Language not mysterious?[1]

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ABSTRACT: In this article argue that is linguistic rationalism is guilty of ignoring the fact that an understanding of the non-conceptual realm of disclosive symbolic forms — those that are used to make, for example, a feeling or a way of being accessible to someone without asserting it— is also a necessary feature of participation in linguistic practice. I suggest that Brandom is dangerously close to displaying a scientistic insensitivity to an important and positive sense in which our linguistic practice ought to remain mysterious to us.

KEYWORDS: Linguistic Practice; Non-conceptual Content; Symbolic Forms; Inferences.

I agree profoundly with the Wittgensteinian thrust of Robert Brandom's exciting work. We can see this as a multi-dimensional holism. Like Wittgenstein, and others who ultimately relate back to Kant, such as Hegel, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, he offers a devastating critique of the atomism which is implicit in the mainstream post-Cartesian epistemology.

This, as I have argued elsewhere, can be seen as a (partly justified) method which has been illegitimately projected onto ontology. The method is one which is meant to check and verify our too hastily drawn conclusions, and consists in breaking the problematic area down into its smallest parts, and checking each of these and their connections. The illegitimate ontological projection issues in the idea that this is how we in fact think, deep down.

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[1]   The paper has greatly benefited from the discussion of an earlier version with the members of the Phiolosophisches Institut of the Freie Universität, Berlin

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So we accredit the idea (1) that one could first take in one piece of information, then another; then link them, and see the correlation; and hence make inferences. Then (2) one could pass to another plane, and start communicating these "ideas"; to which end one would "invent" language. This too proceeds atomistically: first one word is invented, then another, then another. See Condillac's famous treatise.[2]

Process (1) doesn't make sense for Brandom. How could we take in an isolated piece of information? What sense could we make of such an isolated bit of information? Well what sense **do** we make of it? Elder says: "go, Scout, and see if there are any tiger tracks". Scout comes back: "Elder, I saw a paw track in the sand!" That's a particulate bit, but it makes sense here within our whole general grasp of our situation, which includes forest, tigers, the consequent danger of being eaten, our collaborative efforts to avoid this and other dangers, and so on.

This bit is relevant because it will license multiple inferences, practical and factual. Included among the former would be here: "Let's not go there now". So Brandom's opening move in *Making it Explicit* is absolutely crucial. He dethrones representation as the primary building-block of thought and language. What is crucial is inferences.

Here he joins up with the holism of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, who insist on a primacy of our whole grasp of things; in Kant-speak: the transcendental unity of apperception, over the elementary bits.

Process (2) likewise doesn't make sense. Again, what could we do with, what sense could we make of, a single word? Here both Brandom and Wittgenstein connect back to Herder in his famous critique of Condillac. The French thinker tried to explain the origin of language through his famous fable of two children in the wilderness. It was part of their natural endowment that they tended to cry out when frightened. The cry was in a sense a natural sign of danger. The children come in time to use this as a word for danger; they treat this as an "instituted" sign in Condillac's terms.

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[2] *Essai sur l'origine des Connoissances humaines*, 2.1.1

Herder protests that the really difficult issue has been covered up. How do they become capable of understanding what a "word", an "instituted" sign is, what it involves? Building on both Kant and Frege, Wittgenstein unpacks something of what is involved, that is, the background of practices and activities and the understanding they suppose, which make possible, by making sense of, our uses of language. Meaningful language requires a context of action.

Canonically, we can see this consciousness developing in our philosophical tradition over the last two centuries or so, gradually undoing the tunnel vision abstractions of the main line of modern epistemology (Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Condillac). Brandom's *Tales of the Mighty Dead*[3] sets out one interesting version of this canon. I offer a simplified version here. Kant introduced the primacy of the judgement, that is, you can't understand what it is to master a word, or concept, without mastering the feat of making judgments. Frege develops this point further with his enunciation of the primacy of the sentence: "Nur im Zusammenhang des Satzes hat ein Wort Bedeutung."[4]

But Wittgenstein takes us well beyond this, because he sees that making judgments, cast in the form of sentences, is only one among many language games. More accurately, there is a family of such games, which have in common that they put in play "prepositional contents", combinations of reference and predication, which can be used to make empirical claims ("Sam smokes"), to ask questions about how things are ("does Sam smoke?"), and to give commands ("Sam, smoke!").[5] But lots of other things are going on in language. We also establish intimacy or distance; open contact and close it off; cry for and give or withhold sympathy; disclose the beauty of the world, or the depths of our feelings, or the virtues of the good life, or the nature and demands of God or the gods, and so on.

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[3]   Harvard University Press 2002

[4]   *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik,* F. Meiner, 1986, p. 10.

[5]   The example is taken here from John Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press 1969, chapter 2.

