

## ***Genuine Normativity, Expressive Bootstrapping, and Normative Phenomenalism***

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper, I offer a detailed critical reading of Robert Brandom's project to give an expressive bootstrapping account of intentionality, cashed out as a normative-phenomenalist account of what I will call genuine normativity. I claim that there is a reading of *Making It Explicit* that evades the predominant charges of either reductionism or circularity. However, making sense of Brandom's book in the way proposed here involves correcting Brandom's own general account of what he is *doing* in it, and thus presenting the argumentative structure of *Making It Explicit* in a new light.<sup>1</sup>

### **0. Introduction**

Robert Brandom's *Making It Explicit* has been the subject of much critical debate.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me, however, that the nature of the project as well as the exact argumentative architectonic of its execution have been widely misunderstood. Brandom, I believe, is not entirely exempt from blame for this, as he is partly unclear, partly misleading, and, as I will claim, partly even mistaken about what he is actually doing at the different stages of his awe-inspiring book. In this paper, I offer a critical interpretation of *Making It Explicit* in order to clarify the debate. I hope to show that if one reads *Making It Explicit* in the way embraced here, the account that it offers can be seen to evade the two predominant charges pressed against it, namely the charge of reductionism and the charge of circularity.

My paper comes in three parts: In the first part I will lay out what I take the project of *Making It Explicit* to be, which is to develop an expressive bootstrapping account of intentionality by elaborating a normative-phenomenalist account of what I will call genuine normativity. I will specify

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Alice Lagaay for helping me to get clearer about what I am actually doing in saying these things, and for refining my English.

<sup>2</sup> Brandom 1994, henceforth *MIE*.

the claim of the normative-pragmatist project, its explanans, its method, and the condition of adequacy it would have to meet. In the second part, I will review, in a series of steps, how the project is executed in the story that *Making It Explicit* tells. At each stage that the story reaches, I will pause to ask whether the condition of adequacy has been met, and it will turn out that it is apparently not met anywhere near the place where Brandom claims that it is being met. I will therefore argue that the best interpretation of the story requires quite dramatic changes to the official picture as to what is being done by telling it. In the third part, I will develop that interpretation, which includes reading Chapter 9 as providing the key to a dissolution rather than a solution of the problem of accounting for genuine normativity. The crucial point of the dissolution, according to my reading, lies in acknowledging the *irreducibility* of two perspectives that are *both indispensable* for us to make sense of discursive practice: the normative-interpretational stance of the agent and the descriptive stance “from sideways on” of the observer.

## 1. *The Project of Making It Explicit*

### 1.1. *Normative Pragmatics: The Very Idea*

The project of Robert Brandom’s *Making It Explicit* is to develop a normative pragmatist account of intentionality and meaning in thought and talk. Let me spell out what this means.

*Having intentionality* in the sense Brandom is concerned with just means *being minded* or *having thought*, in the sense of having access to the realm of Fregean *thoughts* – having mental states with contents expressible by *that*-clauses. Intentionality in the full sense of the term is what we ascribe to systems whose practices we can *only* make sense of by interpreting their doings in the light of propositional attitude ascriptions of beliefs, desires, and the like, in other words, by taking the intentional stance. There is a peculiar kind of *necessity* involved here: In order to count as genuinely intentional, it is not enough that intentional vocabulary be *sufficient* to specify a being or the practices it is involved in, for intentional vocabulary is sufficient (can be used) to specify almost anything, including the behaviour of thermostats. It rather seems to be the case that a being exhibits intentionality in the full

sense if and only if its practices are *essentially* and *necessarily* specified by intentional vocabulary.<sup>3</sup>

*Pragmatism* in general is the view that philosophy's classical "What is...?" questions should be understood as questions about what human beings *do*. Therefore, pragmatism as a strategy for developing an account of intentionality transposes the question, "What is intentionality?", into a pragmatist key and asks, "What is it that beings we treat as having intentionality are capable of *doing* that *makes* us treat them that way?" The core answer of the pragmatist tradition to this question has always been that the practices on the basis of which we credit some beings with having intentionality are *discursive*, i.e. *linguistic* practices. Having language, according to this tradition, is constitutive of having thought, while having language itself, in turn, is to be understood as being capable of taking part in practices involving the use of signs. Contents (meanings) are *entirely* conferred on signs by their suitably being caught up in practices of producing, using, and exchanging them. Contents (meanings) are theoretical entities postulated and ascribed by us in order to make these practices intelligible, thereby interpreting performances within them as meaningful acts of *saying* and *thinking*.

A *normative* pragmatist account of intentionality involves the view that the best and maybe the only vocabulary suited for developing an intelligible account of intentionality is *normative* vocabulary. According to an influential strand of twentieth century semantics, having meaning is, as Paul Boghossian puts it, "essentially a matter of possessing a correctness condition"<sup>4</sup>, while having genuine intentionality is essentially a matter of being able to normatively *assess* correctness conditions or, to use the well-known phrase taken from the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the *spiritus rector* of that view, to *follow rules*.<sup>5</sup> As John McDowell writes, the idea is that understanding the meaning of a word is to acquire something that "obliges us subsequently – if we have occasion to deploy the concept in question – to judge and speak in certain determinate ways, on pain of failure to obey the dictates of the meaning we have grasped".<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the task for the normative pragmatist account is to say, by specifying necessary and sufficient conditions in normative terms, how a set of prac-

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<sup>3</sup> See Brandom 2008, p. 183. This would not have to be taken to mean that it would be impossible to specify a genuinely intentional practice in non-intentional ways, only that the non-intentional ways of specifying it would be conceptually dependent on the intentional one.

<sup>4</sup> Boghossian 2002, p. 149.

<sup>5</sup> I will use the terms "norm" and "rule" interchangeably in this paper.

<sup>6</sup> McDowell 1998, p. 221.

tices must be structured in order to confer propositional and other conceptual contents on the signs and performances that play appropriate roles in those practices. The account thus has to specify what a being must be able to *do* in order to *count* as speaking a language, to make intentional vocabulary applicable to her and her doings.<sup>7</sup>

## 1.2. *Genuine Normativity*

What are the essential features of intentionality which a pragmatist account must make intelligible as being conferred on beings, their states and expressions, by nothing but their being caught up in practices of a suitable kind? It seems to me to be in line with Brandom's thinking to say that there are at least three such features:

(a) *Rationality*: Philosophers like Dennett and Davidson have stressed that to ascribe intentional states to a system is to make sense of it in the light of the constitutive ideal of rationality. To explain and predict a system's behaviour in terms of propositionally contentful intentional ascriptions is to *rationalise* its behaviour by ascribing states to it that would count as *reasons* for the system to behave in the way it does. I will speak of this rationalising explanation as intentional *interpretation*. The conceptual connection between intentionality and rationality is so close that intentional states are to be *individuated* by their *rational* relations to other intentional states. What constitutes the identity of a contentful state or expression, Wilfrid Sellars argued, is not its causal position in the natural world, but its *inferential position* in a rationally connected web of contentful states. A systematic theory of propositional content based on this thought can be called *inferential semantics*. Its founding stone is the idea that to be propositionally contentful is to be caught up in *inferences*. Inferential practices form a *necessary* subset of *any* discursive practice. Thus it is a condition of adequacy on a normative-pragmatist account of intentionality that it can specify what kind of a doing *inferring* is, and what a practice must be like in order to establish inferential relations between the performances it consists of.

