NATURALISTIC DESCRIPTIONS AND NORMATIVE-INTENTIONAL INTERPRETATIONS

BERND PRIEN

Normative pragmatists about linguistic meaning such as Sellars and Brandom have to explain how norms can be implicit in practices described in purely naturalistic terms. The explanation of implicit norms usually offered in the literature commits pragmatists to equate actions with naturalistic events. Since this is an unacceptable consequence, I propose an alternative explanation of implicit norms that avoids this identification. To do so, one has to treat the normative-intentional concepts such as “norm”, “action”, “sanction”, “belief”, “desire” as a holistic system, in the sense that one has to apply all of them to a given naturalistic practice simultaneously. This result might be taken to imply that the pragmatist strategy of explaining the content of assertions and beliefs in terms of norm-governed use is misguided because it presupposes that one can account for the concept “norm” independently of the concept “belief”. I argue that this consequence does not follow.

Keywords: Implicit norm; linguistic meaning; pragmatism; action; intentionality.

Introduction

In this paper I am going to discuss how social norms can be implicit in our practices. This discussion is located in the context of normative pragmatism about linguistic meaning, the central thesis of which is that linguistic expressions mean what they do because of the way their use is governed by social norms. Prominent defenders of this thesis are Wittgenstein,1 Sellars, and Brandom. Now, as the regress-of-rules argument attributed to Wittgenstein shows, the norms that confer meaning on expressions have to be implicit in our social practices: Because every explicitly formulated norm requires another norm determining how it is to be interpreted, there must be a way of following a norm that does not involve interpretation.2 Thus, if linguistic expressions have their meanings because of the

1 Because of Wittgenstein’s general reluctance to subscribe to philosophical theses it may seem problematic to mention him here. But even so, Wittgenstein’s views seem to come close to what I call normative pragmatism. By mentioning Wittgenstein here, I do not mean to imply that he, like Sellars and Brandom, also sees the need to account for normative vocabulary in terms of naturalistic vocabulary.

norms governing their use, these norms cannot require explicit formulation, on pain of a regress. Hence, it is incumbent on normative pragmatists to provide an account of how norms can be implicit in social practices.

Concerning the practices in which norms are supposed to be implicit there is an important distinction to draw. These practices can either be described in purely naturalistic terms or in intentional terms. In the first case, one speaks of organisms (complicated, yet ultimately purely naturalistic objects) having dispositions to causally interact with their environment, including other organisms. In the second case, one assumes that the organisms are agents with beliefs and desires, and that they perform goal directed actions according to these intentions.

Now, the general agenda of normative pragmatism about linguistic meaning implies that the practices in which norms are implicit have to be naturalistic practices. According to the pragmatist agenda, the semantic content of linguistic expressions is to be explained in terms of the norms that govern the use of these expressions. Beliefs are then explained in terms of the disposition to use linguistic expressions to avow them. Thus, the contents of beliefs are ultimately explained in terms of norms as well. Also, if one took contentful intentional states as given, there would not be much point in taking the trouble of accounting for linguistic meaning in terms of overt use. One could account for the meaning of linguistic expressions simply by saying that they express intentional states.

Therefore, it would be question begging for a normative pragmatist about linguistic meaning to assume intentional practices as what implicitly contains social norms. Rather, the normative pragmatist has to explain how norms can be implicit in practices described in naturalistic terms, i.e., she has to explain how it can be correct (in some sense of correct) to also specify naturalistic practices in normative terms. Since social norms play a fundamental role in the theory of linguistic meaning of normative pragmatists, it is of the utmost importance that the question of how these norms can be implicit in naturally described practices be answered satisfactorily.

---

1 John McDowell has introduced the notion of a second nature which includes normative proprieties. Therefore, it should be stressed that "naturalistic" in this paper does not refer to second nature, but only to first nature. What I call the "naturalistic practices" belongs in what McDowell calls the realm of law which is characterized by causal relations.

