a behavior (an action) is an explanatorily useless—because causally inert—intention. In attributing such an intention we are explaining nothing more than a purported phenomenological experience—the fear or hope of the antelope, for instance—which must be connected to the entity's situational context and a physiological account of the entity's brain

¹⁶⁵ It may be relevant to say a word or two on the problem of empirical studies of the intentional states of animals. Intentional attributions in these studies are often self-consciously eliminated in favor of situation/physiology-input and behavioral-output relationships. One primary reason for doing so is that it delimits a clear data set within which the only theoretical entities necessary are ones subject to more-or-less direct empirical verification, whereas intentionality as a theoretical entity is ontologically nebulous at best. See Chapter 1 of Sara J. Shettleworth's *Cognition, Evolution, and Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Ironically, I think this methodological decision can be seen as a corollary of Brandom's desire to restrict the attribution of intentionality strictly in terms of language use, where any non-linguistic animal's intentionality must be understood as a function of the linguistic intentionality of the interpreters—us. (Brandom, *Making it Explicit*, pages 152 and 155). Insofar as cognitive psychologists on animal behavior eschew intentional characterizations as a means to delimit clear evidential criteria (behavior, physiology, and situation), Brandom eschews the attribution of nonlinguistic intentionality so as to ensure a similarly clear criteria of application—language use. I am here attempting to offer a via media, where intentional attributions can be understood to apply to nonlinguistic animals without supposing original intentionality is linguistic, and without spurning behavioral, physiological, and situational factors.

chemistry if to serve as a respectable attribution within what we understand as the constraints on which entities are capable of intentional states. Critically, however, this permutation of the theory under discussion makes explicit the need to connect intention to behavior if a change is to be effected in the world. The indirect intentions “hopes that”, “wants that”, or “fears that” are only causally efficacious when linked to a behavior.¹⁶⁶ We must *be* the agents of the changes we wish to see in the world. I suppose all this is obvious—but one strength of this theoretical formulation of intentionality is that it derives these obvious results as a matter of the structure of the theory.

Finally, we might suppose that, when there is no behavior to be considered at all, an individual is in an intentional state strictly in virtue of its physiology and situational context. Where an actor is not engaging in any behavior that would support the attribution of intentionality, and yet where there are reasons for attributing intentionality, we again must rely on our understanding of physiological constitution and the situational context of the actor. Suppose Frank is sitting in a prison cell and he has not eaten for three days. Though Frank is giving no behavioral cues as to his desire to eat (he is just sitting on his cot, conscious but not calling out for food, for instance), it would seem reasonable to attribute to him a desire for food. This is an attribution licensed by this account, because *built into* this theory is the condition that in addition to behavioral cues we must have recourse to situational and physiological factors in support of an

¹⁶⁶ Later we will examine how the causal connection between intentional states and behaviors can be used within an evolutionary theory to provide a “ratcheting-up” explanation for the evolution of self-consciousness.

attribution of intentionality. The decoy which happens to lure the wolf away from the fawn has no hopes. In analysis Frank's desire to eat is still given the theoretical explanation "should ϕ to cause x ", though in this case there is no ϕ ing behavior open to cause x . The absence of this causal-behavioral route explains Frank's lack of activity despite being in the relevant intentional state.

4.4 Prescription, Norms, and Explanatory Perspectives

Though this may provide us with a causal theory of intentionality making use of the normative resources already in play through the theory of meaning given in section 3, there are a few issues that need to be addressed. In the first place, we can disobey these norms. In using the word "should" there is implicit recognition of the fact that the actor in question may *not* so behave. This account understands intention in terms of prescription, whereas the assertion "A intends ψ " seems to be descriptive and, if causal, on a par with the laws of the physical sciences. To say that "A intends ψ " is in many cases to say not only that A desires ψ but that A *will* ψ or *is* ψ ing. To suppose "A intends ψ " is to be understood as "A *should* ϕ to cause x " is *prima facie* to say something with much less explanatory power than "A is ψ ing". While at the moment this may look problematic, the next subsection will spell out why we should not be concerned about this difference between norms as prescriptive accounts of intentional behavior and laws as descriptive accounts of physical behavior. In fact, the very capability of our disobeying a norm is what gives us the self-reflective capability to constantly assess their value and so revise them. What this theory commits us to is a difference between the explanatory power of norms and the explanatory power of physical laws. *What laws are*

as theoretical postulates that license the deduction of observed phenomena in explanations of the physical world, norms are as theoretical postulates that license the deduction of observed phenomena in explanations of the social world.

What I hope we can see our way toward accepting is that the existence of norms as theoretical postulates used to make sense of intentional and ultimately social behavior should be no more mysterious or nonnatural than the existence of laws as theoretical postulates used to make sense of physical behavior. By developing a case for this view I am going beyond Brandom's use of normativity in explaining conceptual content and intentional states. More than an appeal to normativity as a way to make sense of concepts and intentions,¹⁶⁷ I am suggesting that a theoretical account of explaining what it means to attribute an intentional state can be grounded on a causal-prescriptive account of an actor's behavior indexed to a hypothetical end. Furthermore, in subsection 4.5 I will endeavor to show how we can understand the existence of prescriptive, normative, behavior to have arisen in the natural development of biological evolution, and to provide a warrant for the above assertion that intentional and social norms are no more mysterious an explanatory resource than are physical laws.

But at this point a crucial distinction should be made. The analysis of intentional states offered above adopts *prescriptive* terminology, and in doing so is essentially a normative terminology. But the norms implicit in the explanation of intentional behavior need not be the norms we think of in terms of full-blown social conventions. It may be that the prescription implicit in an intentional action *is* socially normative, as

¹⁶⁷ See Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 163.

when we intend to drive on the right side of the road. But some prescriptions are more-or-less individual. Indeed, connecting this account to the biological sciences requires that in some cases we understand intentions as a function of biological imperatives “programmed” by our genes—as in the case of mother love, for instance. Clearly some of these biological proto-norms may become enshrined in social practices, so that my intention to call my mother on the second Sunday of May (Mother’s Day in the U.S.) is a function of both a biological imperative and a social convention.

Intentional behavior as implicitly prescriptive is not yet the home of social norms in the way we are socio-linguistically interested, though reflection on implicit normativity by individuals acting intentionally forms a substantial locus for the genesis of social norms proper. The ape who shows anger at a sexual partner caught in a liaison with a competitor is, if said to be acting with intention, on this model to have his intention characterized in prescriptive, normative terminology. From this it does not follow that the ape’s intentional/normative behavior represents anything like our norm of marriage and fidelity, a self-conscious and explicit pattern of activity in our society. For we should not expect the proto-norms that characterize intentional behavior via prescriptive explanation to be anything so developed as the norms that characterize human socio-linguistic behavior. But these proto-norms implicit in the simplest intentionality are the seeds from which, by the germination of time and the light of self-reflection, will shoot forth the tree of normative self-knowledge.

