

Norms of Life

Introduction

Life can only be understood in terms of norms. By norm I mean a principle that divides things into two unequal classes. By life, I mean all life: biological, human or artificial life. By understanding, I refer to an actual human activity, not, for instance, some potential divine grasp of the world.

I will proceed in the first part of this paper by offering a preliminary definition of norm and then fleshing it out by showing how norms are involved in three kinds of life: biological life, linguistic life, and the life of a self. In the second part, I will explore how these different kinds of norms interrelate, an exploration that will lead to a discussion about how understanding applies to life.

PART ONE

1 Normativity

Define norm

Examples of norms abound. The norm of truth divides propositions into two classes: true ones and false ones. Health is a norm that distinguishes bodily states that are well from those that are diseased. The purpose of a knife -- to cut -- sets a norm dividing sharp knives from blunt, those which fail to fulfill the purpose. Actions can succeed or fail. Moral actions can be good or evil. A computer program can fulfill its purpose, or have a bug and fail. A coin may be genuine or counterfeit.

A preliminary definition of a norm is a principle that divides reality, things, or events into two sets: those in accord with the norm and those not in accord with it. A norm sets an ideal against which reality is measured. It is similar to a value. Charles Taylor uses the term "bivalence."

Kinds of norms

I claim that all life is normative, but I don't mean that all life is regulated by the same norms.

Biological life is governed by functional norms. An organism is organized into organs. Each organ has some function in the organism that sets a norm for the organ. The function of a heart is to pump blood. If it does, it fulfill its function; if it doesn't, it has failed.

Linguistic life is subject to rules established by the particular linguistic community. In English, for instance, the verb must agree in number with its subject. "Dogs run" is grammatically correct. "Dogs runs" is incorrect. Not all language rules are grammatical, but they all establish norms that distinguish correct use from incorrect.

"Be thyself" is a normative injunction. A narrative self constitutes itself by establishing ideals for its life, norms against which it can judge its beliefs and actions. If at some point in the past I decide I'm going to be a kind person, that decision sets up a narrative norm which determines whether my future actions are "truly my own" or "failures to be myself."

I will focus only on these three kinds of norms, though there are many other realms of life -- cultural, social, political and so on -- each with their own distinctive norms. (I will mention moral norms only to say that I will not mention them.)

Non-normative reality

In contrast with the normativity of life, physical reality is non-normative. At the birth of Modern Science, Hobbes and Galileo, Descartes and Kant conceptualized the material world as made up of objects and events related to each other by causal laws. The paradigm is the impact of a billiard ball causing a second ball to react according to a mathematically precise law. The proponents of this "mechanistic" conception were clear that they were rejecting the idea that nature is normative. They explicitly repudiated the Aristotelian notion of indwelling forms whose *teloi* explained the behaviour of objects. Heavy objects do not seek their natural, low place, as Aristotle held; rather, they are caused to fall by the external force of gravity. We should not ask the purpose of the sun rising every morning; we should explain the the movement of the earth and planets in accordance with the mathematical, causal laws of the Solar system. Normativity has no place in the true scientific conception of the world; science should seek facts that are value-free.

The mechanists exiled norms, values and purposes from the world: they are appearances, not components of reality.¹ In so far as they have any being at all, they are subjective -- denizens of our minds, or of the Mind of God. The purposes of God are inscrutable, so attempts to investigate purposes in nature border on blasphemy. The goal of human scientists should be modest: discover the causal laws, preferably mathematical, that govern the behaviour of material objects.

But mechanists have a problem. Claims made by physicists should be true, not false. So physicists are governed by norms! Physicists themselves, then, cannot be part of physical reality. The typical way out of this dilemma, in the Early Modern period, is to position the norm-governed scientific knower outside of the realm of causal physical reality and so the period ends up with a metaphysical dualism of mind and matter.

For mechanists, life is an enigma; it does not fit easily into the dualist scheme. One could place biological life into the mental side of the dualism -- perhaps this is what the "Vitalists" do -- but the materiality of life makes this implausible. To fit life into the material side, mechanists typically attempt a "reduction:" if we cannot understand a blade of grass directly in terms of causal laws, we should decompose the phenomenon into smaller, atomic parts and apply physical laws to the parts. Somehow this reductive process will explain the original phenomenon, though we need a lot of hand waving.