4 Brandom proposes to replace the notion "belief" by "doxastic commitment" which, he claims, can do much of the theoretical work the former notion was supposed to do (cf. Brandom 1994, p. 196). Thus, to have a belief, according to Brandom, is to be in a normative state. The usual way (see footnote 11 below), however, of acquiring such a state is by using a linguistic expression. Thus saying that to have a belief is to be in a normative state and saying that to have a belief is to be disposed to use certain linguistic expressions come to the same thing.

5 “Naturalistic practice” is merely an abbreviation for “practice described in purely naturalistic terms".
I have argued that if one takes norms to be implicit in our practices, one has to show how they can be implicit in naturalistic practices, where “naturalistic” refers to what John McDowell calls the realm of law, a logical space of events characterized by causal connections. McDowell, however, would deny that one has to account for norms in naturalistic terms, even if he would agree that they are implicit in our practices. He would argue that norms are part of or implicit in our second nature, which is distinct from the realm of law, or first nature. (Something similar seems to be true for classical pragmatists such as John Dewey.) However, I think that this position is unsatisfactory because 1) it is quite unclear what exactly such a second nature is supposed to be and 2) there are rich connections between naturalistic descriptions and normative interpretations that we need to spell out in detail if we want to gain an understanding of normative terms.

In what follows, I will assume that we have to show how norms can be implicit in naturalistic practices. The general idea of how this is possible can be traced back to H. L. A. Hart. Hart’s idea is to reverse the order of explanation between norms on the one hand and actions and sanctions on the other. The normal order of explanation has it that because the norm “In situation S, one should do A” obtains, people generally perform action A in S and sanction others for not performing A in S. Reversing the order of explanation, we get the following connection: The fact that most people perform A in S plus the fact that deviations from this regularity are sanctioned by others constitute (in some sense) the fact that a norm obtains in the community.6

As I have pointed out, normative pragmatists are committed to explain how norms can be implicit in naturalistic practices. Therefore, they have to find naturalistic surrogates for “performing an action” and “sanctioning someone”. They thus come up with the following explanation of norms implicit in the practices of a group of organisms:

1) Most members of the group are disposed8 to exhibit performance A in situation S.
2) Most members of the group are disposed to react to deviations of other organisms from this regularity by negatively reinforcing their behavioral dispositions. Thus, if an organism does not exhibit performance A in S, others

---

6 Of course not only the order, but also the type of explanation changes. In the first case, the norm provides the agents with a reason to act in certain ways, whereas in the second case patterns of actions and sanctions constitute the norm.

7 Hart himself is happy to assume practices consisting of intentional actions and intentional sanctionings. This does not conflict with the above argument because his aim is not to account for linguistic meaning, but to elucidate “The Concept of Law”.

8 Of course, talk of dispositions is itself problematic in that it requires the consideration of counterfactual situations. However, I think that in the context of social philosophy, we can rely on our intuitive understanding of the concept “disposition”.

24
are disposed to react to this by performances that make it more likely that the first organism will in the future perform A in S.\(^9\)

Before I go on to discuss this proposal, I want to stress that we are looking for an explanation of the concept “implicit norm”. We want to know what it is for a norm to be implicit in naturalistic practices. Therefore the above explanation has to be intentionally adequate, it has to be an explanation of the concept “implicit norm”. It would not be sufficient to provide a merely extensionally adequate criterion. Normative pragmatists claim that the existence of a norm consists in the above naturalistic patterns. The claim is not just that a norm obtains whenever these two conditions are fulfilled. Even a Platonist about norms could concede that.

In what follows, I will argue that the above proposal of accounting for normative vocabulary commits the theorist to equate actions with purely naturalistic events, which is an unacceptable consequence since for a naturalistic event to be an action, it must at least be connected to a belief. I will then propose an alternative account that avoids this identification. On this alternative account, concepts such as “action”, “sanction”, “norm”, “belief” turn out to form a group of correlated concepts that have to be applied simultaneously to a naturalistic practice. This result at least seems to be at odds with the central explanatory strategy of normative pragmatism, according to which the contents of assertions and beliefs are to be explained in terms of the norms governing linguistic expressions. This strategy is easily understood as implying that one has to grasp the concept “norm” independently of the concept “belief”. However, I will argue that this understanding is not mandatory.