The task of social self-reflection, exhibited paradigmatically in the criticism of the standards of a discourse, is to make explicit the normative patterns that guide

judgments within the discourse and offer them up for criticism. At an individual level this process obtains as a function of our willingness to criticize self-reflectively the norms implicit in our intentional behavior and likewise subject them to rational revision. For intentionality exists only as indexed to the values, the norms, by which it is constituted. The movement from mere prescription to self-conscious normativity, from proto-norms to social norms, is one link in the chain from inert physical matter to biological regularity to normative intentionality to social normativity. Because our actions are directed by our momentary intentions to realize particular ends, and we often fail to reflect on the fact that our actions implicitly embody norms in the very activity of intending these ends, it is incumbent upon us to self-consciously engage in this process of rational reflection, both at the individual level of intentionality and at the social level of the standards of our discourses.

Finally, the reader may have another concern about the difference between intentional characterizations and prescriptive ones. “A intends ψ ” is a description, making use of no overtly prescriptive terminology. But its theoretical counterpart “A should ϕ to cause descriptive state x” includes a prescriptive component. It might appear that the smuggling in of this prescriptive category obviates the sense in which this really is an explanation of the phenomenon under consideration. But the inclusion of a new category for the explanation of a phenomenon should not by itself be a problem—introducing a new explanans (in this case normativity) to account for an explanandum (intentionality) is indeed *necessary* to avoid circularity in the explanation. The question to be addressed if this substitution is a worry, rather, is whether a

normative explanans can serve to account for the intentional explanandum without leaving anything unaccounted for. I will leave addressing that question to another time, and suppose we are satisfied for current purposes that this schema provides us a way to understand intentionality in normative terms as a causal relation between actors, events, and behavior. What this account suggests is that at the level of theory we can explain the descriptive characterization of behavior in terms of intentionality by characterizing these intentional descriptions as implicit prescriptive judgments about the effects of that behavior. Providing this explanation is precisely what allows us to continue using intentional terminology, now divorced of its mystery. We can still descriptively characterize actors as intentional, for in doing so we need commit ourselves at the level of *theory* to nothing more than hypothetical prescriptions. Furthermore, with intentional attributions understood as prescriptive behaviors indexed to particular ends, we have in play a theoretical discourse that allows us to understand intentional attributions in such a way as to make sense of their *social* nature in the construction of full-blown social norms. At this stage we are ready to meet Sellars's second desideratum offered above. With a theory on board that makes use of normativity as a theoretical entity postulated to explain both linguistic meaning and human intentionality, we turn now to an examination of how this theoretical entity can be understood as a natural one, locating it within the larger corpus of our understanding of the world.

4.5 Norms, Laws, and the Development of the Universe

I propose that we can get a grip on the notion of a norm by modeling normativity on the theoretical generalizations that characterize lawlike discourse in the physical

sciences. That is, what *laws* are as *descriptions* of the causal relationships among *physical* entities, *norms* are as *prescriptions* of the causal relationships among *intentional* entities.¹⁶⁸ A critical implication of the conclusion we arrive at regarding the common explanatory role of laws and norms will lie in a crucial difference between them—while no physical object need intentionally dispose itself toward the maintenance of the physical laws that constrain its existence, the intentional origins of social norms requires that human beings have an obligation to reflect on and self-consciously endorse and propagate those norms that constrain the existence of their own intentional states. No star has ever had to focus on gravity to ensure its existence, but critical self-reflection on the social rules they wish to see realized is an obligation incumbent upon all mature citizens of a society, integral as these rules are to their own intentional states. To motivate the acceptance of this modeling of norms on laws I will tell a story of the non-mysterious emergence of normative systems within a world of lawful ones; or what amounts to the same thing, a story about the emergence of intentional entities from a world of non-intentional (physical) ones.

The natural sciences provide us with a remarkably tight and encompassing account of our existence in the universe, and of the existence of the universe itself. Leaving open the question “why not nothing?”, what we *do* know is how most of what’s here got here, at least in broad detail. Looking into the sky we are capable of observing the frequency and wavelength of the light emitted from stellar objects in the galaxy and

¹⁶⁸ What this model makes explicit is the fact that norms can be violated—they prescribe our behavior but we need not hold ourselves to them. A significant portion of the following discussion will be concerned to spell out the implications of this difference between the laws of physical systems and the norms of intentional ones.

universe around us, and through spectroscopic analysis we are capable of inferring the compositions of many of these objects. Knowing what we do about the way different elements give off light, we can compare our assessments of composition with the electromagnetic wavelength emitted by these stellar objects. In doing so we discover that everywhere we look in the universe the light we see is shifted in wavelength toward the infrared end of the spectrum. This redshift indicates that the objects we're looking at are moving away from us, and consequently that the universe is expanding. The redshift of stellar objects was first observed in the middle of the 19th century, but its incorporation as part of the explanation for the Big Bang would not occur for over 50 years. In 2006 the Nobel Prize in physics was awarded to the American physicists John C. Mather and George F. Smoot for their work on cosmic microwave background radiation, the incredibly faint omnipresent afterglow of the intense heat and energy that characterized the universe as it was still small and condensed immediately after the Big Bang.

Our understanding of cosmology and particle physics has provided us a cogent account explaining how (though not why) there came to be *something* rather than *nothing* after the Big Bang. Immediately after the Big Bang the universe was an incredibly hot, dense, and energetic system. As the universe underwent rapid expansion during those first few moments it began to cool, and through this cooling process the first elementary particles began to form, like vapor in condensation on the inside of a glass. Eventually the universe was large and cool enough to allow for the emergence of the first atomic elements, and during this period the only elements in existence were vast

quantities of hydrogen, some helium, and a very tiny amount of lithium. But because of the unequal distribution of atoms in the universe different clouds of hydrogen mixed together, and when there was enough mass in a localized area of space the first stars began to form.

A star is a long, slow, balance between the tendency of gravity to cause the matter of the star to implode, pulling itself inward, and on an atomic level the fusion occurring in nuclei as a result of this gravitational implosion causing the release of vast amounts of nuclear energy tending the star to explode outward. The life of a star is measured by this slow process of nuclear fusion caused by gravitational implosion, while in the cores of stars heavier elements are formed as a result of this fusion. Depending on the initial mass of a star a number of different “deaths” are possible. If the initial mass was sufficiently small the star will eventually fizzle out when all the elements susceptible to fusion have been burned up and there is no more nuclear fuel to be produced by the star’s gravity. When this occurs gravity will force the star down to a point where the atoms composing it will be so closely packed together gravity cannot condense it any further. If the star is heavy enough, however, then the possibility for a nova or supernova presents itself. In either of these cases the gravity of the star will be such as to cause the star to implode beyond the ability of the packed atomic structure to offset the force of gravity, until eventually the star reaches a critical mass/volume ratio and violently explodes outwards, ejecting into the universe the heavier elements created

during the stellar furnace's existence.¹⁶⁹ The energy released in this process also leads to the formation of heavier elements than were produced in the star during its period of nuclear fusion, a process only capable of creating elements up to the atomic weight of iron.