(b) *Objectivity*: Propositional content can be characterised in terms of truth conditions, and even if a pragmatist semantics does not use the notion of truth as its starting point, in the end it has to arrive at the point of being able

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<sup>7</sup> *MIE*, p. 159.

to explain what it is that makes propositional contents represent states of affairs. This amounts to the same thing as being able to explain the representational character of propositional content. What is propositionally contentful necessarily has a representational aspect, it represents things as being a certain way. Nothing that does not display that aspect would be recognizable as expressing a proposition. Meanings are a special kind of norm which, according to a normative pragmatics, is therefore different from any other kind of norm instituted in practice. Anybody practitioner as well as the entire community together can be *wrong* about what the relevant norm really *demand*s. There are other types of norms instituted in practices, which reach no further than the consensus of the practitioners: If *everybody* agrees what a certain norm demands, then that's what it demands. (Think of the proprieties of greeting or of folk dancing or playing football.) But representational contents, and hence the norms that a normative pragmatics presents as theoretical substitutes for them, are *objective*. They *outrun* each and all the actual attitudes that practitioners take towards them. All the people all of the time may have agreed that some claim is true – and it may still turn out to have been wrong all the time.<sup>8</sup> Thus it is a condition of adequacy on a normative-pragmatist account of intentionality that it can specify what it means for a normative practice to institute norms that are taken to be objectively true or false.

(c) *Self-consciousness*: Having meaning may be a matter of having correctness conditions, but having meaning is not the same thing as being minded. One may be tempted to say that a minded being is one whose doings are subject to – are assessable in the light of – norms. That is, a minded being would be one whose actions can be interpreted as displaying meaning. But that is not enough. Being minded demands not only displaying, but *understanding* meaningfulness. Not every understandable behaviour is understanding behaviour. The signs displayed in a book or produced on the screen of a computerised informational system are assessable in the light of norms and hence display contents, but not for the system displaying them. Intentionality in the full sense of the term however requires the capacity of ascribing intentional states to oneself, of being self-conscious in that sense. In other words, the rationality and objectivity of the contents that are exhibited in the practices of some sorts of beings must not exist only in the eye of the beholder. They must exist *for* the beings engaging in those practices themselves.<sup>9</sup> Borrowing John Haugeland's terms, we can speak of *genuine* (as op-

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<sup>8</sup> See *MIE*, p. 626.

<sup>9</sup> See *MIE*, 630.

posed to *derived*) intentionality.<sup>10</sup> Thus it is a condition of adequacy on a normative-pragmatist account of intentionality that it can specify what it means for a being not only to be subject to, but to *hold itself responsible* to and thus *follow* norms.

It seems evident to me that all the mentioned features of intentionality are necessarily interconnected. If a practice can be understood as displaying one of the three features, it will necessarily display all the others too.<sup>11</sup> I will henceforth say that a normative pragmatist account of a practice suffices to make the practice intelligible as being discursive if and only if it suffices to make the practice intelligible as instituting *genuine normativity* – by which I mean instituting norms that form a rationally connected whole, which the practitioners grasp and follow, and which are objective in the sense that everybody can be wrong about what they really demand. If and only if this is the case does the account meet what Boghossian calls “the normativity constraint”.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.3. *Expressive Bootstrapping*

If we think of the project of giving a normative pragmatist account of intentionality in this way, it becomes evident that the normative vocabulary used in the account has to be *conceptually independent* from the vocabulary of intentionality and semantics.<sup>13</sup> In other words, if giving an account of linguistic practices is supposed to make intelligible what it means to ascribe having language and intentionality to a being engaging in those practices, the vocabulary used to specify the practices must not, on pain of circularity, make use of intentional or semantic locutions. For example, it would reduce the account to triviality if it proposed to specify certain performances within the practices as acts of expressing thoughts, or as acts of saying *that p*. For the question is precisely, what does it *mean* for a practitioner to *have*, and therefore what does it mean for any of his performances to be *expressive* of, a thought?

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<sup>10</sup> See Haugeland 1998a, 303.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Davidson has argued this point again and again. Being an interpreter of others (assessing their performances in the light of the constitutive ideal of rationality), being a self-conscious thinker and agent, and grasping objective truth-conditions, necessarily go together. You can't have either one without the other two. The reasons Davidson summons for this thesis are complex, and I don't have the space to elaborate them here. See Davidson 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Boghossian 2002, p. 148.

<sup>13</sup> See *MIE*, pp. xv, xviii.

It is important to see that the project to develop such an account does not amount to a *reduction* of semantic or intentional to normative-pragmatist vocabulary. A reductionist account would involve the claim that everything that can be said by means of intentional vocabulary can equally be said by means of a suitably constructed non-intentional normative-pragmatist vocabulary, implying that everything that can be done by using the first can also be done by using the second. Indeed the project of *Making It Explicit* has been understood in this way, and Brandom is not entirely exempt from blame for it. As philosophers like Donald Davidson and John McDowell have strongly urged, there are good reasons to be suspicious of such a reductionist programme and to assume that intentional vocabulary is in fact *sui generis* and the contents expressed by it are irreducible. However, Brandom's project can be understood in a much more modest and therefore more charitable way. This methodological clarification can helpfully be made in the terms of Brandom's latest work, *Between Saying and Doing*: His aim is not to be able to say in non-intentional terms *what can be said* using intentional vocabulary, but rather to be able to say in non-intentional terms *what counts as using* intentional vocabulary. Consider the analogy that to say what counts as playing tennis (saying what counts as making a proper serve, as winning a set, and so on) does not in itself amount to actually *playing* tennis. The project of *Making It Explicit* is to construct a universal pragmatist metavocabulary, i.e. a pragmatist metavocabulary for any discursive practice whatsoever. This means that in this metavocabulary one must be able to *specify*, i.e. to say what counts as engaging in, a practice; a practice that is sufficient in itself to *deploy* another vocabulary, i.e. engaging in which counts as *saying* something: "Being a pragmatic metavocabulary (...) is a *pragmatically mediated semantic relation* between vocabularies. It is pragmatically mediated by the practices-or-abilities that are *specified* by one of the vocabularies (which say what counts as *doing* that) and that *deploy* or are the *use* of the other vocabulary (what one says *by* doing that)." <sup>14</sup>

Brandom argues that the semantic relation that is established thereby between two vocabularies is of a distinctive sort, quite different from reducibility or translatability. For it is possible that the metavocabulary that allows one to say what counts as using the target vocabulary, can be strictly expressively weaker than the target vocabulary, which means that things that can be said using the target vocabulary cannot be said in – translated into – the metavocabulary. This is what Brandom calls "expressive

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<sup>14</sup> Brandom 2008, p. 11.

bootstrapping”.<sup>15</sup> Thus the insight that intentional and semantic vocabulary expresses irreducible contents can be respected. It can be granted that what can be said in these vocabularies cannot be said in any other vocabulary that does not conceptually presuppose them. We can take the following characterisation from *Between Saying and Doing* to be the correct specification of the project of *Making It Explicit*, and take it to be “specifying in a non-intentional, non-semantic vocabulary what it is one must do in order to count as deploying some vocabulary to say something, hence as making intentional and semantic vocabulary applicable to the performances one produces (a kind of pragmatic expressive bootstrapping)”.<sup>16</sup> Specifying performances in a target discursive practice in this way does not imply that what one says in the metavocabulary expresses the *sense* the target performances express (what one can say by using them), that they *mean* the same thing, but only that the pragmatically defined types of *doings* specified in the metavocabulary are necessarily extensionally equivalent with semantically defined types of *sayings* in the target vocabulary.<sup>17</sup> Thus one would have to show that having such-and-such a pragmatically specified structure is sufficient for any practice to count as discursive, and, conversely, that any discursive practice must have a structure of just this kind. Having such a metavocabulary for discursive practice as such would put an observer who analyses a suitably structured practice from afar – “from sideways on”,<sup>18</sup> as John McDowell likes to say – in a position to say *that* the practice in question suffices to institute propositional contents and hence to count as being discursive, *without* thereby being in a position to say *what* is being said by the practitioners, that is, to understand and translate and their sayings into the metavocabulary.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Brandom 2008, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Brandom 2008, pp. 78 f.; compare also Brandom 2005, p. 227.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Grönert has argued the point in Grönert 2006, Chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>18</sup> McDowell 1996, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Consider the analogy that a hypothetical future neurophysiology, which would give us a clear idea of what a structural or material description of brain states implementing consciousness should look like, could put us in a position to know with certainty, on the basis of data observed from a third-person perspective, *that* a creature under observation is in pain (because its brain is in the relevant state), without thereby being in a position to know *what* it feels like for that creature to experience the pain.

