MAKING NORMATIVITY EXPLICIT

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Abstract
Robert Brandom's Making It Explicit is a very complex, difficult, extensive and misunderstood book. One of its main objectives is to explain normativity from a pragmatist point of view, basically, the thesis that the norms are instituted by attitudes of rational beings engaged in social and inferentially articulated practices. In this paper, my goal is to develop the structure of the book regarding specifically the "normative pragmatics", showing the concepts and vocabulary Brandom introduces to account normativity. Then, I present three modes at which we can understand the normative practices and discuss the problems and solutions we find in each mode. I conclude with a short analysis on the main criticism made to the book.

Keywords
Brandom; Norms; Pragmatism; Inferentialism

Resumo
Making It Explicit, de Robert Brandom, é um livro complexo, difícil, extenso e mal compreendido. Um de seus principais objetivos é explicar a normatividade de um ponto de vista pragmático, basicamente, a tese de que as normas são instituídas pelas atitudes de seres racionais envolvidos em práticas sociais inferencialmente articuladas. Neste artigo, meu objetivo é desenvolver a estrutura do livro considerando especificamente a "pragmática normativa", mostrando os conceitos e o vocabulário que Brandom introduz para explicar a normatividade. Então, apresento os três modos pelos quais podemos compreender as práticas normativas e discuto os problemas e as soluções que encontramos em cada um destes modos. Concluo com uma análise sobre as principais críticas feitas ao livro.

Palavras-chave
Brandom; Normas; Pragmatismo; Inferencialismo

Normative status, normative attitudes, and sanctions

In *Making It Explicit*, Robert Brandom accepts the normative characterization of rational practices appealing to Kant, Hegel, Sellars, and Wittgenstein. Giving special attention to Wittgenstein, Brandom tries to show that the *Philosophical Investigations* analyzes and rejects two possible explanations on norms, which Brandom calls "regulism" and "regularism" – also analyzed in Sellars's *Some Reflections on Language Games*. Regulism is the idea that a performance is considered correct according to its relation or reference to some explicit rule determining what is correct. According to Brandom, *Philosophical Investigations* rejects regulism because it generates a regress argument (the well-known Wittgenstein's regress of interpretations). Then, Brandom's conclusion is the necessity of a "pragmatist conception of norms", that is, "a notion of primitive correctnesses of performance implicit in practice that precede and are presupposed by their explicit formulation in rules and principles" (BRANDOM: 1994, p. 21). What kind of explanation could respect that? A possibility is the regularism: to take norms just as the description of regularities. But according to Brandom, Wittgenstein shows that the regularist always can justify any performance appealing to some norm, and in doing so it cannot offer a good distinction between what is considered correct and incorrect, between what is done or should be done. Thus, it is necessary a pragmatist explanation that maintains the normative dimension of practices. In other words, Brandom thinks that the *Philosophical Investigations* teaches us that to explain normativity is to offer an answer to this question: "In what sense can norms (proprieties, correctnesses) be implicit in a practice?" (BRANDOM: 1994, p. 25). That is one of the central purposes in *Making It Explicit*.

So, Brandom turns to Kant. According to Brandom (1994, 2007, 2009), one of the most important ideas from Kant is that rational beings recognize the authority of rules and follow them because of that recognition. They treat some practices identifying the normative dimension and grasping the boundaries delimited by this dimension, then choosing freely to act within these limits. This is to say that rational beings have normative attitudes. A natural attitude toward a rule is only a behavioral response that can be described in a non-normative vocabulary – for instance, by any empirical