To telescope the discussion rather greatly, when the conditions are right, two or three generations of stellar formation down the line, a star might form in a nebula of gas within a field of some of these heavier elements ejected from the deaths of earlier stars, and so as in our case, eventually lead to a solar system containing not just a sun but a number of solid inner planets composed of this stardust. Again if conditions are right, a planet with the right material composition might form in an orbital sweet-spot around the star, in a region warm enough to melt frozen water but not so hot as to burn it off. Eventually a planet in this situation might give rise to living organisms, which organisms might themselves develop according to natural processes of trait heritability, variation, differential reproduction, and competition for resources. In the right situation we might have social self-conscious organisms, capable of looking back out into the universe and having a sense of whence they came. Beginning from the rapid expansion and cooling that occurred after the Big Bang, one can look at the universe's development as a long,

¹⁶⁹ A black hole is the other death-track of a star. If the initial mass of the star is sufficient, then the implosive force of gravity will contain even the tendency to nova and supernova, causing the star's matter to condense into a singularity, a point of immense mass and little volume (perhaps infinite mass and zero volume), around which is an event horizon that marks the outer boundary of the singularity from which not even light can escape its gravitational pull.

slow process of condensation, from subatomic particles to hydrogen to atoms to planets to life to society.¹⁷⁰

The development of self-conscious entities (and so intentional states) in turn can be understood as a function of the selection pressures that operated on complex biological systems as they evolved in ever more constrained and resource-competitive environments. That is, some biological systems had to functionally discover that they should ϕ to cause event x , where event x was beneficial for their survival.¹⁷¹ The need to be able to differentiate self-and-world, and just as critically self-and-other-self, necessitates the adoption of intentional dispositions as the means of anticipating the consequences of behavior (ours and others) and also anticipating the intentions of

¹⁷⁰ Indeed, I think we can view each particular in the universe as a condensation of the cosmos as it spreads out in all directions, each particular condensation ontologically on a par with the condensations of the first subatomic particles formed during the cooling of the Big Bang's initial expansion. The fact that many of these particulars share certain properties (universals if you will) should be no more mysterious than the fact that in a moment before time all things now in the universe were united in one spec of being; in other words, it should not be too surprising if particulars that share this common ancestry should also be capable of sharing universal properties. These are just some inferences predicated on the notion that the evidence we currently have is a good ground for making them. But I think in this account there is a case to be made for a modern version of the Enlightenment encyclopedia, beginning from the everyday observation statements of human life and detailing how this account coheres, from astronomy to physics to chemistry, biology, and sociology, each section written by experts in their respective fields. Call it a *Philosophical Encyclopedia of the Sciences*.

¹⁷¹ The phrase "functionally discover" is ambiguous at best. In describing the conceptual content held by so-called intentional entities in such a way as to explain intentionality in non-intentional terms one runs into the difficulty of having to avoid *ascribing* intentional comprehension in the very act of attributing that content to them. So, for instance, it looks suspicious to say an organism *knows* that they should ϕ to cause event x , because "know" itself is intentional. What is critical to recognize is that when linguistic interrogation is not available (that is, when we can't just *ask them* what their intentions are) the entity in question must be one for which we are justified (behaviorally and physiologically) in believing they apprehend the thought "I should ϕ to cause event x ". Thus while from *our* perspective we implicitly attribute intentionality in applying to them predicates like "apprehend", "discover", and "know", from the *subject's* perspective the explanation is strictly normative, causal, and descriptive "I should ϕ to cause event x ". And for our *explaining* that intentional state, of course, the schema is the 3rd person non-intentional attribution that "The entity should ϕ to cause event x ."

others.¹⁷² The survival value of deceit, for instance, was critical in the development of the higher animals. Understanding intentionality in terms of a theoretical discourse of normativity gives us a grip on how to understand the intentional states that characterize at least the higher forms of biological existence on this planet. On this account then normativity plays a role as a theoretical postulate used to account for, not just meaning in language, but intentionality more generally.

We are now in a position to understand the role of normativity as it exists in a realm of natural law. Notice that at each stage of the universe's development we can talk about the objects and properties that emerged as *deducible* given the natural laws that constrained their emergence. Grant an ontology (say hydrogen atoms dispersed in a given concentration throughout space) and a set of laws (say gravity, strong and weak nuclear forces, and electromagnetism) and the initial formation of stars and subsequent formation of planets, life, etc. becomes understood as deducible consequences *indexed to these laws*. The existence of stars is not a deduction *tout court* but the presence of matter capable of nuclear fusion under the force of gravity is deducible on condition of the constitution of the world we inhabit. We could imagine a different possible world where different objects would have formed, but in our world our laws make possible the objects and properties this world has.

So the formation of stars is a lawful consequence of a balance between gravity's tendency to cause vast quantities of closely grouped hydrogen atoms to implode and the tendency toward explosion as the nuclear fusion of these hydrogen atoms releases vast

¹⁷² In effect a contemporary correlate, couched in evolutionary terms, of the Kantian position discussed at the beginning of section 2, subsection 2.3; that "there is no *I* without an *it*."

amounts of energy caused by the force of gravity. Given the laws and objects in play, stars are deducible consequences of prior states of existence in our universe. The same relationship holds between *norms* and *intentional* social systems as does between *laws* and *non-intentional* physical systems.

That is, grant an ontology (human beings in geographical distribution, economic and industrial affluence, constraints from the non-intentional world) and a set of norms (freedom of expression, liberal capitalism, totalitarianism, mother-love, brother-envy, etc.) in different measures and regions and the sorts of intentional entities and social systems that will come to exist under these conditions are deducible as well. The *intentional states* that come to be in society are critically dependent on the *normative structure* that constitutes the society's standards.¹⁷³ The selection pressures that operate among biological systems developed on this planet toward a direction where successful exploitation of an environment's resources required complex self-and-other differentiations posited by some of these organisms; required these organisms to intentionally dispose themselves to the world and each other. In doing so they came to anticipate both the consequences of their actions and the intentions and consequences of their fellows, thus enabling them to compete successfully in this environment.¹⁷⁴ In the course of coming to form social organizations the norms exhibited in intentionality

¹⁷³ The relationships that would explain the deduction of intentional states from social norms would have to be probabilistic to account for outlying datapoints, individuals who for one reason or another diverge from the norm. This divergence can be accounted for in at least three ways: genetic variation that disposes an individual to behavior counter to the social norms of the group; environmental conditioning that have inculcated norms other than those of the group; self-reflective assessment of the value of the norms in question with a conscious decision to behave differently.

¹⁷⁴ Millikan adopts the view, which she connects to Sellars, that norms have survival value. Millikan, "The Son and the Daughter," 10-12.

became susceptible to broader application—they became the basis not only of *my* activity but of *our* activity.¹⁷⁵ Just as physical states of the universe can be deduced from physical laws, intentional states can be deduced from social norms.¹⁷⁶

Equivalently, just as physical laws give us an explanation of the physical states of the universe we happen to perceive, social norms likewise give us an explanation of the intentional states we attribute to other people.

The critical difference is that while none of us needs to focus on gravity to ensure we have stars or stay on the planet, we are collectively responsible for the maintenance of the social rules that govern our intentional existence. For the prescriptive norms that bind us into social groups are ones we are free to question, to revise, and to outright reject. In so doing we are essentially reorganizing the social conditions that will give rise to new intentional states, even if our individual contribution is only minimal. But

¹⁷⁵ As we will see, it may be more appropriate to suppose the relationship between individual intentionality and social life developed in tandem.