### Actions Are Not Purely Naturalistic Events

One can distinguish two aspects of the above explanation. First, the concepts “action” and “sanction” are explained in terms of naturalistic events. Second, the concept “implicit norm” is explained in terms of communally shared dispositions to act and to sanction. Brandom has criticized this second aspect of the above explanation; he argues that one cannot explain the concept “incorrect according to a norm” in terms of communal sanctions because even communally shared dispositions to sanction can be incorrect.\(^10\) Unfortunately, I do not have the time to comment on this. Instead, I want to criticize the first aspect of the above explanation. Defenders of the above explanation are committed to hold that an action is nothing but an event of an organism causally acting on its environment. In

---


particular, a sanction is merely an event of an organism causally affecting the behavioral dispositions of another organism. This commitment is produced by the fact that an intentionally adequate explanation of “implicit norm” has to be given. Since the concept “norm” is explained in terms of the concepts “action” and “sanction” (a specific kind of action), which are equated with naturalistic events, defenders of the above explanation are committed to hold that this equation is intentionally adequate.

The objection I want to raise in this paper is that one cannot explain the concepts “action” and “sanction” in terms of events described in purely naturalistic terms. Of course, an overt action always involves such a naturalistic event. When I wash the dishes, an organism (my body) interacts causally with its environment. But it is also clear that actions involve something more. Roughly speaking, actions, unlike naturalistic events, can be given reasons for and they are subject to praise and blame. To make the difference between actions and naturalistic events a little more definite, it is helpful to distinguish between three kinds of action: goal directed actions, norm directed actions, and sanctionings.

1) Goal directed actions are performed because the agent thinks that they will further his or her goals. In this case, the reason for acting is provided by having adopted a goal and having a belief that a certain action will be conducive to the fulfillment of that goal.

2) Norm directed actions are performed because the agent thinks that they are required by a norm. In this case, the reason is provided by a norm and a belief on part of the agent that the norm is applicable in the case at hand. For example, the norm that one should bow before the king and the belief that one is standing before the king right now constitute a reason for bowing.

3) Sanctionings are performed because the agent thinks that a norm has been violated. Here again, the reason for an action of this kind is in part provided by a norm, however, this time combined with a belief that a given action of another agent violates the norm. 11

Inspection of these three cases reveals that for a naturalistic event (an organism causally affecting its environment) to count as an action it is required that certain beliefs can be ascribed to the organism. Moreover, in case 1), the adoption of a goal is required and in cases 2) and 3) it is required that the organism belongs to a community in which certain norms are in effect. To keep things simple, however, I will base my argument here only on the fact that actions are always bound up with beliefs, that one cannot grasp the concept “action” without grasping the concept

11 Those who think that all actions are in the end goal directed actions would argue that norm directed actions and sanctions involve the adoption of a goal that people behave uniformly (at least in certain respects) in a community.
“belief”. Nothing will be made here of the claim that some types of action conceptually involve goals and others norms.

By saying that the agent has to have certain beliefs if his or her behavior is to count as an action I do not want to claim that the agent is always aware of such a belief. The agent herself might not even be able to give reasons for her actions. But for someone formulating hypotheses as to the reasons of the actions of another person, the ascribability of beliefs is an important test. For example, the hypothesis that the agent performs the action of bowing because there is a norm requiring that one should bow before the king would be called into question if the agent was not prepared to avow the belief that she was standing in front of the king, and it would be refuted if she explicitly denied having this belief (assuming sincerity). If an appropriate belief cannot be ascribed to the agent, this would count as evidence that she wasn’t really acting, that what she did was some sort of involuntary behavior.

