

THE NORMS OF THOUGHT : ARE THEY SOCIAL ?

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Abstract :

A commonplace in contemporary philosophy is that mental content has normative properties. A number of writers associate this view to the idea that the normativity of content is essentially connected to its social character. I agree with the first thesis, but disagree with the second. The paper examines three kinds of view according to which the norms of thought and content are social: Wittgenstein's rule following considerations, Davidson's triangulation argument, and Brandom's inferential pragmatics, and criticises each. It is argued that there are objective conceptual norms constitutive of mental content, but that these are not essentially social.

Key words:

Normativity, norms, mental content, social character of thought.

It is a sort of commonplace of contemporary philosophy that mental content has normative properties. Our thoughts and propositional attitudes are *rational* or not, they can be *evaluated* as true or false, as *correct* or *incorrect*, as *justified* or *unjustified*, and they seem to *commit* us to other thoughts, or to concepts involved in them. The difficult question is what kinds of implications we can draw from this observation. There are several strands in these debates. One is whether these *prima facie* or apparent features are genuine or intrinsic properties of thought itself, whether they display some real essence of mental phenomena or some constitutive feature of our concepts of them. For those, on the one hand, who advocate a positive answer to this questions, the normativity of mental content is a major obstacle to the reduction of thought to natural properties and to the “naturalisation” of content. For those, on the other hand, who claim that such normative features are extrinsic or superficial properties of contents,

or of our way of talking about them, this normativity poses no threat to a naturalistic or to a purely descriptive causal account of the mind. Another strand is whether such features apply to all sorts of mental contents, or whether they apply to some only. It is much less clear, for instance, that sensations, raw feels or *qualia* exhibit normative features than it is the case for the contents of propositional attitudes, such as beliefs and desires. A further strand concerns the nature of the “norms” involved: talk of “norms” invites the idea that mental contents are subject to certain “oughts” or to imperatives of some sort. But are all normative concepts of this *deontic* kind? Some refer to evaluations or to values, and it is not the same thing to be subject to an obligation and to be sensitive to a *value*. And if we agree to call “norms” both obligations and values, what are the “norms” which are involved in thought? Are they *epistemic* norms, having to do with our reasons to believe only, or are they in some sense *practical* norms, having to do with our reasons to act? And is there an overlap between the two kinds of reasons and of norms?

I shall not attempt, within the scope this paper, to examine all of these questions. My aim is more modest and concerns one further strand in these debates, which is somewhat orthogonal. I shall take for granted that thoughts and meanings have *prima facie* normative properties in the sense alluded to above, and I shall deal only with one of the ideas associated to this view, that these normative properties are essentially tied to the *social* character of thoughts, hence that the norms of thought are social norms. This view seems very plausible with respect to linguistic meaning (to be able to use a word is to be able to *appraise* its applications, to assert a sentence is to *commit oneself* to its truth, for instance), for meanings are public entities, and speech acts are actions, which like all actions seem to be guided by some principles and norms. But it is less obviously with respect to thought. A number of philosophers, however, have held that thoughts *cannot* be purely internal to individuals and

that they *have to be* social or external, in the sense that they depend, not only for their expression but also for their very individuation, upon the public practices and rules of a community. Several arguments to this effect have been proposed during the past twenty years, very often upon the basis of thought experiments (e.g. Burge 1979). I shall, however, deal only here with three kinds of such arguments, which purport to show that thought and meanings have essential normative *social* properties: Wittgenstein's so-called "rule-following" argument, Davidson's "triangulation" argument, and Brandom's arguments in *Making it explicit* (1994). I shall accept the idea that there are essential normative properties of thoughts, but I shall reject the view that this normativity is due to social factors. I shall, therefore, have to say what the normative properties of thought are, once we grant them and that we deny that they are essentially social. I shall leave open the question of the implications of this view for naturalism in general.

1. The scope of normativity

We are confronted with two main claims: (1) Thought contents have normative properties (let us call this the "normativity thesis" for short), and (2) these normative properties are intrinsically social, the norms of thought are social norms (let us call this the "sociality thesis"). Before examining various instances of (2), let us try to be clearer about what (1) involves.

What does it mean to say that thought has normative properties? As I said above, this seems to apply primarily to the contents of propositional attitudes, so let us for the moment leave out the content of sensations and perceptions and let us concentrate upon beliefs. The normativity of thought seems to designate certain characteristic and constitutive features of the contents of beliefs. First there is a dimension of *assessment* or of *evaluation* which goes with

the very idea of having beliefs or to entertain their propositional contents: beliefs are *true* or *false*, and they are *justified* or *unjustified*.¹ This applies also to the constituents of beliefs, the concepts which figure in them: to have a concept is to be able to *apply* it *correctly*, and to reject *incorrect* applications of them. Second, there is a dimension of *rationality*, which applies not only to individual beliefs but also to sets of beliefs, and to inferences made on the basis of these, and leading to other beliefs. In this sense, one often says that a creature has the beliefs that she *ought* to have, in so far as she is rational. These themes are familiar from the writings of the authors (in particular Davidson and Dennett) who emphasise the interpretative stance that we must take in order to attribute thought to any being, and they are clearly associated to the holistic character that much of our propositional attitudes are said to have: in order to ascribe a belief to a creature one must ascribe her a number of beliefs, which fit into a coherent or rational pattern. This constitutive “rational ought” (Brandom 1994, p. 5) is part of what is meant by Sellars’ famous dictum that to have a thought is to be able to place it into “the space of reasons” (Sellars 1963, p. 67). But there is a further strand as well: that these rational constraints have a certain normative *authority*, or normative *guidance*, and that to be subject to these rational norms one must be able to follow them or to be guided by them. A norm, in the practical realm, for instance a moral norm, is in general such that a person who is aware of it considers herself to be able to perform actions which conform to it, and to be liable to sanctions, or regrets, if she does not conform to it. In other terms the person must be *responsible* before these norms. It is much less clear that rational norms of thought entail such a responsibility or such obligations. We can agree, presumably, that to believe that P is to believe that P is true, and that if one sees that P implies Q, one is thereby *committed* to the truth of Q, and that such implications go with what it takes to *understand* P