¹⁷⁶ In this admittedly quick discussion of an evolutionary account enabling us to posit intentional states as capable of causal roles in a theory of behavior I have ignored many issues worth discussing at some point in more detail. Not least of which is the problem of distinguishing between sapient organisms, sentient ones, and those merely living. Brandom, it will be remembered, classifies sapience in terms of language-use and leaves it at that. I however would like to leave open the possibility that we can justifiably attribute conceptual content at least to the higher non-linguistic animals. And the mere fact that we cannot always define a clear boundary between, say, sapience and sentience does not imply there is no distinction worth making. Certainly at the extremes we mark a distinction between what is sapient and what is merely living, as for instance between humans and plants. But the fact that there are plenty of undecided cases does not in itself indicate the theory is untenable any more than the first microscope's inability to see inside a cell told against the viability of perfecting the design. A behaviorist account of the attribution of intentionality, patterned after Sellars's methodological behaviorism, is one way to proceed. On this method the complex behavior of an entity is a criterion for the attribution of intentional states, but this does not mean intentions *just are* dispositions to behave—for as I've argued we can understand intentions instead as norms regarding what behavior will cause what ends. I suspect we are best advised to hedge our bets by adding to the behavioral criterion the stipulation that only organisms developing from natural selection pressures can have original intentionality—this will, as a matter of practice, help us avoid ascribing intentional states to thermostats and light sensors (although I do know of some ontological and linguistic puritans who in denying the existence of intentionality go on to characterize thermostats as intentionally on a par with humans—a clearer *reductio* against the supposition that we can do without a coherent theory of intentionality I can't imagine).

we are always making ourselves available for the self-reflection of others, and the norms implicit in our behavior become potential sources for the intentional behavior of our audience—a lesson a parent knows all too well. So long as we are willing self-reflectively to assess the norms implicit in our values and behavior, this indicates the incredible freedom we have as norm-deploying entities. And because these social norms invariably *will* change over time, it is incumbent upon us, it is one of our duties, to engage in this process of change and revision with a self-reflective index assessing what sorts of human intention we wish to see realized in our societies. Otherwise we're no better off than animals or plants, living by the whims that impel us unreflectively and changing only as the conditions around us change.

This is a conclusion from the *natural* status of norms consonant with the implications derived from the *linguistic* account of normativity offered in section 3; namely, that socio-linguistic existence brings with it an obligation to reflect on the norms implicit in the concepts and behaviors we bring to bear on the world.¹⁷⁷ Under the conception being developed here we can understand the duty to reflect on the norms of linguistic discourse as a species of the obligation to reflect on the norms that constitute our intentionality in general.

¹⁷⁷ C.f. McDowell's claim that learning to use a language is initiation into "a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what. The tradition is subject to reflective modification by each generation that inherits it. Indeed, a standing obligation to engage in critical reflection is itself part of the inheritance" (*Mind and World*, 126), and Brandom's assertion that "Critical thinkers, or merely fastidious ones, must examine their idioms to be sure that they are prepared to endorse and so defend the appropriateness of the material inferential transitions implicit in the concepts they employ. In Reason's fight against thought debased by prejudice and propaganda, the first rule is that potentially controversial material inferential commitments should be made explicit as claims, exposing them both as vulnerable to reasoned challenge and as in need of reasoned defense. They must not be allowed to remain curled up inside loaded phrases such as 'enemy of the people' or 'law and order'." (*Articulating Reasons*, 70).

4.6 Returning to the Literature on Normativity and Naturalism

If the emergence of intentionality is essentially a function of behavior and evolutionary development, and intentionality itself is to be understood in causal and normative terms, then we can begin to understand the relationship between the norms of society, original intentionality, and individuality. Allan Gibbard's "Thought, Norms, and Discursive Practice: Commentary on Robert Brandom, *Making it Explicit*" will be helpful in this regard. In one sense society plays an integral role in accounting for the origins of conceptual content. The evolution of individual intentional human beings depended upon their social existence; our neurophysiology evolved as a result of the processes that selected for this neurophysiology in tandem with our social existence—we evolved in social groups, not as individuals. In this sense we can mark sociality as a constraint on intentionality. But *pace* Brandom's emphasis on the social origins of conceptual normativity for individuals, Gibbard thinks this evolutionary account allows us to assert that individual human beings, as the *result* of this extended process of socially-dependent evolution, nonetheless develop and mature with the gray-matter hardware that allows them to be intentional independent of social education.¹⁷⁸ I think this is correct.¹⁷⁹ At the same time we must recognize that the determinate forms of intentionality open to particular human beings today depends integrally on their acculturation within a social order. Though we might expect a "feral child" to be able to

¹⁷⁸ Allan Gibbard, "Thought, Norms, and Discursive Practice: Commentary on Robert B. Brandom, *Making it Explicit*," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol.56, No.3 (September 1996): 699-717, p.706-7.

¹⁷⁹ Millikan makes the case for individual intentionality from the other direction: "...if we ask whether the survival value of the concepts we acquire from learning a language are at root benefits gained only through the community by means of social cooperation, the answer seems to be no. Clearly there are benefits to the isolated individual as well." Millikan, "The Son and the Daughter," 11.

(non-linguistically) behave in such a way as to warrant the attribution of intentions and so to justifiably characterize her behavior as following norms, we would not expect her behavior to approach anywhere near the full potential open to socio-linguistic existence. More to the point, the norms that are internalized by an individual will depend critically on what sort of social environment they mature in. The social norms that govern my intentional states are hardly the norms of a Wahabi Sunni fundamentalist. What this leaves us with is an account for which intentionality is dependent upon social existence, where nonetheless individual human beings can be in intentional states independent of social existence, and yet where social maturation profoundly impacts the contours of the norms of intentionality that develop for an individual.

And so I am generally in line with Dennett and Millikan's position that an explanation of the norms of sociality must go beyond the social sphere, even if this means relinquishing the clear criterion of linguistic behavior as a metric for the attribution of conceptual content. There is however one point of disagreement important to point out in my reading of Millikan, as clarifying this dispute will help reinforce the sense in which normativity is the *locus classicus* of human intentionality, and the freedom and duty this brings with it.

Millikan's position on the evolutionary origin of conceptual content and normativity, a position she calls 'teleosemantics', distinguishes between what she calls conventional and prescriptive or evaluative norms. On Millikan's account the norms of language are conventional, "not prescriptive or evaluative norms."¹⁸⁰ They are "merely

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 10.

a measure from which actual facts can depart...”¹⁸¹ I will argue that characterizing linguistic norms as merely conventional, in contrast to evaluative, obscures the difference between a socio-linguistic norm and a biological regularity or proto-norm. But first let us see why Millikan is inclined to posit such conventions or, to use a term I prefer, proto-norms.

Recall that Millikan is interested in providing an evolutionary account of the origin of normativity. To do so she must be able to connect the lawlike regularities of physical objects with the genuinely normative dispositions of human beings. Her efforts here center on the way biological organisms exhibit behavioral regularity that is subject to evolutionary change without being normative. The behaviors of biological organisms are constrained by the physiological constitution that evolution has equipped them with. Biological constitution is therefore a sort of regularity or norm. Owing to the possibility of genetic mutation these regularities can change, but it is not *prima facie* the case that such change is licensed to normative censure—we cannot say that a mutation in a gene is *wrong*, merely that it is less advantageous. Rather offering standards of normative evaluation, the evaluation of evolutionary change is measured by the evolutionary success of such change.

