

PERCEPTION, ACTION, AND THE MATERIAL WORLD: BRANDOM AND ROUSE ON THE NORMATIVE AUTHORITY OF SCIENTIFIC PRACTICES

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In chapter six of *How Scientific Practices Matter* (2002), Joseph Rouse criticizes Robert Brandom's (1994) account of perception and action. Brandom's account, argues Rouse, does not give material objects' sufficient "normative authority": "[Brandom's] effort to incorporate perception and action within discursive practices fails to show how causal interactions with objects acquire normative authority over what people say and do" (Rouse 186). In other words, Brandom cannot explain how scientific practices are accountable to material objects. In this paper I offer a Brandomian reply to this criticism. I argue that Brandom can explain how our perceptual and practical interaction with objects puts significant constraints on our discursive—and, by extension, scientific—practices.

The structure of the paper is as follows. After getting clear on what Rouse means by "normative authority," I summarize Brandom's account of perception and action. I then consider Rouse's criticisms of that account and propose a Brandomian reply. Put simply, my reply is that insofar as our discursive practices are rational, they are assessable in terms of inferential norms. These norms operate on the level of linguistic practice. Although a number of practical skills are necessary for language use, I conclude, such skills are irrelevant to the objectivity of discursive practices unless they are expressible—i.e., describable, explainable—in language.

Normative Authority

The kind of normative authority Rouse is primarily concerned with is practical accountability. Something has normative authority if our practices must respond to it, must take it into account. For Rouse, normative authority comes from our interactions with causally-efficacious stuff as we move around in and try to make sense of the world. Because the world is one way rather than another, we should carry out our practices in one way rather than another. Thus, for Rouse, the only things with normative authority in our scientific practices are our causal interactions with worldly phenomena.

In contrast to Rouse's naturalism, Brandom develops a non-naturalistic framework for understanding our discursive practices. He describes meaningful language use as a rational, norm-instituting social practice. Central to Brandom's account is the materially good inference.² Conceptual content is explained in terms of such inferences: "Endorsing [materially good] inferences is part of grasping or mastering...concepts" (Brandom, *Reason* 52). The central notions of Brandom's deontic scorekeeping account of discursive practices—entitlement and commitment—are then explained in terms of the inferences that a speaker is entitled/committed to make. For Brandom, perception and action are understood in terms of their functional roles in our linguistic practices:

1. Observation (a discursive entry transition) depends on reliable dispositions to respond differentially to states of affairs of various kinds by acknowledging certain sorts of commitments, that is, by adopting deontic attitudes and so changing the score.

2. Action (a discursive exit transition) depends on reliable dispositions to respond differentially to the acknowledging of certain sorts of commitments, the adoption of deontic attitudes and consequent change of score, by bringing about various kinds of states of affairs.³ (Brandom, *Reason* 83)

In the case of observational reports, assessments of reliability involve appeals to truth; in the case of intentional actions, by contrast, reliability has to do with success.

So, what is Brandom's account of normative authority? For Brandom, normative authority is intelligible only in the context of our engagement in a game of giving, asking for, and assessing reasons. Because I view myself and others as rational, I view myself as committed (as having an obligation) to take responsibility for my claims. Taking responsibility here involves trying to justify my claims—i.e., trying to show that I am entitled to make these claims. I must also be open to critical assessment from others concerning whether the reasons I offer are good or not. Why I ought to acknowledge my entitlements and commitments? Not only because I see myself and others as rational language users, but also because the concepts that give our linguistic practices content are inherently normative. Even if I am not aware of it, I acquire commitments and entitlements simply by using language in a meaningful way. And, for Brandom, my normative status (my constellation of commitments and entitlements) is objective; it does not depend on anyone's attitudes or opinions. Hence, I am (and ought to be) accountable to the norms at play in my language community.

Rouse's Criticisms of Brandom's Account

Rouse's basic criticism of Brandom's account of perception and action is that it cannot explain how our discursive practices are accountable to the extra-linguistic stuff that makes up most of the world in which we live. According to Rouse, "Discursive practices cannot be just a tissue of words, but must incorporate the material, causal circumstances to which they are accountable" (Rouse 204). Brandom wants to understand perception and action merely as language-entry and language-exit moves. Since Rouse wants to give an account of our scientific practices, he is concerned with explaining how discursive practices are accountable to material objects. With this in mind, Rouse proposes that we turn Brandom's account inside out: "Properly reconceived. . . practical/perceptual coping with one's surroundings should. . . be placed at the center of human intentionality, with conceptually articulated discourse as a powerful extension of these integrated bodily capacities" (Rouse 211). Practical/perceptual skills should be at the core, and language use at the periphery, of an account of our discursive practices. In order to justify such an inversion, Rouse needs to show, first, that linguistic practices get their content from some extra-linguistic stuff and, second, that perception and action cannot be adequately understood as moves in a language game. If Rouse's arguments for these claims were successful, then he could legitimately claim to have shown that an account of the normativity of our linguistic practices (e.g., Brandom's) is not adequate as an account of the normativity of discursive practices in general and scientific practices in particular.