Some of these other activities are going on in and through the enunciation of sentences, and the making of judgments: "Die Welt ist tief" (Nietzsche)[6]; "God is Great!" But a lot else is going on which we won't get if we just focus on the judgments qua judgments. A great deal is carried in the rhetorical stance, tone of voice, body language, choice of words with a given resonance: these are clearly determinative of intimacy or distance, giving or withholding sympathy, and much else besides. Moreover, the disclosive power of our words in poetry is plainly something we often can't bring to light just by fixing clearly the reference and predication of the judgments we can identify (sometimes, indeed, the force depends on the very uncertainty attending these).

All these points suggest that the boundaries of language as we ordinarily take it, that is, speech in words, are perhaps too restrictive. Some of the disclosive work of poetry, rhetorical exhortation, the projection of ideals, the revelation of beauty, and so on, has close analogies to what goes on in painting, in music, in dance, in gesture. Perhaps to get clear on the whole phenomenon of human language, we need to see how the narrower phenomenon (speech in words) relates to the broader field of the whole range of "symbolic forms", in Cassirer's terms.

Wittgenstein takes the context-building of Kant and Frege (judgment or sentence as the context for word-meaning), and in turn embeds this in a wider frame: as one set of language games among others; and he sets the language games in the all-encompassing frame of a form of life.

There is another dimension of Wittgenstein's contextualization, which goes beyond Frege and Kant (though not Hegel, to take an important figure from Brandom's *Tales of the Mighty Dead*). Language games are social, they are developed and played out in exchange. If a word can't have meaning outside of the capacity of making judgments; this capacity itself can only arise within games of exchange, what Brandom calls games of "giving and asking

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[6] See *Also sprach Zarathustra*, "Nachtlied", Book 4; also Mahler's 3rd Symphony.

for reasons". The primacy of sentence over word turns out to mean also the primacy of the dialogical over the monological.

Much of the above, in particular this latter point, is brilliantly developed in Brandom's work. We are all very much in his debt, so that it is almost churlish to enter caveats and cavils here. But philosophy is in a sense a perpetual disturbance of the peace, and so I plunge on.

I have set the stage in the above which should allow me to identify the area in which (I think) our disagreement lies. The stage is set by the story I have been telling, which seems close to Brandom's story, of our slow and difficult emergence from the hole that modern epistemology and the primacy of monological representation dug for us. The climbing gear, the pick and pitons, which have enabled this are the identifications of essential contexts. The isolated bit of information cannot be outside of the framework of judgments, which means also a framework of exchange, a particular language game, eventually a way of life.

The question that needs to be asked here is: how far must this embedding in necessary contexts go? There is a set of language games, whose goal is to make, exchange and check claims about the factual state of things, and draw inferences about other states, or practically about what to do. Plainly this is a package deal. One can't imagine a language capacity which would consist of deploying just isolated moves in this set of games – say, a single person having a single bit of information, then finding a word for it, then communicating it to another; or people just having representations, then making inferences.

But is this package – let's call it the "everyday fact-establishing and practical" package – itself self-sufficient? Or can we only make sense of our having this set of capacities if we set them in the context of our ability to operate through the whole range of symbolic forms which I gestured at above?

Right away this question might appear ill-formed, until we are able to define the boundaries of "fact-establishing". Does it include establishing "facts" about the beauty of things, the depth of feelings, the virtues of the good life, the existence and will of gods? After all, about these matters we may also

give and ask for reasons. But to take the term in this broad sense would in effect foreclose the question I'm trying to pose. The answer would have to be negative.

Let me set out my reasons for this last claim, because they are crucial to my argument here. A serious attempt in prose to set out true judgments about the beauty of things (aesthetics), the virtues of life (ethics), or the nature of God (theology) has to draw on uses of language, in Cassirer's broad sense, which are disclosive. I mean the uses which either without asserting at all, or going beyond their assertive force, make something manifest through articulating it.

Let me say something about this distinction assertoric/disclosive that I have been invoking here. This is meant to mark a contrast. A pure case of the disclosive would be where we use language, or some symbolic form to articulate and thus make accessible to us something – a feeling, a way of being, a possible meaning of things – without making any assertion at all. For me, Chopin's Fantaisie-Impromptu in C Sharp Minor articulates a certain as yet indefinable longing; it draws me into it, and makes it part of my world. I daresay I am not alone in seeing this in the music, and that this was not foreign the inspiration Chopin had in composing it. A human possibility is articulated and disclosed here, but nothing at all is asserted.

At the other end, when the cook shouts out of the kitchen to the men in the yard: "Soup's on!", something is asserted, but nothing is disclosed. But the contrast doesn't simply hold between "pure" uses of language or symbols. For an immense range of human speech and symbol, there is both assertion and disclosure. Very obviously, this is the case in poetry and novels, but it is clearly present also in works of philosophy, as soon as one is attentive to their rhetorical dimension, and the range of literary reference they draw on. In these cases, we can speak of the disclosive dimension of a work, for instance, the stance to the world that an author is articulating for us, that he may even be drawing us into, convincing us to adopt, so powerful is his portrayal, the stance which I as a reader critic might capture in my own assertoric prose, defining it by describing its essential features, but which is not so described in the novel. Tolstoy offers a useful example, because he couldn't resist being

his own critic, and offering long moralistic descriptions in *War and Peace*, driving home is assertoric form what was meant to be disclosed in the narrative.