While this is all well and good, her extension of the non-evaluative nature of the proto-norms of biological evolution to the linguistic norms of social conversation would, if accepted, rob us of the normative theory of conceptual content so hard fought for in section 3—for a “merely conventional” norm not subject to evaluative appraisal is not a

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

norm capable of playing a role in rationally articulating warranted assertions. Thus it is incumbent upon us to provide a response to Millikan's claims if we are to continue relying on the linguistic role for normativity, all the more so because we've made such liberal use of her thinking in connecting normativity to an evolutionary account of human development.

In her discussion of convention Millikan has in mind the sort of biological regularities that constitute a species' physiological composition while being subject to change because of evolutionary mutation across generations. As a sort of norm these conventions are nonetheless *not* the sorts of changing regularities subject to evaluative assessment.

Behavioral forms that have had past survival value are a measure from which actual behavioral dispositions, both past and present, can depart, but such departures are in no sense proscribed. Indeed, departures sometimes prove advantageous. What a biological or psychological or social form has been selected for doing, through natural selection, through learning, or through selection for social transmission, is a norm against which the form's actual performances can be measured. It is the "natural purpose" of the form to fulfill this function, purposes, like norms, being *essentially* things that are not always fulfilled.¹⁸²

So to mark her proto-norms as a link in the causal chain from physical law to intentional norm Millikan must have a category of regularity that while not being law-like is also not evaluative.

At this point I am not in objection—this seems to me the right way to proceed in conceptually trying to bridge the gap between prescriptive norms and descriptive laws.

¹⁸² Ibid, italicized emphasis in the original was underlined, changed for stylistic purposes to italics.

The problem enters in when she extends this biological account of conventional proto-norms to language use.

Language conventions are best thought of merely as lineages of behavioral patterns involving a speaker's utterance and a hearer's response. They do not correspond to rules, and certainly not to prescriptive rules. It is true that many conventions are ways of doing things to which one ought to conform, given that there are such conventions. For example, conventions about which side to drive on and whether to stop at the red or the green are conventions with which one ought to conform. Moreover, in traditional cultures, doing things in unconventional ways is often proscribed quite generally. But this evaluative kind of normativity is something added to mere conventionality. Decorating for Christmas with red and green is conventional, but surely in no way required.

I must confess that I fail to grasp the distinction between conventions that are “ways of doing things to which one *ought to* conform, given that there are such conventions” and an “*evaluative* normativity [that] is something added to mere conventionality” (emphasis added). It seems to me that the distinction between conventional norms and evaluative ones is a distinction of degree, not kind.¹⁸³ The fact that something is a convention is datum enough to ensure that violating it is liable to bring some kind of censure down upon the individual. If I stand close to you in conversation it may be that I'm violating a convention of some sort, and I am liable to censure for it. But if you *don't* censure me it's not because the convention doesn't bring with it a license to censure, it's because you either haven't adopted the convention or you choose not to prosecute its violation in this case. Similarly with a Christmas tree draped in skulls and painted black. One's natural inclination might be to judge “that isn't right”, but in discourse we could

¹⁸³ At least at the level of language—for the reasons mentioned in the preceding paragraph I think it is important to keep distinct evaluative norms from the proto-norms that constitute biological regularity. The problem, as I'm attempting to articulate here, is that calling these non-evaluative biological proto-norms ‘conventions’ and extending this treatment to the norms of language is problematic.

probably convince an individual to understand the practice as *merely* conventional, and so subject to revision according to the tastes of its practitioner. Coming to recognize this does not mean that traditional decoration of the Christmas tree is “surely in no way required;” it merely means that it is in a *very weak way* required—required via the social standard of the convention.

If this treatment is right then at the level of language-use conventional norms are just as surely standards of evaluation, indexed to their hypothetical ends of intentional realization (*à la* Laudan) or their institutions (*à la* Gibbard) as are stronger norms like moral injunctions. The difference is that what Millikan calls conventional and evaluative norms are subject to different standards of metalinguistic revision, depending on how entrenched the hypothetical ends and institutions are that enshrine them. For the purposes of marking the distinction between those that are better enshrined than others we may want to call some norms “merely conventional”. But conventions are as subject to evaluative appraisal as are any other norm, and all are potentially open to revision.¹⁸⁴ This distinction then would be an *artificial* one drawn within a theory of language that is wholly subject to evaluation, but a *useful* distinction in that it allows us to mark the disparity between those norms indexed to weakly revisable ends (convention, as how to decorate a Christmas tree) and those whose ends are more integrally indexed to the selves we collectively wish to be. And for the purposes of separating variable but regular-tending behaviors in the biological sciences from full-blown norms it is probably

¹⁸⁴ Unless there are some categorical ends that are beyond revision for self-conscious language-users, as perhaps Kant can be thought to have held.

better to adopt a term like “proto-norm” than to use one as evaluatively-loaded term like “convention”.

4.7 Social Norms and Intentional Self-Reflection

In concluding section 4 I wish to offer some final assessments regarding the notion of rational behavior with respect to society this view of normativity leaves us with.

If a normative model of intentionality as developed here is a viable model for the explanation of intentional states, it is a model that also brings with it certain implications about the obligations of intentional entities within a socio-linguistic system—obligations that apply to human beings with respect to their roles in society. Because each of us is inextricably bound up in the social order that conditions our self-identity, the intentional states available to us, we owe it to ourselves and to each other to reflect on the relative value of the norms that structure our society, for in so structuring our society they structure our self-identity as well. Societies invariably change over time, whether by internal revolution, external shock, or as a more moderate function of the shifting trends between generations. The younger generations that grow up in a society are engaged at once in the process of being conditioned by its norms, internalizing them as self-prescriptions for their behavior, and revising the social structure through their responses to different stimuli. One of the guiding themes of this thesis has been the supposition that the normative forces that constrain our behavior, the norms that we internalize in shaping our own self-identity, are subject to rational revision given self-reflective assessment.

But what does it mean to rationally revise a norm that guides society? In the first place it means to be willing to spell out the propositions that lead inferentially to it in the game of giving and asking for reasons, those propositions that *entitle* us to accept the norm as one that guides a social order, whether it be in the rigid form of a social law that codifies behavior or in something more conventional like standards of dress at a social function. In the articulation of entitlement relations we provide warrants that show our norm is one we are justified in appealing to as an explanation of behavior, or as a prescription for it. In some cases it may be found that the entitlement-articulation of a given norm leads us to discover it is an ineffectual standard, whether because the norm has been explicitly revoked (as in the case of the prohibition of alcohol in the United States), because it has been superseded by some other norm (as protecting our children from danger gradually gives way to allowing them freedom to make mistakes as they age), or because the norm itself has become irrelevant (as the duty to pay compensation by a State to a Native American Tribe would cease to have any relevance if the Tribe no longer had any living members).

But concurrent with an investigation of the entitlement-articulation of a society's norms, its members are obliged to investigate the commitment relations of their norms as well. If entitlement relations are upstream from a proposition, in that producing such entitlements serves to warrant the proposition as one that is licensed by the utterer, commitment relations lie downstream and articulate what further propositions the utterer is obliged to assent to. It is in the investigation of commitment relations that a society determines the worth of its norms. Believing that women should not vote implicitly

commits one to the belief that women are in some sense incapable of performing the role, evidently fit only for men, of helping to shape the nature of a democracy.

