

How Subjects Institute Objective Norms: A Brandomian Account

Brandom famously understands *linguistic activity* as an activity in which subjects make assertions, and *assertions* as normative acts by making which subjects undertake assertional commitments. An aspect of Brandom's philosophy of language that has attracted a huge amount of attention is that he wants to *reconcile* the claim that the normative significances of assertions are *instituted* by subjects, that subjects *make* assertions have certain normative significances by *taking* them to have those normative significances, with the *prima facie* incompatible claim that those normative significances are *objective*, that assertions *have* certain normative significances independently of whether they are *taken to have* those normative significances. The first claim plays a crucial role in Brandom's *nonreductive naturalism* about norms.

In my presentation, I will reconstruct Brandom's reconciliation of these two claims, drawing mainly on the two final chapters of *Making It Explicit* (MIE) and on Brandom's reading of the Spirit chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in his unpublished *A Spirit of Trust* (ST, available on Brandom's website). I will proceed in three steps.

In a first step, I will extract from chapter 8 of MIE an account of linguistic activity as an activity in which subjects on the one hand have subjective perspectives of taking assertions to have certain normative significances, on the other hand take assertions to have *objective* normative significances in that they do not take any subjective perspective to be privileged over any other, which is manifest in that subjects dissolve incompatibilities between subjective perspectives not by adjusting one subjective perspective to another, privileged one, but by engaging in *rational argumentation*.

This first step presupposes that there are determinate normative significances that subjects can take assertions to have. In a second step, I will reconstruct Brandom's account, given in his reading of the Spirit chapter in ST, of linguistic activity as an activity in which subjects make the normative significances that they take assertions to have *ever more determinate*, by producing *rational reconstructions* that retrospectively incorporate elements of indeterminacy that assertions exhibit into their determinate normative significances.

To show that *subjects can take assertions to have* objective normative significances is not yet to show that *assertions have* objective normative significances. It must be shown, in a further step, that subjects by doing so *do not mistakenly take* assertions to

have objective normative significances, but indeed *make* assertions have objective normative significances.

I will show that Brandom can be seen to provide an argument to this effect – an argument that he presents in a rather confused way in chapter 9 of MIE and in a much more perspicuous way in ST. I will further improve on Brandom's presentation in ST mainly by introducing a distinction of different stances that subjects can adopt: the *pretheoretical stance* of subjects as *participants*, the *three theoretical stances* of subjects as *Geisteswissenschaftler*, *Sozialwissenschaftler*, and *Naturwissenschaftler*, and the *theoretical metastance* of subjects as *philosophers*.

At the heart of the argument is an understanding of the differences and relations between the three theoretical stances – an understanding developed from within the *theoretical metastance* of subjects as *philosophers*. Seen from the *first-personal internal* stance of subjects as *Geisteswissenschaftler*, there are both attitudes of taking assertions to have normative significances and assertions that have normative significances. Seen from the *third-personal internal* stance of subjects as *Sozialwissenschaftler*, there are only attitudes of taking assertions to have normative significances. Seen from the *third-personal external* stance of subjects as *Naturwissenschaftler*, there are not even such attitudes, but only dispositions to positively or negatively reinforce dispositions to behave in certain ways.

I will show that Brandom can be seen to give an argument to the effect that the *first-personal* stances of subjects as *participants* and as *Geisteswissenschaftler* are privileged over the *third-personal* stances of subjects as *Sozialwissenschaftler* and as *Naturwissenschaftler*: To adopt a third-personal stance, subjects must also adopt a first-personal stance, but not vice versa. In addition, Brandom can be seen to argue that the stance of subjects as *Sozialwissenschaftler* can only be understood as derived from the stance of subjects as *Geisteswissenschaftler*, in that it can only be understood as obtained from the latter by subtracting the first person. That first-personal stances are privileged over third-personal ones has as a consequence that the interpretation according to which subjects by *taking* assertions to have objective normative significances *make* assertions have objective normative significances is privileged over the interpretation according to which in doing so they *mistakenly take* assertions to have objective normative significances.