## 2. *The Architectonic of Making It Explicit*

### 2.1. *Normative Phenomenalism*

In the first part of my paper, I have tried to lay out what I take to be the *claim* of the normative-pragmatist project, its *explanans*, its *method*, and the *criterion* of adequacy it would have to meet. In the second part, I will turn to *Making It Explicit* in order to critically assess Brandom's attempt to work out the project. I will start by introducing Brandom's general conceptual framework for a pragmatist account of intentionality: a three-layered *phenomenalist* account of normativity.

Phenomenalism can be defined as a kind of supervenience thesis, the general recipe of which states that “the facts of what things *are* *Ks*, for a specified sortal *K*, supervene on the facts about what things are *taken* to be *Ks*.”<sup>20</sup> At the first level of his phenomenalist account of norms, Brandom introduces two types of so-called *normative statuses*, namely commitments (to do certain things) and entitlements (to do certain things). The concepts of commitment and entitlement are loosely modelled on the more traditional normative concepts of obligation and permission.<sup>21</sup> Taking the practice of playing *games* according to certain rules (norms) as a model of linguistic practices, we may say that the normative statuses a practitioner has earned are what commit her to certain moves within the game and entitle her to other such moves. Normative statuses are supposed to serve as the normative-pragmatist substitutes for the traditional notion of intentional states.<sup>22</sup>

But where do these normative statuses come from? In answering this question, the second layer of the phenomenalist account comes into play, which introduces *normative attitudes*, of which again there are two: undertakings and attributions. Undertakings and attributions are doings, *moves* within a normative practice. Attributing a commitment or entitlement to someone is *taking* or *treating* her as having that normative status. Undertaking a commitment is licensing others to attribute that commitment to oneself. Normative statuses are to be explained as being *instituted* by normative attitudes, that is, by the practices of taking or treating practitioners *as* committed or entitled to certain moves within the game. We may refer to this important thesis of Brandom's as the *institution thesis*. It is recognizably an instantiation of the pragmatist strategy: Norms and normative statuses are not ob-

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<sup>20</sup> *MIE*, p. 292.

<sup>21</sup> See *MIE*, p. 160.

<sup>22</sup> See *MIE*, p. xvii.

jects in the causal order, but they “are domesticated by being understood in terms of normative attitudes, which *are* in the causal order”.<sup>23</sup>

But now, what does it mean to have normative attitudes, to take or treat someone *as* committed or entitled in practice? At this point, the third layer of Brandom’s phenomenalist account is invoked, which brings *sanctioning* into the picture. Attributing a commitment to a practitioner means being disposed to sanction her if she does not behave in the ways she is taken to be committed to. Acknowledging a commitment comes down to entitling other practitioners to sanction oneself if one does not behave in the ways one ought to behave in the light of what one has committed oneself to. The sanctioning behaviour itself is to be understood in terms of positive or negative reinforcement, where negatively enforcing a performance is reacting to it in such a way as to make it less likely in the future that this performance will be elicited under the relevant circumstances, while positively enforcing it is to make this more likely.<sup>24</sup> Explaining sanctioning in this very broad sense by employing the learning-theoretic notion of behavioural reinforcement is important in order to counter the objection that our everyday concept of sanctioning *presupposes* the concept of norms and therefore cannot serve to explain their institution.<sup>25</sup> But sanctioning dispositions in the learning-theoretic sense are nothing but reliable responsive discriminational capabilities of responding in different ways to different stimuli, hence entirely specifiable in a *naturalist* vocabulary. Brandom calls this a “retributive approach to the normative”<sup>26</sup>. We might speak of the *retribution thesis* and follow Sebastian Rödl in saying that for Brandom, normativity is to be explained by appealing to *retributive disposition plus social institution*.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.2. Conformism

On the basis of the terminology thus introduced, Brandom in Part I of *Making It Explicit* offers a model of normative practice that was originally elaborated by John Haugeland but goes back to Sellars’s classical work “Some Re-

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<sup>23</sup> *MIE*, p. 626.

<sup>24</sup> See *MIE*, p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Rosen 1997, p. 169 f.; Rödl 2000, p. 770 ff.

<sup>26</sup> Brandom’s official position is that the third layer of the phenomenalist approach, defining normative attitudes in learning-theoretic terms, is *optional*, and its endorsement is not part of the project of *MIE*. It is, however, highly important to note that, according to Brandom, adding the third layer to the account is definitely *possible* (see *MIE*, p. 42; compare also *MIE*, p. 165 f.).

<sup>27</sup> See Rödl 2000, p. 770.

flections on Language-Games”.<sup>28</sup> There, Sellars discusses the problematic of how one could make a practice intelligible as being normative and the practitioners’ behaviour as being guided by norms, without specifically describing the practitioners as intentionally *grasping* and *obeying* norms, thereby begging the question as to what it *means* that they are capable of doing just that. A good way of thinking about what the account has to achieve is to think of it in terms of Davidson’s scenario of radical interpretation: We observe, from afar as it were, a community of more or less alien practitioners, engaged in a complex set of practices. What kind of a structure must this set of practices have in order to legitimately count as being a case of language use? In other words, “what one must interpret a community as doing in order for it to be talking that one is thereby taking them to be doing”?<sup>29</sup>

The key, according to Sellars, is to understand their doings as “pattern-governed behaviour”.<sup>30</sup> Pattern-governed practices institute regularities in behaviour which then serve as normalising standards for subsequent performances within the practice, which again reinforce the regularities. Thus, within such a practice, the regularities are what they are because the performances are the way they are, but the reverse is also true: the performances are the way they are because of the regularities being what they are. Such a practice is *self-steering* in that it at once institutes, follows, and maintains the regularities that govern it, even though none of the practitioners have to be credited with intentionality in order for this process to be intelligible.

Haugeland has turned this Sellarsian idea into a neat thought experiment that fits well into the radical interpretation scenario. Imagine a pre-linguistic, non-intentional community of hominids which we will call the *conformists*.<sup>31</sup> These are characterised by having two fundamental second-order dispositions: First, a conformist has an innate disposition to imitate behaviour of other members of its kind (“imitativeness”). Secondly, a conformist has another disposition called “censoriousness” which leads it to influence the behavioural dispositions of its peers by encouraging imitativeness in others and suppressing variations in their behaviour via simple conditioning mechanisms. Such a practice does not presuppose thought, language, or rationality on the part of the practitioners. Nevertheless, the conformist practice is self-steering in the way sketched above: Any community of conformists will, in the long run, and as the result of nothing but the wired-in dispositions of its members, tend to institute uniformities of behaviour among its members.