Now my claim here is that there are certain matters which can't be properly explored without recourse to the disclosive dimension. That is, there couldn't be an intelligent discussion of the beauty of landscape which didn't either deploy, or draw on our familiarity with, say, certain paintings, or certain powerfully evocative descriptions. There couldn't be a discussion of Christian piety which didn't draw on, say, the music of Bach, or certain hymns, or Chartres Cathedral, or an evocative life of Saint Francis, or the *Divine Comedy*, or … the list could be extended almost indefinitely. Treatises on ethics either draw on disclosive works, or move at some or other point into an evocative-disclosive key ("the starry skies above and the moral law within"; or the contrast between the social virtues and the "monkish" virtues). The notion of a totally rhetoric-free work on ethics is close to absurdity. Few books are more unintentionally comic than the moral treatises of fiercely (on epistemic grounds) anti-rhetorical, metaphor-mistrusting philosophers, like Hobbes or Bentham. The reader is offered a feast of powerful images – Leviathan, lives which are "nasty, brutish and short", "two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure" - all in the name of sober, purified reason.

So there is no point even asking the question, whether the fact-establishing and practical family of games could exist on its own, unless we draw the boundaries pretty narrowly. One way of drawing them would be to fence in the zone in terms of the everyday practical issues dealt with. In this zone, we establish the state of things and make inferences of an everyday practical kind. The practical inferences draw on norms that are treated as unproblematic, and remain unproblematized, or else on the uncontroversial behavioural meanings of things.

Examples of the first might be: "I'm invited to dine with the Governor-General, so I'd better fetch my tux from the cleaners"; of the second: "there's a tiger loose in the woods, so don't go there", or "it's going to rain, so take an umbrella." This class might also include: "Patricia says the paintings are

beautiful, so we'll go to the Exhibition." Brandom's examples are mainly drawn from this everyday domain.

Beyond this, there are more specialized domains, where the things taken for granted in the everyday domain might be challenged. For instance, we might question, and hence transform our practices of fact-finding (science, among other things, does this). Or we might question our norms – maybe I should follow the example of Evo Morales, and wear a sweater to dinner with the Governor-General, to make a political point? And are we sure that Patricia knows beautiful painting when she sees it? Of course, the boundaries are fluid here, but some rough distinctions of level can be made, defining the everyday as the domain of the unproblematized.

Now we might hope to treat the everyday package so defined as self-sufficient, as not dependent on the disclosive dimension of language, and thus on the wider range of symbolic forms. We might then make another move: extend the boundary to allow in the specialized domains of (natural?) science, because these by their very nature operate on a set of exclusions which demand that we sideline the disclosive, that is they function without drawing on metaphysical, theological, aesthetic considerations, or on moral values, and without being swayed in one's reasonings by the rhetorical force of the expressions used.

We would then arrive at a familiar grouping, the language games of science and everyday life, which the Vienna positivists already identified as their zone of unproblematic meaningfulness, over against "metaphysics", "poetry", religion, and the like.

But within this general zoning proposal, there are harder and softer versions. There are hard-line materialists, for instance, who frown on sciences of the human which aren't taken from the beginning as reducible to some level of natural science (minds to be explained by the functioning of brains, emotions by endocrinology). And there are more permissive versions which leave these questions open. One very severe version, which wants to admit only natural-science style causation into its ontology, and which appeals to what Quine called "a taste for desert landscapes", is denounced by Brandom

under the name "naturalism". He insists, against them, that we have to introduce norms into our account of language. Naturalism consists in the attempt to "bake a normative cake with non-normative ingredients", and is bound to fail.[7] Here Brandom stands in a very important modern tradition, with Russell, Husserl and others in their denunciation of "psychologism", and their recognition that this type of reduction makes nonsense of logic.

Moving farther in an inclusive direction, some philosophers want to fence in certain reasonings about ethics, in fact what is usually called "morals", that is norms which regulate our actions toward each other. This inclusion can be justified by the claim that we can define a morals on the basis of "reason alone", independent of metaphysics, theology, or people's conceptions of the good life. Such attempts in our day usually draw either on Benthamite or Kantian traditions, and they include some of the most influential of today's moral philosophers: e.g., Rawls (in one of his stages), Habermas, Scanlon. I, alas, haven't read all of Brandom's work, but I suspect that he has some sympathy for a position of this range.

But even a broad-gauge ontology, which would allow norms, and even moral norms, into the bounded area, would still possibly be able to leave the disclosive uses of language outside, and hence could lay claim to a positive answer to my above question, whether the fact-establishing practical family can be seen as at least potentially self-sufficient.

Before I come to grips with Brandom's work, I'd like to explore a bit further the reasons for defining such a bounded frame for fact-establishing discourse. Of course, part of it may be the familiar "secularist" outlook that wishes to separate itself from the religious and metaphysical beliefs which have dominated the human past. But the crucial idea involved here is a concept of "reason alone" ("die blosse Vernunft", in Kant's famous formulation.)[8] By this I mean a notion of human reason, which can suffice to

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[7] *Making it Explicit*, Harvard University Press 1994, p. 64; see also *Articulating Reasons*, Harvard University Press 2000, p. 26.

