

Chapter 4

Constitutivism about Semantic Normativity

Now, let us bring together the various strands that have been developed throughout this thesis:

1. Brandom-style inferentialism must account for some form of objectivity (minimally construed as attitude-transcendence of norms) in order to avoid relativism about conceptual norms, but whether Brandom's own account succeeds is at least questionable, if not incoherent (Chapter 1).
2. For logical vocabulary, the requirement that intrinsic harmony must obtain between rules governing the meaning of an expression provides this normative standard viz. attitude-transcendence of norms, but the principle is not grounded on substantial fact/principle (Chapter 2).
3. A proper appreciation of the dialogical constitution of meaning shows that intrinsic harmony is part and parcel of meaningful communication between discursive subjects. (Chapter 3).

In this chapter, I aim to make explicit the grounds for semantic normativity. The principal question is the following: how do conceptual norms generate genuinely normative reasons for concept application, paradigmatically in assertions and judgments? That is,

in virtue of what do conceptual norms have their normative authority over our thoughts? My answer is that semantic normativity can be grounded on constitutive principles of discursive agency.

In section 1, I summarize the constitutivist strategy to ground practical normativity in metaethics, with particular focus on Korsgaard (2009)'s Kantian Constitutivism. Then, in section 2, I show that we can apply the same general strategy to conceptual norms. There, I present my approach to grounding semantic normativity, which I call *Dialogical Constitutivism*. In the final section, I deal with some possible objections to my account.

4.1 Constitutivism

A popular strategy in metaethics is to explain the normativity of ethical claims by appealing to facts about the nature of agency. *Constitutivism* is a family of views that adopts this strategy (e.g. Korsgaard (2009), Velleman (2000), Katsafanas (2013), Street (2010)). Its central idea is that certain features of action are constitutive features of action, such that in the absence of those features, an event would cease to be an action. In other words, some features demarcate *action* from mere *behavior*. The constitutive features then provide us with normative standards against which actions, and derivatively, ethical claims, may be evaluated.

4.1.1 The General Idea

The standard example that illustrates how constitutivism works is the game of chess. When a subject plays chess, she aims at winning (i.e. checkmating her opponent), or at the very least, obtaining a draw. If she simply moves around pieces on the board in accordance with what is permitted by the rules of chess, then she is not playing chess at all. So, all moves that the subject makes implicitly have the aim of checkmating. Thus, the aim of checkmating one's opponent is a *constitutive aim* of playing chess; making arbitrary moves on the chess board without this aim, therefore, does not count as playing chess.

Two immediate qualifications are in order. First, winning is rarely the sole aim of play-

ing chess. In fact, it would be rather sad and dull if it were. Trying out a new, and thus risky, opening and purposefully putting oneself in a bad (*qua* more likely to be checkmated) position to take on a challenge are things chess players regularly do. As these examples show, auxiliary aims often are in direct conflict with the primary aim of playing chess, which we analyzed as winning. But what makes these aims auxiliary or secondary and the aim of winning primary is precisely the fact that these kinds of deviation from the aim of winning can only go so far before one ceases to be engaged in the game of chess.

Relatedly, there is another worry: it seems possible to play chess with the active intention of losing, for instance, when a more experienced player (say a father) wants to encourage a less experienced player (his daughter) to keep playing and improving. The father's aim actively undermines the supposed aim of chess, but surely, the objector would point out, that he is nonetheless still playing chess. A typical constitutivist reply is the following is that if all chess players were to play with the intention of losing at all times, playing chess would cease to be an activity, or at least, it would radically change the nature of the activity such that we can no longer say that it is the same activity. Thus, playing to checkmate is a constitutive aim of chess playing as it is practiced today.

This reply points towards a general call for a more fine-grained analysis of what events count as what activity. This is the second qualification. For example, the constitutivist might say that the activity in question (i.e. chess playing the with intention of losing) is a more complex variant of playing chess. As Katsafanas (2018) writes,

"The important point is that describing the agent simply as playing chess in these cases elides important details. It's as if we describe the person interviewing for a job as *talking*—it's true, but it leaves out further aims that she has, aims that modify the activity in significant ways, and thereby require that someone who analyzes the features of the activity describe it more precisely. Just so with chess: if you find out that your opponent is playing with the intention of losing, then in ordinary circumstances it does not matter whether we describe him as *playing chess* or *playing chess with the intention of losing*. However, the latter, more specific description picks out important features that distinguish this action from an ordinary case of playing chess" (p.368, original

italics).