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<sup>28</sup> See Haugeland 1998 b, p. 167, Fn. 25.

<sup>29</sup> *MIE*, p. 637.

<sup>30</sup> See Sellars 1991, pp. 324-327.

<sup>31</sup> See Haugeland 1998 b, pp. 147-152.

These uniformities, whatever they are, are nothing but the result of the performances of the community members. However, once the uniformities are instituted, they write back into the practice, that is, they are causally efficacious for their own reproduction. For future behaviour (behaviour of just the kind which instituted the uniformities in the first place) will now be positively or negatively reinforced *because* the uniformities are what they are. One could call this process *normalisation*, and the uniformities established and maintained that way could quite straightforwardly be called *norms*.

Let us grant that this is an intelligible model of a community with a normative practice, but no concepts.<sup>32</sup> However, it is obvious that the conformist practice, as far as it has been described, cannot be understood as instituting genuine normativity and therefore not as a specifically *discursive* practice. In fact, what has been elaborated so far does not provide the conceptual resources needed to distinguish the discursive practices of rational animals from the behaviour of a flock of hens maintaining their pecking order. The easiest way to prove the point is to show that the norms instituted by the conformists' practices are not objective – they are whatever the conformist community takes them to be. The sheer question whether the conformists might be wrong about a norm they all “agree” on by maintaining it does not make sense. For the conformist account explains normative statuses in terms of normative attitudes, and normative attitudes in terms of *dispositions* to behave in regular ways. Thus everything that can be said about normative statuses in a conformist practice, according to this specification, can be said by talking only about constellations of behavioural regularities. It thus seems obvious that the normative statuses ascribed to this kind of practice cannot be understood to *outrun* the actual normative attitudes of the practitioners. Therefore, conformism cannot account for the institution of normative statuses with propositional contents because these require objectivity – the possibility of making a difference between what *is* right and what everybody *takes* to be right –, and within a conformist practice there is no room for this distinction.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Maybe it isn't even that. It might be objected that it is questionable whether the conformist view should even count as a *normative* account at all, since it identifies the distinction between right and wrong performances with the distinction between performances that occur *regularly* and those that do not. It thus reduces the basic normative distinction between what is right and what is wrong to *do* to a purely descriptive distinction between what usually does and what usually does not *happen*. Thus one could argue that it is not even fine-grained enough to establish any principled difference between forms of *normative* regulation of behaviour on the one hand and purely *natural* regularities occurring in animate or inanimate nature on the other hand.

<sup>33</sup> Brandom is well aware of this: See *MIE*, p. 36.

### 2.3. Scorekeeping

So how can there be normative statuses instituted by nothing but normative attitudes in a social practice, but nevertheless instituted in such a way that the question what these statuses *are* is neither settled by referring to the *factual* normative attitudes of any one practitioner nor to the *totality* of factual attitudes of the whole community, but only by referring to what it means to be *correctly* attributed that status? Brandom's decisive move at this point is to introduce the idea of a scorekeeping practice. The decisive difference between a scorekeeping practice and a conformist one is that the first one, but not the latter one, is governed by internal, not external sanctions. This means that within a scorekeeping practice, the normative statuses and attitudes governing the practice form a structure of mutual relations, a system of interdependencies. There is no *a priori* boundary to the complexity such a system of interconnected normative statuses could have. Thus we would have a system of normative statuses completely internally individuated in terms of their relations to each other. Such a system would be *holistic* in that the identity of any status defined within it would depend on nothing but its relations to other statuses. In a practice governed by such a system of normative statuses, the members' treating some behaviour as being inappropriate in the light of a normative status the practitioner has inherited, would not consist in sanctioning her by external punishment, but just by keeping track of consequential changes made concerning other, interconnected different statuses that are also ascribed to the respective practitioner (or even to others, like her family). This is *internal* sanctioning. Many game-playing activities can be understood as practices establishing such a system: Within such a game, playing a card, making a move with a stone on a board or uttering a noise of a certain type, can all have consequences only upon what other moves within the game are appropriate or not for the player when it's his turn again. In such a practice, it's "norms all the way down".<sup>34</sup> This practice could be followed without any external sanctioning in place, just for fun, so to speak. One could refuse to follow the rules, but only on pain of giving up the game.

This idea of a system of relationally interconnected normative statuses is the core of Brandom's normative pragmatics as developed in Part I of *Making It Explicit*, and Brandom claims (sensibly, to my mind) that it is this move which makes the normative character of his theoretical vocabulary ir-

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<sup>34</sup> *MIE*, p. 44; see also *MIE*, p. 625.

reducible.<sup>35</sup> His notion of a holistic system of internally related normative statuses instituted by nothing but practices of normative attitudinising is also meant to provide the foundation for the pragmatist project of “grounding an inferential semantics on a normative pragmatics”,<sup>36</sup> by offering a pragmatist account of what it means to stand in inferential relations, and therefore of what kind of a doing inferring is.

However, even if we accept that such a holistic system of internally related normative statuses is a *necessary* feature of any practice that can be understood as linguistic, it is clear that this idea as such is not *sufficient* to explain how such statuses could be understood as carrying propositional content. In fact, the game analogy makes this perfectly clear: The moves in a game of chess or football are entirely internally constituted, they involve commitment-preserving, entitlement-preserving and incompatibility relations between players’ normative statuses, but they are not assertions with propositional contents. They are correctly or incorrectly executed, but neither true nor false. A scorekeeping practice, in other words, is not necessarily a discursive practice. What Brandom describes in Chapters 1 to 3 of his book are various relations between normative statuses implicitly defined in a system of such statuses. The practice of navigating these relations by keeping score of the changes that attributing or committing oneself to one of the statuses has for the set of collateral statuses one must also commit oneself to or attribute to others can be called “scorekeeping”. But scorekeeping in this sense means no more than keeping track of the kinetics of normative statuses in a practice of moves that systematically change the statuses of those involved in the practice. This kind of scorekeeping is involved in a game of chess or solitaire no less than in asserting or arguing. In order to be entitled to say that this kind of scorekeeping amounts to uttering and understanding speech acts, it would have to be intelligible as *discursive* scorekeeping or *reasoning*. But in order to show that the normative statuses being tracked in the practice are propositionally contentful, that is to say, representational, it would have to be shown, by Brandom’s own lights, that the normative statuses instituted in the practice can be understood as being *objective*. And this has not been shown.

The picture is not altered if we include Chapter 4, the closing chapter of Part I of *Making It Explicit*, into our considerations. Here we are shown how the moves in the game can be causally connected to events in the natural environment of the players, so that the game is embedded in perception and

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<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Brandom 2005, p. 224.

<sup>36</sup> *MIE*, p. 132.

action, or rather, sensual stimulation and bodily comportment. Indeed we should accept this as another necessary condition for any practice in order to qualify as (empirically) discursive.<sup>37</sup> Surely the representational dimension of propositional content demands some kind of connection between moves in the practice and the world, so there should be language-entry- and language-exit-transitions. What we get is a kind of game that includes, unlike chess, but rather like football, minigolf and scouting games, things and events in the environment of the players as relevant factors for their moves.<sup>38</sup> The world, not the chessboard, becomes their playground. Indeed there are many such games and the language game must be one of their kind. But it is precisely this fact that makes it perfectly clear that anchoring the game practice in the world is necessary, but surely not sufficient in order to make a practice discursive. Passing the ball on to a running teammate in a football match is making a move in such a game, but it does not amount to *saying* something.