psychology – but a rational attitude includes the normative significance of that response. Joining this idea and Hegel's "normative functionalism", Brandom proposes that the authority of rules comes from attitudes of mutual recognition of rules. The "normative attitude" involves attributing a prescriptive dimension, recognizing certain practices as involving an opposition better described by pairs of terms like "correct" and "incorrect", "right" and "wrong", "appropriate" and "inappropriate", and so on. Then, it is an attitude of attributing (to oneself or to any other normative being) a normative commitment, treating the target of such attribution as committed. Brandom calls this commitment a "normative status". Thereby, a normative attitude is an attitude of attributing a normative status. To understand a practice as normative depends on recognition and attribution of such status in social environments. So, to act conforming norms is not sufficient to be following norms, because normative practices require the recognition of the normative aspect of the practical application of norms. Considering that, Brandom suggests that normative attitudes explain the normativity of practices because these attitudes institute normative status, the normative attitudes control the adoption and modification of commitments. Putting it differently: a (normative) commitment emerges from attribution of commitment, and the result is a set of commitments as products of doings. There are not commitments before people act attributing commitments in normative contexts. Normative beings impose the normative on the non-normative using the ability they have of acting recognizing commitments in situations they consider as having proprieties or correctness. Lastly, Brandom adds a third component to this strategy. He believes that the Enlightenment juridical tradition offered a form to explain the relation between normative attitudes and status invoking the concept of sanction. Roughly, the account is formulated in terms of reward and punishment: someone treats a practice as correct by offering a reward, and treats a practice as incorrect punishing it. In the course of time, the process molds the behaviors and imposes norms. Inspired by that, Brandom's objective is to explain normative status in terms of normative attitudes, and normative attitudes in terms of positive and negative sanctions. We could call that account a "sanction-based normative pragmatics", but Brandom prefers "retributive approach to the normative".

Assertional practice and scorekeeping

Using a normative vocabulary, Brandom explains norms in terms of inferentially articulated commitments that characterize a performance as correct or incorrect because normative beings recognize and attribute each other such commitments in their practices, and they can sanction inadequate behaviors. This is the first level one can describe normative practices and it is the basis of the *scorekeeping* model that *Making It Explicit* develops.

To start, Brandom (1994, 2002) introduces a model of language-use explaining what anyone is doing when using the language, specifically making an assertion – according to him, the basic block of language games which expresses the undertaking of commitments. To claim a sentence as an assertion is to undertake a commitment to the correctness of inference from its circumstances of appropriate employment to its appropriate consequences of application. Put it differently, Brandom's assertional model specifies the circumstances under which one is committed to claim sentences – other commitments authorizing the original commitment – and the consequences of being committed to claim sentences – other commitments authorized by original commitment. Then, an assertional practice requires inferential commitments to the justification and consequences of the sentences. Since commitments are instituted because the agents have a capacity of attributing commitments, one can think the attitudes of attributing commitments according to the model of antecedents and consequences, in social practices. To attribute a commitment is to be able to master the inferential proprieties involving justifications and consequences of that specific commitment, holistically considered. For example, if a community accepts the assertion "The Ocean is blue" then it must accept the consequential assertion "The Ocean is colored". This is not a habit or a dispositional behavior, but it is practicable once linguistic agents have an internal mastery of which conceptual commitments are valid in their community. They are able to control and manage commitments, relating them to expected consequences and recognizing the responsibility of justifying them. Additionally, this inferential structure permits to accommodate the concept of sanction, because to undertake a commitment authorizes (offers the right to) a further sanction; for example, if a justification is not

offered or is not good, the sanction could be justly applied. Then, sanctions are an important part of that structure of commitments being attributed and recognized by social agents: they are a sort of commitment too, seen as consequences of other commitments unfulfilled.

Commitments are inferentially articulated and depend on recognition of consequences and conditions of applications. The attitudes of normative beings institute norms because they show what those beings are disposed to accept and recognize as commitments, in practices of their community. So, linguistic beings can use those commitments to keep track of the normative game, to keep track of what is considered correct or incorrect within the game. Using such ideas, Brandom develops the normative assertional game as a "deontic scorekeeping", a model where the players undertake and attribute commitments when adopting normative attitudes. The scorekeeping is the practice of treating oneself or an interlocutor as having inferentially articulated commitments governing his practices. To be a good scorekeeper is to know how to attribute and recognize commitments, regarding the proprieties from community.

Reductionism and circularity

On Brandom's view, the normativity requires an account of norms implicit in the practices. To explain normative status in terms of normative attitudes and sanctions avoids regress (because norms are implicit in actions and do not need to be explicit), but this is exactly where we can find the most important critics of Brandom's conception.