[8] *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, *Kants Werke*, Akademie Ausgabe, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1968, vol VI, pp. 1-202.

tackle the whole range of inescapable human problems, but which can do so without relying on the deliverances of religion or metaphysics. This is not synonymous with, but can easily evolve into a notion of reason that doesn't have to have recourse to the disclosive-articulative dimension of human language in the broad sense.

The bridges between these two formulations are, first, that religious claims, and often also metaphysical ones, rely heavily on alleged truths derived from this dimension. But second, there is the fact that the canons of argument can be made much more rigorous and conclusive, if one leaves the disclosive aside. We can more easily agree on the conclusions of natural science, and certain facts about human desires and aspirations, as well as the rules of logic, while differences on the nature of beauty, on the highest virtues, on the existence of God, and the like, seem quite intractable. By stripping down its range of operation, reason can become more effective in reaching common conclusions.

Encouraging this mode of thinking stands obviously the spectacular success of natural science since Galileo, which has been won precisely by factoring out the whole culturally-varied domain of the human meanings of things, and frames the phenomena to be studied in neutral terms in a stance of disengagement. This has obviously been the model inspiring the aspiration to a more restricted, and for this reason more effective reason, although only the most radical, materialist versions would make natural science the royal road to all valid truth.

So we can see that here are powerful motivations to believe in a family of fact-establishing practical language games, whose scope is drawn narrowly enough to exclude the disclosive. Now the hope here is that this narrowed realm of reason can suffice to decide all the inescapable issues of human life. It follows that what the disclosive dimension yields is not essential for these issues. This can be assured, on one hand by declaring certain deliverances of the disclosive dimension as without any real object (religion, metaphysics), and by declaring others as expressive of legitimate differences of taste and temperament (ethics, i.e., modes of the good life, as against moral rules; and aesthetics, the beautiful, what moves us in art and nature.) We will differ on

these latter questions, but there is no common object to agree about; what moves us reflects our own variable natures, not some common independent reality.

So one of the strongest strands of the motivation to this narrowed reason is epistemological, that certain questions would be easier to resolve if the really divisive issues could be legitimately left aside. In this, there is an echo of the original epistemological tradition, whose errors can also be seen as epistemologically driven. I argued above that we can see the original positing of particulate bits of information as a kind of reflection of what was seen as a good method. This is the one which Descartes sets out in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, and involve our breaking any issue down into its smallest elements, and then building up to the global solution by careful steps.[9] The error was to project this resolutive-compositive method onto the mind, not just as a good way of proceeding in certain questions, which it undoubtedly is, but as how the mind really works. We ontologized the method.

The question arises, whether something similar isn't happening here, in this narrowing of reason. It would be handy epistemically, if a restricted definition of reason alone really panned out, that is, really could solve all the inescapable questions; so we jump too quickly to the belief that this is how things are.

The original mistake had two sides: first, ontologizing the method; but then, as result, applying it universally, even where it didn't work at all. So atomism was applied everywhere, to thoughts in our minds, to "impressions" of the world (Hume), to words invented one by one to form language (Condillac), and to societies as broken down into individuals (Hobbes). Some of these applications turned out to be crippling, and we are only slowly climbing out of them. (We still hear of "methodological individualism" in politics and sociology).

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[9]   See the discussion in *Sources of the Self*, Harvard University Press 1989, chapter 8.

In the case we're looking at here, our understanding of human language, it might also be true that the mistake has two sides: first, ontologizing the method, that is believing that this narrower reason really can resolve all inescapable problems; and then, because of this, applying it to areas where it is disastrously mal-adapted (like the study of societies with quite different cultures, or of ethical ways of life, or of religions, etc.).

But is it a mistake? We musn't draw the parallels too close. Of course, if we look at the actual phylogenesis of human language-users, and the ontogenesis of human agents, it is clear that this stripped down reason has not been operating from the start. A plausible account of phylogenesis, like that of Merlin Donald, for instance, would see our hominid ancestors developing a culture of linguistic communication through stages; involving first, mimesis, ritual and dance; and then perhaps later, myth and narrative; finally developing what we think of now as speech, with the capacity to operate on the meta-level, making second-order judgments about the validity of first-order ones.[10] The very possibility of conceiving stripped down reason only appears at the third level, and is realized over centuries of development.

Something parallel is obviously true for ontogenesis, where the mimetic and the narrative have a big role early on, before the child grows beyond what Piaget calls "egocentrism".

Now such phylo- and ontogenetic considerations immediately invalidate the epistemological-atomist claim, because that tried to tell us how the mind **always** works. But "reason alone" isn't vulnerable to this. It can allow for a genesis in which it emerges out of more primitive modes of thought. We slough off these earlier forms, and the assumptions about the cosmos and God on which they depend, and we become adult and independent reasoners. We have grown beyond our "self-inflicted nonage" ("selbstbeschuldigte Unmündigkeit", as Kant called it[11]), and can reason in this way.