#### 2.4. *Readjusting the Structure*

The critical remarks made at the end of the foregoing section may seem trivial. However, it has to be pointed out that they squarely contradict much of Brandom himself has to say about what he is doing in *Making It Explicit*. More than once does he explicitly claim that the chapters making up the Part I of his book (introducing what he calls the “core theory”)<sup>39</sup> provide *sufficient* theoretical material to explain the conferral of propositional content on normative statuses instituted in a scorekeeping practice.<sup>40</sup> He presents the basic notions of commitment and entitlement as theoretical replacements of beliefs and justifications and assumes the game in which such commitments and entitlements are instituted to be the game of giving and asking for reasons right from the start. According to the view presented here, he is simply not entitled to this kind of talk. The kind of activity Brandom describes in Part I of *Making It Explicit* is indeed a game, but the moves in it are nothing but pragmatically specified generic performances, and to call this practice a game of giving and asking for reasons is a *petitio principii*. On the most charitable reading, one would have to say that when Brandom *does* call it so, this must be seen as a huge promissory note that will only be redeemed when it has

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<sup>37</sup> I leave aside the question whether a strictly non-empirical autonomous discursive practice is a conceptual possibility.

<sup>38</sup> John McDowell has argued this point forcefully in McDowell 2005, p. 127.

<sup>39</sup> *MIE*, p. xxii.

<sup>40</sup> See for example *MIE*, pp. xv, 45, 136, 159, 607. See also Brandom 2005, p. 237, for a very recent statement to the same effect.

been made intelligible how normative statuses can be objective. Until then, the scorekeeping practice can only provisionally be called a model of *discursive* scorekeeping, instituting propositional and conceptual content.

I suggest that, for the sake of charity, this is the best way to read Part I of *Making It Explicit*, despite Brandom's official claims to the contrary. If this reading is accepted, however, it follows that Part II of the book too must be read in an entirely different light than the one that falls on it from Brandom's own blinking advertising signs. For Brandom's own account of what he is doing in the chapters comprising Part II crucially depends on the assumption that the scorekeeping performances introduced in Part I could legitimately be understood as speech acts, as *assertions* with propositional contents. He presents the chapters of Part II as developing normative-pragmatist substitutes for notions like truth, aboutness, singular terms, predicates, indexicals, saying, and believing, instead of presenting them as what they strictly speaking are, terms for "constellations of tokenings, structured by the commitments (inferential, substitutional, and anaphoric) that link those tokenings", terms that "bear a certain resemblance to classical notions of sentence and term".<sup>41</sup> Brandom tends to make it appear that, *since* the normative statuses introduced in the first part of the book could be understood as propositionally contentful thoughts, it would *therefore* be legitimate to regard the subsentential entities extracted from them as singular terms and predicates. But in fact, as we saw, this is not quite how things stand at this point. Rather, at this point, *it remains to be seen* whether the practices in question can be understood as being discursive at all. And in fact only a positive answer to the question whether it would be feasible at all to impose on the practices a description like the one developed in Chapters 5 to 8 of *Making It Explicit*, specifying in pragmatist terms the structures of subsentential – I should rather say: sub-move-in-the-game – performance types, could provide a reason for regarding the practices in question as *discursive* practices in the first place. Thus, the entitlement to call the sub-move-in-the-game performance types utterings of singular terms or predicates cannot be *derived* from an anterior and independently established entitlement to call the full move-in-the-game performance types makings of assertions. Rather, these two entitlements could only be earned *together*, mutually conditioning each other. I therefore suggest that the best way to understand the relevant chapters of Part II of *Making It Explicit* is to regard them as specifying further necessary conditions that any practice would have to satisfy in order to count as discursive.

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<sup>41</sup> *MIE*, p. 539.

## 2.5. *Elaborated Scorekeeping*

So let us return to our question: How can there be normative statuses instituted by nothing but normative attitudes in a social practice, but nevertheless instituted in such a way that the question what these statuses *are* is neither settled by referring to the *actual* normative attitudes of any one practitioner nor to the *totality* of actual attitudes of the whole community? What has to be introduced into the account of the practice in order for it be intelligible to generate objective normative statuses? If we read Part II of *Making It Explicit* in the charitable way which I suggested in the foregoing section, the answer suggested by Brandom seems to be that the scorekeeping practice has to be *elaborated*. Thus, on the one hand, the job of Chapters 6 and 7 of the book would be to show how a basic scorekeeping practice can be refined so as to allow for the decomposition of the original performances constituting the game into various *component performances*, and by what scorekeeping rules each of these subordinated component performances would have to be governed in order to be useful for composing new, correct but unforeseen moves in the game, and so count as singular terms and predicates. On the other hand, the job of Chapters 5 and 8 would be to show how the introduction of *second-order performances* into the scorekeeping practice could be achieved, performances which would count – taking the ground-level practice as already being discursive – as deploying and introducing into the language logical, semantical, intentional and other second-order locutions.

Let us grant that the elaborate structures specified in Part II of *Making It Explicit* are necessary conditions on practice in order to qualify as discursive. But are they jointly *sufficient* for a practice to institute objective norms and confer genuine intentionality on its practitioners? Brandom's official position is that, yes, they are. For with all the technical raw materials introduced in these chapters, combining the notions of substitutional commitments, anaphoric commitments, and *de re* and *de dicto attributions* of commitments, Brandom thinks he can show how a practice must be structured in order to license understanding the performances of its practitioners as expressing contents that are *objectively* true or false for the scorekeepers. There is no space here to review the details of this breathtaking manoeuvre.<sup>42</sup> In a nutshell,

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<sup>42</sup> See *MIE*, pp. 495-520 and 584-608. The best account of the story that I am aware of is Loeffler 2005.

Brandom proposes to reconstruct the objectivity of discursive commitments out of two basic features of any scorekeeping practice, first its holism, second its perspectivity or social articulation. The first feature can be derived from the fact that in a scorekeeping practice, normative statuses are holistically defined in terms of each other. The identity of a normative status is constituted by a set of collateral statuses: those to which one consequentially commits oneself by attaining the status in question and those from which that status itself can be consequentially derived – in other words, the statuses that follow from it and from which it can be followed. But that means that making a change anywhere in a holistically structured system or set of normative statuses – e.g., replacing one commitment with another – alters the entire system and so the identity of every status within the system. The second feature is a simple corollary from the very idea that in a scorekeeping practice, *every* player is also a scorekeeper who keeps the score of the game on everybody else. There is in general no umpire who has the authority to decide what the real score of the game is – who is committed to what. Rather, a good deal of the game *consists in* the players' comparing and negotiating their respective score tables, trying to straighten out differences, and doing so is, *ipso facto*, a continuation of the game itself. In such a practice, mastering the game – understanding what the performances of one's fellow players mean, and what they have committed themselves to by producing them – becomes a matter of *navigating* the different scorekeeping perspectives. For in order to assess the normative consequences of some practitioner Z acknowledging a commitment p, a scorekeeper Y has no other option to calculate these consequences than by embedding p into her own set of collateral commitments. She might thereby reach the conclusion that she is henceforth entitled to treat Z also as committed to q, as – from her perspective, within her holistic set of commitments – q follows from p. But Z himself might not acknowledge any commitment to q, because his own acknowledged collateral commitments include a commitment to non-q, and he does not acknowledge any connection between these commitments such that commitment to one of them would preclude entitlement to the other. Now, in order to make sense of Z's performance as a player – which is, after all, the point of scorekeeping – Y somehow has to keep a double set of books for Z. For she has to attribute to Z a commitment to non-q. After all, this is a commitment Z acknowledges, which is a move in the game. But on the other hand, she must also – if she is in the business of calculating significances, of making sense of Z's performances at all – attribute to Z a commitment to q, for this is, among a host of other holistic consequential relations, what constitutes the very identity – the content – of Z's status p in the first place. Seen from Y's perspective, q is

what Z is in fact committed to because of his acknowledging p, whether he acknowledges this consequential commitment or not.