Believing that America should adopt the practice of renditioning to transfer suspected terrorists to places that practice torture implicitly commits one to the belief that torture is an acceptable means to acquire information.¹⁸⁵ Social norms are incessantly changing, and as they change so too do the intentional systems capable of coming to self-awareness within the societies these norms structure. Being a mature member of a society critically requires reflecting on and engaging in the process of revising the norms that constitute one's social structure.

We all come to maturity in a time and condition peculiar to our age, and in coming to maturity we are obliged to begin to reflect on the constraints that have served to dispose us toward the world in the ways we do, to reflect on the norms we have implicitly internalized and begin to self-consciously assess their value. Only in doing so can we earnestly engage in that aspect of the cosmos's development that is our own to direct—in the formation, sustaining, revision, and rejection of the norms that guide our intentional existence.

“This Becoming [this awareness of self through the historical conditions that have shaped us] presents a slow-moving succession of Spirits, a gallery of images, each of which, endowed with all the riches of Spirit, moves thus slowly just because the Self has to penetrate and digest this entire wealth of its substance. As [the self's] fulfillment consists in perfectly *knowing* what *it is*...this knowing is [the self's] *withdrawal into itself*... and this transformed existence...now reborn of the Spirit's knowledge—is the new existence, a new world and a new shape of Spirit...So

¹⁸⁵ Again we can see the way a normative explanation of intentionality operates here: “I intend to rendition Mustafa” is to be understood as “I should send Mustafa to a prison in Saudi Arabia to cause him to divulge information”. On this account the intention is implicitly prescriptive, it serves to institute a norm directed toward the hypothetical end of acquiring information, and it prescribes the activity of renditioning and torture to causally achieve that end.

although this Spirit starts afresh and apparently from its own resources to bring itself to maturity, it is none the less on a higher level that it starts.”¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §808, page 492.

5. CONCLUSION: RATIONAL DISCOURSE, RATIONAL REFLECTION, AND NORMATIVITY

The is/ought distinction has become a hallmark of philosophy in the English-speaking tradition. So well established is the distinction that some of us take it to be a truism. There is a discourse of facts, propositions regarding the world that are true and false—with it we carry on our scientific investigations, the epistemic disciplines concerned with what we know. Set opposite the discourse of facts is a discourse of values, propositions concerned with what our obligations are—with value-discourse we offer pronouncements on what we should appreciate aesthetically and how we are obliged socially to behave. G.E. Moore helped enshrine this pathos of Anglo-American philosophy by christening it a fallacy, the *naturalistic fallacy*. There is a discourse on factual things and there is a discourse on valuable things—and never the twain shall meet.

But one might wonder whether this is/ought bifurcation is more philosophical chaff than wheat. Certainly the view that led Moore to identify the so-called naturalistic fallacy is not one that has been shared by all philosophers, or even all English-speaking ones.¹⁸⁷

John Dewey examined two general historical approaches to facts and values in *The Quest for Certainty*, one before the rise of the physical sciences and one afterward.

¹⁸⁷ The next 7 paragraphs, in slightly different form, originally appeared in my paper “Pragmatism and the Normative Theory of Rationality” given at the Western Canadian Philosophical Association’s 44th Annual Meeting at the University of Saskatchewan in October 2007.

In this work he criticizes the pre-scientific revolution notion of a fixed realm of immutable being, the categories of which are thought to provide the only measure of certainty for knowledge worthy of the name.¹⁸⁸ Opposed to this realm of ideal being philosophers have historically placed the messiness of becoming, the constant flux of the phenomenal world. There is a manifest strain in this conception. Human life obtains in the realm of becoming, the world of constant flux and transition, yet knowledge on this view requires access to the fixed and immutable categories of being. Such a bifurcated relationship might have lasted far longer had not the rise of physical science undermined its plausibility. For Dewey, the rise of science is the story of our freedom from intellectual authoritarianism. As the growth of the empirical sciences dismantled the old conception of an immutable ideal realm, and in the absence of authoritative standards drawn from that realm, Dewey cautions us that we must come to recognize that *we* give standards to the world, that *we* are the ultimate bearers of meaning, and thus that we are ultimately responsible for the values we take to be real. We must come to recognize that norms are tools we bring to bear in facilitating our interaction with the facts of the world, that it is essential to the existence of an ideal that it be *made real* through human activity.

For Dewey the philosophical instability brought on by the growth of the sciences impels the rejection of the extreme polarity that motivated the fact/value, real/ideal distinction to begin with. The problem lies not in our inability to proffer an account of

¹⁸⁸ John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, (New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1929), 26-7.

immutable Being's realm of ideals related to the shifting facts of Becoming, but in the suggestion that the two realms were so distinct in the first place.

The assumption of the antecedent inherent identity of the actual and the ideal has generated problems which have not been solved...[But] there is an idealization through actions that are directed by thought...Nature thus supplies potential material for [the] embodiment of ideals...It lends itself to operations by which it is perfected. The process is not a passive one. Rather nature gives, not always freely but in response to search, means and material by which the values we judge to have supreme quality may be embodied in existence. It depends upon the choice of man whether he employs what nature provides and for what ends he uses it.¹⁸⁹

Dewey encourages us to view ideals as instruments through which human activity may be directed in the world. Norms are not the sorts of things that obtain transcendentally, available to the philosophical investigations of Ivory-towered academics. Norms are instruments, tools made use of in the practical activity of human life. Ideals do not stand above and opposed to the real world. Rather, ideals are made real through being put to use. It is the very meaning of a thing being real that it be *made* real through becoming.¹⁹⁰ Instead of an ideal realm held off from the realm of nature, Dewey offers a view of values whose “maintenance is dependent upon the intentional activities of an empirical agent”.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Dewey, *The Quest For Certainty*, 301-2.

¹⁹⁰ “Why should the idea that knowledge makes a difference to and in things be antecedently questionable? If one is already committed to a belief that Reality is neatly and finally tied up in a packet without loose ends, unfinished issues or new departures, one would object to knowledge making a difference just as one would object to any other impertinent obtruder. But if one believes that the world itself is in transformation, why should the notion that knowledge is the most important mode of its modification and the only organ of its guidance be *a priori* obnoxious? From p. 210 “The Practical Character of Reality,” *The Philosophy of John Dewey: Two Volumes in One*, ed. by John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981b): 207-222.

¹⁹¹ From p.207 in “Experience and Objective Idealism,” *The Philosophy of John Dewey: Two Volumes in One*, ed. by John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981a), 193-207. One idea that came across quite clearly from Professor McDermott's lectures on Dewey was the philosophical significance of the etymological ramifications behind Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Not only did

The normativity that Brandom and McDowell draw from Kant is channeled through socio-historic development in just the way that Hegel—and Dewey—advocate.¹⁹² Indeed, while Sellars thought of himself as moving contemporary philosophy from its Humean to its Kantian period, Richard Rorty’s introduction to Sellars’s *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* remarks that Brandom’s work “can usefully be seen as an attempt to usher analytic philosophy from its Kantian to its Hegelian stage...”¹⁹³ What this refers to, in the context of the normative approach Brandom adopts, is the shift in emphasis from a transcendental status for the norms that underwrite rationality, to an immanence where these norms are lodged in the social life through which human beings come to maturity, embodied in coming to learn and use a language.

