

ABSTRACT: "Games and Workshops"

Following Sellars, Robert Brandom has claimed that: "...at the core of discursive practice is the game of giving and asking for reasons". In this paper I argue that this assertion of Brandom's, which involves the claim that the discursive practice of asserting has the normative structure of a game, is ultimately incoherent. Rather, I argue, the way in which norms govern the proper use of a set of tools in a workshop is a far better model for the way in which language use is norm-governed.

At least since the late Wittgenstein emphasized it, the normative character of language has been widely recognized. But perhaps because Wittgenstein himself was not especially clear that the norms governing games and those governing the proper use of tools have a very different structure, it has not been as widely recognized that it is one thing to say that words and sentences are to be used to perform various jobs, as are the kinds of tools in a tool chest, and quite another thing to say that at the core of discursive practice is a game. In particular, the source of the authority of the norms governing and constituting games is radically different from the source of the authority of the norms constituting tool types. The norms constituting games are *autonomous*. They are independent of any goals of the players that playing the game might help to achieve. The norms governing the proper use of tools are not autonomous in the same sense. I argue that the norms governing language use cannot be autonomous.

## Games and Workshops

### 1. Games and Workshops

Language is norm governed. Only certain combinations of phonemes properly count as words. Only certain combinations of words can correctly form sentences. Only some sequences of sentences are appropriate; others are either incongruous, or incoherent, or absurd. Only some sets of words can properly replace others without altering the 'sense' of the complexes in which they appear.

There are, however, several different varieties of norms, and it is anything but clear just which kind of norm governs language use. Some norms have the status of the rules constituting games. For example, a chess player ought

only move a bishop on the diagonal, and three strikes ought to make the batter out. Some norms specify moral modes of behavior or specify appropriate ways to fulfill some socially defined role. For example, I ought to love and support my daughter. Some norms are prudential. For example, if one wants to stay dry one should not run naked in the rain, if one wants to win a game of chess one ought to act so as to control the center, and, all things equal, my dog ought not eat poison. Some norms specify how a tool is to be used, and thereby constitute tool types. A hammer is an object that is to be used in conjunction with nails and boards in such a way that the result is that the nails fasten the boards together. Although there is considerable debate concerning how these various types of norms are related, at least *prima facie* these different kinds of norms each have their own structure. In particular, each of these kinds of norms has a different source for its authority.

At least since the late Wittgenstein emphasized it, the normative character of language has been widely recognized. But perhaps because Wittgenstein himself was not especially clear that the norms governing games and those governing the proper use of tools have a very different structure, it has not been as widely recognized that it is one thing to say that words and sentences are to be used to perform various jobs, as are the kinds of tools in a tool chest, and quite another thing to say that at the core of discursive practice is a game. In particular, the source of the authority of the norms governing and constituting games is radically different from the source of the authority of the norms constituting tool types. The norms constituting games are *autonomous*. They are independent of any goals of the players that playing the game might help to achieve. The norms governing the proper use of tools are not autonomous in the same sense. Let me explain this difference.

Games are instituted among human beings through the establishment of a set of normative statuses, a set of 'game

objects', types of objects that get their character from the rules of the game. What it means to say that some object is a bishop is just that that object can properly be moved in certain ways in certain situations and can not properly be moved in other ways in those situations, where the 'situations' in terms of which these norms are specified are themselves similarly constituted in terms of the proper performance with other kinds of game objects. Because of this feature of game constituting norms, games are established by a holistic system of rules that specify a set of interconnected proprieties of performance with a group of related game objects.

When there is some purpose to the moves involved in playing the game, as there is in chess, what constitutes the achievement of that end state, winning, is also constituted by the system of rules constituting the game. What it is to check mate the king is defined solely in terms of the proper moves of the game objects of chess. This fact implies that the norms relevant to the playing of the game are insulated in two important ways from themselves being evaluable in terms of practical norms external to the game itself.

First, because the goal or *point* of playing the game is internal to the game itself, and is itself constituted by the norms governing the game, and whether or not a legal move is a good one is fixed by whether or not it is instrumental to achieving that goal, the norms that are relevant to the goodness of a legal move are also constituted by the norms that constitute the game. What makes moving the bishop in just this way in this situation the right (as opposed to a legal) move is just that, given the rules of the game, it is instrumental to winning the game, a state that itself is defined solely in terms of the rules of chess.

Second, since the point of playing the game is internal to the game, neither the goal of winning nor any external goal that a player might have in playing the game is at all

relevant to the evaluation of the norms that establish the game. Although being instrumental to winning is the only standard for evaluating the relative merits of different legal moves, because what constitutes winning is a creature of the rules, it makes no sense to evaluate the rules themselves in terms of their instrumentality for winning. But any goal external to the game that an individual might have for playing the game is equally irrelevant to the evaluation of the game rules that constitute the game. An individual might want to play and win a game for any number of personal reasons, in order to achieve all sorts of goals, from honor, to riches, to power. But the fact that the player is playing in order to achieve any of these goals implies that it is her judgment that these goals are potentially achievable through the playing of the game as presently constituted by the rules. So playing in order to achieve these external goals presupposes acceptance of the rules constituting the game and thus precludes using those goals to evaluate these constitutive rules instrumentally.