2 Norms of Organic life

Norms are constitutive

So let me turn now to biological life. It is the normativity of life that makes it resistant to such atomistic reductionism. The beating of an individual heart can be explained by reference to the firing of many tiny nerves, and these can be explained by even tinier molecular processes. However, the function of the heart -- its *telos* is to pump blood -- is normative and is left unexplained by such reduction.²

What do I mean by a "function?" The word has many uses in English.³ A university convocation is a function; there are mathematical and computational functions; the chair of a Colloquium is a function. But even when we close in on the sense I need (e.g., the function of a heart) there are a cluster of equivocal meanings. The function of my house alarm is to protect me from break-ins. I've had no break-ins, so it has never functioned. Except for one annoying night when the alarm went off due to a mal-function, it has carried out its function perfectly, that is, by not functioning. The word is used in two different ways here. Hearts beat intermittently: during the resting part of the cycle -- the diastolic part -- the heart rests and so carries out its function (sense 1) by not functioning (sense 2). Only in sense 1 is function normative; in sense 2, it is purely mechanistic. From here on, I'll be using the word only in sense 1.⁴

The heart is defined by its function, not by the mechanistic processes that undergrid it. An artificial heart that successfully pumps blood is still a heart, though the underlying mechanism is entirely different. Aristotle claims that it is the form an eye (or of anything) that makes it what it is. By form here he means function, not shape. The form of the eye is defined by its *telos*: to see. The "eye" of a stone statue, he says, is an eye only by equivocation; since it cannot fulfill its function, it is not a real eye, no matter how accurately the sculptor has reproduced the shape.⁵ The function of an organ is not an add-on to a pre-existing entity. It is the function that constitutes the entity in the first place, that makes it what it is: the functional norm is constitutive of its very being. It is not that organs first come into existence and then, secondarily, are subordinated to some norm. Norms are co-natural with organs; it is the norm that unifies the organ as the one object in the first place.

No objects in themselves

Nevertheless, an organ like a heart or eye is not an isolated object-in-itself defined by its indwelling function. Functions only make sense in a wider context. It will be one of my major points that all norms make sense only in a context. To say a heart is constituted by its function is to refer the entity to the organism of which it is a functioning part. If, *per impossibile*, an entity were miraculously to come into existence in outer space which had the shape of a heart and could actually pump blood, it still would not be a heart. For one thing, there would be no blood to pump. And if we created a red liquid for it to pump, it would not be blood, for blood is also defined functionally, as a liquid that carried nutrients to tissues -- and there are no tissues! For us to create a heart, we would have to create a whole body, otherwise the created object could not be a "heart." Only in the context of an organism can there be an organ with a function.

Evolutionary context of functions

Besides the synchronous context of the organism, biological norms have a second, diachronic context: their evolutionary history. Only because ancestor organisms with hearts survived better in the past have descendants been designed by evolution to have hearts. It is the evolutionary design context that constitutes hearts as having their function. A purely mechanistic, causal account can explain why this heart, at this moment, is in fact pumping blood. The mechanistic account, however, cannot explain why the heart has the *function* of pumping blood, why it's supposed to pump blood. This is a normative issue. Only appeal to the historical context, the evolutionary adaptations of the species can account for the heart having the function that it does.⁶

3 Norms of Linguistic Life

Linguistic life is as normative as biological life. The phonemes of any language are a set of ideal sounds, or contrasts between sounds, that set norms for individual speakers. The actual sounds speakers make attempt to obey these rules, though in reality no two speakers' sound waves are identical in the actual event. Similarly, on the syntactical level, each language has rules of grammar. Such rules are not so much descriptive -- in everyday speech people are constantly uttering incomplete or malformed sentences -- as prescriptive: the rules divide utterances into those with correct and with incorrect grammar.