This maturity is the “second nature” that McDowell appeals to in grounding our capability to apprehend the world through conceptual norms. Second nature is acculturation, and it is through social education that we come to adopt particular norms in our interaction with the world. Social life is *constitutive* of human nature, and it is

Darwin’s work undercut the old idea of fixed and unchanging species, but even the word itself spelled a certain death-knell for classical philosophical commitments. For “species” is the Latin translation of the Greek *eidos*—Plato’s forms and “the essence of each thing and its primary substance” for Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, 1032b1-2 in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Richard McKeon, ed., (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), page 792). In arguing for an *origin* of species, Darwin was (perhaps wittingly) arguing for an origin of essences as well. “There are, indeed, but two alternative courses,” in the aftermath of Darwin, Dewey writes. “We must either find the appropriate objects and organs of knowledge in the mutual interactions of changing things; or else, to escape the infection of change, we *must* seek them in some transcendent and supernal region.” From “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy,” McDermott, *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, 34. Dewey, of course, argues we should cut our moorings from the transcendent realm and ground ideals in our “mutual interactions [with] changing things.”

¹⁹² Dewey would remark in “From Absolutism to Experimentalism” that his exposure to Hegel “has left a permanent deposit on my thinking.” See p. 8 of “From Absolutism to Experimentalism” in *The Philosophy of John Dewey: Two Volumes in One*, ed. By John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981c), 1-13.

¹⁹³ Richard Rorty, “Introduction” to Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), pages 8-9.

thus *natural* on this conception that through our sociality we come to make normative judgments. Our social life is permeated by normativity, to the point that (as Brandom and McDowell argue), human nature is itself normative—or as Sellars said it is “fraught with ought.” The social norms we come to apprehend through acculturation are constitutive of the human nature of, at least, all language-using human beings. Though some cultures may exhibit a greater or lesser wealth of normative standard to reflect upon, owing to their respective historical traditions and the records that preserve them, we all turn to and reflect on cultural standards in coming to comport ourselves to the world. Our traditions form a foundation upon which to craft our dispositions, our interpretations, and the justifications we levy to support them. As language is the primary means whereby norms, values, and ideals are communicated and transmitted from generation to generation, this program of pragmatic normative rationality makes explicit our duty to self-reflectively criticize the linguistic formulations through which we inevitably participate in our ongoing cultural enterprise.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁴ It may do well to reconsider some comments made in a footnote given in Section 3, now with the import of their meaning more clear. In *Mind and World* McDowell asserts that learning a language is an initiation into “a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what. The tradition is subject to reflective modification by each generation that inherits it. Indeed, a standing obligation to engage in critical reflection is itself part of the inheritance” (McDowell, *Mind and World*, 126). Brandom’s own take on the obligations of rational discourse is rather similar: “Critical thinkers, or merely fastidious ones, must examine their idioms to be sure that they are prepared to endorse and so defend the appropriateness of the material inferential transitions implicit in the concepts they employ. In Reason’s fight against thought debased by prejudice and propaganda, the first rule is that potentially controversial material inferential commitments should be made explicit as claims, exposing them both as vulnerable to reasoned challenge and as in need of reasoned defense. They must not be allowed to remain curled up inside loaded phrases such as ‘enemy of the people’ or ‘law and order’.” (Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 70). Firmly wed to Brandom’s theoretical semantics then (no less than to the conceptual space argued for by McDowell) is the suggestion that theory must be put to use “in the form of an investigation of the ongoing elucidative process [of our societal concepts/norms and their commitments], of the ‘Socratic method’ of discovering and repairing discordant concepts...” (Ibid., 75). “It is in the context of these ideas [set forth in *Articulating Reasons*] that I have sought to present an *expressive* view of the role of logic and its relation to the practices constitutive of rationality. That view

Normative values are tools we adopt to work within the world's ceaseless becoming. Norms are things the presence of which is inimitably connected to the world of facts and causes, not immutable objects inhering in transcendence above it. Through self-reflectively adopting these normative tools we come to rework the world of facts into an image of our own likeness. Adopting norms is an inevitability of human life—in any social interaction (and indeed, I would argue, in any interaction with the world by self-conscious subjects whatsoever) we use norms, values, and ideals to pattern our activity. Making explicit this inevitability, and engaging wholeheartedly in its cultural manifestations, is one task for philosophical thought. Indeed, it is an *obligation* exhibited by the contemporary normative investigation of language and rationality. Though under the old conception of norms and facts we could not derive an *ought* from an *is*, under the new we are compelled to make explicit a *should* from a *must*.

This thesis has focused on normativity, but with a particular specification of its role in mind. What we have been moving toward (perhaps too frequently in fits and overzealous leaps) is a position at which rationality can be understood as a fundamentally normative notion—a process of articulating our positions as ones we are *committed to* in virtue of the reasons we levy in support of them. What this thesis suggests is that we are acting *rationally* only insofar as we *bind ourselves* to the *norms* that constitute our *reasons* for action—whether linguistic or behavioral norms. The process of articulating the rationality underpinning our *linguistic behavior* is a process of articulating the inferential warrants that entitle us to assert certain propositions, and

holds out the hope of recovering for the study of *logic* a direct significance for projects that have been at the core of *philosophy* since its Socratic inception.” (Ibid., 77).

being willing to reflect on the commitments we have implicitly adopted via these assertions. The process of articulating the rationality underpinning our *practical behavior* is a process of articulating the social norms that entitle us to so behave, and ultimately in articulating the hypothetical social ends these norms serve to help realize in our society by guiding our intentional behavior. Articulation of the rationality of our linguistic and practical behavior is a process of offering reasons that serve to license that behavior as justified given the ends we set before ourselves. But consequent on this initial articulation comes a further obligation—to assess whether the commitments we have taken up are ones we self-reflectively wish to bind ourselves to. The initial articulation of the norms guiding our linguistic and practical behavior comes by recourse to the social setting within which we are acculturated, but that setting is not static. It changes as a result (though not exclusively) of the revisions given it by thoughtful members of the community, those who are willing to reflect on the relative value of the propositional and behavioral entitlements and commitments licensed by its current structure. As a society's structure of linguistic and practical norms change so too do the assertions and behaviors licensed by that structure. While initially rationality is a process of articulating our obligations given the current structure of our society's norms, this activity brings with it the obligation to reflect on and be willing to revise this normative structure itself—whether for better empirical data, changing environmental contexts given a set of norms and ends held fundamental, or a change in those norms and ends themselves.

Making an assertion in aesthetics or ethics should be seen as no more arational than making an assertion in the physical sciences. In each case the assertion is justified by recourse to the standards according to which it is licensed in that community. What makes a discipline *rational* is the capacity of its conversants to produce warrants for their assertions within the discipline's discourse in the face of questions of license, up to and including engaging in revision of the axioms and ends that heretofore have structured the discipline. A discipline is by itself neither rational nor arational—rationality is a function of the behavior (linguistically or otherwise) of a discipline's *disciples*. What propositions are rational to assert within a discipline depend upon the standards of discourse for that discipline—but even these standards are up for rational revision.