This fact, that neither the internal nor the external goal of playing a game is relevant to the evaluation or authority of the rules that constitute the game, forms the core of the distinctiveness of game playing as a form of practical activity. The source of the authority of the norms of behavior that constitute games and game objects is entirely divorced from the point of playing the game. Rather, what *makes* it proper for an individual to perform with a certain game object in a certain way, for example, what makes it proper to move a bishop in only those prescribed ways that constitute it a bishop, is just that other players of the game *treat* only those types of moves as proper, sanctioning other, 'illegal', moves. If you will, the reason why it is right to move a bishop on a diagonal, but not vertically, is just that the second move, but not the first, will be criticized by one's peers. That is, none of the rules constituting different kinds of game objects

can itself be evaluated in terms of any norm outside the game. While there is an obvious sense in which an individual player can get the rules constituting bishops wrong, and play a bishop illegally, there is no sense in which the rules themselves can be wrong. What the players treat as legal or illegal performance *is* proper or improper performance. Those norms are autonomous of other normative evaluation.

There are important analogies between the norms constituting tool types and those constituting game objects. Indeed, in many respects these norms are so similar that it is easy to fall into the confusion of thinking that they are identical. But there are also important differences between these kinds of normative structure. As with game objects, tool types are defined in terms of proprieties. A hammer is an object that ought to be used in certain ways, in certain situations, and not in other ways in those situations. Just as what it is to be a bishop is fixed by how such objects are to be employed in various different situations, what it is to be a hammer is also fixed by how hammers are to be employed in various situations. Similarly, the situations in terms of which the appropriate uses of tools are specified are themselves holistically specified in terms of other tool types. How hammers are to be used is specified by reference to nails and boards, and how nails and boards are to be used are specified in terms of hammers and other tool types. So, just as with the classification of objects as bishops, the classification in terms of which objects are hammers is dependent on a holistic set of interconnected proprieties of use of various types of tools that normatively specifies both what it is to be a hammer and how and when it is proper to employ an object that is a hammer. There are no hammers outside a set of practices that treat performances with hammers as acceptable or unacceptable, just as there are no bishops outside a set of practices that treat performances with bishops as acceptable and unacceptable.

But, as opposed to the set of norms constituting games and game objects, the set of norms constituting a system of tool types, or a workshop, can and must itself be evaluated in light of another kind of norm. That is, what *makes* a performance with a hammer legitimate or not is not just whether it is treated as correct or incorrect. Some ways of organizing the workshop of a carpenter, some ways of constituting the interconnected tool types of carpenters, are better than others in the sense that the same kinds of objects can be built more easily, more efficiently, or to stricter specifications using one workshop rather than the other. In a different way, one mode of organizing the workshop can be superior to an other in virtue of allowing for the building of more types of objects. And, finally, whether a particular use of a hammer is a good one or a bad one does not depend solely on whether it is acceptable to one's peers because it is instrumental to reaching the goals that are constituted along with the establishment of the workshop in which hammers operate. It also depends upon whether that performance is instrumental to achieving the goal for the sake of which carpentry was established in the first place.

What allows for these normative evaluations of the system of norms constituting a set of tool types, and for the external evaluation of particular performances with tools, is that the tools and *techniques* of the carpenter that are prescribed by the norms governing tool constitution and use subserve an external goal or purpose. The *point* of carpentry is to build things, and that point provides a standard that can and should be used to evaluate the social norms governing the use of the tools of the carpenter. As opposed to the norms constituting the proper way to play a game, the norms prescribing the appropriate use of tools are not autonomous. There are reasons for performing in certain ways with objects that are tools that are independent of how those performances are treated by one's peers.

The heteronomy of the norms governing tool use is thus related to the fact that tools function in an essentially prudential context. In this respect the norms governing appropriate tool use, while not reducible to, are parasitic upon, the prudential norms governing instrumentally rational practical activity.

When an agent, human or otherwise, acts in order to achieve an end, what that agent does is successful or unsuccessful, and in that sense correct or incorrect, proper or improper, only in light of whether or not it is instrumental to the achievement of that goal. If my dog Mac brings me a toy in order to get me to play, it is the right thing, the proper thing, for him to do if it gets me to play with him, and the improper, wrong, thing to do if it fails to help him achieve that end. The structure of the normativity of tool constitution is not the same as the structure of the normativity of this kind of instrumentally rational action, of course. Mac is not a tool user and this is not a mere accident. To be a tool user an agent must be sensitive not only to prudential norms, which Mac is, but also in addition be sensitive to the norms that constitute types of objects as to be used, with other types of objects, to achieve standardized ends. And Mac is incapable of acting in light of these kinds of norms. He can't recognize hammers as hammers, any more than he can recognize bishops as bishops.

But the fact that tool types are defined in a context in part constituted by the purpose of the workshop ensures that the norms that constitute the various types of tools in a workshop stand under further norms. The constitution of an entire system of tool types, through the establishment of norms of proper use, can essentially be treated as a single act that is performed in order to achieve an end. For, after all, there is a prudential point to establishing the workshop in the first place, through treating certain performances with certain objects as appropriate and other

performances as inappropriate. And, just as with any other goal oriented act, the activity in which the norms constituting tool types is established can be successful or unsuccessful, proper or improper, in light of that goal.

There is a second, crucial, way in which the norms involved in tool use are heteronomous in a manner in which the norms governing games are autonomous. As we have seen, to say that some move in a game such as chess is a good one is to say no more than that, given the rules constituting chess, the move is instrumental to the winning of that game, as that winning is defined by those rules. There is no further standard to be used in evaluating the correctness, in the sense of goodness, of a legal move. By contrast, there are two norms relevant to whether or not a particular 'legal' performance with a tool such as a hammer is well or badly done. First, insofar as it is a performance with a token of a tool type that is constituted by the set of social proprieties of performance that sets up the workshop in which tools of that type function, part of what it means to say that the performance is done well is that it is instrumental to achieving the ends that are established along with the constitution of the workshop. There are traditional techniques of tool use which are well suited for building things of traditional type out of wood, and whether a particular use of a hammer is a good one or not is in part a question of the degree to which that use satisfies that tradition. In this respect, evaluating the use of a hammer in the process of building a house is similar to evaluating the use of a bishop in the process of winning a game of chess. But, in addition, particular uses of hammers stand under a second, competing norm. As the point of carpentry is to build things out of wood that are useful, a particular use of a hammer might fail to satisfy the socially accepted norms and yet be better than one that does. If, for example, a carpenter comes up with new techniques for building a new and better kind of house, there is a sense in which what she



does with a hammer is done well, even if using hammers in that way is less suitable for building traditional houses than traditional modes of hammering. Because the workshop is for the end of building, a particular use of a hammer might be instrumental to that end even if it is not instrumental to achieving an already socially established end, and for that reason might be a better use of a tool than the use that is best suited to achieve the socially accepted goals for which the workshop was established.