Brandom extends the normativity of language to the semantic level. He offers an account of the meaning of assertions in terms of the commitments a speaker makes for future utterances and actions. If someone says, "There's a tiger in the street" we attribute to them certain commitments: that they will say, "It has stripes"; that they will become fearful and run away. If the speaker says instead that it is pure white, and then picks it up and swallows it, we begin to wonder if perhaps the speaker's assertion is making the kinds of commitments we would make by uttering the sounds, "There is an aspirin in the street." The "conceptual meaning" of an assertion, for Brandom, is the set of things the speaker is committing herself to. More precisely, the meaning of a linguistic assertion is the set of commitments the speaker *should* be committing herself to. Meaning is normative. The linguistic community establishes rules. What we call "the meaning of an utterance" is a normatively constituted object: it is what the speaker should mean by the sounds uttered.⁷

For Brandom, the linguistic community enforces the rules that constitute meaning by various sanctions. Someone who often utters, "There is a wolf," when the rest of us believe there is no wolf, will eventually be stripped of their credibility. That is, we will no longer take them as committing themselves to the expected implications of their utterances. Put more simply: we will treat the sounds they make as meaningless. We will exile them from the linguistic community and treat their utterances as we do the sounds of parrots. Of course, there are other possible sanctions we could use: we could also beat such a person with sticks.

Accounts of social norms based on behavioural sanctions, whether with sticks or by exile, cannot be used, however, to reduce meaning to any purely factual pattern. Brandom argues that semantic norms can only be constructed if we use the sanctions correctly, that is, in a way that establishes the rules. Sanctioning someone when they say, "Wolf," will only work to enforce the communal meaning of the assertion if we sanction solely when there is no wolf present. Sanctioning every time the word is uttered, or at random, will not lead to a linguistic community. The sanctioning must itself follow rules, that is, it must itself be normative. He claims that we cannot explain the normativity of language by reducing it to a non-normative, purely factual description of a behavioural pattern. As Brandom puts it, it is "norms all the way down."⁸

The objects of linguistic life -- phonemes, grammatical patterns, assertions -- are therefore constructed as normative. They are, in this respect, analogous to biological organs. It is not that there are prior-existing objects, such as sentences, to which meaning is added like a superficial layer of paint to their surfaces. Linguistic objects are normative through and through. Their normativity comes from their context, the linguistic community, similar to the way that organs are constituted normatively within the context of the organism and its evolutionary history.

4 Norms in the life of the Self

The life of a self is also normative. The injunction, "Get a life!" is not addressed to a corpse. It is only addressed to a being that already has organic life, and that is already living in a linguistic community. The self is more than the body, even a body with language.⁹

What is this "more?"

A self is unified over time: I am the same self yesterday as tomorrow. As Locke points out, if this were not the case, it would make no sense to reward or punish someone today for what they did yesterday. One could, of course, think of this identity over time as the identity of a substance: there is one "thing" -- an ego, a mind -- that persists over time and is the subject of properties. Locke, Parfit and others have shown why this substantialist approach is untenable, and have proposed instead a persistence based on memory, on experience. Recent "narrative" accounts of selfhood develop this notion and understand the self as a linguistic level entity, constructed by the story of one's history. The unity of a self is the unity of a narrative.¹⁰

While I think there is much to be said for this narrative theory, in its typical form it misses the normative nature of being a self. In a number of recent papers, inspired partly by Ricoeur's distinction between idem-identity and ipse-identity, I have laid out an account of selfhood based on responsibility rather than memory.¹¹ A self is a current structure that faces the world by interpreting perception and selecting actions on the basis of its own personality: its values, expectations, and so on. While this current structure has come to be on the basis of past experience, understanding the relationship to the past as purely factual or causal, or even as a pure memory of events, is inadequate. Against any pure narrative theory, I hold that the current structure which makes up a self is a result of decisions and commitment. Today I value giving you \$10

because yesterday I made a promise to do so. I am not caused to give you \$10 by the memory of things I said yesterday. I give you the money in fulfillment of an obligation I engaged myself in yesterday. I give a philosophy lecture because I committed myself to an academic career decades ago. I speak truly because I have constructed myself as an honest person over a lifetime.

Unlike the simple memory/narrative approach, my account is intrinsically normative. I give the money or the lecture, I speak the truth, because I should. I don't mean that I should morally (although that may be a part of it). I mean that who I am, the self to which I want to be faithful, the self whose integrity is at stake, is the set of norms I have constructed for myself (with a little help from my friends,) it is the set of things I should do and think because this has become my nature, this is who I am.¹² I may fail to live up to these norms, but in so far as I fail, I am not being myself. That's the point of the injunction to "Be thyself." This is not a purely subjective, isolationist approach: Responsibility is an attributed status. It is attributed to me by a social community that holds me responsible for what I say and do. As soon as, during development, I become enough of a self to do so, I also attribute responsibility to myself.