¹ It is not obvious, though, that truth and falsity are normative properties *per se*. But they are normative properties in so far as a subject who *assesses* her beliefs assesses them as true or false. The constraint is sometimes expressed by saying that a subject who believes that P, but discovers that P is false, is rationally bound to abandon her belief. For more on this see Engel 2001.

and Q, and the appropriate notion of inference. But it is less obvious that someone who takes P to be true, and Q to be inferred from P incurs thereby an *obligation* to believe Q, for she might have other reasons not to believe Q. For instance I may believe that if I go to the cupboard, I shall find *cheerios* in it, but if I go to the cupboard, and find there no *cheerios* but *rice crispies*, I shall not feel obliged to believe that there are *cheerios* in it (Harman 1986, p. 2). The phenomenon of belief revision often belies the objective obligations or norms which seem to go with our recognition of the rational and logical constraints on thought. At most they are in force only *ceteris paribus*. The fact, however, that a logical norm is often violated does not imply that there is no norm, nor that we should not follow certain epistemic norms which hold in general. For instance it is often said that it is a norm of rational belief that we should believe on the basis of sufficient evidence, and to take into account the relevant facts. Such norms are of much higher profile, because they purport to prescribe what an inquirer must do. In this sense it is less clear that they enter directly the contents of thought. An important question is whether such epistemic norms are categorical imperatives, or whether they are only hypothetical. It is an open question whether a rational subject must always follow some universal norms, and whether other norms cannot compete with them.

Let us try to summarise these remarks by distinguishing what we may call, paraphrasing Quine on modality (1953), three grades, or levels, of normative involvement. 1) At a first level, we might say that there is a normative dimension of *assessment* of thought and thought constituents, which go with their *reference*: beliefs are true or false, concepts have conditions of application, and it is part of what it is to believe something that belief “aims at truth”, or that belief has a “mind to world direction of fit” (contrary to desires, which have a “world to mind direction of fit”). This can be cashed out in terms of

particular “oughts”, which we might formulate in the following, conditional way, respectively for propositions and concepts :

- (i a) If one believes that P, then one ought to believe that P is true
- (i b) If *dog* applies to dogs, then one ought not to apply *dog* to non-dogs

(ia) is a condition on understanding what a belief is, and the *ought* in question is constitutive. A subject, for instance, who would assent to “I believe that P, but not P (or “P is false)” would be in a paradoxical state (as Moore’s paradox, which takes precisely the form of such self- ascriptions, shows). He would not understand what the *concept* of beliefs implies. Similarly for concepts : a person who does not conform to (ib) would not possess the concept in question.

2) At a second level, we have a normative dimension of the *rationality* of beliefs, and of the inferences in which they figure, and we might call this a rational ought. This dimension seems to go with the *sense* of beliefs, or to the way it appears to a subject, rather than with its reference: a person ought to believe what it *makes sense*, for her or for an ascriber of thoughts to her, to believe, in so far as she is rational.² We can try to express this too in terms of particular conditionals of the form :

- (ii) If one believes that P, and if P entails Q, then one ought to believe that Q

This dimension too is constitutive: it goes with what it is to understand the belief in question. At this level , which one might call the level of the *rational ought* comes the idea that a subject has certain beliefs for certain *reasons*, and with certain justifications (and the inferential links between beliefs are part of these reasons).

² I distinguish the level of reference and the level of sense for normative constraints in the way Peacocke (1992) does it for concept possession.

3) At a third level, we have the idea that the subject is able to appraise the reasons for her beliefs, and to take them as exerting a certain authority on the formation of her beliefs in the long run. This is the sense, for instance, in which someone could be said to believe only what is true, or to believe on the basis of appropriate evidence. In this sense the agent takes herself to be subject to particular epistemic obligations in the course of her rational inquiry. This sense too can be considered as constitutive, if the epistemic norms (truth, evidence, rationality) are considered as universal categorical imperatives. They could be expressed in terms of conditionals of the form :

(iii) for all P, believe that P only if P is true (justified)

But it is debatable whether such norms are universal norms that any thinking subject ought to follow³. So we can restrict their scope, and say only that at this level the subject is liable to certain epistemic obligations, which might compete with others. Such obligations will part of what we might call a subject's epistemic policy.

These three levels of normative involvement give us only a preliminary map. There are many more questions to ask about them. But I shall take this rough sketch as sufficient for the purpose of this paper. The question which now before us is whether these normative features are in some sense essentially social.

2. *Wittgenstein's rule following argument*

³ This has to be distinguished from : For all P, if P is true you ought to believe that P, which makes no sense (for no one is obliged to believe anything true, including trivialities). For more on this, see Engel 2001.

One of the main sources of the normativity thesis and of the sociality thesis resides in Wittgenstein's famous considerations on "following a rule". But Wittgenstein talks primarily of the normativity of meaning⁴. In order to get claim that these constraints apply to thought contents and to concepts, one must apply these considerations to them. In other words "rule" must be understood as a rule both for the correct application of the meaning of an expression and for the correct application of a concept. In order to get the further claim that these constraints are essentially social, one must add that the correct uses of expressions and concepts cannot be established when there is no community of speakers able to appreciate these uses and able to follow public rules determining these correct applications.