So the fact that workshops are established for prudential purposes implies that the norms constituting the tool types within a workshop are heteronomous in two related respects. Both the norms that constitute the tool types in a workshop and the norms that govern the acceptability of particular performances with tokens of these tools stand under norms that are not established by the practices that establish the workshop. Games are different from workshops in both of these respects.

It is now possible to specify the question that is at issue in this paper. Are the norms governing discursive practice autonomous in the manner of game rules, or are they heteronomous as are the norms establishing the tool types within a workshop? How we answer this question is crucial to our understanding of language. For if the norms governing language use are heteronomous, as those that govern tool constitution and use are, then language would be unintelligible apart from an understanding of practical, nonlinguistic rationality, the ability of a non-verbal agent to act for reasons. In that case, the order of explanation would need to go from an understanding of what it is to act in an instrumentally rational way to an understanding of how practically rational creatures could in addition adhere to discursive norms. If, on the other hand, games stand at the core of discursive practices, then it is at least possible that linguistic competence could be understood independently of an understanding of practical competence, but that

practical activity was not fully intelligible apart from an understanding of discursive practice.

Robert Brandom is committed to the second alternative. "At the core of discursive practice is the game of giving and asking for reasons."<sup>i</sup> And he has worked out an exceedingly detailed and full view of language, and its relation to practical activity, on the basis of this assertion of the game character of discursive norms. In the course of that development, Brandom explicitly endorses the view that there is a certain priority to language use over practical activity, because practical activity is not fully intelligible apart from the discursive practice of language using creatures. "The intentionality of nonlinguistic creatures is presented [in Making It Explicit] as dependent on, and in a specific sense derivative from, that of their linguistically qualified interpreters, who as a community exhibit a nonderivative, original intentionality."<sup>ii</sup>

"...simple, nonlinguistic intentionality can *not* be made fully intelligible apart from consideration of the linguistic practices that make available to the interpreter (but *not* to the interpreted animal) a grasp of the propositional contents attributed in such intentional interpretations."<sup>iii</sup>

In the remainder of this paper I examine and criticize Brandom's version of the thesis that the norms governing discursive practice are formally similar to those governing games, and argue that the view is ultimately incoherent.

## 2. Brandom's Game of Giving and Asking for Reasons

For Brandom, discursive or linguistic practices essentially involve performances that have the force of *assertings*. Assertings belong to types that correspond to the intuitive notion of the content of an assertion type, or the sense of a proposition. Assertings are performances that: (1) are treated as correct and incorrect by the members of the group; (2) when acceptable, entitle the user to correctly engage in certain other kinds of assertional performances; and (3) when acceptable, commit the agent to

perform and accept yet other kinds of assertional performances. Given (2) and (3), assertings must form a system in which the correctness or incorrectness at a time of different types of assertings varies as a function of the discursive situation, where that situation is characterized in terms of which other assertings a particular agent is entitled to assert or committed to asserting at that time. That is, assertings are typed holistically by their proprieties of performance, where those proprieties are specified in terms of a system of entitlement and commitment relations among various types of performances.

Entitlement and commitment are normative. Any particular asserting is typed not by how it is in fact used, but rather by how it is *appropriate* to use it, which other assertings properly entitle or commit one to assert it, and which other assertings it properly entitles or commits one to. Because the type of an asserting is fixed by the entitlements and commitments associated with it, and entitlements and commitments have to do with when it is proper to make one assertion given others, an asserting is typed by its role in *proper inference*. Regularity of use is neither necessary nor sufficient for propriety of use, and it is propriety of use that fixes the type of an asserting, its 'content'. As anyone who has taught logic knows, it doesn't follow from the fact that asserting  $p$  properly commits one to  $q$  that any given individual will accept  $q$  when she accepts  $p$ . All that follows from asserting  $p$  is that it is appropriate to assert, that one is entitled and committed to assert and accept,  $q$ , or that one ought to assert,  $q$ .

If it isn't an actual pattern of use that fixes the proprieties of use that are central to commitment and entitlement, and thus, for Brandom, to assertion-type, what does fix those proprieties? For Brandom, the source of these entitlements and commitments, that which makes it the case that an agent is entitled to or committed to just these

performances, is just that the other members of the community treat that agent as entitled or committed. The statuses of being entitled and being committed, which are essential to the normative character of discursive practices, are entirely in the eyes of the beholders.

"Deontic statuses of the sort to be considered here are creatures of practical attitudes. There were no commitments before people started treating each other as committed ... Similarly for entitlements."<sup>iv</sup>

For Brandom, the normative statuses of commitment and entitlement thus have a non-instrumental structure. All there is to whether or not an agent is correct in giving a particular assertional performance is whether she is treated as being entitled or committed to do so by her peers.<sup>v</sup> Since it is the entitlements and commitments associated with an assertion that specify what kind of assertion it is, and those entitlements and commitments are constituted solely by how performances are treated by one's peers, assertions are similar to bishops in being game objects, types that are instituted by the norms governing their appropriate use in a game. But, according to Brandom, what kind of game is the linguistic game?