Thus, I think that there is a conceptual connection between each of the concepts “performs a goal directed action”, “performs a norm directed action”, and “performs a sanctioning” and the concept “holds a belief”. These three conceptual connections differ slightly from each other due to the role played by the concepts “has a desire” in the first case and the concept “norm” in the second and third case. These differences, however, will not be relevant here. What will be important is that one cannot grasp the concept “action” without grasping the concept “belief”.

The Problem and a New Proposal

The result that acting conceptually involves having a belief poses a serious problem for the normative pragmatist. Not only is the above explanation of the concept “implicit norm” proven inadequate because it rests on a faulty explanation of the concepts “action” and “sanction”. It also seems that normative pragmatists have no choice but to understand the concepts “action” and “sanction” naturalistically, because they are committed to explaining intentional states (beliefs and desires) and their contents in terms of dispositions to avow them linguistically. Since they also want to explain the content of linguistic expressions in terms of the norms governing their use, they cannot help themselves to the concept “intentional state” to explain the concepts “action” and “sanction” without begging the question.

I will now propose a method allowing normative pragmatists 1) to stick to Hart’s general idea of how norms can be implicit in practices, 2) to assume that what implicitly contain norms are naturalistic practices, and 3) to avoid the mistake of equating actions with naturalistic events. According to my proposal, the explanation of implicit norms starts off quite like the usual way: We have to look for shared dispositions in the group of organisms to exhibit behavior B in situation S together with a shared disposition to negatively reinforce deviating behavior. However, in order not to violate the strictures just formulated, we have to make sure
1) that the events of organisms exhibiting behavior B in S can count as norm directed actions and 2) that the events of negatively reinforcing other's dispositions can count as sanctionings. In order to do that, it is necessary (though not sufficient) to make sure that appropriate beliefs can be ascribed to the organisms. As will be remembered, for something to be an action directed by the norm that one should do A in S, the belief that S obtains must be ascribable to the agent, and for something to be a sanctioning, the belief that a norm has been violated must be ascribable.

Concerning the ascription of beliefs, Dennett has argued persuasively that, in all interesting cases, ascription must rest on linguistic avowals. One can of course also ascribe beliefs on the basis of non-linguistic behavior, but this method only allows for relatively few different beliefs with relatively simple contents. Moreover, for normative pragmatists, what is at issue here is not just the epistemic problem that one can only know about the beliefs of others if they avow them linguistically. Rather, to have a belief is to be disposed to make certain claims. Thus, when we want to make sure that a given bit of behavior can count as an action because we are in the process of ascribing a norm to a community, we have to look for dispositions on part of the organisms to use or to assent to linguistic expressions with contents expressing an appropriate belief.

As the next step, we have to take into account that for normative pragmatists, an expression has a certain content if and only if its use is governed by certain implicit norms. Thus, because of the requirement that agents have to have beliefs we have to look for two things: 1) dispositions on part of the organisms to utter certain expressions, 2) norms governing the use of these expressions that would constitute the fact that the utterance is the claim that p. What the content of p has to be depends on as what kind of action we want to interpret an event. If the event is to count as an action governed by the norm “Do A in situation S”, p has to be the

13 For a less crude version of this thesis, see Brandom’s proposal to replace the concept “belief” by “doxastic commitment”. Brandom (1994, 196) argues that one advantage of this replacement is that it removes an ambiguity contained in the concept “belief”. In one sense, a person believes exactly what she is prepared to avow explicitly. In another sense, a person willy nilly believes what follows from her explicitly avowed beliefs, even if she is not aware of these consequences. Brandom argues that this ambiguity is captured by the difference between doxastic commitments we acknowledge, and those we undertake without acknowledging them.
14 Pragmatists differ over the question of how the use of expressions has to regulated if content is to conferred. Drawing on Dummett, Brandom distinguishes between one-sided and two-sided semantics. There are two kinds of one-sided semantics, the first claiming that the content of an assertion is determined exclusively by the conditions of appropriate application, and the second claiming that content is determined exclusively by the consequences of application. Brandom, on the other hand, defends a two-sided semantics. He argues that both the circumstances and the consequences of application are needed if conceptual content is to be conferred. However, these differences are not relevant for my purpose here (cf. Brandom 1994, 116-132).
claim that S obtains. If the event is to count as a sanctioning of a violation of this norm, p has to be the claim that the target of the sanction has not performed action A in S.