The persistence of my self over time is not like the dead-weight of a rock (idem-identity) but is a continuous self-constitution in so far as today I hold myself (and am held) responsible for the promises I made, the acts I performed, and the beliefs I endorsed yesterday. Responsibility to commitments is primary: it constitutes self-identity over time and is not just a secondary property attached to a pre-existing unity. It is because I am responsible for my promises and actions, it is because I am responsible for my beliefs and thoughts, that they are "mine." The norms are not add-ons that supplement a pre-existing substantial ego: the norms that guide my life are what construct me as a self in the first place. A self is as normative an entity as an organic organ or a sentence in a language.

PART TWO

1 Intra/Extra-systemic Norms

Three approaches to norms

I have argued so far that life is intrinsically normative, although the norms are different for different kinds of life. In the rest of this paper, I want to explore the relationship of these norms to each other. There are three approaches one could take: reduction of norms of one kind to another; absolute separation or autonomy of the different kinds of norms; or a middle course, the golden mean, which I wish to defend. My claim is that we must understand linguistic norms and the norms of the self on the basis of evolutionary and historical developments, but that such an understanding is not reductionist. To work out what such a middle course could be, I will look first at linguistic norms, and then at norms of the self.

Language

Language is an evolutionary adaptation: it persists because it gives a species with language some reproductive advantage. It is an organic function whose

possession is a norm for humans: a dysfunctional language module is as much a defect as a dysfunctional heart. Brandom claims that the norms of a linguistic community go all the way down, that we cannot give a non-normative account of the behaviour of a linguistic community. He does not thereby mean to deny the theory of evolution. Language is an evolutionary development governed by adaptive norms, but each language is governed by its own internal norms. How do these fit together?

The reductive approach won't work. We cannot account for the norm, in English, that a verb must agree with its noun -- "dogs runs" is grammatically wrong -- by appeal to the adaptive function of language. We have some 6000 extant languages, each with distinctive rules. If the norms of language derive from survival pressure, should not all languages have the same rules? One could argue that since some language groups have more speakers than others -- those that are extinct have none -- some grammars must be biologically superior to others. That English and Mandarin have more speakers than Irish or Beotuck might be explained by hypothesizing that their rules are more adaptive. I think this argument is implausible. The contemporary predominance of Mandarin and English is due not to biological adaptation but to accidents of history and politics, of wars and empire, of available resources and technology, and so on -- all factors extraneous to the grammatical norms. The availability of coal and protein led to the expansion of the British Empire and so its language, the Queen's English, was widely dispersed.

In other words, *contingency* slips in. That one set of grammatical rules rather than another gets replicated has little or nothing to do with the nature of these norms as such. We cannot understand why the norms of English are such as they are by looking to the replicability of the British Empire, or, what is even less likely, the replicability of *Homo sapiens*. We can say that the possession of language as such is governed by the functional norms of adaptation, and that for it to be a language, there must be some internal norms, but the particular norms cannot themselves be accounted for by the survival of the carrier. So while evolutionary norms give us some understanding about language, there is an insulation, an explanatory divide, between the forms of life. This divide prevents us reducing the linguistic norms to the biological ones.

Self

The norms of selfhood are protected from biological norms in a similar way. A reductionist might argue that, since humans are animals, biological norms govern not only my animal life, but my human life too and so my choice of career, who I mate with, what I spend my time on, etc. are all ultimately governed by their contribution to my survival and reproduction. We may, in a kind of Freudian, self-deceptive way, interpret our behaviour in terms of pursuit of philosophy, of romantic love or of the aesthetic value of music, but these are just sublimations of the real drivers of my actions. The truth is that I need a salary so I can eat and keep my body alive. The truth is that I have a sexual instinct aimed at reproduction and being a philosopher makes me attractive to the opposite sex. From this point of view -- perhaps this is what "sociobiologists" hold -- norms of the self are a superficial appearance that can be reduced to the underlying reality: biological norms.¹³

I reject this reductionist position. My claim is that my self, as a set of current

norms, is based on the promises I've made and the honest character I have constructed in my narrative history. I might have become a different self. During adolescence, I could have been enticed by the image of myself as a wheeler-dealer who, if successful, could become rich at the expense of others. If I had committed myself to such a norm, I might well judge as "successful" my skipping out with the \$10 I promised. "There's a sucker born every moment."