According to Kripke (1981), Wittgenstein first makes the claim that any application of an expression or of a *concept*, such as "plus" or "cat", is a case of rule following, i.e a case of "going on in the same way" in the application of this word or of this concept. And he formulates, according to Kripke, a "sceptical paradox" to the effect that *any* continuation of a same series of examples can count as a "going on in the same way" according to *some* application of the rule (Wittgenstein 1953, § 201). The argument has the following consequence: no interpretation of the rule can uniquely determine its application. This is what is called the "sceptical" reading of the argument: there is *no* rule that the agent is supposed to follow. Two distinct problems raised by this doubt: a) the problem of *infinity*: how can a finite sequence of examples or actions instantiate one rule rather than an *infinite* number of rules? b) the problem of *normativity*: what determines the *correct* way of continuing a finite sequence of examples in such a way that the individual follows the rule? In each case, the sceptical challenge is that these questions have to be answered in the negative: a finite sequence cannot determine the rule, and it is *always* the case,

⁴ For a clear expression of this idea, see for instance Wright 1993 : 24

and there is no *correct* way of “going on in the same way”. The basic sceptical argument stops here. But one can go further, and claim that it applies only within specific conditions: the conditions under which it is supposed that following a rule is a private matter, for a single individual, with his own dispositions and mental states. If one takes this line, the sceptical argument is essentially directed against the idea of a *private* rule following, and not against the idea that an individual belonging to a community, or a community itself, follows rules. In this respect, as Kripke remarks, it is essentially connected to Wittgenstein’s private argument against private language.

Kripke presents, on the model of Hume’s “sceptical solution” to doubts about induction, a sceptical solution: following a rule is not the property of an individual taken in isolation, but a social practice, and it is the community which determines which rules an individual is supposed to follow and which applications of the rules are correct. This is often called *the community view*: the very existence of rules, and of the activity of following them presupposes the existence of a community of individuals. Now if following a rule is a normative activity, and if meaning and thinking are rule governed activities, then these rules or norms cannot but be social. Individual dispositions to behaviour, mental episodes or states are not, in this sense, normative, and they cannot determine any rule. Hence nothing, no natural property of this kind, which would be independent of social relationships could fix the sense of our rules. A number of writers, and in particular Pettit (1993, 1998) hold that this is a condition of possibility of thought *per se*, and take this to provide a basic argument in favour of a form of social *holism*. According to Pettit, there is a sense of “holism” according to which the very existence of thoughts and beliefs in an individual depends upon the existence of beliefs and thoughts of *other* individuals, and upon the existence of an individual’s interactions with other agents. This form of *minimal* holism has to be distinguished from a holism of the stronger, more

familiar, kind, where the very nature of an individual's thought is collective in character, and depends upon some collective spirit or *Volksgeist* transcendent to individuals. The former view, minimal or weak holism, does not entail the latter stronger view, *collectivism*. Pettit's holism is "individualistic", since it implies that it's the *individual* who has beliefs or who masters meanings, although these beliefs are dependent, not only causally, but also non causally, on social relations, for instance in the sense in which my having a certain power or status depends not only upon the existence of others but also on their recognising this power or status. According to Pettit, Wittgenstein's argument against private rule following is a holistic argument in this weaker sense. And it seems to be sufficient for claiming that meaning and thought, in so far as they instantiate rules, are necessarily social.

But should we accept the community view and its exploitation in favour of a form of social holism about thought and meaning? In the first place, it is not clear that Wittgenstein's argument is really a sceptical argument (McGinn 1984; Baker and Hacker 1984). What Wittgenstein actually says is that following a rule is not based upon an *interpretation* of it, since interpreting the rule would imply interpreting its interpretation, and would thus lead to an infinite regress. Wittgenstein does not deny that we follow rules, but he is opposing a certain conception of the epistemology of rule following, mostly the platonic conception according to which we would follow rules as "rails" and grasp them through some intuitive faculty (McDowell 1984). In this sense he says that one obeys a rule "blindly". Now, if there are actual rule followings, and if they are not based on interpretations, what are they? The answer is: it is a *practice*. Now what determines the meaning of this practice? The community view says that practices are social, and that they are not simply dispositions to act or to think, since dispositions cannot by themselves fix the *correctness* or the normative power of rules.

But two objections can be raised against this. In the first place it is not obvious that dispositions are absolutely useless in helping us to determine which rules an individual follows. For even if finite dispositions cannot provide us a solution to the infinity problem, it is quite hard to imagine that the fact that an individual follows a given rule can have no effect at all on his actual or potential dispositions. To take up an example of Blackburn's (1984), let us suppose that a man who builds a brick wall receives the order of bringing two bricks at a time, but that a sceptical doubt can be raised about his following the deviant rule "Bring two bricks at a time until 1000, and 4 bricks after 1000". If he follows this latter rule, or if he doesn't, it is bound to be displayed in his behaviour at some point: for instance if he is physically unable to carry more than two or three bricks at a time. In other words, his *other* dispositions will help fixing the rule, and what the sceptical argument forgets is that dispositions do not come one by one, but are interconnected, as are mental capacities. So a certain set of dispositions might fix the meaning of the rule. In the second place, does the sceptical "solution" completely dispels the sceptical doubt? No, for it is perfectly possible to imagine that a *whole community* follows "deviant" rules. Who is going to correct it? Another community? The infinity problem can be raised for communities just as it can be raised for individuals alone (Blackburn, *ibid.*). In this sense, the credentials of the community view for solving the sceptical problem are dubious.