The picture here is that different kinds of asserting, different assertions, are sorted, and thus have the character or 'content' that they do, by the different norms that govern the entitlements and commitments that are associated with their performance. Taken together, those entitlement and commitment norms, or the norms that govern when a performance of that type ought to be accepted in the community, specify the inferential role of a type of asserting. Given those norms that specify when it is proper to use an assertion of a given type, what determines whether or not any particular performance of that type is proper is its linguistic situation, what other assertions the agent is entitled or committed to at that time. If agent S is entitled to assertion p at time t, and given the norms

governing p and q, being entitled to p entitles one to q, then S is also entitled to q. That is, it is proper for S to use a token of type q; the assertion of q is licensed by p. Now another player of this game can be in doubt regarding whether S is really entitled to q, whether she should let S get away with q, whether it is proper for S to 'play' q. The observer can challenge the propriety of S's use of q. For S to respond to this challenge it is sufficient for her to display an appropriate performance of p, which constitutes her license to the proper use of q. P thus constitutes a reason for q in the sense of a ground that legitimates the use of q. For Brandom, this process of legitimation by linguistically displaying one's entitlement is at the heart of both language and (theoretical) reasoning. That is, the discursive game is a game of giving and asking for reasons. "At the core of discursive practice is the *game* of giving and asking for reasons."<sup>vi</sup>

We can now see the profound sense in which for Brandom the norms governing discursive practice are norms of a game. According to Brandom, the game of giving and asking for reasons that is the core of linguistic practice is fully intelligible apart from any purpose that it might serve. Indeed, fledgling players can play the game of giving and asking for reasons, that is, speak and interpret language, even if they themselves have no purposes at all, and are entirely devoid of practical reasons for doing anything. According to Brandom, this is possible because the only ability that an agent needs in order to track and adhere to linguistic norms, and thus to be a speaker and interpreter of language, is the ability to discern and respond differentially to performances that are treated as correct by her peers and those that are not treated as acceptable. And this ability is entirely accounted for by the ability of an agent to respond differentially to distinct kinds of situation, and does not require any ability to act practically in order to achieve an end. Because engaging in

discursive practices is possible even for agents without any practical rationality, initial speakers need not have any beliefs or desires at all prior to learning how to speak and understand language. "The story to be told here assumes only that suitable social creatures can learn to distinguish in their practice between performances that are treated as correct by their fellows (itself a responsive discrimination) and those that are not. In accord with the pride of place being granted to the linguistic sense of belief, no appeal will be made to instrumental rationality on the part of fledgling linguistic practitioners."<sup>vii</sup> And, because the players of the game of giving and asking for reasons need not be acting in order to achieve any goal, the instrumental value of the game, or any performance within it, for achieving any goal can have no relevance for evaluating the norms governing the practice. Speaking is a pure game.<sup>viii</sup>

Here is how Brandom's argument works. To be a full participant in the game of giving and asking for reasons an agent must be able both to appropriately accept and correct other player's performances, and also themselves be able to make the proper 'moves' within the game. But doing the first amounts to an agent responding to performances by others that are treated as correct by her peers by herself treating those same performances as correct, and responding to performances by others that are treated as incorrect by her peers by treating those same performances as incorrect. Doing the second amounts to the ability of an agent to respond to the fact that certain types of performances are treated as incorrect by her peers in certain situations by refraining from giving those kinds of performances herself in those situations, and for that agent to respond to the fact that some type of performance is acceptable to her peers in certain situations by giving that kind of performance in those situations. But, Brandom claims, none of this has anything whatsoever to do with any purpose for

which the game is played, or even with any purpose any of the player's might have in giving any of these performances. Because this is the case, fledgling players do not need to display even minimal instrumental rationality; none of the players need to know how to achieve any end whatsoever. The only thing required of the agent is differential responsiveness, and this is a capacity that even iron bars display.

Since agents need not even display practical rationality in order to speak and understand language, they need not even have any beliefs or desires when they take up the game of giving and asking for reasons. So, Brandom concludes, no instrumental norms derived from the goals of the players could possibly be relevant to evaluating the norms that constitute the game of giving and asking for reasons, or even relevant to evaluating the performances within the game of particular agents. Assertions are essentially game objects, similar in their ontology to bishops, rather than tools. And, beyond this, since the theoretical reasoning embodied in the ability to correctly perform linguistic inferences does not require practical rationality, he infers that the role of beliefs in theoretical reasoning within the game of giving and asking for reasons is entirely understandable apart from the role of belief in merely practical reasoning. "I claim that one can explain the role of beliefs in theoretical reasoning (leading from claims to claims) without needing to appeal to practical reasoning, while I do not believe that one can do things in the opposite order."<sup>ix</sup> And, finally, since theoretical reasoning has priority over practical reasoning, and since the theoretical reasons for asserting *q* are understood in good game fashion in terms of a community treating an asserting of *p* as a reason for asserting *q*, even practical reason is to be understood ultimately in terms of a community treating a performance as correct. "Being a reason is to be understood in the first instance in terms of

what it is for a community to *treat* something in practice as such a reason, on the practical side of reason for action just as on the doxastic side of reasons for claims.”<sup>x</sup>

### 3. What’s Gone Wrong? Part One: Treating as Correct

Human beings do many things with language aside from making assertions. We ask questions, give commands, make jokes, create metaphors, etc. In addition, it is often thought that frequently agents make assertions in order to achieve an end. It is a commonplace to claim that often the goal of assertion is communication, and agents make assertions in order to communicate their beliefs to hearers. One might think that this multiple utility of language would undercut Brandom’s understanding of language as fundamentally a game, the game of giving and asking for reasons. After all, in order to use language in any of these ways, one must be able to achieve some end through the use of language. And to achieve an end one must be capable of rational prudential behavior and thus also be capable of instrumental, practical reasoning. This in turn would seem to suggest that practical reasoning is necessary for linguistic competence, rather than the other way around.

