Brandom and the Boy Who Cried Wolf

Dana Riesenfeld

Abstract In this chapter I distinguish between two types of rules: necessary and normative rules. These two types, I claim, are mutually exclusive. Normative rules that ought to be obeyed cannot be said to be necessary, and vice versa; necessary rules which cannot be broken, cannot be said to be normative. Brandom's inferential rules, however, attempt to be both normative and necessary. According to Brandom, the status of inferential rules is that of a normative necessity, i.e., rules that both ought to be followed and that must be followed. The idea of a normative necessity, I argue, represents a deep problem in the philosophical use of the concept of rule rather than solve it.

Keywords Brandom • Rules • Normativity • Necessity • Inferentialism

1 Introduction

David Lewis, Brandom's teacher, famously said:

> It is the profession of philosophers to question platitudes that others accept without thinking twice. A dangerous profession, since philosophers are more easily discredited than platitudes, but a useful one. For when a good philosopher challenges a platitude, it usually turns out that the platitude was essentially right; but the philosopher has noticed trouble that one who did not think twice could not have met. In the end the challenge is answered and the platitude survives, more often than not. But the philosopher has done the adherents of the platitude a service: he has made them think twice.

In this chapter I attempt to question a platitude regarding types of rules and, finally, salvage it. I think that it is platitude that the rule $2 + 2 = 4$ is a different type of rule from: "Borrowed money ought to be returned." I believe that we intuitively

D. Riesenfeld (✉)
Department of Philosophy, Tel-Aviv University, P.O.B. 39040, Ramat Aviv, Tel-Aviv 69978, Israel
e-mail: danari@zahav.net.il

D. Riesenfeld and G. Scarafile (eds.), *Perspectives on Theory of Controversies and the Ethics of Communication*, Logic, Argumentation & Reasoning 2,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-7131-4_9,

agree, without thinking twice, that these two rules are essentially different. However, I do not only think that these rules are *different*. I will argue that these types of rules are *mutually exclusive*: that a rule, any rule, cannot be of the same type of the first rule and of the same type of the second rule at one and same time. I call the first type of rule a "necessary rule" and the second type of rule a "normative rule," and I claim that necessary rules and normative rules are mutually exclusive, i.e., that no rule can be both necessary and normative. Incidentally, this does not mean that *all* rules are either normative or necessary; there are other categories of rules that are neither normative nor necessary.

Although I consider the intuitions regarding the difference between necessary and normative rules to be quite commonsense, some philosophers seem not to concur with this dichotomy. One of them, around which this article is centered, is Robert Brandom. In order to perform the complex and various tasks Brandom assigns to what he dubs "inferential rules"; these rules, I claim, must be both normative and necessary. In the following I give a general outline of what Brandom calls "inferential rules"; I then argue that in order to fulfill the communicative role Brandom assigns to them, inferential rules need to be both necessary and normative; and finally, I argue against the possibility of a normative and necessary rule.

2 Brandom on Inferential Rules

Let me start by giving a very general and rough outline of the monumental Brandomian project, called inferentialism. Brandom's inferentialism is a detailed and intricate elaboration of the basic idea that language is essentially the game of giving and asking for reasons. Within inferentialism, the role of normativity is crucial. "There is a need," Brandom claims, "for a [...] notion of primitive correctnesses of performance *implicit* in *practice* that precede and are presupposed by their explicit formulation in rules and principles." "There is a kind of correctness that does not depend on explicit justification, a kind of correctness of practice" (1994: 21–22, italics in the original). This primitive notion of correctness, for Brandom, is normativity. Brandom regards normativity – more specifically, the normativity of action – as a primary concept within his theory of language and communication: "There is a kind of correctness that does not depend on explicit justification, a kind of correctness of practice" (1994: 21–22).

Normativity is primary for Brandom in three interrelated senses: First, it is conceptually prior as it is an atomic concept, irreducible to any other concept. Second, the normative dimension of linguistic practice is ineliminable, i.e., not dependent on any other concept, and yet has the entire conceptual apparatus (reference, truth, rational action, representation) depend on it. And, finally, it is methodologically prior in that it comes first in the order of explanation.