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[10]   See Merlin Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind*, Harvard University Press 1991.

[11]   "Was ist Aufklärung", in *Kants Werke*, Akademie Ausgabe, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1968, vol VIII, pp. 33-42.

The issue of false ontologization here is quite independent of our genetic story; it amounts to this: can we conceive of a viable way of human life in which the fruits of the articulative-disclosive dimension are clearly segregated from public reason, and relegated to the zone of differential personal experience? (which of course, wouldn't prevent us from mutual communication and exchange about them). The second question, that about the scope of this "reason alone", takes up the same issue from another direction. Does this stripped down reason constitute a good method for deciding only a certain restricted range of questions, for instance, those of natural science, where no-one would contest its appropriateness? Or is it also omnicompetent, that is, sufficient for all inescapable questions to be resolved by reason? These questions are closely related, but as we shall see below, slightly different.

Okay, why am I going on at length about this, when I should be talking about Robert Brandom? I crave the reader's indulgence, the more so in that I want to go a little bit longer talking at this level. The issue I'm addressing is this: after all the discoveries we have made (and Brandom helped make) about the necessary contexts of our ordinary uses of language, is there one more contextualization we have to make? Are our everyday fact-establishing practical games of giving and asking for reasons, which we have shown to be the essential context for all the micro-moves within them, themselves only possible in a broader context, that of the range of symbolic forms which run the full range from pure assertoric to pure disclosive?

And a good reason for asking this question is that there has been a strong temptation to answer it in the negative, to assert the self-sufficiency of the factual-practical. We saw one range of motives for this, following the reasoning of the Vienna Circle, and another (overlapping) range, which springs from a deep investment in the idea of a post-metaphysical way of life grounded on "reason alone".

But there is also another very influential view, which draws its motivation from a certain biologism. Human beings should be explicable, like other

animals, in terms of their biology. The exigencies of human survival and the hazards of evolution have wired in to our natures a certain number of goals. These can be established, as for any other species, by observing us.

If we think of humans as another animal species, seeking survival, then the development of language can appear as a great advantage. Imagine that a group of hominids regularly hunts mammoths. They surround the great beast and attack from several sides; or try to scare it into a trap. What an inestimable boon it would be to develop a mode of communication permitting something like our factual-practical family of language games. You could shout out: "Watch out! He's turning left!" This is the context in which some theorists seem to think of the evolution of language. For instance Steve Pinker in *The Language Instinct*.[12]

And Bernard Williams in *Truth and Truthfulness* argues plausibly that these two goals, establishing reliable truth, and communicating it reliably to one's fellows, would be highly prized in early human societies.

So from the evolutionary biological standpoint, there is already a positive reason to see the factual-practical family as the crucial gain over their hominid ancestors that language offered homo sapiens.

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[12]   Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, New York; Morrow 1994, p. 16: "A common language connects the members of a community into an information-sharing network with formidable collective powers." The example he gives in the text is not mammoth hunting, but our paleolithic ancestors stampeding horses over a cliff. The bones of the victims are "fossils of ancient co-operation and shared ingenuity. This example is the occasion for a short scientistic sermon. Language, he says, "does not call for sequestering the study of humans from the domain of biology, for a magnificent ability unique to a particular living species is far from unique in the animal kingdom. Some kinds of bats home in on flying insects using Doppler sonar. Some kinds of migratory birds navigate thousands of miles by calibrating the positions of the constellations against the time of day and year. In nature's talent show we are simply a species of primate with our own act, a knack for communicating information about who did what to whom by modulating the sounds we make when we exhale."(p. 19). It is typical of Pinker's approach that he identifies the issue whether the study of humanity "should be sequestered from the domain of biology" (which few in their right minds would propose), with the issue whether a reductive theory of language entirely focussed on the factual-practical is viable (which is highly dubious).

And negatively, there is a reason to look askance at the disclosive. We saw above that this cannot be avoided if we want to make a serious attempt to establish what is really beautiful, or really good, or really Godly. But the aim of the sociobiological approach is to bracket these questions. True, people seek what they call truth, beauty, goodness, and often think of these in relation to God. But the "scientific" approach disregards the language, and looks at the actual patterns of behaviour. In this way, following Hume, we can establish the patterns of reaction called "morality": actuated by sympathy, they feel react positively to actions which enhance the general utility. We can also quite well understand how this kind of pattern would have been selected for in evolution: bad team players must have been given a hard time, and had a short life.

Similarly, rather than focusing on the issue of what true love is, and the fidelity it requires, we note that pair-bonding as a behaviour pattern has been slected for. An obvious "just-so" story suggests itself why the gene for this would become preponderant. And, of course, another "just-so" story can explain why, while upholding the general rule, so many men want to "cheat". Having multiple partners spreads one's genes wider.