If we grant that Wittgenstein's position does not lead us to scepticism about rules, and that following a rule is a practice, what prevents us from holding that solitary individuals follow rules? What prevents us, to take up the well worn example, from envisaging a Robinson Crusoe following rules? After all, a solitary individual can correct his own actions, apply to himself sanctions when he does not follow the rule. Of course, in Wittgenstein's celebrated phrase,

what “will seem to him right will be right”, and there will be no end limit to his justifications, but a community does not fare better in this respect, and so there is no proof that rightness or correctness are better determined by the social than by the individual context⁵.

The question to which the Wittgensteinian answer – following a rule is a practice – does not answer is the question of *how* a practice fixes a rule, and why this practice has to be social. One can answer (Esfeld 1999, 3, p. 15) that in the case of the solitary individual, there can never be any process of negotiation, and no convergence of individuals upon a rule, in difference from what happens with the individual. But if sceptical doubts can be raised about the rules followed by a community which converges upon which rules they actually follow, there is no reason to suppose that such convergence or negotiation can fix the rules at the social level.

Such objections have led Pettit to elaborate (Pettit 1993, p. 179 ff.; 1998), the Wittgensteinian argument in favour of a sort of “transcendental deduction” of the essentially social character of thought and meaning. Pettit formulates the conditions of rule following in dispositional terms, thus rejecting the Kripkensteinian bar upon the use of such notions. He proposes in fact the following, genetic account of the formation of rules and thought (Pettit 1998, p. 176-182; see also Esfeld, 1999, 3, p. 10):

1. Being able to think involves the capacity to use voluntary signs in representations of how things, as the subject believes, are.

⁵ Wright 1986 makes a charge against the “contractual model” upon which the community view is based: the idea that once a sort of contract has been sttled between us an our community, the meaning of the rule takes care of itself. He opposes the “investigation independence” involved in such a view.

2. In order to represent a property – or other entity- voluntarily, the thinker must be able to identify that property and must be able to see it as something that they can try, fallibly, to register.
3. Thus the capacity to think requires the thinker to have at best a consciously fallible criterion for determining whether or not the property is present in a given case.
4. How does a human thinker register the presence of a property that in their repertoire is semantically basic, i.e not defined by other properties? They cannot use the fact that they are disposed to apply the predicate in a given case as a criterion for the presence of the property; they could not even think of the property as something that they can try but fail to register.
5. A human thinker might be able to in principle to use an idealised version of this predicative disposition in a criterial role, and so there is no argument in principle against the abstract possibility of the solitary thinker.
6. But in actual fact, the human thinkers are not solitary in that way; they use a socially shared, predicative disposition as an identifying criterion.
7. The social holism thus supported is a deep, not superficial, changeable feature of human thinkers; it explains how human conversationalists can claim to know – to know immediately, not to derive – what they each have in mind with the use of certain words.

Pettit grants that our use of signs for thought is based upon a “capacity” or a disposition. He also supposes that individuals who share the same biological equipment share, roughly, the same dispositions. A lone individual is able to follow rules in idealising his own dispositions or capacities. But individuals also share dispositions to cooperation, which are reinforced by sanctions of the community. When these conditions are in place, rules are followed. Pettit’s view belong to the family of what are called “response dependent” accounts of

norms and rules, where correctness conditions are framed in terms of biconditionals of the form:

(RD) X is correct iff under suitable conditions C, suitable subjects S would take X to be correct ⁶

Not only does such a view actually use the very notion of disposition in the genealogy of rule following, but it also accepts that solitary individuals can follow rules. Now *as a matter of fact* we are not solitary: we engage in rule following within communities. So there is no *necessity*, either causal or *a priori*, of the existence of the community for the existence of rules⁷. In other terms, Pettit's "social holistic" view is merely a *contingent* thesis, which he takes to be compatible with the *collectivist* version of social holism and with a form of individualism, which limits the attribution of thoughts and meanings to a solitary individual. This is, in my view, a coherent combination, but it limits seriously the argument which underlies the so-called community view, for it is not clear that this view is not collectivist. The transcendental argument according to which thought is possible only within a community is blocked, since this condition becomes, in Pettit's hands, only contingent. So the *a priori* character of this argument is lost. Moreover, the way Pettit understands the emergence of norms from a biological disposition to cooperation does not prevent us from deriving norms in a biological way, in the style of contemporary accounts of the emergence of cooperation (Axelrod 1984). Norms can, in the end, be reduced to idealised dispositions.

3. Davidson's triangulation argument

⁶ For an excellent analysis of these response depend accounts in the recent literature and of a comparison with Pettit's view, cf. Jussi Haukioja 2000.