None of this bothers Brandom much, however. Of course he would not deny that human beings use language for many purposes. Nor would he deny that we make assertions in order to accomplish many and diverse ends. Nothing he says denies these possibilities. Rather, Brandom’s claim is twofold. First, he asserts that the ability to speak and interpret articulate language does not depend upon the ability to act practically in order to achieve goals. And, second, he claims that what it is to act in order to achieve goals is not fully intelligible apart from an understanding of what it is to be able to play the discursive game of giving and asking for reasons, but the reverse is entirely possible. His claims thus have to do with the ontological and explanatory priority of linguistic competence over practical rationality, not with whether or not language can be used by



competent speakers to achieve ends. These claims, however, are problematic.

As we saw above, to be a full participant in the game of giving and asking for reasons an agent must be able both to appropriately accept and correct other player's performances, and also themselves be able to make the proper 'moves' within the game. But, as we also saw, for an agent to do these things it is at least necessary for the agent to respond to performances by others that are treated as correct by her peers by herself treating those same performances as correct, and responding to performances by others that are treated as incorrect by her peers by treating those same performances as incorrect. Brandom sums these points up by saying that the capacity to engage in discursive practices depends upon the ability of social creatures to learn to "distinguish in their practice between performances that are treated as correct by their fellows (itself a responsive discrimination) and those that are not". Now, for the ability to speak and interpret articulate language not to depend upon the ability to act practically in order to achieve goals it must be possible for an agent to have the ability to perform this discrimination between performances that are treated as correct and those that aren't without having any practical abilities. That is, as Brandom recognizes, for discursive practice to be independent of instrumental rationality it must be possible to give an account of the discrimination between those performances that are treated as correct and those that are not that does not depend upon the instrumental abilities of the social creature. "In accord with the pride of place being granted to the linguistic sense of belief, no appeal will be made to instrumental rationality on the part of fledgling linguistic practitioners."<sup>xi</sup> So the crucial issue in regard to the relation between practical rationality and the ability to engage in discursive practices comes down to the question of the abilities that are necessarily involved

in the ability of an agent to distinguish in her practice between performances that are treated as correct by her fellows and those that are not.

There are two sides to the ability of an agent to discriminate in her practice between performances that are treated as correct and those that aren't. There is the discrimination between two classes of events, those that are treated as correct by one's peers and those that are treated as incorrect. And there is the manner in which this discrimination is carried out, in the discriminator's practice. To say that these agents discriminate between these types of events in their practice is to say that they respond with different behavior to the occurrence of events in one class than they do to occurrences of events in the other class. Such discriminate response is extremely common in nature. To use Brandom's own example, there is a sense in which iron bars discriminate in their behavior between the presence of water vapor in their environment and its absence. Such bars rust when it is present and don't when it isn't.

As the iron bar example should make clear, most such discriminations in practice that occur in nature are differential responses by an inanimate object to environmental factors, physically described.<sup>xii</sup> Indeed, there is a familiar sense in which the realm of the physical is definable in terms of the set of descriptive laws that govern such differences of response. And it is certainly the case that discriminations of this type, differential response to physical conditions by a physical agent, require no instrumental abilities on the part of the agent. Iron bars need demonstrate no instrumental abilities in order to make the discrimination in practice between water vapor and its absence.

But as a class, simple nonlinguistic instrumentally rational organisms appear to distinguish in practice between environmental conditions that are not physically

characterized or characterizable. To say that such creatures are instrumentally rational is at least to say that they can distinguish in their practice between kinds that serve their purposes and those that don't. Indeed, the necessary condition for attributing what Brandom calls 'simple nonlinguistic instrumental rationality' is exactly this ability to discriminatively respond to non-physical, teleologically determined, kinds. So, for example, it is of supreme instrumental importance for my dog Mac that he is able to distinguish in his practice between a class of objects that one might characterize as 'dominants' and another class that might be characterized as 'submissives'. Mistakes in such response on Mac's part can lead to prudentially disastrous results. Submissives share nothing in common physically; both the cocker spaniel down the block and Katherine, the girl across the street, are submissives. What submissives share in common are their likely responses to certain kinds of behavior on the part of Mac. But neither of these kinds of behavior, Mac's or the submissive's, are themselves physical or natural kinds. Aggression takes many shapes, as does submission. Nor should it be thought that the kinds are specifiable behaviorally in terms of simple stimulus and response mechanisms. Behaviorism has collapsed as a research program for dogs as well as for humans. All of the obvious simple candidates for defining such kinds of behavior in non-teleological terms fail for various reasons. It is certainly false to say that all dominant behavior is harmful to the object of the behavior, or that it is likely to suppress dominant behavior in the recipient, for example. Rather, what submissive behaviors share in common that distinguishes them from dominant behaviors is a certain rather complex role in the economy of social relations in which Mac takes part, an economy that is itself embedded in an ongoing attempt on Mac's part to achieve goals such as survival, security, and comfort. To say as Brandom does, that the best way of predicting and explaining Mac's behavior is

to invoke the intentional stance, is to say that attributing practical rationality to Mac is basically our only way to understand his behavior, because we can't identify any physical or behavioral kind that Mac is responsive to and which will account for his behavior.

