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CAN ACTION BE NORMATIVE? SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Abstract. This article concerns the problem of the normativity of action. In what sense can we say that actions are normative? Can we explain the normativity of action by reference to some established norms, by a relation to the language-user's knowledge, or through regularities of social practice? Engaging with Robert Brandom, who distinguishes two ways of understanding the relation between rules and their application (regulism and regularism), the author claims that rules are a kind of actions that are normative per se. This view entails that those actions can establish norms and rules of action. Hence, it seems that Brandom's distinction doesn't exhaust the realm of all possible relations between actions and norms.

Keywords: normativity, action, rule, neopragmatism, Robert Brandom, Wilfrid Sellars, Ludwig Wittgenstein

1. Introduction. 2. Between regulism and regularism. 3. Actions and knowledge. 4. Conclusions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Robert Brandom, in his *Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism*, claims that the most important aspect of Ludwig Wittgenstein's thought is the so-called pragmatist thesis, characterised by him in the following way: "The pragmatist thesis (what I will call 'the semantic pragmatist thesis') is that the use of concepts determines their content, that is, that concepts can have no content apart from that conferred on them by their use"¹. It follows from Brandom's characterisation that pragmatics constitutes semantics – actions take precedence over statements. In Wittgenstein's language this entails

1 R.B. Brandom, *Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism*, in: R.B. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead. Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2002, 210.

the primacy of language games or forms of life over the domain of description, observation, report or explanation.

But what does it mean exactly to say that usage determines the content of statements? Do we mean any possible usage? Can some voluntary actions performed by an individual influence the lexicon of a whole group? Or perhaps it is the group that determines the meaning of linguistic signs? Is the group limited only to the so-called experts? All of these questions ultimately boil down to the problem of the rationality, justification and normativity of human actions. What does it mean for actions to be normative?

2. BETWEEN REGULISM AND REGULARISM

From the very beginning, Wittgenstein was a Kantian to the extent that Kant's philosophy concerns the relation between norms and their applications. His entire thought is steeped in the duality of the conditioning and the conditioned². Wittgenstein's Kantianism is most visible in some of the oppositions he introduced, such as logic/experience, grammar/metaphysics, description/explanation, norm/application, rule/usage and so on. It was only towards the end of his life, in the *On Certainty* notebooks, that he realised that the boundaries between the foundation and what is founded upon it is mobile – depending on the context or situation, i.e. what counts as a rule in one case may be its application in another. Are those situations arbitrary? We cannot give a definite answer to this question, as Wittgenstein did not reflect on the issue of the agent who applies a given rule (the problem of the subject). Neither did he treat normativity as a philosophical problem, due to his openly declared quietism³. This is why

2 Idem, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1994, 8.

3 R. Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 4, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, 127; R.B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, op. cit., Chapter 1.

I do not agree with such views as the one expressed by Saul Kripke, who considered the problem of rule-following as central in the late period of Wittgenstein's philosophy⁴. Rather than suggesting new ways to approach some traditional philosophical views, Wittgenstein seemed to deconstruct them in order to lay bare their relativity⁵. Still, his reflections do contain an implicit philosophical vision.

In *Making it Explicit* Robert Brandom made a distinction between two opposing positions on how to understand norms: *regulism*, which equates rules with norms; and *regularism*, which identifies norms with the regularity of actions and practices. Brandom derives the first position from Kant's philosophy, and describes it as Platonic. Norms (rules, laws, conventions or orders) are rules governing actions. Each of them specifies what needs to be said and done. Rules are derived directly from norms, which are usually codified in one way or another. Whether a given action is correct or not depends on its compliance with a rule or maxim expressed verbally. According to Brandom, this view was radically criticised by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*⁶. His critique may be encapsulated in the so-called regress argument. Wittgenstein writes, "But what does a game look like that is everywhere bounded by rules? Whose rules never let a doubt creep in, but stop up all the cracks where it might?—Can't we imagine a rule determining the application of a rule, and a doubt which it removes—and so on?"⁷; and, in a different section of the book, "But how can a rule show me what I have to do at this point? Whatever I do is, on some interpretation, in accord with the

4 See: S. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language. An Elementary Exposition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1980.