Obviously, to practise this kind of sociobiological explanation, the disclosive offers no help. It can only distract from the main story, which is the selection of certain patterns of external behaviour, however rationalized in terms of goodness and beauty. The stripped down picture of human life now looks like this: through evolution humans have acquired a tendency to desire certain patterns of action: pair-bonding of men with women, some degree of mutual aid, and to react positively to actions which increase the general utility. But these are not sufficient to determine their behaviour, because they can and often must reason how to encompass these goals, or manifest these reactions. Moreover, thanks to language they can deliberate together, and also pursue enquiry, so that over time their rational calculations become more effective and far-reaching.

All this points to the thought that what is crucial about human language is just the "Viennese" combination above: the fact-finding pragmatic family of language games, augmented by empirical science.

So we have isolated three motivations to assert the self-sufficiency of the factual-practical family: the "Vienna" one (all other uses are meaningless); the "post-metaphysical" one (we are acceding to a culture based on "reason alone"); and the sociobiological one.

But why talk about all this in a paper on Robert Brandom? Because I suspect that I might have been talking about him after all, that in other words, he subscribes to some version of the self-sufficiency of fact-establishing practical language games, or otherwise put, of stripped down reason.

And the evidence? - Well, remember, I just said "suspect". We aren't at the stage of an indictment here, let alone a conviction. – Yes, but the evidence?

Twofold: first, certain statements which belong very much to the vocabulary of the stripped down version. Which ones? Well statements like this, about the norms that we have to suppose at the heart of language games, that "their existence is neither supernatural or mysterious".[13] Or, again about norms, as products of social interaction; as such, they "are not studied by the natural sciences – though they are not for that reason to be treated as spooky or supernatural".[14]

Secondly, in defense of these demurrals, Brandom seems to want to insist on how norms are somehow our creatures. Normative attitudes, he says, "have been appealed to in explaining where discursive norms came from – how sapience could have arisen out of the primordial nondiscursive ooze of mere sentience. For it has been claimed not just that we discursive beings are creatures of norms but also that norms are in some sense creatures of ours …"[15] Now in some sense this last sentence must be true; the "creating" goes both ways. But I believe that there is also an asymmetry here, which this phrase doesn't quite capture, and which has very much to do with the issue of stripped down reason.

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[13] *Making it Explicit*, page 626.

[14] *Articulating Reasons*, p. 26.

[15] *Making*, loc. Cit.

All right, maybe I am hyper-sensitive, pathologically suspicious, jumping to conclusions about Brandom's real meaning. So for the remainder of this discussion, let me switch tack. I want to say what I think is wrong with both of these claims, and leave undecided whether Brandom puts them forward in the sense that I am denying them.

Take the first group: "spooky" is too vague; and "supernatural" is odd, even absurd (what is part of the "natural order", if not fish swimming, birds flying, humans talking?). So let me focus on "mysterious". It seems to me a very apt word to characterize human language, and its emergence in the course of hominid-to-human evolution.

I want to distinguish three facets of the meaning of this widely used word, not all of which are always in play, of course. 1) we use it to designate something which defies understanding, something we can't explain, which even seems impossible given how we (think we) know things work, but nevertheless happens. This is the sense in which a novel is a "murder mystery". 2) It can also mean something which is (1), but also given a great importance, because the puzzling matter is something of great depth and moment; what is still barely understood here would reveal something of great moment about us, the cosmos, God, or whatever. 3) If we draw on the etymology, which relates the word to what is hidden, and then also to the process of initiation, in which secrets are revealed, then another facet comes to the fore: here we are dealing with the way that we could come to know more about the matter in question. Something is a "mystery" in this sense, when we can't come to understand it by taking a disengaged stance to it, applying already articulated concepts, but when we have to open ourselves to our experience of it, explore it by immersing ourselves in it. For example, the behaviour of people of another culture can be mysterious, but we can learn to understand it by immersing ourselves in it, interacting with the people, remaining open to their values, norms, ways of talking. If we remain fixed within our initial judgments about them: strange, coarse, barbaric, etc., we will impede the learning, and never grasp what they're about. Or the appeal of a work of art can be baffling, until we allow ourselves to be led by the articulations of a helpful friend and give our full attention to it.

Now it is clear that some things can be (1) without being (2) or (3) (murder mysteries). Some things are both (1) and (3), without being (2) (a work of art which is itself not terribly profound). But some things are at once (1) and (2) and (3). Leaving aside the mysteries of religion, I would nominate human language and its genesis as the prime example of such a three-faceted mystery. It seems to me (1) that we haven't got a clue how these capacities of mimesis, narrative, and then descriptive speech emerged out of earlier life-forms, and only a very incomplete grasp of how they relate to each other. Then (2) that there are few matters which touch more profoundly on what it is to be a human being. We are in sum the "zôon echon logon" of which Aristotle speaks, but giving "logos" its fuller sense englobing both speech and reason. And then, to the extent that articulating to disclose is crucial to language, it is the very realm where (3) holds, where we have to engage with things (works of art, modes of human life, our relation to God) in a stance of openness and potential neologism, in order to articulate what they're about.