The choice as to which kind of character I would become, that is, which values I would adopt as my norms in future, depended on many contingencies: the gang I ran with as a teenager; the culture I was brought up in; my hormonal levels; the personality of my teacher; which novels I read; and so on. By contingencies, I mean factors that are not necessitated by the biological norms of survival and reproduction. That is, the norms that constitute my narrative selfhood are no more determined by organic norms than the rules of English syntax are governed by the biological norm of species survival.

So I do not escape reductionism by adopting the alternative extreme -- the position that appeals to eternal, non-natural norms that comes to us from elsewhere, maybe from Beyond (that which "transcends"), as if human norms float free from our biology. My appeal is to the contingencies of the history of a self.

My middle course wants it both ways. Selfhood is an evolved, biological, adaptive function. The construction of individual selves governed by their own internal discipline, responsible for their own characters and actions, is an adaptation that has helped the species flourish. Selfhood is a biological function just as language is. Both contribute to the biological replication of the species. But the norms of this organic function do not regulate what norms a self establishes for itself. That people take up careers that they stick with long enough to become proficient is biologically adaptive. That I might commit myself to a life of philosophy fits within this scheme, but is not determined by it. The adaptive nature of selfhood as an institution does not mean that biological norms reach up into the self and dictate its norms any more than the adaptive norms of language in general necessitate the grammar of English.

System

To understand my middle course, we must distinguish intra- and extra-systemic norms. By a *system* I mean a unified context within which norms make sense. So an organism, such as the human body, is a system to which the functional norm that the heart should pump blood is referred. Without the organism, the heart could not have a function; it would not *be* a heart. So with respect to the organism as context, the norms for the heart are intra-systemic. Similarly, grammatical norms are intra-systemic with respect to a language as a system. Yet a system as a whole may have a role in a larger structure, which may itself establish norms: "extra-systemic" norms. In so far as language (like the heart) is a biological adaptation, it is governed by adaptive, biological norms. It is functionally normative that humans have language: humans who lost their linguistic capacity would be defective just as ones whose hearts failed. Syntax is adaptive; nevertheless biological adaptation doesn't determine specific syntactical structures. My general thesis is that, due to contingency, extra-systemic norms do not govern intra-systemic norms.

In the same way, humans who lost their capacity to be selves are abnormal by reference to biological norms that are external to the system of selfhood. Nevertheless a self is a system with its own internal norms that cannot be derived from the norms of biology. Failure to fulfill a promise is one thing; the loss of the capacity to make promises is another. The first violates a norm internal to the self; the second violates a norm external to the self.

In the middle way I am trying to develop, extra-systemic norms may place constraints on a system. At the very least, they say whether the system should exist in the first place. But I am arguing that contingent factors create a gap between extra- and intra-systemic norms such that extra-systemic norms cannot establish specific intra-systemic norms. The external norms do not reach through to the system's internal norms; it does not micro-manage them. The normativity of the system as a whole does not necessitate the particular norms of the elements internal to the system. This allows room for contingent factors to influence the establishment of intra-systemic norms.¹⁴

2 Modes of Understanding

So can the origin of norms be understood? Contingency may protect the norms of selfhood or of language from being reduced to biological norms, but does it do so at the cost of making their origin unintelligible? Does it not also mean that they cannot be explained, that their origin is mysterious? Brandom's quip, "It's norms all the way down" suggests that the norms established by a linguistic community have a kind of a brute facticity impenetrable to understanding.

It depends what we mean by "understanding." One way to understand something is to see how it is necessary. Mechanists, modelling understanding on logical and geometric demonstration, assume that to explain physical events is to show how they necessarily follow from the laws of physics. Given the laws of gravity, a planet's path around its sun must be an ellipse. But we cannot understand life this way. Life involves a greater or lesser dose of contingency and can only be understood by taking this into account.