5 The problem of the relation between Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy and deconstructionism is discussed by M. Piekarski *Czy znaki kształtują myślenie? Wittgenstein, Derrida, Havelock*, *Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia* 11(2016)1, 143–157.

6 R.B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, op. cit., 18–20.

7 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Basic Blackwell, Oxford 1986, § 84.

rule?”⁸. Let us imagine that I have to carry out an instruction to, for example, write a series of numbers on the board. Once I have written it, the teacher might ask me whether I performed the task correctly and thus accurately applied the relevant rule. Although I can answer in the affirmative, I am not completely sure as I had stipulated no rule which would regulate the performance of the instruction “Write a series of numbers”. Stipulating the rule would, in turn, entail stipulating another rule which would regulate the performance of the previous one, and so on ad infinitum.

An interesting critique of this approach was put forward by Wilfrid Sellars in his article *Some Reflections on Language Games*. Sellars begins by saying that one cannot justify the application of a given rule in the language in which this rule is expressed. To do so requires moving to the higher level of metalanguage. However, the higher-order rule expressed in the metalanguage cannot once again be justified in this language. Consequently, one has to move one rung up to *meta*-metalanguage and so on⁹. As it is easy to notice, the thesis of regularism of a clear distinction between norms and their applications inevitably involves the need to always provide new norms regulating the application of the previous ones¹⁰.

The position that escapes the infinite regress argument is the one Brandom called regularism¹¹. According to regularism, there is no gulf between norms and actions as norms are implicitly contained in the regularity of actions, practices or behaviour.. Repeatability of actions or even behaviour does not necessarily require the subject’s conscious implementation of a rule. To some extent, behaviours have a social sanction. For example, when I go for a job interview at a cor-

8 Ibidem., §198.

9 W. Sellars, *Some Reflexions on Language Games*, in: *Science, Perception, and Reality*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London – New York 1963, 321.

10 For more on this problem, see: T. Zarębski, *Neopragmatyzm Roberta B. Brandoma*, Universitas, Kraków 2013, 52–57.

11 R.B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, op. cit., 26–30.

poration, I do not put on shorts and a polo shirt because this is not how “it is done”. Nobody would show up for the interview dressed like that. I do not have to be conscious of following a norm of behaviour. Seeing me wear sport clothes, my future employer would think either that I have not been brought up well or that I do not treat my future work seriously. It is only at the very end of the interview that he might think that I do not know the rules of correct behaviour and dress code applying to job interviews. The regularity of my behaviour or the behaviour of a social group constitutes their normative character. This is very important in the case of so-called cultural differences where behavioural patterns may be radically different.

As we can see, regularism cannot be dismissed as implying infinite regress. Yet it may lead to a certain relativity of norms, as it is not possible to establish clearly which actions are correct and which are not according to a norm. How can we differentiate between the actions one does perform from those he should perform? How is it possible to make a mistake performing an action¹²? How can one tell the difference between actions driven by some norm and actions governed by the laws of physics¹³? Adopting regularism entails a problem which Brandom referred to as the gerrymandering-of-regularities argument. The thrust of the argument is that in practice there are many possible patterns and norms of actions. An action can be denoted as irregular, falling foul of regulations or inappropriate only in relation to one specific rule. According to another rule, however, it may be in perfect conformity¹⁴. In a situation like this, rules may

12 Ibidem, 27.

13 See: B. O’Shaughnessy, *Trying (as a Mental “Pineal Gland”)*, *Journal of Philosophy* 70(1973), 365–386; H. McCann, *Volition and Basic Actions*, *Philosophical Review* 83(1974), 451–473; J. Hornsby, *Trying to Act*, in: *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action*, eds. T. O’Connor, C. Sandis, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2013, 18–25.

14 R.B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, op. cit., 28.

be manipulated at will to make an action correct or compliant with the norm. This brings us to the “Kripke-Wittgenstein paradox”¹⁵.