The standard criticism insists that to explain normative status in terms of attitudes and sanctions reduces norms to dispositions or regularities. In his defense, Brandom sustains that to explain normative attitudes from application of sanctions would be reductionist, but there is no reason to think this is the unique way. Reductionism is optional, he says, because it is possible to understand sanctions as a normative significance. "External sanctions" affect and model behavior in a reductionist view, but "internal sanctions" are normative, they affect just those creatures sensitive to norms. The scorekeeping model concentrates especially in internal sanctions, which are totally inside a normative dimension. They are part of the structure of norms which normative beings respect, they are sanctions within the system regulating the behaviors

not as dispositions to act, but because they are internalized and added to the "web" of commitments – rights and duties – of linguistic beings. However, that solution seems to introduce a risky obstacle: circularity. Normative sanctions explain normative attitudes, and normative attitudes explain normative status. Once it is legitimate to think possible a wrong application of normative sanctions, a sanction can be necessary to explain another sanction. Then, Brandom's next step is to suggest that internal sanctions are anchored in external sanctions (specified in non-normative terms), but this solution reintroduces the reductionism (I will return to these issues further on). Even so, considering this conceptual methodological apparatus, and despite the temptation to consider Brandom's project as reductionist, *Making It Explicit* considers it a "phenomenalism about norms".

> On the broadly phenomenalist line about norms that will be defended here, norms are in an important sense in the eye of the beholder, so that one cannot address the question of what implicit norms are, independently of the question of what it is to acknowledge them in practice. The direction of explanation to be pursued here first offers an account of the practical attitude of taking something to be correcting-to-a-practice, and then explains the status of being correct-according-to-a-practice by appeal to those attitudes (Brandom, 1994, p. 25).

The phenomenalism about norms explains how taking a practice as correct appeals to the attitudes of taking a practice as correct. What is correct (what should be done) is instituted by the attitudes of taking the practices as correct. So, to understand what is correct we must pay attention to what people take as correct in their attitudes. Then, Brandom is explaining what it is to take a normative commitment, not what a normative commitment *is*. Once the phenomenalism about norms generates reductionism, Brandom needs to reformulate it. This is not a big problem because he says, just in the beginning of *Making It Explicit*, that normativity cannot be wholly understood until the end of the book – until the conclusion, indeed. Therefore, we should take the introduction of phenomenalism about norms as an incomplete and transient argument. Then, in the first part of the book, readers only know that social attitudes institutes norms, described in a non-reductionist vocabulary.

Normative phenomenalism and original interpretation

Norms are instituted by attitudes of acknowledging practices as correctly attributing commitments to agents engaged in such practices. Rather than to explain what normative status are, the strategy is to explain the attitude of attributing them, exemplified by a game called scorekeeping. Scorekeepers produce and consume inferential articulate contents, as assertions, through which they can make their normative moves (to attribute and acknowledge commitments). One can describe permissions, obligations, incompatibilities and so on in the assertional practice in terms of normative status, as a "net" of *commitments* and *entitlements* determining the valid transitions to the conceptual contents. This is the first approach to normativity (phenomenalism about norms), the first level one can describe normative practices, and its principal threat is reductionism. To avoid it, Brandom makes an important upgrade, introducing the second level of understanding of the normativity: the "normative phenomenalism".

> The (normative) phenomenalist strategy that has been pursued throughout is to understand normative statuses in terms of normative attitudes – in terms of (proprieties of) *taking* to be correct or incorrect. This strategy dictates two questions concerning proprieties of scorekeeping practice. First (apropos of phenomenalism about norms), what must one be doing in order to count as taking a community to be engaging in implicitly normative social practices – in particular in deontic-status-instituting, conceptual-content-conferring discursive scorekeeping practices? Second (apropos of its being a normative phenomenalism), what is it about the actual performances, dispositions, and regularities exhibited by an interacting group of sentient creatures that makes it correct or appropriate to adopt that attitude – to interpret their behavior by attributing those implicitly normative discursive practices? (Brandom, 1994, p. 628).