For example, we can explain in retrospect how lactose-intolerance came to be abnormal. Around 5000 years ago, European herders of cattle did not have the gene for the enzyme lactase, which is needed to digest the lactose in milk. One individual had a genetic mutation so that they produced lactase, which made it possible for them to drink milk. The adaptive advantage led to higher rates of replication in their offspring, so now the presence of lactase in their European descendants has become a functional norm and its absence a disease to be cured. The original mutation may have been caused by an error in a gene during reproduction, or maybe it was due to DNA damage from cosmic rays. The physical cause of the mutation, however, is irrelevant to our evolutionary understanding of how the presence of lactase became a functional norm. While the event was necessitated by the laws of physics, it was purely contingent from the viewpoint of evolution. Whether or not we understand what physical laws determined the original mutation (or if we believed it was due to quantum indeterminacy or even to divine intervention) makes no

difference to our ability to understand the evolution of lactase. Our understanding of lactose tolerance as a norm accepts the event as orthogonal chance and integrates this contingent event into our explanation. That for many of non-European origin lactose-intolerance does not count as pathological highlights the contingency of the lactase norm.

In linguistic life we can understand how the norms of English emerged due to extra-systemic events that were not governed by the internal norms of the system: the history of the Indo-European languages, the interaction between the Saxons and the Celts, the role of French-speaking Normans, etc. led to the system of norms we call "English."

It is similar in understanding the life of a self. Ricoeur presents narrative selfhood as the integration of chance elements into an ongoing, coherent life. He bases the insight on Aristotle's account of *mythos* as the incorporation of extraneous happenings into the unifying story of the drama. The impingement of orthogonally random events on a system does not render the system unintelligible. As long as we understand what the system does with the impinging events, we can explain what has happened. Ricoeur's model for the understanding of a narrative life allows for a mode of understanding in which chance elements, themselves left unexplained, do not undermine the understanding of the coherent whole into which they are incorporated.

Let me call this "understanding by contingency" to distinguish it from the mechanistic paradigm of "understanding by necessity." Understanding in the first sense is the project of showing how chance events are involved in setting systems of norms. Understanding by contingency is non-deterministic, non-predictive and non-reductive. My claim is that this is the appropriate model for understanding organisms and languages, as well as selves -- for understanding life.¹⁵

3 Conclusion

Let me summarize. First, I've argued that life is normative -- at least the three areas of life I've discussed: biology, language, and selfhood. Life is therefore different than physical nature as it is conceived by 17th and 18th century mechanists. (Contemporary physics is, of course, a quite different matter; most tenets of mechanism were dropped during the 20th century.) Second, I've explored the relation between these three regimes of norms, and opted for a middle course between absolute independence between the regimes and the reduction of language and selfhood norms to biological ones. Finally I have claimed that this middle course allows us to explain the origin of the norms of language and self, provided we reject mechanism's claim that explanation has to show why something is necessary and broaden our idea of understanding to incorporate contingency.

David L. Thompson
Memorial University
2012

ENDNOTES

1 As Brandom puts it (interpreting Pufendorf), mechanism holds that "These norms are not part of the intrinsic nature of things, which is entirely indifferent to them. ... Our activity *institutes* norms, *imposes* normative significances on a natural world that is intrinsically without significance for the guidance or assessment of action. A normative significance is imposed on a nonnormative world, like a cloak thrown over its nakedness, by agents forming preferences, issuing orders, entering into agreements, praising and blaming, esteeming and assessing." (Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, 48). Brandom himself rejects this view, siding rather with Heidegger, whom he quotes: "In interpreting, we do not so to speak, throw a 'signification' over some naked thing that is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it." (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, sec. 32, p.190.) Cited by Brandom, *Making It Explicit*. p.661n64.

2 These paragraphs are a very brief summary of issues I have discussed at more length elsewhere. See, for instance, my paper "A Brief History of Mind," 2006.

3 The etymological origin of function refers to a public office. (Latin "fungio" means I perform an office.)

4 An alternative way of making the same point:

Mary (my guest): What's that noise?

Me: There's a sump pump in my basement that just came on.

Mary: What's a sump pump?

Me: A sump is a hole in the basement floor in which water collects when the basement gets wet. I have a pump that comes on automatically when there's water in the sump and it pumps the water out into the drain.

Mary: Does it function all the time?

Me: No. It works intermittently. Once it empties the sump, it turns off until the water collects again to a certain level. You just heard it functioning; that's the noise you heard.

Mary: So what's its function?

Me: Its function is to keep my basement dry.

Mary: But do you only want your basement dry intermittently?

Me: What? No, I want it dry all the time. That's the function of the pump: to keep my basement dry all the time.

Mary: But I thought you said it only functioned intermittently?

Me: The function of the sump-pump is to keep my basement dry, day in and day out. The way it functions is by functioning some of the time and not functioning other times.