Rouse wants to establish that intra-linguistic practices necessarily involve perception and action because such practices acquire semantic content through perception and action. He argues that it is impossible to have an intelligible discursive practice without empirical

content acquired via perception (Rouse 206-216). Why does Rouse care about this? Because if discursive practices could function without empirical content, then perception would not play an essential role in discursive practices. And if perception does not play an essential role in discursive practices, then it would be possible that all our talk is about nothing more than our talk, and thus, not accountable to the extra-linguistic world. But if the extra-linguistic world does play an essential role in our discursive practices—by supplying empirical content through perception—then the normative authority of the extra-linguistic world is not mysterious at all. This is why Rouse is at pains to show that our discursive practices cannot exist without the empirical content they acquire via perception:

Even if one did not need perceptual or practical access to objects referred to by linguistic expressions, there must be such access to the uttered expressions themselves. Without such access to public significations, nothing would distinguish the intentionality of discursive practices from the intentionality of private mental states. (Rouse 206)

Our practices cannot avoid being accountable to (at least some of) the things we perceive; namely, tokens of linguistic expression. Therefore, concludes Rouse, “the discursive normativity that makes possible meaningful utterances can only get a grip upon agents who make, track, and differentially respond to material transformations of the world” (Rouse 226). This is supposed to show why Brandom’s account is inadequate as an account of discursive practices. Brandom tries to make sense of such practices simply in terms of the linguistic game of giving and asking for reasons, but Rouse takes himself to have shown that, in order to make this game intelligible, we need more than language.

How does this relate to the issue of normative authority? If Brandom cannot explain how linguistic practices can be accountable to material objects, not just to our talk of such objects, he risks making discursive practices a mere “tissue of words.” If the only kind of discursive practice Brandom can make sense of is intra-linguistic practice, he would have no way to “incorporate the material, causal circumstances” (Rouse 216) of language use itself. In short, Rouse’s criticism of Brandom’s account is that by treating discursive practice as purely linguistic it thereby makes the normative authority of such practices inadequately objective. Brandom cannot explain how the world puts sufficient constraints on our talk about the world. Brandom has a powerful response to this criticism, however. Or so I will now argue.

A Brandomian Reply

What I hope to show below is that Brandom can explain the normative authority of discursive practices without giving an account of how our intra-linguistic practices acquire empirical content through causal interaction with extra-linguistic, objects. Here is a sketch of the Brandomian reply to Rouse I will defend: Brandom can grant Rouse that “causal interaction with the world as active, responsive bodies incorporates and expresses conceptual understanding” (Rouse 211). Brandom does not deny that perception and action require practical skills. What he does deny is that such skills can account for the normative authority of material objects in our discursive practices. On Brandom’s account of the intra-linguistic aspects of our discursive practices (which Rouse claims to

accept⁴), rational assessment—and hence normative authority—is intelligible only as the give and take of reasons among members of a language community.

Put simply (and in the first person), Brandom's reply runs as follows: I put forward my account as one way of understanding the normativity of our linguistic practices. If you (Rouse) want to give a complete account of discursive practices in general and scientific practices in particular, then you will have to add all sorts of things to my inferentialist framework. But, on its own terms, my account is coherent and not a mere "tissue of words." For, I can fully explain the rational aspects of language use (including the rational aspects of perception and action—i.e., those aspects of these activities which are open to assessment in terms of reasons) on my deontic scorekeeping model. Moreover, I can explain how our talk can be about things other than our own talk. Our linguistic practices are objective in the sense that the propositional contents therein do not depend on the attitudes of any (member of a) language community: "[I]n claiming that the swatch is red we are not saying anything about who could appropriately assert anything, or about who is committed or entitled to what, are indeed saying something that could be true even if there had never been rational beings" (Brandom, *Reasons* 203).

Rouse argues that since discursive practices must be public, they "require mutual recognition of accountability to norms governing the correct use of linguistic expressions. [And] this condition requires public access to token uses of those expressions" (Rouse 206). This argument is supposed to show why our discursive practices must be about material objects in the world, not merely about our talk of objects. But if Rouse is willing to concede (as he seems to be) that the requisite objects can be nothing more than tokens of our linguistic expressions, then this kind of "objectivity" is compatible with Brandom's account of normative authority.