⁷ Contrast here with Esfeld 1999, who holds that it is a matter of necessity

A second kind of argument in favour of the social normativity of thought and meaning is due to Davidson. It has a number of facets, among which one is his conception of interpretation as based upon ideal norms of rationality (Davidson 1984). We have already noticed above that this view is part of what is meant by the claim that thought is subject to a rational ought. In itself, however, it provides no *prima facie* ground for the sociality thesis, but only, as we saw for the normativity thesis. For the rational requirements on thoughts can be understood as purely general requirements which are in place whether a creature interacts or not with others. But Davidson has another argument, also derived from his theory of interpretation, according to which there cannot be thought, in the sense of *objective* thought about an external world, without communication with others, hence without some form of social interaction. This specific argument is indeed the ground for one form of the sociality thesis, and it is the one that Davidson has recently developed as a claim about *triangulation* (1991). Davidson presents it as a direct descendent of Wittgenstein's argument about rules. He supposes that an individual who applies a word in a given context to an object, for instance "cow" to cows, must operate within an external environment in which this individual reacts to stimuli caused by this environment. But what makes it the case that these stimuli are similar? Similarity is largely a subjective notion, and by himself, in isolation, an individual has no similarity criterion. But if he can observe the reactions to stimuli of an other individual, he will be able to establish that they are similar or different to his:

“We can think of it as a form of triangulation: each of two people is reacting differentially to sensory stimuli streaming in from a certain direction. If we project the incoming lines outward, their intersection is the common cause. If the two people now note each other's reactions (in the case of language, verbal reactions), each can correlate these observed reactions with his or her

stimuli from the world. The common cause can now determine the content of an utterance and a thought. The triangle which gives content to thought and speech is complete. But it takes two to triangulate. Two, or, of course, more.” (Davidson 1991, p. 159-160)

This is the basic condition for the existence of objective beliefs about the world, and hence for thought itself. Only in these conditions, says Davidson, can a subject have the notion of error, and hence that of objectivity. As he says, this triangulation is supposed to apply in cases of perception, and not only to the cases of linguistic communication. Let us consider these only, since a counterexample at this level will be sufficient to show that not all thought is based on communicative interaction. The problem is that one does not see how an isolated individual, who considers his own past stimuli, cannot triangulate alone. Nothing prevents him from thinking about his own responses, and to find them similar to each other (Child 1994: p. 22). In other terms why should it be easier to compare similar reactions to a stimulus on an *interpersonal* instead of an *intrapersonal* basis? The answer will presumably be that the subject can only compare these reactions within time, using his memory of past stimulations. And then, “what will seem to him right will be right”. But why should the contrast between subjective and objective come from an interaction with another agent? What prevents two agents to err in common? So we find again the worries that we raised about the Wittgensteinian version of the community view. In fact, contrary to Davidson’s claim that only human animals can “triangulate” because they have the resources of linguistic communication, the triangulation model has been employed to describe the behaviour of rats in their navigation through space. These animals are placed in a pool full of an opaque liquid. There is an immersed platform to which they learn to move. They cannot see the platform, but they can move towards it, by keeping track of their relationships to different coordinate points which they

can see in the pool. Once on the platform, the rat registers the visual indices that he can see. If the distance between one index is larger than the distance from the platform, the animal swims towards it; if it is smaller, the animal avoids it. His movement is the result of these calculations (Campbell 1993, p. 78-79). There it seems there is a grasp of an objective world, even though the vectors given to the animal are given only from a purely “egocentric” point of view. If a rat can “triangulate” in this way, why should a human be prevented from doing so? It is not obvious, then, that the contents of perceptual experiences, which are thought contents, must depend upon a form of triangulation of kind that Davidson envisages, that is upon a form of communicative intersubjectivity. If this is correct, Davidson’s triangulation argument does not give us an *a priori* reason to think that thought has to be based upon a normative guidance coming from interaction with others. At best, his argument gives us only the contingent version of this claim: as a matter of fact, human thinkers are able to triangulate through communication, but this not a necessary feature of thought in itself.⁸

4. Brandom’s inferential-socialist view of thought

Let us now turn to a recent form of the normativity thesis combined with the sociality thesis, proposed by Brandom (1994). Brandom’s views are cast on the basis of two main assumptions : (i) that the notion of propositional content is determined by what kind of inferences can be made on its basis and from what kind of premises it can be inferred (this involves some form of “inferential role semantics” according to which the meaning of an expression in a language and of a concept in the thought of an individual is the “inferential” or “conceptual role” that it plays within a set of inferences involving that expression of concept), and (ii) that the inferential and assertoric conditions which

⁸ In Engel 1999, I argue that Davidson should make room for conceptual norms of the form described in § 1 above.

individuate thoughts and concepts are implicitly instituted by social practices and depend on the capacity of the individual involved in these practices to take normative attitudes towards their own assertoric and inferential performances. The first assumption, that content is conceptual role, is Brandom's version of the normativity thesis : for any content there are some conceptual and inferential relations in accordance with which it is *correct* to entertain this content. Such norms – conceptual norms – are constitutive and correspond at least to our two first grades of constitutive norms above (§1). The second assumption, that these norms are instituted within practices of individual in a community, corresponds to Brandom's version of the sociality thesis. The individual who makes an inference between certain beliefs , or who uses a certain concept has to recognise that these inferences or concepts are correct or incorrect in terms of the proper circumstances of validation of the inferences or the correctness of applications set by the community to which he belongs. In other words, the individual has to take an attitude of *commitment* , which is a normative attitude, towards the concepts that she uses, the inference that she makes, and she takes these attitudes as those that others would themselves take. These practices are conceived by Brandom as games in which each participant enjoys various “deontic statuses”, and where each significant move alters the deontic statuses of the participants. And such deontic statuses exist only insofar as they are mutually attributed to each other by the participants in the games. Brandom takes our linguistic practice as a form of what he calls *deontic scorekeeping*: members of a speech community are the scorekeepers of each others commitments and entitlements within what Brandom calls a “normative pragmatics”.