Now, the discriminative ability that is necessary for discursive practice is the capacity to discriminate in practice between two classes of events, those that are treated as correct by one's peers and those that aren't. On their face, neither of these kinds are physical, or even natural or behavioral, kinds. Rather, the ability to respond differentially to those performances that are treated as correct and those that aren't would seem to demand instrumentally responsive abilities that are at least as complex as Mac's ability to distinguish submissives and dominants. After all, it seems obvious that the training that goes in to learning a language turns on getting the learner to understand which performances will aid the fledgling speaker in achieving her ends and which won't, at least in the minimal sense of generating responses that help her achieve her biologically programmed goals. But if this appearance stands then Brandom is just wrong in asserting that the ability to speak and interpret articulate language does not depend upon the ability to act practically in order to achieve goals. And he is also wrong in asserting that what it is to act in order to achieve goals is not fully intelligible apart from an understanding of what it is to be able to play the discursive game of giving and asking for reasons, but the reverse is entirely possible. For if the ability to distinguish in practice between those performances that are treated as correct by one's peers and those that aren't is necessary for discursive practice, and instrumental rationality is necessary for such differential response, then instrumental rationality is necessary for discursive practice, but not the reverse.

Brandom is of course aware of this gap in his

presentation and makes an effort to fill it. His strategy is complex, with several strands and alternative maneuvers. But the attempt to fill the gap ultimately fails.

First, Brandom considers the possibility that the normative status of a given performance, such as being entitled to that performance, can be understood in terms of a web of such statuses. On this view, what it is to be e.g., obliged to do B in order to be entitled to do A, (treated by one's peers as entitled to A only if B), is understood in terms of an agent who performs A without B losing an entitlement to C. The example that Brandom gives is a person who is permitted to enter a hut if she displays a particular kind of leaf, but if she enters the hut without displaying the proper leaf she is not entitled to attend a festival. Brandom suggests two variants on this approach. The web or chain of normative status can either be anchored in non-normative interpretations of certain base statuses (someone who goes to the festival after entering the hut without the leaf is struck with sticks or negatively reinforced in some way for going to the festival), or it can be 'norms all the way down'. I first consider the former alternative, leaving the more radical second alternative for later consideration.

This picture of a web of entitlements anchored by non-normatively characterized relations between certain normative attitudes and physical or behavioral factors is clearly borrowed from Sellars' way of understanding language, with its language entry and language exit rules. The problem to be dealt with here is precisely how Brandom thinks it is possible to discriminate in practice between those performances that are treated as correct in one's community and those that aren't without being responsive to the instrumentally salient features of the situation. Brandom's initial suggestion is that "these webs of norms linked by internal sanctions are anchored, as each chain of definitional dependence terminates in some normative status that is definable independently, by external sanctions

specified in nonnormative terms".<sup>xiii</sup> That is, Brandom suggests that there are two types of cases. In the first type of case, being treated as correct or incorrect can be identified with members of the community responding in some physically or behaviorally described manner to some non-normatively described state. In Brandom's example, if an agent who is present at the spatio-temporal location of the festival is beaten with sticks<sup>xiv</sup> (or negatively reinforced for being there), the community is treating his performance as incorrect. In the second type of case, this non-normative specification of normative status (being treated as correct or incorrect) is impossible. What is possible, according to Brandom, is to specify the difference a performance having the status of being treated as correct or incorrect makes to whether or not another performance of the agent is ultimately treated as correct or incorrect in the unproblematic sense. In his example, if the agent goes into the hut with the leaf, she is not beaten at the festival; if she doesn't have the leaf but goes in to the hut anyway, she is later beaten if she attempts to attend the festival. And this treatment amounts to the presentation of the leaf being treated as entitling entrance to the hut, and failure to present this entitlement being sanctioned with loss of entitlement to go to the festival.

Brandom clearly loves this example, as he introduces it several times, most prominently in introducing the game of giving and asking for reasons. But whatever plausibility the model has depends upon there being unproblematic cases in which a performance 'being treated by one's peers as correct or incorrect' can be identified with a physically or behaviorally characterized response to a physical stimulus. And there are exceptionally few such identities. Behaviorism would be a more plausible research program if there were. Even Brandom's prime example is flawed. Most obviously, neither the physical nor the behavioral specification of the sanction for coming to the festival without entitlement is

coextensive with any plausible characterization of the range of performances that count as specific ways of treating going to the festival as incorrect. 'Beating with sticks' picks out at best a tiny fraction of sanctioning performances, and there are even occasions on which beating with sticks can count as treating the behavior as correct, as during some Shi'a religious festivals. And, as the same example shows, even beating with sticks can be positively reinforcing of behavior, rather than negatively reinforcing, although one suspects not consistently so. Similarly, 'attending the festival' can only very rarely be identified with being in some spatio-temporal location. Even the seemingly unproblematic 'presenting a leaf' is a cooked example. Presenting some physical token is rarely if ever coextensive with presenting a license or being treated as presenting a license. As Brandom himself recognizes, one can have the token and not be entitled, if one receives it illegitimately. And one cannot present the token, and be entitled, if the token is stolen. This lack of unproblematic identities between being treated as correct and incorrect by one's peers and any physical type makes the strategy of anchoring a web of proprieties in such identities unpromising, to say the least.