In order to see how our linguistic practices have normative authority on Brandom's account, let us look at the conception of objectivity he lays out in Chapter 6 of *Articulating Reasons*. Brandom's task there is to show how we can make sense of our practice of making objective normative assessments (e.g., assessments of truth, correctness). His proposal comes in two steps. The first step is to understand the game of giving and asking for reasons as involving two kinds of normative status—commitment and entitlement (he calls this the "normative fine structure of rationality"). Once we acknowledge the fact that our practice of giving and asking for reasons must include the normative statuses of entitlement and commitment, we can understand how our talk (specifically the conceptual content of our talk) can be "objective," in the sense that they do not depend on the attitudes of any particular (group of) language user(s).⁵

How are our conceptual contents objective? Our assertions are, or at least can be, distinct from any claims about a speaker's entitlement/commitment to some other claim(s). We can make explicit what is required to entitle someone to his or her commitments—i.e., how these commitments could be justified—as well as which entitlements are incompatible with his or her commitments. Through this give and take of reasons, we decide which reasons are good reasons in a particular context. In some contexts (e.g., scientific practices), the best kinds of reason will be those that appeal to the way the

world is. In these contexts, one's normative status—one's entitlements and commitments—will depend on the way the world is.

On its face, this conception of objectivity may not seem to be objective enough for our scientific practices. But this appearance is deceiving. Keep in mind that an individual scientist does not work in isolation. Each scientist's work takes place in a context of ongoing discursive interactions with others. Any claim that a scientist makes will be open to rational assessment by his or her peers. Presumably, this kind of assessment ("Why do you say that?"; "What evidence is there for that claim?" and so on) puts real constraints on the activities and pronouncements of any individual scientist. So even though it does not appeal to normative authority of the material world (and is, in that sense, a mere "tissue of words"), Brandom's account does not result in a free-for-all in our scientific practices. The only claims that will survive are those that are justified (or at least justifiable) in such a way that they are accepted by a significant proportion of the scientific community.⁶

If Rouse is to show that Brandom's account is incomplete in a way that would actually trouble Brandom, then he needs to show that Brandom cannot account for the normativity of our discursive practices in terms of our linguistic practices alone. Rouse holds that his arguments on pages 206-16 do just this. He says these arguments show that Brandom's account is incomplete because it leaves out "the practical skills involved in reliable observational reporting and competent action, skills that are publicly expressed and open to normative correction" (Rouse 212). And, indeed, if Brandom could not explain the practical skills involved in reliable observational reporting and competent action, this would be a problem for his account. Fortunately for Brandom, he can (and does) explain both of these things. As we have seen above, he explains both why some practical skills are necessary and how they are open to rational criticism. Brandom explains the relevant practical skills in terms of competent use of linguistic entry and exit moves. One's use of such moves is competent if one makes materially good inferences and is able to recognize the materially good inferences of others. So, practical/perceptual skills are necessary because access to tokens of linguistic usage is necessary to participate in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Likewise, these skills are open to rational criticism in that other members of one's language community can challenge one's entitlement to make a given move. A challenge would be something like "I don't see any red speck there" or "You shouldn't act that way."

Conclusion

To recap: Rouse insists that normative authority comes from our causal interactions with the material world. Brandom locates normative authority in the contentful discourse of "concept-mongering" language users. Rouse wants to appropriate Brandom's account of the normativity of our linguistic practices but, at the same time, deny that it is an adequate account of the normativity of all our discursive practices. Brandom's account is inadequate, says Rouse, because it does not take the material world seriously enough. This is particularly troubling to Rouse, since he wants to make intelligible not only our discursive practices but also our scientific practices. I have tried to show that Rouse's worry here is misguided. From within Brandom's inferentialist framework, the normative

authority of perception and action is intelligible as part of a game of giving and asking for reasons. Brandom is able to explain how appeals to the material world play a role in this game and, thus, why all the normativity we need to make sense of scientific practices can be found in our linguistic practices.

NOTES

1. If, like Rouse, one prefers to gloss “material objects” as “causally intra-active worldly phenomena” throughout, I have no objection.

2. For example: “[T]he inference from ‘Pittsburgh is to the west of Princeton’ to ‘Princeton is to the east of Pittsburgh,’ and that from ‘Lightning is seen now’ to ‘Thunder will be heard soon.’ It is the contents of the concepts west and east that make the first a good inference, and the contents of the concepts lightning and thunder, as well as the temporal concepts that make the second appropriate” (Brandom, *Reasons* 52).

3. For his discussion of reliability, see Brandom, *Explicit* 206-221.

4. For instance: “I endorse and appropriate the core of Brandom’s account (his explication of the semantics of language and thought in terms of pragmatic discursive norms)” (Rouse 186).

5. See Brandom, *Reasons* 185-204.

6. Fortunately, determining what proportion of the scientific community is significant (or even what “the scientific community” refers to) is beyond the scope of this paper.

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