So that saying that language and/or its genesis isn't mysterious is like saying that Atlas isn't strong, or Aphrodite isn't beautiful. It sounds weird.

Yes, but if we could side-step the articulative-disclosive, then (3) would not hold; and also (1) would be less true, because one of the more unfathomable aspects of language would be sidelined. That's what makes me attribute the narrower view to people who say this kind of thing. I know that we could look at it all on a rhetorical level. That the repudiation of mystery and the supernatural is there to balance the (to materialists shocking) idea that norms can't be reduced to causal processes like those in inanimate nature. It's meant to express some kind of agreement in spite of the difference. But around what? I will return to this in a minute.

But first, I admit that my reaction to the denial of mystery as just weird depends on my substantive view on the main issue. I want to answer this question with a resounding negative: the factual-practical can't be self-sufficient. Our ability to operate with this family of language games depends on our operating in the whole range of symbolic forms. The articulative/disclosive is the essential background to our most immediately "practical" discourse.

In other words, I remain convinced that the articulative cannot be peeled off from the public giving of and asking for reasons, and hence that (3) applies. Why not? Because even in those narrow areas where a stripped down reason appropriately applies, as in natural science, or logic and mathematics, there is a continuing and I believe irremovable presence of the articulative-disclosive.

There's a big case to argue here, and not very much space to lay it out, so let me just mention some sub-claims which are meant to back up the bigger claim. Here are a few, which tackle one form of the question:

A) Even in the exchanges about natural science, rhetoric is being deployed. It doesn't seems possible to argue, to try to convince each other, without framing the debate rhetorically, with such phrases as "everyone agrees that"; "surely, the crucial issue is", and the like.

B) The practice of this austere type of enquiry is sustained and guided by an ethic, a certain notion of human excellence, of dedication to the truth, of unflinching facing of unwelcome findings, of full communication. Indeed, this connects back to (A), in that rhetorical stances in these exchanges often try to position the speaker as a paragon practitioner of this ethic (and/or the opponent as grievously failing in this department).

C) Becoming the kind of person who can operate under this ethic is inseparable from a development of self-consciousness and self-examination. It's not by accident that this science develops first in a culture which is simultaneously developing radical self-scrutiny, and a sense of my own responsibility.

What is emerging here is the way in which very stripped down fact-establishing language games still need a Sitz im Leben, in a life in which the kind of self-understandings which can only develop through articulation and disclosure play an ineliminable role. The claim is not that considerations about these disclosures, say, about the ethic that science demands, play a

direct role as premises in the arguments deployed – except negatively, that your words are disqualified if you're violating these precepts. It is rather that the fact-establishing game can't be carried on except within a richer form of life that includes considerations which it can't deploy itself in the giving and asking for (its kinds of) reasons. Science with agents who couldn't understand and respond to this ethic is a human impossibility, though it might be imagined in a strange far-away galaxy in a science fiction story.

The argument for this contextualization is not the same directly evident one which we saw in the deconstruction of atomistic epistemology, viz., that something like a particulate representation, prior to inference, doesn't make any sense. You could write a science fiction story about scientists who were ethical zombies, as I said above; this proves that in some sense it is imaginable. But it is humanly impossible.

So much for the argument against ontologization of this stripped down reason. But we can also argue against the other side of the stripped down claim, which holds that this reduced reason can handle all inescapable issues. Here my considerations will already be familiar. i) It seems to me wildly implausible that we can ever come to understand human society in history, especially cultures very different from ours, without heavy reliance on the articulative-disclosive dimension of language. ii) It also seems implausible that we can develop a morality based on "reason alone" without a consideration of the features which make life a good one, and these, I would argue, can't be adequately considered without articulation. iii) I can't accept a theory of art which voids all objective value, and understands value purely in terms of our responses. iv) And, of course, I don't start from atheist premises in considering religion. I realize that all these reasons will not be equally cogent for readers; but just one suffices to upset the belief in an omnicompetent stripped down "reason alone".

These are my reasons for seeing language as a paradigm case of mystery in the richest, three-faceted sense above. Let me now turn to the other claim that Brandom makes: we create norms as much as they create us.

Now there are different cases here. Sometimes, we really create norms out of whole cloth. We invent a new game, or transform an old one; say, we follow the legendary account of how rugby arose out of a "foul" in a game of soccer. Someone picked up the ball and ran, and then people got the idea of making this the central activity in a new game. (It's supposed to have happened at Rugby School; the rest is history.)

But how about the fact-establishing games of giving and asking for reasons? Well, in a sense, we don't just establish the rules of this game, because it has already a telos. In fact, we repeatedly redesign the rules of enquiry and exchange throughout human history, in order to be truer to what comes to seem to us to be the telos. Hence the revolutions in paradigms, and even in the description of the enquiry itself, as we saw in the 17th Century. There is invention here, but it takes the form of better realizing what is seen as a pre-existing goal. It is hard to know what to say here, because the goal is defined in quite a new way; but the sense of improving on what others were aiming at before us is crucial here, and differentiates this case from inventing rugby, for instance.