For Brandom the very individuation of a thought, and in fact the very having of a thought by an individual is dependent upon the kind of “scorekeeping attitudes” that this individual has towards others and that others have towards

him or her. Thoughts are thoughts, and meanings are meanings, only because they are *ascribed* by individual to others, or interpreted. So Brandom's position is close to Davidson's "interpretationist" view of thought and language, or, as he himself calls it, "phenomenalist": to have a thought is to be ascribed a thought by someone, and the very identity of the thought is relative to this ascription. When one ascribes a thought p to a person, one ascribes to her the fact of being committed to q, r , etc., and one recognises her commitment. In turn, the person herself has the thought only in so far as she recognises this commitment. Again in other terms, the content of a belief is determined by the content of the beliefs that the person *should* have, where the "should" has to be shared by other interpreters of one's speech and thought.

This "expressivist" conception of thought implies a form of social holism (Esfeld 1999, *ibid.*). An individual can only have beliefs within the context of her having other beliefs. The inferential context of a belief is the use of the sentence which expresses it by the whole community. So it is the whole community who, by its shared commitments fixes the content of assertions and beliefs. The order of explanation of mental contents adopted by Brandom is thus the following:

- (a) The content of propositional attitudes is determined by the inferential roles that they have within an individual's psychology
- (b) these inferential roles are normative (they are rules, which involve prescriptions and commitments)
- (c) the normativity of these roles derive from the deontic "scorekeeping" attitudes of the community; inferential content is social content
- (d) hence the contents of propositional attitudes normative because they are intrinsically social.⁹

⁹ This reasoning is expressed, for instance, by Brandom 1994, p. 624 : "Only we discursive (that is concept mongering) creatures can *take* ourselves and others to be bound by the norms that are our concepts.

Let us agree with (a) and (b), understood as above as Brandom's version of the thesis that there are *objective* conceptual norms intrinsic to thought contents. The difficulties arise with (b) and (c). Brandom's "phenomenalism" about norms implies that there are norms only in so far as there are deontic statuses, that is commitments and entitlements, which themselves derive from deontic attitudes that the subjects take. This implies that there are norms only insofar as there are subjects who *take them* to be norms, and who take themselves and others to be entitled to think certain things. So how can the norms in question be objective?

This question is important, because, as Brandom says, "it is precisely the objectivity of conceptual norms, when properly understood, that least to the requirement that the practices in which such norms are implicit be *social* practices." (Brandom 1994, p. 54). According to him, the objective representational dimension of conceptual content "turns out to depend on the social articulation of the inferential practice of giving and asking for reasons" (*ibid.*). Brandom wants conceptual norms neither to be derived from dispositions to judge that subjects would have under various circumstances (for this would amount to the kind of dispositionalism about rules that Wittgenstein criticises), nor to be sorts of platonic entities that the subjects track. So the objectivity of conceptual norms, and hence of content, must derive from the social practices of scorekeeping the normative attitudes that the individual take. But how is the fact that something (within a social practice) is *taken* to be correct supposed to make it the case that it *is* correct? There arises the same problem as the one which arises from the community view with respect to

This is the idea that is followed out in the deontic scorekeeping pragmatics presented here. The idiom in which the account of discursive commitment is expressed is normative throughout. Propositional contents are understood in terms of their explanatory role in specifying proprieties of claiming, judging, and inferring – in general in terms of the roles they play in the game of giving and asking for reasons. what it is for something to state of express a fact is explained in normative terms, and what it is for something to be stated or expressed is explained in turn by appeal to that practice."

Wittgenstein's analysis of rule following. Even if we grant that the members of a community have the capacity to take various practical deontic attitudes to each other, it is not clear that the deontic statuses are correct, i.e. that what seems (communally) to them right is right.

At some points, Brandom seems to suggest that some form of convergence, or of sharing of deontic attitudes will suffice to warrant this objectivity. He seems to say that in order to understand the deontic statuses of expressions, we must share the *commitments* of our fellow speakers: “Practitioners take or treat themselves and others as having various commitments and entitlements. They *keep score* on deontic statuses by attributing those statuses to others *and undertaking them themselves*. [my italics] (1994, p. 166), see also .p.175). But if an interpreter, who attributes a certain belief, for instance, recognises commitments on the part of the person interpreted, does it follow that he himself must share the commitment? It is one thing to attribute a certain normative attitude, and it is another thing to share it. There is a difference between describing something as a normative practice, as an external observer, and being engaged, oneself, in that practice, that is sharing these commitments.¹⁰

But let us suppose that Brandom does not intend such an excessively strong view of interaction to secure his sociality thesis. It stills remains to be shown that one cannot be objectively committed or entitled to something, even when one is not taken to be so committed or entitled by others. Brandom nevertheless says:

“Every scorekeeping perspective maintains a distinction in practice between normative status and (immediate) normative attitude — between what is

¹⁰ See also Gibbard 1996.

objectively correct and what is merely *taken* to be correct, between what an interlocutor is actually committed to and what that interlocutor is merely *taken* to be committed to. Yet what from the point of view of a scorekeeper is objectively correct [...] can be understood by us [...] entirely in terms of the immediate *attitudes*, the acknowledgements and attributions, of the scorekeeper. In this way the maintenance, from every perspective, of a distinction between status and attitude is reconciled with the methodological phenomenism that insists that all that really needs to be considered is attitudes.” (1994,p.597)

But for that Brandom has to show that the things to which someone is objectively committed coincide with what he acknowledges to be committed too, with what others acknowledge him to be committed to, and that this communal understanding yields objectivity. And as we have just seen, he does not want this objectivity to derive merely from the fact that a community agrees, in its dispositions to behaviour or in its practices on certain regularities. Unlike Pettit, he does not want his correctness conditions to depend upon certain idealised suitable conditions where subject would take certain things to be correct (in the form (RD) above §2). So where do the objective correctness conditions come from? They seem to come from the fact that a community *correctly* takes certain things to be correct, where this correctness is *implicit* in the community’s practice. Hence instead of (RD) above, it would seem that Brandom would frame his correctness conditionals in this form :