The phenomenalism about norms considers the norms taken correctly in practice, but the normative phenomenalism considers the norms correctly taken as correct in practices. This difference shows the distinction between attitudes governed by norms and norms governing the attitudes governed by norms. For example, if 'p' entails 'q', anyone acknowledging commitment to 'p' could not acknowledge commitment to 'q', but ought to. So, commitments are not identified by how anyone *actually* keeps score in practices, but with *correct* scorekeeping. Normative phenomenalism considers the commitments governing the attitudes, that is, commitments controlling the adoption and alteration of practical attitudes occurring in the scorekeeping: how scorekeepers are obliged or committed to adopt and alter their attitudes during that game. Then, to

evaluate a practice normatively is to evaluate attitudes regarding commitments, it is to analyze how correct *is* to adopt such attitudes. Thus, if phenomenalism about norms is described in terms of attitudes, the normative phenomenalism includes commitments to such attitudes. In causal order really are agents dealing with each other in a way described as the scorekeeping, but attitudes of scorekeepers already include norms. So, normative phenomenalism resolves the threat of reductionism because it is developed on attitudes governed by normative status. However, circularity is a risk again (norms are necessary to describe those attitudes which institute and maintain norms), and the relation between normative specifications of practices and non-normative specifications of behavior remains untouched.

We can see that solution to the reductionism as an update from phenomenalism about norms to normative phenomenalism, a proposal that does not consider the attitudes actually made, but the commitments controlling the correct adoption of such attitudes. Brandom could stop there, but he does a last and crucial movement: to explain normativity in terms of how the practitioners of assertional game as *interpreters* in the scorekeeping model, that is, when it is appropriate to interpret a community as constituted by linguistic agents attributing and recognizing inferential articulate commitments to each other. This is the third level of the description on normativity.

Now, Brandom applies the same strategy used from phenomenalism about norms to normative phenomenalism. He does not explain *actual* interpretation, but *correct* interpretation. There are commitments governing the capacity to correctly apply an interpretation within scorekeeping, licensing the interpreter to undertake commitments to the practices being interpreted. In correct (or normative) interpretation, the interpreter can take the other scorekeepers as engaged in practices corresponding to the inferentially articulated contents of normative status that articulate the social practices of their community. Adopting the correct interpretation, the interpreter takes the interlocutor being interpreted as committed, according to proprieties that correspond to the inferential contents of the commitments. So, to correctly interpret a community is taking it as bounded by implicit proprieties that articulate the conceptual contents of their practices. Considering that, one can specify the structure an interpretation of the activities of the community must have for their members to treat each other as

exhibiting normative behaviors, in terms of commitments. This is why Brandom describes scorekeeping: basically, to be a good scorekeeper it is to be a good interpreter.

The attitudes to attribute norms explain norms, but these attitudes are normative since the beginning of normative beings' social lives. When they are born, they are not following any norms, but they already have a capacity to become a normative being. When they start to speak the first language and to act in non-linguistic but normative situations, they start to perform their normative ability. This is to say that normative creatures start to learn how to do what they naturally can do: to attribute and recognize norms, to be a scorekeeper. Then, from the start, they learn how to make a normative interpretation. (In fact, they never really know what is not to be a normative being, because they are always inside a normative social perspective).

In this paper, I am not concerned with details about what correct and incorrect interpretations are. However, the idea can be investigated examining the relation between someone interpreting the members of his own community (an internal interpreter) or from outside (an external interpreter). An internal interpreter can explicitly attribute commitments, but he does not need (or cannot) attribute explicitly normative attitudes to the agents being interpreted. An external interpreter explicitly attributes both. So, the difference is that the internal interpreter just implicitly takes or treats someone as committed, insofar the external interpreter explicitly does it. Despite the difference between external and internal, the fundamental distinction is between *explicit* and *implicit* interpretations. One who can make commitments explicit, and to treat other as having commitments implicit in its intelligent behavior, can adopt a "simple" interpretation. One who adopts the simple interpretation, and additionally can make explicit its normative attitudes toward the commitments, can adopt "original" interpretation. Then, the original interpreter must be capable of *saying* what he is *doing,* making explicit the inferential proprieties implicit governing the ascriptions of attitudes. Both simple and original interpreters consider the practitioners being interpreted as engaging in the same interpretive stance the interpreter does, doing exactly what the interpreter is doing (attributing normative attitudes), but simple interpreters does it in an implicit mode and original interpreters as an explicit mode.