Perhaps because this strategy is so unpromising, there are suggestions that Brandom has another strategy up his sleeve. For, he suggests, a system of proprieties might need no anchor at all. It could be 'norms all the way down'. As I reconstruct the argument, here is what Brandom has in mind. What it is for one's peers to treat a performance as correct can never be cashed in in non-normative terms. There is no physical type that an agent is responding to when she discriminates in her practice between performances her peers treat as correct and those they treat as incorrect. But no agent can play the game of giving and asking for reasons without being able to distinguish in her practice between these two types. So how can any agent play the game without

being able to reason practically and distinguish instrumental types? On this pass, Brandom's response is to claim that to play the game of giving and asking for reasons it isn't really necessary that the agent distinguish the class of performances that are treated as correct from those that are treated as incorrect. Rather, what is necessary if we are to play the game is that "we can be trained so as almost always to respond in the same way when applying concepts in novel cases, for instance..."<sup>xv</sup> That is, the suggestion is that all that is needed to play the discursive game is consistency of response across the community in similar physically described circumstances, but such consistent responsiveness doesn't define what is appropriate in those circumstances.

Brandom introduces this suggestion in the course of considering, and rejecting, the 'social regularity' view of normativity, the view that what it is for a performance to be correct can be identified with the performance being in accordance with the overwhelmingly statistically normal response within a community. And as a critique of that view, Brandom's comment is apt. Charity demands that relative consistency of response is necessary for a performance being (treated as) correct, but it isn't identical with it. But the very fact that such consistency fails to capture what it is for a community to treat a performance as correct, that it leaves the normative character of the evaluation unfounded, shows that such consistency also fails to capture what an agent must be responsive to in order to count as playing the game of giving and asking for reasons. While consistency of response in various physically described conditions is necessary in order to play the game of giving and asking for reasons, it is not sufficient.

The conclusion, then, is that Brandom has failed to show how it is possible for an agent to use and understand language, to be a participant in the game of giving and asking for reasons, without being capable of instrumental



rationality. If language is a game, it is a game that is inscribed in a practical nexus, and it is a game that can only be played by agents who possess practical rationality.

#### 4. What's Gone Wrong? Part 2: The Normativity of Belief

But is language a game, and are assertions game objects, at all? Strictly, the conclusion that language isn't a game doesn't follow solely from the premise that only practically rational agents can make the discriminations necessary in order to speak. If it did, it would also follow from the fact that only practically rational agents can play chess that chess wasn't a game, either.

Nevertheless, once one sees just how implausible it is to think that theoretical reason in Brandom's sense has priority over instrumental reason, one can also see that there are excellent reasons to think that language is a workshop composed of a set of tools, rather than a set of game objects.

As we saw earlier, the ontology of tools and the ontology of game objects share several crucial features. Both tools and game objects are entities that are constituted by a set of norms. What it is to be a hammer is defined in terms of how hammers are to be used; what it is to be a bishop is defined in terms of how bishops are to be moved. Further, the norms that constitute both tools and game objects are holistic. How a particular type of tool such as a hammer is to be used is specified in terms of how it is to be used along with other tool types, such as boards and nails, which in turn are to be used with ... in order to achieve standard types of ends. How a bishop is to be moved is specified in terms of its relations with other game objects, such as the board and pawns, which in turn are to be moved with or played on by ... in attempts to win the game. Both tool types and types of game objects are abstract. Physically different types of entities can all count as the same kind of tool or game object, although in general there

is clearly more physical latitude for game objects than for tools. Perhaps most importantly, the norms that establish both game objects and tool types have a special relationship with those who play the games and use the tools. The acquiescence of those who play games and use tools in the norms that constitute games and workshops is necessary for there to be both game objects and tool types. Nothing is a hammer or a bishop unless there are agents who *treat* entities as hammers and bishops.

This list of similarities in the ontology of tools and game objects can surely be extended. Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference between these classes of entities. The source of the authority of the norms that govern games is radically different from the source of the authority of the norms that determine tool types. The norms that determine classes of game objects are autonomous. Those that determine classes of tools are not autonomous. Two crucial differences between the normativity of game objects and the normativity of tools follow from this difference in the source of the authority of the relevant norms. First, the communal norms that establish the classes of tools in a workshop can and should be evaluated in light of the external purpose that the constitution of the workshop is designed to achieve. This is not true of the norms that establish games and game objects. There can be no hammers or nails unless objects are treated as hammers and nails within some community, but nevertheless there can be better and worse ways to constitute the carpenter's workshop. The norms that are embodied in the carpentry practice of one community can be better than those that are embodied in the carpentry practice of another community in virtue of the fact that both sets of practices are embedded in an instrumental nexus. How objects are treated around here is not the final word on whether an individual ought to treat this object in the ways in which we currently treat hammers, although it is the final word regarding how bishops should be treated.

Second, because the norms that constitute tool types are themselves evaluable in light of an external standard, particular uses of a tool can and ought to be evaluated in terms of a standard that is independent of the norms and standard goals current in the community. Bishops are well played if their moves are instrumental to winning, where winning is just what is treated as winning around here. Hammers are well used if that use is instrumental to building things of use, whether or not it is currently recognized that those things are worth making.

Now, one of the most salient features of assertions is that on their face they are normatively evaluable in two different but, one hopes, related ways. Assertions are either inferentially justified or inferentially unjustified. But they are also either true or false. It is one question to ask whether or not an agent is entitled to an assertion in virtue of her entitlement to some other assertions, and quite another thing to ask whether or not an assertion is true. Common sense suggests that the first type of normativity, inferential justification, has to do with the normative relations among acts of asserting, just as Brandom suggests. But the second type of normativity, truth, seems to have something to do with the relation between acts of asserting and the world.