As humans, we are discursive beings, and, as such, we exist in a space structured by norms. For Brandom, these norms are objective and social. Moreover, Brandom argues that norms are objective *because* they are social, i.e., that it is the social nature

of norms which gives them their status as objective. I cannot, within the scope of this chapter, explain the justification Brandom gives to support his claim that norms are objective, but I will touch upon some aspects of it later on.[1]

One of the cornerstones of inferentialism is Brandom's distinction between what is explicit and what is implicit. Brandom argues that "the practices that confer propositional and other sorts of conceptual content, implicitly contain norms concerning how it is *correct* to use expressions, under what circumstances it is *appropriate* to perform various speech acts" (1994: xiii). As a philosophical stance, inferentialism shifts from the idea that our norms are made explicit *in our rules* to the idea that norms are implicit *in our practices*.[2] The picture painted by Brandom is this one:

> To express something is to make it *explicit*. What is explicit in the fundamental sense has a *propositional* content – the content of a claim, a judgment, or belief (claimable, judgeable, believable content). That is, making something explicit is *saying* it: putting it into a form in which it can be given as a reason, and reasons demanded for it. Putting something forward in the explicit form of a claim is the basic move in the game of giving and asking for reasons. (1994: xviii)

Here is a very simple example: the meaning of "red" within inferentialism could be stated, thus, someone who says that $\boldsymbol{x}$ is red undertakes a commitment to a number of claims, that $\boldsymbol{x}$ is colored, $\mathbf{x}$ is extended, $\mathbf{x}$ is not green, and so on.

Summing up Brandom's point, we may see that linguistic practices make *implicit* normativity *explicit* via moves in the language game wherein our linguistic practices are rule-governed. The rules governing our linguistic practices are, he claims, inferential rules. In practice, those inferential rules are manifested by what Brandom calls: "deontic scorekeeping."

3 The Practice of Deontic Scorekeeping

The term "scorekeeping" is taken from Lewis' 1979 paper "Scorekeeping in a Language Game." The name "scorekeeping" is an elaboration of the Wittgensteinian metaphor: thinking of language as a network of language games, we can assume that scores are kept within the language game, "At any stage in a well-run conversation, a certain amount is presupposed . . . Presuppositions can be created or destroyed in the course of a conversation. This change is rule-governed, at least up to a point" (1979: 339). Presupposition provides a clear illustration of the idea of

[1]The idea that norms are objective *because* they are social has to do with what Brandom calls "I-Thou symmetry of subjective discourse attitudes and objective discursive statuses." Briefly, the idea is that there is a distinction between " . . . what is merely held (true) and what is correctly held (true)" (1994: 599) without assuming that the community has a privileged perspective on what is objectively true.

[2]This shift, Brandom claims, makes his concept of rule immune to Wittgensteinian charges of regress in the sense that it does not employ a Platonistic concept of norms as rules.

scorekeeping. If I say "even a three year old could do it," I add to the conversation the new presupposition, namely, that the deed is very easy. This addition, via the presupposition, immediately changes the conversational score. Another prominent example are the material inferences. If, e.g., I say that "today is Thursday," then materially I am committed to the truthfulness of "tomorrow will be Friday" (1994: 97–98).

Brandom's and Lewis' notion of scorekeeping are not identical, but what is important for our purposes is that Brandom makes use of the idea that meaning is dependent on keeping track of one's own and of others' commitments and entailments. Commitments and entailments are, for Brandom, the basic normative statuses, the basic moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons. So, at any stage of the game, the speaker is committed to certain claims and entitled to others. Brandom calls this kind of scorekeeping "*deontic* scorekeeping," since commitments and entailments are analogous to the classic deontic operators, namely, permissions and obligations:

> Deontic scores consist in constellations of commitments and entitlements on the part of various interlocutors. So understanding or grasping the significance of a speech act requires being able to tell in terms of such scores when it would be appropriate (circumstances of application) and how it would transform the score obtaining at the next stage of the conversation of which it is a part (consequences of application). For at any stage, what one is permitted or obliged to do depends on the score, as do the consequences that doing has for the score. Being rational – understanding, knowing how in the sense of being able to play the game of giving and asking for reasons – is mastering in practice the evolution of the score. Talking and thinking is keeping score in this sort of game. (1994: 183)

Like Lewis, Brandom compares his deontic scorekeeping to scorekeeping in a baseball game. After each move of the players, the score is adjusted accordingly. The notion of commitment corresponds to the notion of "strike" – the situation where the referee rules that the pitcher threw the ball outside of the designated boundaries. The comparison to baseball is by no means marginal: unlike "purely formal games" (1994: 183) like chess and tic-tac-toe, baseball is only *partly* formal. The difference between purely formal games and partly formal games is defined by the notion of "material content" as opposed to formal content. Purely formal games have a formal content while partly or impure games have a material content as well as a formal one. The idea is that the decision of whether a pitcher's throw is a "ball" or a "strike," although these terms are governed by the formal rules of baseball, is contingent on other relevant concepts such as the swinging of the bat, the passage of the ball through a certain region of space which is relative to the position of the batter's body. This is very different from the decision of whether a move constituted a checkmate or not. And this is also the case of linguistic scorekeeping; it is an impure game which has a material content. The difference between formal and partly formal games amounts to the fact that although both types of games are rule-governed, the question whether a move has been carried out correctly or not is always decidable *before* the move is made in formal games and always *after* the move is made in partly formal games.