Mary: ???

"Function" has numerous confusing meanings in this dialogue:

Function = what it's for = purpose for which it is designed

Function = how it does what it does = the way it carries out its purpose

ENDNOTES

Function = functioning = it is now doing what it does = the mechanism is currently operating.

Compare:

The function of a heart is to pump blood.

The functioning of the heart = the way it functions = Blood gets pumped by muscles being stimulated by nerves so that ventricles contract and relax.

It just functioned! That pulse was the heart contracting, the muscles working. Between pulses, the heart relaxes and doesn't function. Yet both the contracting and relaxing are functional.

5 "The eye is a matter of vision, and if vision fails there is no eye, except in an equivocal sense, as for instance a stone or painted eye." (Aristotle, *On the soul*, 412 b 20)

6 See my paper, "Causal, Teleological and Evolutionary Explanation" 2008

7 Brandom claims here to be inspired by Kant's doctrine that concepts are normative. "The distinction between normative and non-normative vocabulary claims, and facts is itself drawn in normative terms. In this sense, the story is one in which it is norms all the way down -- a Kantian story ..." (*Making It Explicit* 625)

8 Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, 625

9 "Rational choice introduces a whole new sense of *life*, a new sense in which a person can be said to 'have a life.' And -- importantly-- it is in this sense that we primarily have in mind when we say of someone that he lived well or badly. ..." Christine Korsgaard, *The Constitution of Agency*, 143.

10 This discussion is a very brief summary of a position I have worked out in more detail in a number of my other papers. See, for instance:

"Selfhood and Rationality" 2003

"Intuition by Whom? Responsibility and the Role of the Self" 2004

"Constructing Responsibility" 2009

11 Paul Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* is articulated around the distinction between these two modes of identity. His most explicit exposition is on pages 115 to 125.

12 "The specifically human function is a life of activity in accordance with such principles: a life, as we might put it now in which your actions are shaped and directed by your values." Christine Korsgaard, *The Constitution of Agency*, 148.

13 For Korsgaard, who is thinking in Aristotelian terms, this is the question whether what is good for a man coincides with being a good man. In my terms this is, "whether living up to my own norms as a self coincides with fulfilling my norms as a biological and cultural entity." She says: "Even supposing that human beings do have a function, it is unclear why the good *for* a human being should reside in the good performance of the human function. Granted that a

ENDNOTES

human being who performs the human function well is (in some sense) a good human being, we can still ask whether it is good for a human being to be a good human being. We can ask whether it will make the person happy, in a recognizable sense having something to do with pleasure, or with the quality of the person's experience, or at least with some condition welcome from the person's own point of view." (*The Constitution of Agency* 131). Korsgaard argues that, for Aristotle, that there is no external function for a human: a person's function is the fulfillment of what they intrinsically are. But from a Darwinian perspective, humans, like all organisms, do have an external function, to replicate. Reconciling the norms of the self with the norms of organic life is therefore more acute in the post-Darwinian context.

14 As Heath puts it, speaking of cultural norms, "...once cultural transmission is in place, the forces of biological selection cannot "reach through" and determine the content of particular intentional states, simply because the *structure* of the cultural platform is so fitness enhancing that it permits the transmission of all sorts of *content* that is biologically maladaptive. ... biological factors may contribute to the *cultural* fitness of a behaviour pattern, and thus exercise an influence on which patterns get selected, but they cannot act as a direct forces of selection." (Joseph Heath, *Following the Rules*, 260.)

15 This means, of course, that understanding a system involves seeing how past events have changed it. Past events don't just happen and then disappear: they change the world. A system is not just present at the moment; it cannot be understood except as a dynamic, temporally changing entity whose history is essential to it.

Bibliography

Aristotle, *On the Soul*, Loeb Classical Library, 1957

Brandom, Robert B. *Making It Explicit*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Heath, Joseph. *Following the Rules: Practical Reasoning and Deontic Constraint*. Oxford University Press; 2008

Korsgaard, Christine M. *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology*, Oxford University Press; 2008

Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*, University of Chicago Press, 1995

Thompson, David L. (Available on PhilPapers)

"Selfhood and Rationality" 2003

"Intuition by Whom? Responsibility and the Role of the Self" 2004

"A Brief History of Mind," 2006.

"Constructing Responsibility" 2009