

Meaning, Dispositions and Supervenience

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Brandom's solution to the problem of rule-following is centred around the idea that we can explain the existence of rules if we focus on our activity of treating performances as correct or incorrect. In this way normative statuses are taken to supervene on normative attitudes, which in turn are deemed to be non-describable in purely naturalistic terms. Brandom offers two arguments against the reducibility of normative attitudes to dispositions (Brandom 1994, pp. 42ff). (1): the reduction of attitudes to dispositions to apply sanctions cannot be a proper reduction of normative notions to non-normative ones, because the description of attitudes as dispositions to sanction is not entirely couched in naturalistic vocabulary. In fact, the concept of 'sanction' is a normative notion, something that refers back to a normative theory of what benefit and harm consists in. Moreover, (2) since positive and negative sanctions may consist in acclaim and censure that itself have only a normative significance, there is no direct shift from normative evaluations to bestowals of benefits or impositions of harms.

To these two arguments it can be replied that they do not show that normative notions are a necessary ingredient in the explanation of normative attitudes. One can think of abstract communities in which linguistic practices are enough simple to make it possible to offer a dispositionalist reading of the emergence of normative attitudes. It becomes then difficult to say exactly when normative ingredients enter in play (Rosen 1997). This counter-argument can be strengthened by drawing on the discussion of automata and AI Brandom addresses in his recent *Between Saying & Doing* (Brandom 2008, chs. 2-3).

But if we cannot dismiss the idea that normative attitudes are, at least in principle, reducible to behavioural dispositions—that can be accounted for in non-normative vocabulary—we must also admit, via the thesis of supervenience of normative statuses on normative attitudes, that normative statuses can be taken to supervene on dispositions to regulate one's own behaviour as a consequence of normative assessments.

I consider two readings of the thesis of supervenience of normative statuses. According to the first reading the normative status of a given performance can be specified only in relation to the attitudes of the members of the community. As a consequence, this seems to entail the presence of a plurality of normative statuses—roughly, one for each conflicting attitude—concerning a single performance.

According to the second reading normative statuses are not instituted by actual attitudes but only by correct attitudes (Loeffler 2005). I attempt to show that the second reading tends to collapse on the first because, according to Brandom, identifying the parameters of correctness is entirely up to the interpreter who attempts to reconstruct the discursive scorekeeping practices (Brandom 1994, pp.

646-7; see also Grönert 2005). Therefore, there is no reason to expect that even an idealization of the scorekeeping practice could eventually result in the institution of a single normative status for each performance.

If individuals endowed with different attitudes institute different norms, it seems that Brandom's theory entails a reduction of norms to attitudes. In the last part of my presentation I will try to corroborate this suggestion through a formal analysis of the concept of supervenience and link this result to the previous discussion about the reducibility of attitudes to dispositions in order to reconsider the issue of Brandom's naturalism. My contention will be that the supervenience of normative statuses on normative attitudes commits Brandom to embrace a new kind of naturalism about norms and intentional phenomena. I have argued that Brandom is committed to the supervenience not only of normative statuses, but also of norms on normative attitudes. But then, if we accept the reducibility of normative attitudes to behavioural dispositions and formulate the thesis of supervenience of norms as a weak supervenience thesis, we obtain the following:

Supervenience of norms on behavioural dispositions: If two individuals possess the same behavioural dispositions, they can be said to institute the same norms.

But supervenience entails that individuals having the same correct dispositions institute the same norms, but the converse does not hold. On the contrary, it is a central feature of the concept of supervenience that if a set of properties A supervenes on a set of properties B, a property A can supervene on several different subsets of B. This means that, if norms supervene on behavioural dispositions, it is possible that two individuals institute the same norm even if they possess different dispositions. In response, one could maintain that the variability in the dispositional basis is connected with the fact that different individuals may be disposed to react to other practitioners' performances in different manners. But this suggestion does not help, since the variability in the way of sanctioning is merely contingent respect to the obtaining of a system of norms.

From this follows that the idea behind Brandom's account of norms in terms of attitudes boils down to a reduction of norms to attitudes. This drift is consistently amplified by the shape analytic pragmatism assumes in Brandom's last book. I conclude that *Between Saying & Doing* makes it explicit that Brandom's account of norms—and Brandom's semantics—prove to constitute a new kind of naturalism about normativity and meaning: accepting Brandom's elucidation of norms means accepting the idea that there may be a story entirely couched in naturalistic terms that explains how individuals, starting from a small set of dispositions to social behaviour and to acquire new dispositions, can institute a whole world of norms.

References

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