Considering simple and original interpretational analysis to normative practices, the difference between phenomenalism about norms and normative phenomenalism is

the type of attitude adopted to attribute commitments. In the phenomenalism about norms, the interpreter keeps a *simplified* sort of score by attributing commitments to which the subject is taken to acknowledge only implicitly in its behavior. The normative phenomenalism analyzes when it is appropriate to adopt an interpretation attributing to it a set of explicitly commitments. Then, the crucial difference between simple and original interpretation is just an *expressive* matter. Using resources from logical vocabulary, the original interpreter is able to express the articulation of his normative attitudes. So, it is possible to see the external interpretation as a special (more complex) case of the internal interpretation: to be capable of distinguishing the commitments being acknowledged and undertaken by agents, and attributing those commitments explicitly.

When an external interpreter recognizes his capacity to make explicit, he achieves an explicit interpretive equilibrium, and the explanatory gap between simple and original interpretation disappears: both interpretations coincide. Thus, the collapse of interpretations shows the difference between creatures able or enable to express the implicitly articulation of their practices, *logical* or *rational* creatures. The external interpreter is also an internal interpreter, for this reason, commitments that would be available only to external interpreters are also available to internal interpreter. When logical beings dominate the expressive resources of their language, they can theorize about their ascriptions of commitments, and doing that their normative relations become topics for justification and discussion. They can make explicit to themselves as normative beings. Thus, original interpreters do not theorize about norms that they analyze in external communities (observing animals, for example), but about their own norms, their practices containing those norms. So, they can recognize themselves as a community, demarcating the boundaries of their conceptual, normative, and expressive space of reasons. According to Brandom, we (human beings) can do that, projecting our interpretation within our own community. We interpret our practices and undertake commitments to correctness of our performances. So, the appropriate interpretation needs to be according to those proprieties governing our practices. If the interpreter interprets interlocutors as bounded by a different set of norms, he is offering a different interpretation, distinct from the one the community is taking.

Criticisms

It is possible to describe norms in three ways. In the initial level, the normative appears as normative status inferentially articulated. However, to talk of normative status is talking about normative attitudes (normative status are only used to identify and individualize attitudes) then, in the next level, norms appears as normative status governing the adoption and alteration of practical attitudes. In the highest level, norms govern the normative interpretation: one who attributes norms interprets other as bounded by the same normative status (and perhaps uses logical locutions to make explicit the interpretation). Second and third levels require being appropriately restricted by commitments that are not in causal order, so, if it is impossible to describe normativity in these levels exclusively in non-normative terms then the discussion remains about how norms are instituted.

In the phenomenalism about norms, the norms are in the eyes of their beholders, the external interpreters describing the scorekeeping. Once the external interpreter is an internal interpreter, the norms that external interpreters are describing are the active norms in their own practices, described by them from within, using logical capacities. We do that. As logical beings, we can make explicit the commitments implicit in our normative practices. Everything we have to theorize is our commitments and its connection with our practices in interpretational contexts. This is clearly a pragmatist account that does not offer an ontological answer to normativity. Brandom explains what we do as normative creatures, and how to understand and talk about the normativity associated with our practices. So, we must see *Making It Explicit* as offering a very complex development of the Sellars's "logical space of reasons", as a conceptual, normative, and logical space guiding rational beings. In any case, there are four main categories of criticisms on Brandom's account of normativity: reductionism, circularity, idealism, and frustrated readers.

The most common critic accuses *Making It Explicit* of reductionist. Nonetheless, the normative phenomenalism resolves the problem because it is developed on attitudes governed by norms. Normative beings are within a normative space (their comprehension of the world and themselves is always normative). Norms bound them all the time, since they start to speak and live in a linguistic community. Thus, there is