At this point, we are, in a sense, back at the beginning. In order to ascribe the norm “Do A in S”, we have to ascribe other norms concerning the use of linguistic utterances. This shows that the ascription of implicit norms is holistic: In order to ascribe one norm, one has to ascribe many norms. In particular, one has to ascribe norms concerning the use of linguistic expressions which in turn is a precondition for ascribing beliefs in any interesting way. Seen on the level of naturalistic practices, the above consideration shows that one can interpret a pattern of naturalistic behavior consisting of a shared disposition to do A in S plus a shared disposition to negatively reinforce deviation (a pattern corresponding to the norm “Do A in S”), only if other such patterns corresponding to linguistic norms are also present in the naturalistic practice at hand.

**Holistic Consequences of this Proposal**

To sum up the features of the explanation of implicit norms proposed here it may be helpful to contrast it directly with the usual explanation presented at the beginning of this paper. There, a certain order of explanation was involved: The first step consisted in explaining the concepts “action” and “sanction” in terms of purely naturalistic events. The second step was to explain what it is for a norm to be implicit in practices in terms of communal patterns of actions and sanctions. The third step is then to determine the linguistic meanings of expressions on the basis of the norms that govern their use. The final step is to account for the beliefs and desires of the agents. In all interesting cases this can only be done on the basis of linguistic avowals. Thus, normative pragmatists usually adhere to a bottom-up strategy when it comes to ascribing normative and intentional concepts.

The method proposed here, on the other hand, acknowledges that the concepts “action” and in particular “sanction” cannot be explained in purely naturalistic terms. A proper explanation of “action” must include both that actions have effects in the natural world, and that reasons can be asked for them. As we have seen, this includes beliefs on part of the agent. To accommodate this insight, the explanation of implicit norms defended here gives up the bottom up structure of explanation featuring in the usual way of thinking. Instead of first trying to explain “action” and “sanction” naturalistically, then trying to explain norm in terms of patterns of actions and sanctions, and so on, I have proposed to apply the concepts “action”, “sanction”, “implicit norm”, and “belief” to a given set of naturalistic practices all at once.

The considerations put forward in this paper suggest that the concepts “implicit norm”, “action”, “correct according to a norm”, “sanction”, “belief”, “desire” form a holistic system in the following sense: One can apply one of these concepts to a naturalistic practice only if one can also apply others. I can apply “action” to an
event only if I can apply “has a belief” to the organism causing the event, which in turn I can only do if I can apply “implicit norm” to the group of organisms in question. In this way, the normative-intentional concepts just mentioned behave like the concepts “mountain” and “valley”: If one wants to apply one of them to one part of a landscape, one has to apply the other to another part of the landscape. Similarly, if I want to apply the concept “child” to one human being, I have to apply “mother” and “father” to others.

We thus have two groups of concepts that can be used to characterize a given practice: On the one hand, I hope to have established in this paper that the normative and intentional concepts, such as “action”, “sanction”, “norm”, and “belief” form a holistic system of concepts belonging together. On the other hand, we have naturalistic concepts, such as “naturalistic object” and “property”, “event”, “cause”, “effect”, “disposition”, etc. These concepts arguably should be treated as belonging to one group as well.

A practice that can be described using the naturalistic terms can sometimes also be interpreted in normative-intentional terms. For this to be possible, however, elaborate patterns have to be present in the naturalistic practices. So far, it was supposed in the literature that a shared disposition in a group to exhibit behavior A in situation S plus a shared disposition to negatively reinforce deviations suffices. We have seen, however, that the naturalistic patterns have to be far more elaborate than this. In any case, we can see that there are two sets of concepts that can be used to characterize one and the same practice at different levels.