Now, constitutivists agree that actions in general have constitutive features that distinguishes them from other events. Highly contentious is what the constitutive features consist in. Velleman (2000), for example, suggests that action constitutively aims at *self-understanding*; contrarily, Katsafanas (2013) argues that action has two constitutive aims: “(1) agential activity, which [is] analyzed as requiring stable approval of one’s action given complete information about its etiology, and (2) encountering and overcoming resistance to one’s ends” (p.376). The general idea is that these constitutive aims issue normative reasons for action, in the sense that we have all-things-considered reasons to successfully achieve the aim because that is just what practical rationality consists in.

4.1.2 Korsgaard’s Kantian Constitutivism

Up to this point, we have given an overview of the dominant kind of constitutivism which extracts constitutive features based on a special kind of intention (viz. ‘aim’) of the practical agent. But this is not the only way to think about constitutive features of action. Another approach is to identify the constitutive feature of action with its *constitutive standard* or norm. Thus, we arrive at two kinds of constitutivist views: aim-based (or Humean) accounts and rule-based (or Kantian) accounts. The former takes aims to be the constitutive feature of action, while the latter takes norm-governedness to be the constitutive feature of action. The main proponent of the latter view is Christine Korsgaard. Since it is the latter view that is relevant for the purposes of this paper, I will spend this section outlining Korsgaard’s main ideas.

To get the discussion started, consider the Aristotelian conception of nature under which categories of objects are individuated by their respective *telos* or functions. What makes something a hammer, for example, is that we can use it to hammer in nails. The objects’ characteristic function, then, give rise to normative standards for evaluation: a hammer whose handle is broken and thus cannot be used to hammer a nail in place is a *defective* hammer. Thus, on the teleological view of nature, functions give rise to constitutive standards.

Furthermore, if the hammer turns out to be unusable *qua* hammer and is beyond the point of repair, then that object would cease to be a hammer. This is what Korsgaard (2009) calls the ‘constitution requirement’: conforming to the standards that apply to an object *qua* its kind is what constitutes the object as the kind of object that it is. That said, this does not preclude the possibility of the object falling short of a constitutive standard that apply to its kind, and yet still belong to it. But, as Korsgaard (2019) writes,

“There is a limit—if the object falls too far below the standard, the object ceases to exemplify the kind. A standard is constitutive in this specific sense not merely if it arises in some general way from the nature or function of the object, but if it arises from (something like) the very concept of the object. A house is, by definition, a kind of shelter. It may have a leaky roof and still be a house, but a thing that provides no protection from the elements—a thing that has altogether ceased to shelter—is no longer a house” (p.100)

In Korsgaard’s view, action, too, has constitutive standards. It also comes in degrees, in the sense that the more an action conforms to the constitutive standards, the more fully it is an action. But what are the constitutive standards of action? Korsgaard’s analysis begins by taking primitive the idea that action is essentially performed by an agent, or some person to whom we attribute the movement and its causal effects to as its author (2009, p.18). Actions are accordingly separated from other events (like mere behavior) due to the fact that it can be attributed to an agent. So, the constitutive principles of action trades on the constitutive principles of agency. The notion of an agent is then cashed out as “the autonomous and efficacious cause of her own movements” (2009, p.213). According to Korsgaard, in order to be *efficacious*, one must act in accordance with the hypothetical imperative; in order to be *autonomous*, one must act in accordance with the categorical imperative. By conforming to these principles, one *constitutes* herself as an agent. So, the principles of practical rationality—which is cashed out as Kantian categorical and hypothetical imperatives—are the constitutive principles of of agency, and so derivatively, of action.

Korsgaard’s argument in support of these claims is rich and complex, and I don’t have

the space here to do it justice. Here, I will content myself with presenting three of her key moves, relevant to the argument I will make later on: Korsgaard's reading of the categorical imperative (CI) and its relation to autonomy, her reading of the hypothetical imperative (HI) and its relation to efficacy, and her general approach to grounding normativity on human necessity.