(B) X is correct iff X is *correctly* taken (by the community) to be correct ¹¹

But how can such a tautology help? The normative status of X depends on the correctness of adopting a certain practical stance towards it, which itself has to be correct. But where does this last correctness come from? There are only two

¹¹ The remark is made by Gideon Rosen 1997, p. 167.

options: either to say that the correctness could be cashed out in terms of practices (for instance sanctions, such as, to use Brandom's phrase, "being beaten with a stick") described in non intentional, possibly behavioural terms, and then come back to some form of regularism or of ideal dispositionalism, or to say that the correctness has to be cashed out in terms of normative attitudes. The first option is, as we saw, unattractive for Brandom. The second leads to a regress, which in the end he seems to accept:

"There is never any final answer as to what is correct; everything, including our assessments of such correctness, is itself a subject for conversation, and further assessment, challenge, defence and correction. The only answer to the question of what makes one interpretation better than another is what makes one conversation better than another. The answer is a matter of our practical norms of understanding one another here at home". (Brandom 1994, p.647).

But if Brandom has not solved the problem of objectivity, he has not solved the problem of sociality either.

5. Normativity without socialism

I have tried to show, on the basis of three versions of the normativity thesis, why we can resist the claim that the norms of content are necessarily social norms. But it remains to be seen why these norms are independent from social interactions and from the requirements of communication, and why they can hold for an individual subject alone. I have already indicated, with respect to Wittgenstein on rule following that there can be no principled objection to the idea that a lone individual could follow rules, and with respect to Davidson's triangulation argument, why triangulation could be had without communication, for an organism endowed with perceptual capacities. In many

ways such claims rest upon the view that the basic capacities for thought are independent of language and of communication, insofar as most of the partisans of the sociality thesis tend to claim that thought cannot be independent from language, which in turn requires communication. Much of classical analytic philosophy rests upon what we may call the thesis of the priority of language over thought, and that the structure of thought is parasitic on the structure of sentences. But much of contemporary philosophy of mind and cognitive science tends to withdraw this thesis.¹² This is a huge issue, with which I cannot hope to deal here. But we can try to formulate a version of this problem which is relevant to the present issue. Much of the vocabulary of normativity of thought can be expressed by using the notion of a *reason*. The normative features of content that we have sketched above and examined with respect to the views of Wittgenstein, Davidson and Brandom, all have to do with the idea that mental content is liable to reasons: a thought has normative properties because the thinker of this thought has *reasons* to entertain it, or *justifications* to hold it true, and because the mastery of the concepts involved in it is a *rational* capacity. Now the concept of a reason is, normally, the concept of a state (presumably a psychological state) to which the thinker has access, and which he or she can articulate. This is, why in general, it is required that a subject can be *conscious* of his reasons, and capable of *reflecting* upon them. Another connected feature of our ordinary concept of reason is that a subject who has a reason to do or to believe something should be prepared to defend his reason before others, i.e to feel responsible for what he does or believes. These two features of the ordinary concept of reason, associated to the idea that normativity is coextensive with the “space of reasons” are what leads us naturally to the idea that reasons must be sharable, hence public, and that the exercise of our capacity for reason-giving must depend upon our belonging to a community of thinkers. Indeed they are part of what Brandom calls our

¹² See in particular Dummett 1993, and for a criticism of his views, Peacocke 1986 ch. 8, Peacocke 1997.

“deontic attitudes” and our “commitments” implicit in our discursive practices. But if we can *extend* the concept of a reason both to contents that are not necessarily the object of conscious attention from a reflective thinker, and which are not necessarily dependent upon language or upon communication, and if, moreover we can show that such reason can be *objective*, we shall be able to understand why there can be normativity at a primitive level of thought.

And I want to suggest that we can. A basic form of content that a creature – even non linguistic creatures such as animals or infants – can entertain is perceptual content. Such a content can indeed be false, or illusionary, but it is the function of perception to be able to present us certain contents about the external world as correct. Similarly for memory: it is the role of memory to preserve the contents of past perceived events. And both these faculties are such that we take them usually at face value, even though they are fallible. But the discovery of error in perception or in memory is parasitic on this general confidence or trust in the delivery of our natural capacities. So there is a sense in which we take what we perceive and what we remember *as correct* although we might discover later that they are not. In an important series of papers, Tyler Burge (1993, 1996) has argued that we are *entitled* to accept as correct or to take as true at face value certain informational contents which are presented to us.¹³ And he contrast this entitlement to a *justification* of the given contents. Justification is a reflective capacity, which involves reflective *reasons*, whereby we assess certain contents on the basis of others, by some form of inference. But there are entitlements to our basic perceptual beliefs in the absence of justification. They are, as Burge says, the “epistemic default position”. Perception and memory are the basic cases, and they are shared by both non linguistic and linguistic creatures. A more complex case is where a subject acquires the capacity of reflecting upon his thoughts, or to have second order

¹³ See also Peacocke 1996, 1999 ch. 1, for elaborations upon the same theme.

thoughts. Typically a second order thought of the form “I believe *that P*” represents to the subject the content that was presented in the first order thought *P*. But whereas the latter can be false (can misrepresent) the former cannot. It is, in Burge’s words, *self-verifying*: I can be wrong in *P*, but I can’t be wrong in my thinking that I think that *P*. So we are *prima facie entitled*, without justification, to our second order thoughts (Burge 1996). And this this capacity for second-order thought which is crucial for the connection between having a belief and being able to recognise it as true, that I have expressed above in the form of the first-level conceptual norm (ia) (§2). This basic form of entitlement is what allows us, at later stages, to reflect upon our reasons and justifications for the belief, at what I have called the second level of normativity. “ If one lacked entitlement to judgments about one’s attitudes, there would be no norms of reason governing how one ought check, weight, overturn, confirm reasons or reasoning.”(Burge 1993, p.101). If I am right, this kind of entitlement is precisely the kind of “deontic attitude” that Brandom claims to be associated with belief. But on the view proposed here, it does not depend upon the recognition of this attitude by others, nor upon a commitment which one would have to justify within a discursive practice.