Something similar is true of moral renewals and revolutions. There is a widespread western narrative of "secularization" which goes something like this: formerly people took their values from the divine or the cosmos; then they awoke, and realized that we are on our own. So they took it into their own hands to establish their values. This makes moral/political change seem like inventing rugby. It pleases us to do things this way. But this seems to me wildly distorted as an account. The thinkers who developed the first contract theories, understanding societies as founded by individuals, and not as pre-existing orders, had a strong sense that the foundation must conform to the norms they called "Natural Law", and very often that this law was backed by God. The atheists of the French Revolution appealed to Nature; the Bolsheviks to the historical development of freedom. They recognized demands they had to meet.

There is an asymmetry on these serious issues. Our revolutions, redesignings, always come in response to a demand which is seen as prior; be it that of grasping reality (science), or that of building a properly human way

of political life. The demands are prior in two senses. First they are demands made on us as human beings, which are valid, independent of our choices. But second, just because they address human beings as such, we can see earlier understandings of the kind of demand in question (enquiring about the nature of things, building the good society) as faulty versions of what we now identify (more) correctly.

This is even more clearly the case, if we think of the ontogenesis of each one of us. We all enter a world in which certain goals, values, goods, ways of talking, thinking, enquiring are established. We only learn these activities because we take these as given, at first unquestionable. Then we may come to innovate, even in revolutionary fashion. But we are altering what is there in order to bring it more into true with its inherent telos.

But there is one way in which we could have a real sense of creating our norms; suppose we could arrive at a point of perfect transparency; we could understand by reason why our present norms have to be the way they are, given the inescapable telê of human life. What grasping the world means is studying it with the methods of natural science. What the good society means is one organized by norms, which themselves are dictated by "reason alone".

There are two variant bases for this sense of transparency. The first, of Humean origin, is illustrated by the sociobiological approach. We discover the ends of human life when we grasp how humans have evolved, and with what built-in ends. Enquiry then concerns the factual nature of the world, and deliberation deals with the best way of responding to this factual nature given our ends. True, this is not what "science" meant to earlier ages, when it was still deeply involved with metaphysics and theology, but we now see that there is nothing further we need to understand (except in detail) about our predicament and the kind of giving and asking for reasons that it requires. There is no place for a sense of mystery.

The second basis is inspired by Kant. Here the key notion is that our norms can be established by reason alone; or else that reason establishes the form of all moral norms, and we only need to fill in the facts to come to determinate conclusions about what we ought to do. There would be no

simple brute acceptance of certain ultimate goods, such as human rights, democracy, equality, where we couldn't see by transparent reason alone why these have to be the criteria of right. Since we are reasoning beings, there is no constraint in our being guided by reason alone.

This is the Kantian dream, and it has seduced many "and the best of them" to quote Pound.[16] It would really establish a symmetry because the norms which create us, as free rational beings, would themselves be dictated by free rationality.

In other words, some variant of the post-metaphysical, or the sociobiological approach, which would establish the self-sufficiency of the factual practical family of language games, might succeed in taking the mystery out of language.

But I'm wandering too far. I mention these possibilities not because I'm convinced that Brandom adopts either one, but because each in its own way would establish a real symmetry between the way we are made by our culture, our norms, our language, and the way it makes us, a symmetry of the kind he seems to espouse.

Brandon does reject one kind of "naturalism", one which would claim to give an adequate account of norms in terms of natural science. But there are other forms, sociobiological for instance, on which I find it hard to interpret him.

What Brandom actually says seems to suggest more something like the rugby analogy. "<D>iscursive deontic statuses are *instituted* by the practices that govern scorekeeping with deontic attitudes".[17] He also says that while normative statuses are instituted by practical attitudes, their being correct or incorrect doesn't just depend on these attitudes.[18] But something like this distinction holds for games too. We invent our new game of rugby, we design the rules, but this doesn't determine who wins. The important issue is

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[16]   Pound, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley"

[17]   *Making*, loc. cit. Italics in original.

[18]   *Making*, p. 64

whether this designing of rules responds to an unrefusable telos which precedes our design.

In fact, the mystery resides in our having certain ends of life, which we endlessly redefine, without their even becoming totally transparent, that is, without our ever fully understanding the reasons for them.[19]

I have taken the reader very far afield, and I recognize, very far away from Brandom's agenda, rather concentrating on questions that bother me, perhaps an inappropriate response to the invitation to participate in this volume (like Evo Morales wearing his sweater to meet the King Juan Carlos). I was induced to do so nonetheless because of the great richness of Robert Brandom's work, both the wealth of detail, and the striking general architecture. The latter, which in fact draws us up out of the tunnel vision of the Cartesian tradition and shows the dimensions of the house of language which we inhabit, is what encouraged me to raise a further question about the shape of this remarkable (and I think mysterious) dwelling.[*]

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[19] A similar point is made by Charles Larmore, in his *Les Pratiques du Moi*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 2004, p. 148.

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