First up is Korsgaard's reading of the categorical imperative and its relation to autonomy. Her understanding of CI relies heavily on the first formulation: "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (Kant, 1785/2003, 4:421). Korsgaard rejects the prevailing reading of the CI test, which states that maxims allow us to evaluate the moral value of an action; this view is typically juxtaposed with the Aristotelian view, which insists that general rules cannot help us with evaluating specific actions, as only virtuous (or *phronetic*) perceivers can determine the goodness of an action. By contrast, Korsgaard reads Kant as an Aristotelian, in at least two major ways: Kant also thinks that moral characteristics do not—at least primarily—attach to act-types, and that what is at stake is the *form* of the maxim, understood in Aristotle's sense (Korsgaard, 2008, p.225-229). The form, according to Aristotle's metaphysics, is the arrangement of the parts of something that enables to perform its function. Given this, Korsgaard writes, "The parts of the action as described in a Kantian maxim are, primarily, the act and the end. [...] Kant's question is whether the act and the end are so arranged, or related to one another, that the maxim can serve as a universal law" (Korsgaard, 2009, p.15).

To illustrate this point, consider the following maxims (from Plato's *Republic*):

1. I will keep my weapon, because I want it for myself.
2. I will refuse to return your weapon, because I want it for myself.
3. I will refuse to return your weapon, because you have run mad and may hurt someone.

Maxims 1 and 3 describe good actions, while maxim 2 describes a bad one. Maxim 1 and 2 share the same kind of motivations (ends); maxim 2 and 3 share the same kind of

actions (means). The asymmetry of the moral valuations arise precisely from the fact that moral value does not rest in the individual parts (the content), but the way it is related (the form). Thus, “if the action and the purpose are related to one another so that the maxim can be willed as a universal law, then the maxim is good” (Korsgaard, 1996, p.108). As such, what distinguishes the agent, “is not first and foremost what he thinks about when he decides, but rather the way he deliberates when he makes his decisions” (ibid., p.48).

Second, according Korsgaard, hypothetical imperative “says that if you will an end, you must will the means to that end” (2009, p.68). In this sense, hypothetical imperatives can be understood as compliance with instrumental reason. But of course, Korsgaard rejects the Humean notion of instrumental reason (also known as *internalism* about practical reason), which, in its crudest form, says that we have normative reason to do whatever it takes (means) to satisfy our desires (end) given some background beliefs about how that may be achieved. Instead, Korsgaard follows Kant (1795/2003, 4:412) in understanding rationality as self-determination: unlike non-rational beings that behave/move in accordance with laws of nature, rational beings act in accordance with in accordance with its own representation of a law. That is, it is not enough that *my body* causes the movements for it to count as an action; *I*, the rational person, must *will* it:

“Suppose I decide to get some work done on my book today. At this moment, now, I decide, I will, to work; at the next moment, at any moment (importantly, maybe even at this moment), I will certainly want to stop. If I am to work I must will it—and that means I must determine myself to stay on its track. Timidity, idleness, and depression will exert their claims in turn, will attempt to control or overrule my will, to divert me from my work. Am I to let these forces determine my movements? At each moment I must say to them: “I am not you; my will is this work.” Desire and temptation will also take their turns. “I am not a shameful thing like timidity,” desire will say, “follow me and your life will be sweet.” But if I give in to each claim as it appears I will do nothing and I will not have a life. For to will an end is not just to cause it, not even if the cause is one of own my desires and impulses, but to consciously pick up the reins, and make myself the cause of the end. The reason that I

must conform to the hypothetical imperative is that if I don't conform to it, if I always allow myself to be derailed by timidity, idleness, or depression, then I never really will an end. The desire to pursue the end and the desires that draw me away from it each hold sway in their turn, but my will is never active. The distinction between my will and the operation of the desires and impulses in me does not exist, and that means that I, considered as an agent, do not exist" (Korsgaard, 2009, p.69-70)

Crucially, Korsgaard's conception of HI is, ultimately, deflationary, in the sense that it is superfluous to CI. It is not the case that we first will some end as a universal law (according to CI), then try to find ways to fulfill it (according to HI). Every HI, which consists of a practical judgment that leads to an intention/action, has to be underwritten by the corresponding CI, a theoretical judgment whose form can be universalized. To understand this, we need to hark back to Kant's definition of rationality as self-determination: we are only free inasmuch as we set our own laws and follow them, therefore, "every rational being must so act as if he were through his maxim always a lawmaking member in the universal kingdom of ends." Given this, if the movements we make are not underwritten by the CI, then they are not really free, which implies that the efficacy of those movements cannot be attributed to the agent. Thus, "the hypothetical imperative is not really a separate principle at all; rather, it captures an aspect of the categorical imperative: the fact that the laws of our will must be practical laws" (Korsgaard, 2009, p.70).