Of course the immediate reply that such remarks will prompt is that it is not clear that such an entitled capacity of second-order thought is not dependent upon language, and indeed Davidson would claim that it depends upon the capacity of triangulation, hence of communicating one’s beliefs to others and checking them. But I have also argued above that it is not clear that such a capacity cannot be had by a solitary thinker, and that in the case of some primitive perceptual contents in animals (in particular with respect to spatial perception) there can be assessments of contents as correct. If I am right, then, there are a range of normative relations between contents which occur at a relatively basic stage, from the level of perception onwards to the level of belief

formation and judgement, and which are objective without requiring social communication.

A confusion between this basic form of normativity, entitlement, and a later stage of normativity, having to do with justification and reasons, is what is apt to induce scepticism about the idea that the contents of thoughts are normative. This is because, as we noted above, the most usual notion of normativity, according to which a norm is a rule that a subject recognises, that he can accept, reject, or violate. In that sense “norm” means “reason”, to act, or to believe. These norms are such that a subject is free to choose them or not, to accept them or not, and for which he can be sanctioned by others. But there is, a further sense of norm. There are *conceptual* norms, pertaining to concepts and beliefs¹⁴. In the case of concepts, these “norms” are the kind of “normative liaisons” which Peacocke (1992) calls “the possession conditions” of concepts. They are not such that one is free to choose them, to acknowledge them or not, or to be sanctioned. Actually they are such that a subject cannot violate them. If he did, he would not have concepts, beliefs, or judgments. Such conceptual norms do not depend upon social recognition. A subject can have no appropriate conscious reasons to justify them, and in this sense they may not belong to the scope of his individual intentional psychology. These norms can be called *cognitive* or *epistemic* norms. They belong to such epistemic notions as belief, concept, judgement, but they are not normative in the sense that they would be socially appraised, or would depend upon social interactions. In this sense they belong to an *individual's* psychology. If one wants to use the Sellarsian notion of the “space of reasons”, the point is that this space is not a social space. As Peacocke says about the concept of knowledge:

¹⁴ I am aware that the use of the notion of “norm” to designate these conceptual norms is a bit strained. They might be called standards, for they do not involve any form of intentional agency. Actually the subject does not have to be aware that he follows these standards, since they are constitutive of the use of the mental contents. But the thesis of this paper it is an important feature of normativity. see also Engel 2000, 2001.

“Social elements are not fundamental in an account of the point and importance of knowledge. Knowledge as something which involves a relation of the sort I have outlined to judgments which are both rational and successful is something which is already of value and of importance to us. The value can be elucidated, and indeed exists for the individual thinker considered in isolation, without mentioning the importance for us of saying that someone else knows something.” (Peacocke 1999,p. 36)

The confusion between these two concepts of norms, the “social” and the “constitutive” is responsible for the fact that norms are usually taken only in the first sense of rules intentionally followed, and upon the model of practical norms, which have consequences for action. Indeed a large number of norms are of this type, and language conventions are thought along these lines. But with respect with what I have called conceptual or cognitive norms, these characteristics are not in order. It is not a matter of choice for me, when I have belief, that it aims at truth, when I make an inference, that my beliefs be implied by others. Of course, I can choose certain epistemic norms, just as I can take certain moral norms. But these are second-order norms, about the more fundamental ones, such as those governing beliefs.

If this is correct, there are, as the normativity thesis says, certain norms which are intrinsic to thought. But, contrary to what the “socialist” or “communitarian” versions of Wittgenstein’s arguments that I have examined here imply, these norms are not intrinsically social. Such a conception, however, is not incompatible with Pettit’s conception, for there is no reason why our constitutive norms for thought and concept would not have their origin in natural dispositions to act, which could, under specified conditions

become social, and which would, as a matter of contingent fact, depend upon our social interactions.

Although I cannot develop it here, this view has important consequences for current debates about the sociology of knowledge. A number of sociologists of knowledge hold that knowledge is essentially a social notion, and that the normative implications of knowledge, about how it is justified, what kinds of reasons we have for it, etc. are inherently social, and many writers had drawn the consequence that knowledge is a relative, non objective, concept, because it is governed by context-relative social norms. But if one grants the existence of non-relative, non contextual, and indeed non-social normative implications in the concept of knowledge and for epistemic concepts in general, then these relativistic views are wrong. This does not mean that we cannot give social accounts of knowledge and thought, of the social ways in which knowledge comes to be acquired, evaluated and transmitted. But if the view proposed here is correct, any such account must presuppose that there is an objective, conceptual, core of the notions of knowledge and belief, which cannot be reduced to social regularities. This is quite compatible with the fact that knowledge is formed in a social setting. Indeed, if we want to have a social view of knowledge, we'd better take into account what is *not* social in it. *

* I take it to be one of the lessons of Raymond Boudon (1993) , who emphasises the “trans-subjective” character of our reasons to know (and to act).

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