Now, attributing a commitment to q as well as to non-q might look either like an irrational attitude of the scorekeeper or like an attribution of irrationality to the player, but in fact it is neither. What is required is rather that one take into account the perspectivity of the game and accordingly distinguishing two kinds of attributions of commitments: The first, which Brandom calls *de dicto attribution*, is the attitude of attributing commitments to a player *as acknowledged* by that very player, attributing commitments as seen from that player's perspective, so to speak. The second, called *de re attribution*, is the attitude of attributing commitments to a player *as consequentially undertaken* by him, whether acknowledged or not, as seen from the perspective of the scorekeeper – calculated on the basis of her set of collateral commitments. Both ways of keeping the score are essential for mastering the game, for if one does not attribute commitments *de re* style, one cannot assess the very identity, the normative significance, of moves in the game at all; and if one does not attribute commitments *de dicto* style, one cannot calculate what another player is actually likely to do next. But the difference between these two kinds of attribution is, Brandom suggests, in fact identical with the difference between what a player *acknowledges*, that is, what she *takes* herself to be committed to (according to the score that she keeps on herself), and what, from the perspective of another scorekeeper, she *should* acknowledge, that is, what she *really is* committed to. In a practice with such a structure, scorekeepers, if they want to master the game at all, have to treat normative statuses as outrunning, i.e. as having more and different normative consequences, than anybody who has these statuses – including the scorekeeper herself – is prepared to acknowledge. Thus, the objectivity of normative statuses – commitments – in such a practice is instituted by the practitioners necessarily *treating* each other in the practice as being bound by such statuses. From every scorekeeper's perspective, anyone and everyone can be wrong about what the rules they follow actually *demand* – that means: what someone committing himself to a certain norm is really committed to, whether he knows it or not.<sup>43</sup> Objectivity, as Brandom claims, “appears as a feature of the structure of discursive intersubjectivity. (...) What is shared by all discursive perspectives is *that* there is a difference between what is objectively correct in the way of concept application and what is merely taken to be so, not *what* it is – the structure, not the content.”<sup>44</sup> Objectivity is not a

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<sup>43</sup> *MIE*, p. 636.

<sup>44</sup> *MIE*, p. 599.

property of an especially dignified class of contents which are, so to speak, *really (eternally) true* as seen from a God's Eye point of view. Brandom's position is that there are no such contents, and there is no such point of view. Objectivity, rather than being something non-perspectival, is precisely a function of the irreducible *interplay of perspectives* that necessarily makes up the structure of any set of social practices which suffices to institute any semantic contents at all.

### 3. *Whose Rules? Which Normativity?*

#### 3.1. *Has the Objectivity Constraint Been Met?*

After having reviewed the entire arc of thought spanning Chapters 1 to 8 of *Making It Explicit*, what are we – finally – to make of the book's master claim? What we have now in the thought experiment is a theoretician who observes the practice of a community of beings “from sideways on” (that is, without taking for granted that the beings she observes can be credited with genuine intentionality). She uses the normative-pragmatist metalanguage of *Making It Explicit* to specify their practice, describing them as being committed and entitled to certain moves, as undertaking and attributing commitments and entitlements within a game. There is a fine-structure instituted in the game that allows for the composition of “new” moves in the game by assembling suited sub-component moves. The observer also identifies certain moves, which while being moves of utterers in the practice, also seem to serve to take up other practitioners' moves and attribute these to them in a new form (so that the utterer explores the consequences of what he takes the original move to have been).

Now let us ask, for the last time: Would the fine-grained pragmatic sub-structures specified in Chapters 5 to 8 of *Making It Explicit*, taken as necessary features of discursive practice, be jointly *sufficient* for a practice to institute genuine normativity, hence to count as a language game and to confer genuine intentionality on its practitioners and propositional contents on their performances? Would a description like this, couched in non-intentional normative-pragmatist terms, *suffice* to reveal that the practice is discursive? Would it suffice to put the observer in a position to say *that* what is going on over there is *talking* – a discursive practice – even though she is as yet in no position to understand or translate *what* is being said? In other words, would

a description like this achieve expressive bootstrapping? The answer to this question is anything but easy.

For a start, one could obviously argue that the answer has to be positive. For if – as has been granted for the sake of argument – a specification of the practice on the lines rehearsed here could be elaborated, it would suffice to show that making a difference between what someone is ready to acknowledge being committed to (from his own perspective) and what he really is committed to (from the attributor’s perspective), is, from the perspective of the practitioners, built into the formal structure of the very process of keeping score in such a practice. Thus, for the practitioners, such a practice institutes a sense of correctness which implies that the deontic statuses practitioners acquire cannot be reduced to regularities of factual scorekeeping attitudes. But this means that, again for the practitioners, the norms they follow *are* objective, because this is what they *necessarily* take them to be. And this seems quite straightforwardly to satisfy the normativity constraint: Genuine normativity is instituted in the practice *for the practitioners*. It would then simply be incoherent to specify the practice in the way outlined above, yet refrain from attributing a grasp of the difference in question to the practitioners.<sup>45</sup> Thus it would seem incoherent to argue, as John McDowell does, that a certain practice might have all that structure and still be “just a game, a behavioral repertoire whose moves do not have a significance that points outside the game”.<sup>46</sup> For, if what I have said about intentionality in section (1.2) is correct, treating a performance as objectively correct *suffices* for one to take it as being true or false, as having *truth conditions*, and that in turn *suffices* for one to take it as being propositionally contentful. It would therefore have been shown that *if* the practice has a structure of the specified kind, then it *follows* that the practitioners within the practice *thereby* treat each other as dealing in propositional contents, as thinkers and speakers, that is, as bearers of genuine intentionality.<sup>47</sup> There is no room for scepticism here.

However, quite a few commentators have not been convinced by this line of argument, and it is easy to see why. From their point of view, it may have been shown that it *appears* to the scorekeepers within the practice under consideration that their norms are objective, that they *take* themselves to be following objective norms. But, these commentators would tend to add, *from the*

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<sup>45</sup> See Grönert 2005, pp. 166 ff. for an elaboration of this point.

<sup>46</sup> McDowell 2005, p. 127.

<sup>47</sup> This is a much stronger defence against McDowell’s objection than the one Brandom himself musters, according to which the practice being structured in the specified way makes it *extremely likely* that the practitioners treat each other as thinkers and speakers (see Brandom 2005, p. 239).