Consider a recent study on the behavior of cleaner fish in the waters off the southern end of the Sinai Peninsula.¹⁹⁵ The author observed a number of species of “client fish” who frequented the site for access to cleaner-fish, and noted the frequency with which certain cleaner fish bit the client fish (instead of removing detritus and parasites), the subsequent behavior of these cleaner fish in apparently “deceiving” other client fish to frequent their location by engaging in altruistic “tactile stimulation” of smaller client fish far more regularly than non-biting cleaner fish, and the behavior of larger client fish in consequence.

As bystanding clients decide whether or not to interact with a cleaner based on how it treats its current client, it seems plausible that the function of the altruistic acts is to attract larger resident and choosy clients to the cleaning

¹⁹⁵ Redouan Bshary, “Biting cleaner fish use altruism to deceive image-scoring client reef fish”, in *The Proceedings of the Royal Society, London, B* (2002): 2087-2093.

station...In the cleaner fish system, cheating individuals [that is, those who bite their clients] use one class of clients for altruistic behaviour to produce a signal that allows them to exploit another class of clients *not despite but because of image scoring*. I suggest that biting cleaners make use of variation in pay-offs between interactions. They might behave altruistically in low pay-off interactions (smaller clients) and exploitatively in high pay-off interactions where mucus is easily accessible (larger clients).¹⁹⁶

What is impressive here is the degree of deceit apparent in the behavior of the cheater cleaner fish. “With respect to the function of tactile stimulation, the data suggest that biting cleaners use this behaviour as a signal out of context: it is not directed towards the current client but towards observers.”¹⁹⁷ That is, the cheater fish use tactile stimulation of small client fish as a means to lure in large score-keeping client fish, who being larger offer more food for the cleaners. It would *prima facie* appear there are indications of cognitive deception at work here, as cheater cleaner fish need to engage in tactile stimulation with small clients (which behavior they engage in more frequently than non-cheating cleaner fish)¹⁹⁸ in order to offset the tendency of score-keeping client fish to avoid feeders seen to engage in biting behavior.

But in a very careful discussion of the apparent score-keeping of client fish who observe particular cleaner fish biting previous clients and their subsequent “deception” so as to lure new clients, the author of the article is very clear to avoid anthropomorphizing the behavior of the fish.

As observers that approach are readily exploited, the altruism of biting cleaner fish seems to function as tactical deception of image-scoring clients. Tactical deception is the use of a signal from the normal repertoire out of context, so that it induces the usual response in receivers, to the signaller’s

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 2092; bracketed remarks and emphasis added, parenthetical remarks in the original.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 2091.

advantage and to their own disadvantage...Note that the definition is purely functional and does not assume specific cognitive abilities...[S]imple conditioning processes may be enough to associate the production of a signal out of context with reward, thereby increasing the probability that the rewarded individual will repeatedly produce the signal under similar circumstances.¹⁹⁹

Surely we *can* account for the behavior of the cleaner fish in positive-reinforcement functional terms, and in doing so avoid anthropomorphism. Whether the score-keeping client fish can be so accounted for is another story, given the apparent necessity of representing to themselves the behavior of bitten fish as being displeasurable, and also representing to themselves the tactilely-stimulated fish as enjoying pleasure, such representational capacity being necessary for the client fish to count as keeping score on cleaner fish at all. Indeed one, wonders in cases like this if the danger of anthropomorphization has become so severe as to have oscillated into a countervailing pathos—a tendency to remove all reference to cognitive capability in order to respect a discipline’s perceived need for objectivity.²⁰⁰ Though it is an ugly word, one might suppose that the urge to avoid anthropomorphization has given rise to a tendency to *anthroprojection*, in the sense of projecting onto other species the research methodologies currently in vogue in the journals of anthropos.

Regardless of whatever we might have to say about the relative merits and pitfalls of anthropomorphization and anthroprojection, for the purposes of our discussion

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 2092.

²⁰⁰ Again, I think a useful comparison can be made between the desire of natural scientists to focus on situation-behavioral relationships as a means to clearly delimit a data set with the desire of Brandom to focus on language-use as the original locus of normativity. In both cases the methodological restriction ensures a clear context of study. Despite the methodological advantages of these approaches, however, an enquirer might justifiably wonder to what extent they distort the world in favor of clear data sets.

the point is made. What counts as a warranted assertion in the context of a particular examination of the behavior of cleaner fish depends on the standards currently in place within the discipline to which the examiners belong. 200 years ago there would have been little—if any—concern with a natural scientist describing the behavior of cleaner fish in unabashedly cognitive terms of deception and intention. Insofar as the cognitive inferences available to the author (Redouan Bshary) of the cleaner-fish study mentioned above were licensed by the contemporary norms of the discipline, the assertions made within the discourse can be understood as rationally constrained—inferentially licensed—by these norms. But rationality offers us a second-order assessment of the norms that delimit warranted propositions within a discipline as well. While granting that Bshary was constrained by the current norms of his discipline to eschew cognitive explanations in the context of this study (which explanations another study might be explicitly addressed), we can also question whether these norms are ones worth preserving (as such a further study might help us address).

The claim in the fourth section of this thesis was that normative explanations of human behavior better explain our experience than explanations supposed to be non-normative in character, and that furthermore an understanding of the relationship between intentions as implicitly normative and social norms as guiding our behavior equips us with a means (individually and collectively) to rationally revise the standards that delimit our social order. For many of the norms that govern our activities in society are in place because of repetitive intentional behavior, not always subject to the rational reflection necessary to say they are norms we have *chosen for ourselves*. The disparity

between the way America is treating its soldiers during the Iraq war, compared with how its soldiers were treated during the Vietnam war, must in part be seen as an implicit reflection on and reevaluation of the way Vietnam veterans were treated. So despite the fact that veterans of the Iraq war are *voluntary* soldiers (issues of socio-economic constraint notwithstanding), whereas soldiers in Vietnam were drafted and had no choice but to fight, American citizens collectively make a distinction today between opposing the war and supporting the troops. Over time our intentional behavior collectively institutes norms that dispose others to behave in alignment with these norms, and an unreflective intentionality is a rudderless contribution to a society's standards. Whether in ethics, epistemics, or aesthetics, a disciple is rational in her discipline insofar as she is willing to articulate the reasons supporting her assertions, and to assess the relative worth of those reasons and to revise them in the face of new information and new ends taken to be imperative.

Though this view should bring with it an aesthetic wonder at our place in the world, though it should encourage the view that philosophy, science, ethics, and art are not so rationally far apart, though it should bring epistemics and aesthetics closer together, and in so doing emphasize the *ethical* dimensions of our epistemic and aesthetic standards as they are put into practice, I suppose our notion of rationality is capable of handling this extension and reappraisal. In making explicit our duty to reflect on and critique the norms we are always already bringing to bear on the world this view at least offers us a peculiar role to play in society, by self-consciously engaging in the rational development of those disciplines we wish to be disciples of. In so doing perhaps

we can offer philosophy a concerted return to its interests in goodness, truth, and beauty, reclaimed for rational enquiry.

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more frequently and persistently one's meditation deals with them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.*²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Werner S. Pluhar, trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), p.203.

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