In the opinion of Brandom and McDowell, Wittgenstein oscillated between regulism and regularism without explicitly supporting neither. McDowell emphasises that the decision on how rules and norms should be understood is related to a decision on where we want to look for an explanation – custom, institutions or actions¹⁶?

3. ACTIONS AND KNOWLEDGE

The question about the normativity of actions is closely linked to how we answer the question about the nature of the acting subject. However, we cannot answer the latter directly because the subject eludes our linguistic analysis, which reduces subjectivity to the personal pronoun. The examples of Wittgenstein and other philosophers of language speak volumes here. We must approach the subject obliquely, focusing our analysis on the nature of actions. What makes certain types of behaviour actions, as opposed to mere movements of the body conforming to the laws of physics? The classic theory of action goes as follows:

Person *a* acts to bring about *p* if and only if:

- (1) *a* intends *p*;
- (2) *p* takes place;
- (3) *a* does *b*;
- (4) *b* conforms with *p*.

15 This problem is discussed by M. Piekarski, *Kripke's Paradox and the Normativity of Actions*, in: *Realism – Relativism – Constructivism: Papers of the 38th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, eds. Ch. Kanzian, J. Mitterer, K. Neges, The Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, Kirchberg am Wechsel 2015/23, 236–239.

16 J. McDowell, *Wittgenstein on Following Rule*, *Synthese* 58(1984)3, 342.

This formula may be shortened to “ aDp ” – a causes event p doing (acting) b ¹⁷. Arthur Danto derives it from the so-called Standard Analysis of Knowledge, citing, among others, reflections by Chisholm, Hintikka, Davidson and Quine¹⁸. The analysis is:

- (1) a is convinced that p ;
- (2) p is true;
- (3) a has sufficient proof (evidence) that p ;
- (4) a knows that e ;
- (5) e is sufficient proof (evidence) for p ¹⁹.

Traditional analytical philosophy relates the notion of action to the notion of knowledge. I act in the way I do because I have specific knowledge. In this classical approach, knowledge seems to be prior to actions or behaviour. Analytical philosophers (Russell, Moore, Ayer or Austin) also identified what might be called the basic level for having knowledge or performing actions. Standard analyses of knowledge and actions rest on the so-called simple convictions and simple actions, which are a necessary component of every conviction and action respectively²⁰. In the case of convictions, this entails a logical analysis of sentences down to the so-called atomic or elementary clauses, which have been understood in many different ways but usually as clauses about what might be called sense data. In the case of action theory, complex actions are usually reduced to simple ones. Danto stressed that if there are any actions, there must also be simple actions and these are actions which do not require any prior cause²¹.

17 See: A.C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of Action*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1973, 7–8.

18 *Ibidem*, 197–198.

19 *Ibidem*, 8.

20 *Ibidem*, 28–50.

21 See also: C. Sandis, *Basic Actions and Individuation*, in: *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action*, op. cit., 10–17.

The division of actions into simple and complex ones seems intuitively convincing. If I want to have some tea, I need to hold the cup in my hand, incline the hand towards my mouth and sip. The action of drinking tea comprises different and simpler sub- actions²². Whether any of them is constitutive of other actions is another question. What is more problematic, however, is the concept of the so-called simple or elementary propositions, as well as the classic conviction about the relationship between knowledge and actions.

In his famous article *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Wilfrid Sellars radically criticised philosophical empiricism based on the belief in the existence of what is directly given. The idea that one can identify some simple and irreducible data in experience, and the language expressing it, leads to a number of difficulties, the most important of which seems to be the blurring of the boundaries between reasoning that something is as it is and experiencing (e.g., noticing) that it is so. Sellars believes that as we conflate the difference between these two, we arrive at the conclusion that inferential knowledge must be based on non-inferential knowledge, understood as “directness”, which is totally independent of language and opinions. This sort of knowledge is supposed to be apodictic and obvious as it is based on experiencing some data or sensory content, such as, for example, a splash of colour apprehended in a primary and pre-categorical fashion²³. Hence, it is atomic. The projects of logical analysis propounded by Russell, Moore and the early Wittgenstein were based directly on acknowledging the existence of such objects. Sellars showed that none of the “base vocabularies”²⁴ suggested by empiricists to capture such “simple” objects or structure are pragmatically autonomous, and that they are not independent of other

22 This problem is discussed by C.J. Moya, *The Philosophy of Action: An Introduction*, Basic Blackwell, Cambridge 1990, 14–17.