The relation between a naturalistic description and a normative/intentional interpretation can usefully be compared to that between a description in observational terms and a description in theoretical terms. Just as theoretical terms unify and make intelligible the observations, the ascription of norms and intentions unifies and makes intelligible patterns of naturalistic events that otherwise would make no sense.

This comparison, however, also has its limits, as becomes clear when we look at cases in which discrepancies between the two levels obtain. Consider first the relation between observational and theoretical vocabulary: When we do not observe what the theoretical description leads us to expect, we will ultimately have

---

15 Indeed, there can be talk of holism in two different senses. As I have noted in the previous section, one ascribe one norm to a naturalistic practice only if one can also ascribe others. Here, the point is slightly different: One can apply one of the normative-intentional concepts only if one can also apply the others.

16 With his theories about mental events (anomalous monism) and about actions and events, Donald Davidson is a seminal figure in this field of research.

17 Even if the distinction between theoretical and observational terms is not entirely sharp, as the logical positivists and their followers thought, it is still a useful distinction as there are clear cases of both kinds of terms.
to conclude that the theory is wrong. The relation between a naturalistic description and a normative-intentional interpretation, on the other hand, is different: When the naturalistic patterns of behavior do not conform to what the normative/intentional interpretation leads us to expect, we do not have to conclude that the interpretation is wrong. We can also conclude that the actual behavior is irrational in the broad sense of not fitting into a normative-intentional interpretation. For example, the interpretation that the norm “Do A in S” obtains would lead us to expect a community-wide disposition to exhibit behavior A in S and a shared disposition to negatively reinforce deviations from this regularity. However, there can be cases in which an agent violates a norm and none of the other community members is disposed to sanction this. If our interpretation otherwise fits the naturalistic events well, we may conclude that the agents are simply being irrational here. There is a reason to apply a sanction, but the agents simply do not act on that reason.

Whether one puts the blame for a discrepancy on the naturalistic practices or on the interpretation will in general depend on the scale of the discrepancies. If they are small, one will say that the interpretation is correct and that people just act irrationally from time to time. If the discrepancies are large scale, one will judge that the interpretation is wrong, that the group of organisms should be interpreted as following a different norm than we have been assuming.

Thus, in the case of small-scale discrepancies we can see that the direction of fit between a normative-intentional interpretation and a naturalistic description is different from that between theoretical and observational vocabulary. While theoretical vocabulary purports to describe what we can observe, a normative-intentional interpretation prescribes what naturalistic patterns of behavior should be present.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the normative and intentional concepts form a cluster of correlated concepts that can only be applied simultaneously to a naturalistic practice. If this conclusion is accepted, the general explanatory strategy adopted by normative pragmatists is in need of qualification. To explain this, Brandom’s (somewhat idiosyncratic) distinction between pragmatics and semantics is quite useful. The pragmatic theory describes the norms governing the use of expressions without invoking any semantic terms. The semantic theory, on the other hand, attributes contents to the expressions on the basis of these norms. Semantics has to answer pragmatics in the sense that the semantic properties of expressions are always due to the norms governing their use and that semantic differences always have to be based on pragmatic differences (cf. Brandom 2002, 40ff).

The pragmatic theory, and the norms mentioned in it, is thus prior to the semantic theory. This priority at least seems to be at odds with the result reached
here that “norm” and “belief” are correlated concepts that can only be applied simultaneously. This is because the priority thesis is easily understood as implying that, in interpreting the naturalistic practices of a community, one first has to attribute norms before one can attribute beliefs. However, such a reading of the priority thesis is not mandatory. It should not be understood as prescribing an order in which the normative and intentional concepts should be applied, but only as formulating a relation of determination: The semantic properties of an expression are determined by the norms governing its use and different semantic properties have to be based on different usages. The priority thesis says that one has to respect this relation of determination when one simultaneously ascribes norms to a community and beliefs to its members.

References


Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster
Philosophisches Seminar
Domplatz 23
D – 48143 Münster
Tel.: ++49 (0)2 51 – 83-2 44 72
Fax: ++49 (0)2 51 – 83-2 42 68
E-Mail: bprien@uni-muenster.de