no reductionism, it is almost the opposite. To explain the story of normative beings we need an irreducible normative vocabulary, fundamental because we cannot describe ourselves as normative beings without it. So, one can see that *Making It Explicit* account of normativity is circular. A manner to investigate this issue is thinking about norms being instituted – non-normative practices become normative. Some kinds of creatures are normative, they have an ability to treat themselves as bounded by norms. In a new situation (where there is no present norm), a normative being acts considering that the other normative beings will act in the same way he acts; he acts attributing to others the same capacity he has to engage in situations that can be identified as correct or incorrect. All normative beings do the same: they attribute correct behaviors to each other. In the course of time, these behaviors are being adjusted (refined), they are modified by interaction between scorekeepers to reflect the attitudes (attributions and acknowledgment) of the community, the norms (and not what someone takes as norms[1]). Thus, normative beings acknowledge those situations as normative, and acknowledge the objectivity of "norms" from the community, that is, the acknowledgment that norms outrun individual attitudes[2]. In that interpretation, *Making It Explicit* does not have circularity, because norms are instituted by attitudes made by creatures with certain normative capacities. Nonetheless, by opposition to reductionism and by extreme focus on normative dimension of rationality, Brandom has been accused of losing contact with the world. This does not happen because all the time he considers the external world. Scorekeepers apply concepts that are *about* the world because there is an objective sense of correctness that governs the conceptual application: "a sense of appropriateness that answers to the objects to which they are applied and to the world of facts comprising those objects" (BRANDOM: 1994, p. 594). Conceptual content is articulated by inferential relations that do not correspond to non-perspectival facts, but by "how the world is", "how things actually are". Although there are many scorekeepers'

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[1] In addition, if they are logical beings, they can modify their behaviors because can explicitly discuss about norms.

[2] The scorekeeping model includes relations between the commitments undertaken and attributed, the practice of treating oneself or others as having inferentially articulated normative status. To understand the correctness of a commitment is to go beyond the attitude of acknowledgement, reaching non-perspectival articulation of commitments. This is to say that commitments generate incompatibilities and consequences that transcending a particular perspective. Thus, the objectivity of norms is the reflection of the perspectival distinction between undertaking and attributing commitments transcending individual attitudes, and every scorekeeper maintains a distinction between objective commitments and subjective attitude.

perspectives, there is just one world bearing how normative beings institute their norms. Then, what one really could reject is Brandom's explanation of the relation between world and norms (how the world participates of normative reign and how norms appear). Of course, this is a very important topic, but the main objective in *Making It Explicit* is to explain how to understand the normative practices. For this reason, Brandom frustrates readers looking for an explanation about the ontology, the origins of normativity (the complete process of institution of norms) or about the relation between the normative and the causal. Brandom does not answer these questions, his focus is on pragmatism about norms and its relations with rational and logical capacities.

Conclusion

According to Brandom, it is possible to describe normative practices by three forms. Initially, considering the game of giving and asking for reasons in terms of normative status and attitudes (phenomenalism about norms). Then, in terms of normative status governing normative attitudes (normative phenomenalism). The last level is in terms of interpretations according to the norms. To interpret a community as engaged in practices instituting norms is taking its members as adopting the normative interpretation toward each other, to interpret those members as bound by norms outrunning their individual dispositions to act. Thus, the interpreter uses the norms implicit in his own attitudes to specify explicitly how those norms extend beyond his own actual capacity to apply them correctly. This is compatible with interpreting other normative beings as answering to the same set of objective norms. So, when someone is correctly interpreting agents as scorekeepers is accepting both (interpreter and interpreted) share objective norms, and once the norms are perspectival and interpretative, the discursive practitioners can be engaged in explicit discussions of those practices in virtue of which they interpret each other. Then, Brandom is replacing the "intentional" interpretation with the capacity to be a scorekeeper, and that capacity cannot be described using a non-normative vocabulary. However, *Making It Explicit* is not concerned with origins of normativity, but just describing the game of giving and asking for reasons using a normative vocabulary in terms of commitments and attributing of commitments. His account is a rich model of rational practices

considering contents inferentially articulated by creatures able to recognize the normative dimension of their actions and language.

The standard criticism insists that to explain normative status in terms of normative attitudes is to reduce the normative to the non-normative. Those who accuse *Making It Explicit* of reductionism do not grasp the difference between phenomenalism about norms and normative phenomenalism. Brandom focus on normative reign could suggest that the circularity is never overcome; consequently, we lose the world. Those who accuse *Making It Explicit* of circularity do not grasp the collapse of levels. Although Brandom is clearly not losing the world, he could offer more details about this issue. The other criticisms are just unsatisfied readers searching what is beyond Brandom's objectives (in that book, at least). He is not offering an accurate explanation about ontology or origins of normativity, or the relation between normative and causal reigns, but a sophisticated hypothesis about our normative practices, appealing to an interpretive stance.

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