23 Sellars claims that they are “phenomenological[ly] simple”.

24 R.B. Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing. Towards an Analytic Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New York 2008, 2–3, 49.

kinds of vocabulary or language-games. He argued further that no language can be made up of non-inferential sentences only. Some sentences can be considered knowledge-generating as long as they can act as premises in some specific reasoning or, to put it differently, they may be considered to be reasons for adopting a particular conviction rather than another.

At this point it may be helpful to introduce Ryle's distinction between *knowledge-how* and *knowledge-that*²⁵. *Knowledge-that* is purely propositional and relates directly to the semantic dimension of language. In light of Sellars' reflections, we could say that it is inferentially derived from *knowledge-how*. The fact that the latter is pragmatic, does not entail that it is not propositional²⁶. Sellars understood it in the following way: knowledge is not about describing an object or a state of affairs empirically; rather, it is about "placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says"²⁷. The activity of searching for and providing reasons is thoroughly practical. Radicalising Sellars' project, Brandom says that the meaning of linguistic expressions emerge through inferential practice, that is as the result of being used in reasoning which he calls material, i.e. related to the content of sentences, instead of formal, i.e. focused on syntactic properties of linguistic expressions. Thus understood, pragmatics is obviously not a domain of pure actions devoid of content, but is highly symbolic itself. To discuss Brandom's approach, we could look at it through the prism of holism. Inferences allow for unconstrained merging of the semantic and the pragmatic, with primacy given to what is practical. This is detrimental to the

25 See: G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, The Chicago University Press, Chicago 2000.

26 See: J. Woleński, *Epistemologia: poznanie, prawda, wiedza, realizm*, PWN, Warszawa 2007, 367.

27 W. Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, in: *Minnesota Studies in Philosophy of Science*, vol. 1, ed. H. Feigl, M. Scriven, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1956, 298–299.

purely semantic, because the possibility of the non-inferential is conditional on the inferential.

4. CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions about the relation between rules and actions can we draw from the reflections above? If we take Sellars' requirement of searching for and providing reasons as the example of norm-making practices, we can justifiably challenge the traditional view whereby the user's knowledge takes primacy over his actions. By saying "Pass me that brick", I already establish a norm which will find its application or performance in the situation in which I am given the brick. I know that the person handing over the brick understands the instruction if he gives me the object²⁸. At the same time, the situation of giving the instruction and acting by it comprises a series of actions which sanction the legitimacy of norms. From this point of view, a certain practice constitutes a norm as long as it is performed. We will never consider the instruction "Pass me that house" to be normative. Observing masons at work, I, as it were, *see* the normativity of their practice. What I mean here is that there are certain situations in which it is actions rather than content that constitute norms and rules.

This brings us close to the position of regularism. However, we move away from this view in so far as we are convinced that there are some situations in which no norms are needed. Actions themselves may be normative or transcendental. What I say and think does not have to be determined by the content of my beliefs, but rather by the practices in which I participate and actualise my life. I believe good examples of such practices are situations in which one takes responsibility for something or someone, thereby becoming committed; or the so-called critical situations. There are not, nor can there be, any norms and rules governing such practices. At best there can only be

28 See: L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, op. cit., § 458.

hints and pieces of advice. How I behave and what I do in a given moment may serve as a model for others or, conversely, a practice no one should follow. This is why I believe we can say that what I called the normativity of actions is related to the subjective-deontic domain rather than the objective-alethic one.

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DOI: 10.21697/spch.2016.52.3.05