In baseball, the final authority on whether a rule has been applied correctly or not lies with the referee, or umpire, as they are called in baseball. Brandom cites a famous baseball jest that of the escalating claims of the three umpires:

> First umpire: I call 'em like I see 'em.
>
> Second umpire: I call 'em like they is.
>
> Third umpire: Until I call 'em, they aint!

He uses this story to illustrate an important point: in baseball, as is in linguistic scorekeeping, all three umpires are justified in making their claims. How can this be?

Brandom speaks of two dimensions of authority: constitutive and normative. In one sense, the third umpire makes the throw into what it is: a strike or a ball; but in another sense, he can only do so in normative surroundings in the sense that his actions are measured against a normative background: "... on the one hand, the actual attitudes of the scorekeepers are essential in determining the score (third umpire). On the other hand, the formation of these attitudes is itself subject to norms; scorekeeping is something that can be done correctly or incorrectly. This is not, of course, because it is in general governed by explicit rules" (1994: 184). The umpire exercises his constitutive authority, but this authority only makes sense because it is employed in a normative surrounding.

It is important that scorekeeping rules are stated in a normative (non-scorekeeping) vocabulary. This secures the possibility of an umpire being wrong, or, analogously, that a scorekeeper wrongly attributes commitments wherein someone isn't really committed. Deontic scorekeeping is too an expression of normative rules, stated in normative vocabulary. This principle is what Brandom calls "norms all the way down" (1994: 627). Brandom's point here is of utmost importance: it is crucial for his project to strictly pry apart being wrong (violating a norm) from merely being attributed such wrongdoing. Like in baseball, wherein the referee can be wrong, so can participants in a language game be wrong. Scorekeepers can be wrong about what the score is: i.e., attribute a commitment or an entitlement in case someone is not committed or not entitled and not attribute a commitment or entitlement to someone who is committed or entitled to that attribution.

4 The Boy Who Cried Wolf

Let us now look at an example of a very specific situation, that of the boy who cried wolf. Brandom makes use of this familiar tale: the shepherd boy amuses himself by calling out "wolf." The villagers, who think that the herd is under the attack of wolfs, rush out to save the boy and the sheep only to find out that he is mocking them. He does so twice, and in the third time, when a wolf really comes to devour the sheep, no one comes to his rescue.

Brandom notes that he uses this tale as an example of a violation of a norm: "In the ideal Sprachspiel being described, making a claim one is not entailed to . . . is a kind of impropriety, the violation of a norm" (1994: 179). And a little later on:

> Having several times committed himself to the claim that a wolf was present (thereby licensing and indeed obliging others to draw various conclusions, both practical and theoretical) under circumstances in which he was not entitled by the evident presence of a wolf to undertake such a commitment and to exercise such authority, the boy was punished – his conduct practically acknowledged as inappropriate –by withdrawal of his franchise to have his performances treated as normatively significant. (1994: 180)

The general context in which Brandom considers the case of the boy who cried wolf has to do with the difference between warranted and unwarranted assertions. For Brandom, lack of entitlement must have a visible result within the language game in the form of a sanction or punishment (1994: 178–179). I, however, in the context of the present discussion would like to use Brandom's example in order to make a point about the role rules have in his theory. I would like to ask now, what type of rule is the rule that its violation had made the boy's action to be incorrect? Let us first make that rule explicit. In Brandom's terminology it is something like: when uttering P ("I am being attacked by a wolf!") the boy is committed to what p entails; i.e., that a wolf is in the vicinity and that he is attacked by it. In the first two times, the boy lied.

More specifically, is the rule violated by the boy a normative rule or a necessary rule? In what follows, I claim that the answer is neither. For Brandom the norm which was violated by the boy is really more than a norm, it is a super-norm, a unique type of necessity I call a *normative necessity*. That the boy has violated a norm, according to Brandom, is clear. But I claim, moreover, that for Brandom the norms implicit in our linguistic practices are necessities. Yes, they are *normative* necessities, but they are necessities nonetheless. I claim this because I think that for Brandom, the boy not only *ought* to have spoken the truth, he *must* have spoken the truth. The necessary aspect of the norm reveals itself whenever Brandom speaks of the constitutive role of inferential rules. "Endorsing a rule, gives it a grip on us" (1994: 52), Brandom says. Once we are in the grip of a rule, following it is not merely what we ought to do, it is what we must do: i.e., that it is necessary to follow inferential rules.

That inferential rules transcend normativity can be seen drawing attention to a few characteristic features. Inferential rules are necessary in that they define normative statuses: a scorekeeper is committed to p or entailed to p *necessarily*. Brandom insists on this point because he does not want his norms to collapse into a matter of opinion. Like the umpire who can go wrong, so can we scorekeepers. What accounts for the possibility of our being wrong in our attributions of normative statues is that the attribution of statuses does not collapse *into being* correct or incorrect. Brandom, like Kant, is faced by the need to explain what makes norms obligatory, what elevates the norm from being a mere recommendation into a binding decree. The solution, taken by both Kant and Brandom, is the creation of a hybrid notion of necessities which are nonetheless normative as well.