*point of view of the observer* it is plainly visible that this is not *really* the case.<sup>48</sup> For her, the normative-pragmatist specification *still* does not meet the objectivity constraint. Certainly, for the practitioners such a practice institutes a sense of correctness which implies that the deontic statuses practitioners acquire cannot be reduced to regularities of factual scorekeeping attitudes. But seen from sideways on, that is, from the point of view of the observer, *these attitudes are all there is and determine everything else*. For the observer, what looks to the scorekeepers like a difference between what a practitioner takes himself to be committed to and what he really is committed to, reduces to a difference in perspective between a set of normative attitudes held by one practitioner and a different set of attitudes held by another practitioner. Therefore, despite all the complexities of the practice in question, all the norms instituted within it are, for the observer, *still of the conformist kind*. In the metalanguage she uses, the normative statuses she ascribes are reducible to constellations of normative attitudes (which are, it should be kept in mind, reducible to structures of sanctioning dispositions describable in naturalist terms, at least in principle). “Being justified”, from the perspective of the observer, means just “being taken by all the practitioners, including himself, to be justified”. In short, “being entitled” or “being committed”, as the theoretician uses these terms, means “being entitled/committed *according to what the practitioners do*”, that is, according to what they actually accept as appropriate. The *status* of being justified is entirely reducible to actual patterns of acts of *being taken* to be justified. But then, obviously, the statuses cannot outrun what the community takes them to be. They do not and could not extend beyond community consensus; they do not bind the practitioners objectively, as seen from the perspective of the observer. Thus what has been accounted for is at best the appearance, the illusion of objectivity, not the real thing.

### 3.2. *The Importance of Going Native*

The way of reasoning rehearsed at the end of the foregoing section seems compelling. And yet there is something deeply suspicious about this kind of move. First, consider how puzzling the apparent conclusion is that there may be beings who coherently, consistently, and legitimately, from their point of view, *take each other and themselves to be intentional beings* (that is, thinkers), but who are, judged from the *observer’s* point of view, wrong to do so. This appears to be the idea of a being that is under the illusion of being a thinker, who takes himself to be thinking but really isn’t, and this is squarely unintel-

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Laurier 2005, pp. 155 f., Grönert 2005, p. 167, Loeffler 2005, p. 59.

ligible. “I think that I think, therefore I think” is an unassailable inference, and it works in the third person, too. Secondly, it is rather disconcerting to think about how *our* actual discursive practices would appear to an observer – say, a visitor from outer space – who watches us in our everyday linguistic dealings from sideways on, that is from the same detached observer’s position that we took towards our fictitious community of scorekeepers. Isn’t it obvious that, details aside, our practices would appear to him exactly as theirs would appear to us? And wouldn’t our alien visitor miss something *objective* about our practices and about us if he concluded that, for all he could tell, we might be engaged in some kind of super-complex, but ultimately meaningless *Glasperlenspiel*? But what kind of a further refinement of the normative-pragmatist specification of a practice, available from the observer’s perspective, *could* supply him with sufficient reasons to say that we really are talking?

I think it is obvious by now that *no* further refinement of such a specification could provide such reasons. And this should lead us – instead of continuing the search for more and more normative-pragmatist specifications – to question the standpoint from which the very request for that “something more” seems legitimate, indeed inevitable: the view from sideways on. We can question it simply by asking why we should accept the idea that, if something cannot be perceived from an observer’s, but “only” from a practitioner’s point of view, it would follow that it is not *really, objectively* there?

Thus my claim is that the key to a dissolution of the apparent problem is not to be found in the complexities of what an observer could report about a practice from sideways on, but in the *attitude* she adopts towards the practice. We can see what “more” is missing from the account if we shift the focus from the question of what practitioners have to do in order for their practice to be *interpretable* as talking, to the question of what *an observer* would have to do in order to count as *interpreting* them as talking. The answer, in short, is that the observer has to go normative herself. She has to stop being an *observer* and start being an *interpreter* – and that means: being a practitioner, a scorekeeper taking part herself in the practices she is trying to understand. Therefore, going *normative* is going *native*.

A further claim I want to put forward is that it is precisely this solution, or rather dissolution, of the apparent problematic in accounting for the institution of genuine normativity, that Brandom should be understood as embracing in the dark and infamous Chapter 9 of *Making It Explicit*. I therefore take it that, contrary to Brandom’s own announcements, the keystone of his enterprise of giving an expressive bootstrapping account of intentionality in normative-pragmatist terms is not inserted into the arc of thought until the

very last pages of his book. I suggest that in reading *Making It Explicit*, we should adhere to the things Brandom can actually be understood as *saying* rather than to what he claims to be *doing*.

Reading Brandom in this way makes available a surprising answer to the question where the proprieties of scorekeeping come from: It is *we* as interpreters who provide them. Any perspective disclosing genuine normativity is itself a constitutively normative perspective. We must normatively assess normative assessments. In order to specify which moves in the practice are *objectively* correct (and thereby to specify what a practitioner is committed to, what he can be taken as *saying*), we as interpreters cannot just specify which moves the *practitioners* take to be correct, we have to specify which moves are *correctly* taken to be correct, *are to be* taken to be correct – i.e., which moves *are* correct. Which means that we must *normatively* assess (not just report, or register) the performances under consideration as to their *correctness*.<sup>49</sup> This makes the attitude of taking someone as a speaker, an intentional being, a normative and evaluative rather than a descriptive enterprise. Brandom clearly states that the interpreter has to use “the norms implicit in his or her own concepts in specifying how the conceptual norms that bind the community being interpreted extend beyond the practitioners’ actual capacity to apply them correctly”.<sup>50</sup> This, Brandom declares, makes the phenomenalist account of normativity an instance of “normative phenomenalism”.<sup>51</sup> From the moment that she goes normative, a *gestalt*-switch will occur and the observer-turned-interpreter will be in touch with objective norms, just as the players she observed were all the time. For then, what has been said about the elaborated scorekeeping practice goes for the interpreter too: In order to understand the moves in the game at all, she has to treat the players including herself as bound by norms whose normative force goes beyond the sum total of the players’ actual attitudes towards them, even though, seen “from sideways on”, these attitudes are all there is. This is summed up in the following statement: “[W]hat from the point of view of a scorekeeper is objectively correct (...) can be understood by us (...) entirely in terms of the immediate attitudes, the acknowledgments and attributions, of the scorekeeper. (...) In this way the maintenance, from every perspective, of a distinction between

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<sup>49</sup> See *MIE*, p. 626 f.

<sup>50</sup> *MIE*, p. 633. See also *MIE*, p. 638, and Brandom 2005, pp. 238 f. Grönert 2005, p. 168, reads Chapter 9 in a similar way that has helped me a lot to get clear about my own interpretation.

<sup>51</sup> *MIE*, p. 627.

status and attitude is reconciled with the methodological phenomenism that insists that all that really needs to be considered is attitudes.”<sup>52</sup>

Let me summarise: The key to *seeing* objective norms *as such* and hence knowing what they are is exchanging the detached third-person perspective of the observer for the engaged first-person perspective of the *agent*, of someone who invests her *own* commitments into the process of interpretation. This may sound like a hermeneutic platitude. So it is. But I think keeping it in mind helps us to see what is wrong with the kind of criticism voiced at the end of section (3.1): It is asking for something that cannot be asked for. Consider the analogy with scepticism about other minds.<sup>53</sup> The sceptic argues that what looks like behaviour expressive of mind, of something inner, may, for all he knows, be just plain behaviour, a pure mechanism, not expressive of anything. He too asks to be given something more, a final proof, in order to be convinced that he is in touch with another mind. But minds, to borrow Stanley Cavell’s terms, cannot be *known* in the same way as turkeys and trees. They have to be *acknowledged*.<sup>54</sup> The same, I would say, goes for objective norms, i.e. *contents* or *meaning*.