Brandom of course recognizes that these two dimensions of the normativity of assertions are not identical. And he has an interesting, complex, and lengthy story to tell about how it is that the normativity of truth and objectivity, or a facsimile of that kind of normativity, can be generated from the norms involved in the game of giving and asking for reasons. But it is important to recognize that the only thing that makes such a story necessary is Brandom's commitment to the position that this game is a game, that the norms that govern inferential practice are autonomous. And the only thing that supports that commitment is the premise that theoretical reason has priority over practical

reason, that true normativity first enters the world with the theoretical reason that is embedded in the ability to recognize and perform proper inference. But this premise is surely false. As we have seen, this premise could be true only if agents could in practice make the distinctions necessary in order to recognize and perform proper inferences without displaying instrumental rationality, and this they cannot do.

Once it is seen that no agent can make assertions without also being capable of acting in an instrumentally rational way, another strategy for understanding truth and objectivity naturally suggests itself. It is the strategy of classical American pragmatism, without Brandom's theoretical, Sellarsian twist. At bottom, beliefs are factors in an agent that explain and justify that agent's instrumentally rational action. Assertions are performances that are typed by the way they are to be used, with other assertions, in order to achieve various goals. In short, assertion types are tool types, and assertions are occasions on which these tools are used. Because assertions are tool types they stand under a double normative standard. They can be evaluated in terms of the community standards that govern whether a particular assertion is used appropriately at a particular time, given the other assertions to which the agent is entitled at that time. But these assertions can also be evaluated instrumentally. Analogously with the truth of beliefs, assertional truth comes down to what is good in the way of assertion. Making and evaluating assertions is not a game. It is a very serious business that is central to the way in which we social animals band together to make a living in the world. If we weren't already in-the-world, prior to getting around to speaking, if things weren't already unveiled for us non-linguistically, we could never make assertions that also unveil the entities in our world in a different way.

5. Conclusion

It is central to Brandom's attempt to understand language that he privileges the pragmatic aspect of language over the semantic. For him, the best way to understand speech is to see it as something that we humans do. This seems to me to be the right decision. It is also central to Brandom's attempts to explicate the structure of language as a whole that among all of the things we do with language, the most important for understanding language is the act of asserting, and he then goes on to explicate the act of asserting by articulating the norms that regulate when one is entitled to make assertions of various types. Both of these decisions also seem to me to be right. Clearly, Brandom is also right in thinking that to a very large degree, those norms specify the conditions under which it is proper to use a given kind of assertion in terms of when it is proper to use other assertions. He is thus also right in thinking that inferential roles are crucial to what makes a given kind of assertion the assertion that it is. Brandom is even right, from my perspective, in the judgment that there can be no such proprieties of use, no entitlements or norms of proper inference, and thus no assertions at all, unless certain performances are in practice treated as proper or improper within a community.

Nevertheless, it doesn't follow from all of this that language is best seen as a game, the game of giving and asking for reasons. What Brandom has failed to recognize is that all of the aspects of language that I have just recounted are compatible both with speaking being the playing of a game and with speaking being a practical activity involving the use of tools. I have argued that the fact that only practically rational agents can make the discriminations in practice that are necessary for speaking undercuts the only reason there might be for thinking of speaking as a game and of the norms which govern speech as autonomous rather than thinking that the norms governing speaking are heteronomous and that asserting is an activity

that makes use of the tools in a workshop.

Brandom, R. (1994), *Making It Explicit*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_ (2000), *Articulating Reasons*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

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<sup>i</sup> Brandom 1994: 159. R., Making It Explicit (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1994), p.159.

<sup>ii</sup> Brandom 1994: 152.

<sup>iii</sup> Brandom 1994: 155.

<sup>iv</sup> Brandom 1994: 161.

<sup>v</sup> Brandom of course recognizes that in fact there is a general distinction between assertions that are really appropriate, in the sense of true, and those that are only appropriate in the sense of being treated as appropriate by even the entire linguistic community. A major part of his project involves funding this distinction in a way that does not contradict the supposed autonomy of the normativity of linguistic rationality. My criticisms here, however, are not directed at that aspect of his project. Rather, I attack the project at its roots by pointing out that the norms governing proper language use are themselves unintelligible apart from the norms governing practical action, but not the reverse.

<sup>vi</sup> Brandom, 1994: 159.

<sup>vii</sup> Brandom, 1994: 155.

<sup>viii</sup> One needs to be clear about the sense in which for Brandom the game of giving and asking for reasons is a pure game. As he makes plain, (Brandom, 1994: 632) Brandom is aware that the fact that discursive practices include language entries and exits ensures that the game of giving and asking for reasons is 'solid', like baseball, rather than 'hollow' like chess. That is, "discursive practices incorporate nonlinguistic things in them (are corporeal)." This distinction between solid and hollow games, however, is quite distinct from the distinction between games and workshops that I have been emphasizing. Brandom's game of giving and asking for reasons is pure in the sense that the norms that govern that game need not be sensitive to merely prudential considerations arising out of the interaction of an organism with its nonlinguistic environment.

<sup>ix</sup> Brandom, 2000: 82.

<sup>x</sup> Brandom, 1994: 253.

<sup>xi</sup> Brandom, 1994: 155.

<sup>xii</sup> It is characteristic of Brandom's position that he tends to divide all differential responses by agents into those, such as the iron bar, that discriminate between merely physical states, and those fully rational responses that depend upon a sensitivity to linguistically articulated reasons. There is no place in Brandom's scheme for an intermediate level of responsiveness in which an agent responds differentially to the instrumental characteristics of a situation.

<sup>xiii</sup> Brandom, 1994: 44.

<sup>xiv</sup> Actually, Brandom's sensitivity to this issue extends to the realization that 'beating with a stick' can be seen as a teleological, and thus normative, kind. Instead he suggests



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'movement of sticks and consequent alterations in dispositions to attempt festival attendance' as the relevant kind. As this kind works no better than the other I leave out consideration of this epicycle.

<sup>xv</sup> Brandom, 1994: 46.