In the case of the boy who cried wolf, Brandom says on the one hand that he has violated a norm but also says, on the other hand, that by so doing the boy has disqualified himself from being treated as normatively significant. This is another sign of a normative necessity; when broken, it breaks down with much greater noise than an ordinary norm. While Brandom claims that it is norms all the way down, I claim that it is really *normative necessities* which are all the way down. Only a normative necessity is sufficient in securing the difference between following a rule and mistakenly thinking that one is following the rule. On the one hand, the rules of the game of giving and asking for reasons are necessary rules – they define our discursive actions as such. On the other hand, these rules are normative, in that they can be carried out correctly or incorrectly.

5 Necessary Versus Normative Rules

Let me now return to the example of the two types of rules with which I began with. The following chart presents what I take to be the difference between normative rules and necessary rules:

Type of rule	Necessary rule (one that *must* be followed)	Normative rule (one that *ought* to be followed)
Example:	$2 + 2 = 4$	Borrowed money *ought* to be returned
Points of similarity		
1.	No action can change the *necessary status* of the rule (i.e., even if no one follows the rule, it is still necessary)	No action can change the *normative status* of the rule (even if no one follows the rule, it is still a norm)
2.	Some actions are regarded following of the rule and some actions are regarded as not following the rule	
Points of dissimilarity		
1.	No action can be regarded as a violation of the rule. There are no instances of violation of a necessary rule, only instances of mistakes	There are actions that are correct or incorrect following of the rule, i.e., there are violations of the rule
2.	One cannot choose to act not in accordance with the rule ("I know that $2 + 2 = 4$, but I chose not to obey it . . . " makes no sense)	One can choose to act not in accordance with the rule ("I know borrowed money ought to be returned, but I chose not obey the rule" makes a lot of sense, unfortunately)
3.	The rule *defines* correctness	The rule is a *standard* against which correctness is measured
4.	A necessary rule reflects a fact or an existing state of affairs	A normative rule reflects or constitutes a value

(continued)

(continued)

Type of rule	Necessary rule (one that *must* be followed)	Normative rule (one that *ought* to be followed)
5.	There are no exceptions to the rule ("Usually 2 + 2 = 4, but sometimes it isn't" makes no sense)	There may be exceptions to the rule ("Usually borrowed money should be returned, but not always. The person the money was borrowed from can decide, in retrospect, that it is a present")
6.	Reasons to follow the rule are exhausted by the letter of the rule	Reasons to follow the normative rule are not exhausted by the letter of the rule

6 Conclusion

"The most urgent question for Kant is how to understand the rulishness of concepts, how to understand their authority, bindingness, or validity. It is this normative character that he calls *Notwendigkeit* (necessity)". "... by 'necessary' Kant means 'in accord with a rule'" (1994: 10).

According to Brandom, for Kant being necessary is being rule-governed. When talking about Kant, Brandom does not actually use my term normative necessity; he does speak of a "rational necessity" (1994: 30). But if being necessary is just being "in accord" with a rule, how can Kant prevent his rule from becoming an unbreakable necessity? Of course, we are all familiar with Kant's solution, quoted by Brandom: "our dignity as rational beings consists precisely in being bound only by the rules we endorse, rules we have freely chosen (like Odysseus facing the Sirens)" (1994: 50). "We bind ourselves with norms," he says a little later on (1994: 51). Brandom illustrates the situation of being self-bound by norms via the image of the chained Odysseus. From my point of view, this is the most beautiful illustration of the idea of a *normative necessity*: the image of Odysseus willingly tied to the mast of the ship, listening to what no man alive had heard; the enchanting voices of the sirens. A most beautiful image, but a wrong one, according to my account. For when Odysseus chose to be tied to the mast, there was nothing necessary about it, and when he was already bound in chains, there was nothing normative about it. I then call for a change in imagery, and the image I choose for a normative necessity is that of an omnipotent being, attempting to create the stone that he cannot lift. And in my terms, an omnipotent being trying to create a necessary rule which can also be broken.[3] With the change of imagery, perhaps a new slogan should also be adopted as well. Brandom likes to quote Sellars who defined linguistic rules as "fraught with ought." On the same note, I have claimed in this chapter that rules cannot be fraught with ought and, at same time, mustered with must.

[3]My critique of the Brandomian normative necessity may also have certain ramifications regarding Kant's explanation of autonomy as a normative necessity. This issue is, however, beyond the scope of the present chapter.

References

Brandom, R. 1994. *Making it explicit: Reasoning, representing, and discursive commitment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Lewis, D.K. 1979. Scorekeeping in a language game. *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8: 339–359.