Thus, again, it is true that one can specify the structure a practice must exhibit in order to count as being sufficient to institute conceptual contents in non-intentional, normative-pragmatist terms, which puts an observer in a position to say *that*, for the practitioners, there are objective norms instituted within the practice. It is also true however that doing so does *not* put the observer in a position to *see* these objective norms *as such* from her perspective, in other words, to say *what* these objective norms are. But in fact this is not at all problematic or even surprising. For being able to say *that* would amount to the same thing as being able to say what it is that the beings under observation are saying, in other words, to translate or understand the meanings of their words. And it was granted from the beginning that it would be too much to ask from a normative-pragmatist bootstrapping account to put an observer wielding it into a position to do *that*. It can – and in fact it should – be granted that, seen from sideways on, a discursive practice cannot be understood as conferring any contents in particular, since the norms constituting the contents are as such invisible from that point of view. Thus going normative – *acknowledging* norms – is the only way to achieve understanding of meaning, hence of knowing *what* norms the practitioners have really bound themselves to. The proof of the pudding, as they say, is in the

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<sup>52</sup> *MIE*, p. 597.

<sup>53</sup> Brandom 2005, p. 240.

<sup>54</sup> See Cavell 1969.

eating. Likewise, I suggest, *the proof of intentionality is in communication* – or rather, in having the pudding, and a nice little chat, with the natives.

### 3.3. *Neither Circularity Nor Reduction*

There are two predominant critical assessments of Brandom's enterprise to account for the institution of genuine normativity. The enterprise is either seen as being reductionist or as being circular. Those who judge the account to be reductionist – like McDowell – assume that Brandom stays within the confines of the view from sideways on (which, in fact, he does until the end of Chapter 8) and thus presents an account of normative statuses that can be reduced to talk about normative attitudes and ultimately about sanctioning behaviour. Seen from that perspective, Brandom's official position that such a reduction is possible, but not mandatory, appears as a mere curiosity at best, and at worst as an attempt to camouflage the reductionist character of the project.

On the other hand, those who judge the account to be circular – like Grönert – realise that in the end Brandom does give pride of place to the first-person perspective of the agent instead of the view from sideways on. But they assume that this move squarely makes the enterprise of giving a phenomenalist account of normativity collapse, because ultimately it has to appeal to the very notion of an objective normative status it set out to make intelligible in the first place.<sup>55</sup> For in Chapter 9, these critics argue, it is suggested that it is the “proprieties” of normative attitudes *as normatively assessed by an interpreter* that are made accountable for the objectivity of normative statuses instituted by the attitudes. However, this *presupposes*, on the part of the interpreter, a grasp of the difference between normative attitudes and objective normative statuses.<sup>56</sup> For the interpreter would not be engaged in the business of intentional interpretation if she only mapped the normative attitudes of the practitioners onto her own normative attitudes. Instead she has to be engaged in mapping the practitioners' normative attitudes, *including her own*, onto what she takes to be objective normative statuses. In other words, the interpreter would not be an interpreter at all if she did not understand that the set of normative attitudes that she uses as a standard for normatively assessing the normative attitudes of other practitioners does not deserve to serve as such a standard because it contingently *happens to be her*

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<sup>55</sup> Thus Grönert writes: “[T]he essence of normative phenomenalism as Brandom characterizes it is the rejection of the phenomenalist approach to normativity from which he starts out.” (Grönert 2005, p. 174)

<sup>56</sup> See Rödl 2000, pp. 773-775.

set of attitudes, but rather that this set of attitudes is *hers* because it conforms to *what she takes the standard objectively to be* – which includes the obligation to subject her own set of attitudes to revision if it turns out to be out of line with the standard.<sup>57</sup> The interpreter must grasp herself as being bound by the very objective norms that she interprets a discursive practice as instituting. Thus, “proprieties of normative attitudes” is just a different term for the notion of a normative *status*.<sup>58</sup> But then it seems that normative statuses have not been made intelligible in terms of normative attitudes, as the phenomenalist account of normativity claimed it would.

It seems to me that the impasse created by these two readings results from treating the disjunction between reductionism and circularity as being exhaustive.<sup>59</sup> It is assumed that the project of normative pragmatics must either lead to a full-blown third-personal, sideways-on account of genuine normativity and intentionality, or it must end in a circle by establishing that the first-personal, intentional perspective of the agent is unaccountable for in any terms other than its own. But in fact, I suggest, this way of seeing things is not mandatory. There is a third option: expressive bootstrapping, which is neither reductionist nor circular. It is not circular because, as I have argued in the foregoing section, we can make better sense of *Making It Explicit* if we do not allow ourselves to be misled by Brandom’s own signposts into ignoring or misunderstanding the crucial move of Chapter 9, which renounces the view from sideways on. However, it does not follow from this that the whole attempt to even try and elaborate a sideways-on view of discursive practice *as far as possible* was futile, and that the only possible conclusion to be drawn from acknowledging the irreducibility of intentionality and genuine normativity would be to acquiesce in some kind of quietism.<sup>60</sup> From the fact that the normative perspective of the agent and interpreter cannot be traded in for an ever so cleverly elaborated descriptive perspective of the observer, it does not follow that there would be nothing to be learned from looking at things from the observer’s perspective. We do need *both* perspectives to make sense of ourselves and of our discursive practices. Thus it is not true that the only thing that a non-intentional account of discursive practice as given from the observer’s perspective would be good for is to serve as a ladder to be ki-

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<sup>57</sup> See Loeffler 2005, pp. 39 f. for a good explanation of this thought.

<sup>58</sup> See *MIE*, p. 628.

<sup>59</sup> Sebastian Rödl, for one, thinks that Brandom wavers between reductionist and anti-reductionist impulses and that his account is therefore inherently unstable. See Rödl 2000, pp. 766 and 777 ff.

<sup>60</sup> I take it to be obvious that there is a palpable analogy here to the question of how to read the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

cked away once we have recognised its futility.<sup>61</sup> Think of it rather like a diving platform erected in the middle of a huge swimming pool: You can climb up it to see the exact shape of the pool (which is not possible while you are in it), and to notice how what in the water looks like a throng of millions of swimmers each paddling the pool in his or her own direction, can be discerned to exhibit clearly identifiable patterns from above. Of course, the one thing you cannot do while you're up there is to have a good swim, but that doesn't mean that it is not worthwhile going up. There is no need to kick away anything. Once you've seen enough, just jump right back in.

I believe that this attitude helps precisely in understanding the problem of the interpreter's own grasp of objective normative statuses: For while it remains true that the interpreter *cannot* evade the irreducibly normative first-personal stance *in praxi*, that is, as long as she is trying to *understand*, it is *also* true that she *can*, at other times, be an *observer* of herself, and can thus *know* that, seen from sideways on, what she is doing in her appealing to objective normative statuses, is nothing but her appealing to a set of perspectival, contingent normative attitudes – the attitudes she happens to have. From that perspective, her appealing to objective normative statuses *can* be accounted for in terms of her taking plain vanilla normative attitudes, and thus any air of mystery surrounding that capacity of hers can be explained away. The price to pay for the enlightenment to be had from that perspective is that no communication, no understanding is possible from there.<sup>62</sup> Our interpreter will never be in a position to take the two stances, the normative-interpretational and the phenomenalist-observational stance, *at once*. But what her life is like – call it the human condition – will essentially be characterised by her ability to take them both, each at a time, and by the degree of sophistication to which she has mastered the terrifyingly complex skill of navigating between them according to circumstances. Mastering this skill is what it means to be a *rational* animal, and a bearer of genuine intentionality.

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<sup>61</sup> I owe this suggestion and allusion to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to Grönert 2005, p. 166.

<sup>62</sup> Therefore, the idea of a genuinely intentional being with *only* the capacity to take the observer's, but not the agent's point of view, is a conceptual impossibility. A being that spent its entire life up on the diving platform would never learn to be a swimmer. But since the diving platform is erected in the middle of the pool, how should the creature have gotten there?

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