The third and final key point is Korsgaard's master argument for 'grounding' practical normativity. For our purposes, we need not get into the weeds of the metaphysical discussion concerning what the relevant grounding relation consists in. As Chang (2013) suggests, we can work with "the basic idea that fact *y* grounds fact *x* when *y* gives a metaphysically necessary explanation of *x* that is not causation, modal covariation, or subsumption" (p.165). All we need to say for now is that some things (like reason or rules governing action) count as genuinely normative *in virtue of* some other thing, and that this relation is transitive.

Korsgaard's master argument (2008, p.25-26), then, goes like this:¹

¹I have opted to simplify the argument slightly for the sake of concision. In fact, Korsgaard adds another

1. It is (rationally) necessary to conform to the principles of practical reason in virtue of our being an agent necessarily.
2. Action requires an agent, so the necessity of being an agent comes down to the necessity of acting.
3. The necessity of choosing and acting is is “our plight: the simple inexorable fact of the human condition” (ibid., p.2)

So, Korsgaard’s strategy is to ground the categorical imperative on the human condition, namely, the fact that we must choose and act. Since we must act and since universally willing whatever maxim we act in accordance with is what allows us to act in the first place, categorical imperatives ought to have a normative grip on us.

Now, the reasoning may sound circular. In the final section, I will deal with some major objections to Korsgaard’s constitutivism as it affects my variant, and offer my responses. But first, let me flesh out my account.

4.2 From Metaethical to Semantic Constitutivism

My strategy is to adopt Korsgaard’s general scheme for grounding practical normativity (as it applies to actions) to explain semantic normativity (as it applies to assertions). In particular, I will argue that the constitutive principles of specifically *discursive* agency, understood as the ability to be the autonomous and efficacious cause of her own moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons, are what Rahman et al. (2018) calls the ‘principles of immanent reasoning.’

4.2.1 Why Semantic Constitutivism?

Let us take a step back. What has been at stake for the preceding chapters is the following question: What is the normative principle that distinguishes good conceptual norms

inferential step between 1. and 2., namely: “The necessity of conforming to the principles of practical reason comes down to the necessity of being a unified agent. And if it is correct that agency requires unity, then the necessity of being a unified agent comes down to the necessity of being an agent.”

over others? In particular, what normative principles can we appeal to in order to avoid relativism about conceptual norms, such that concepts like ‘tonk’ and ‘Boche’ can be singled out as defective ones? Furthermore, in virtue of what are those principles genuinely normative, rather than merely conventional? This is to ask for, as Korsgaard (1996) puts it rather poetically, the “source of [semantic] normativity.”

On one hand, Brandom’s answer is to appeal to the objectivity of conceptual content. In Chapter 1, I argued that his account is at best questionable, if not outright incoherent. Brandom’s explanation for objectivity takes us far outside of pragmatism, understood as taking *use*, or actual features of discursive practices, as theoretical primitives for building a meaning theory. The question at this point was to seek a way out of relativism within a broadly pragmatist theoretical orientation.

On the other hand, the principle of harmony is just that kind of normative principle that can do the job of discriminating between good conceptual norms and bad ones. However, as we have discussed in Chapter 2, there isn’t an obvious way to ground it. The choice offered was between the Principle of Innocence, which results in drawing a sharp boundary between the semantics of logical and non-logical vocabulary and Dummett’s negative reasoning, i.e. given 1) the inferentialist approach to semantics is correct given the defects of the representationalist approach and 2) any adequate meaning theory must account for compositionality, the principle of harmony must hold.² I argued that neither of these choices are acceptable grounds for the principle of harmony. That is, even if we accept that inference rules are genuinely normative in virtue of the constitutive principle of logic (viz. harmony), there is not a viable answer to the question, in virtue of what is the principle of harmony genuinely normative?

This is where the constitutivist strategy comes in. My suggestion is that the principle of harmony can be grounded on our discursive agency. Indeed, it should be clear from the discussion in the previous chapters that many logical inferentialists are, though not explicitly proclaimed, constitutivists about logical normativity. Given the understand-

²There is another approach to grounding the principle of harmony, one different from the approaches considered, namely by appealing to evolution. This is one of the theses of Tennant (1987), and more recently, Peregrin (2024). There are reasons to doubt that normativity can in principle be grounded on non-normative facts (i.e. naturalized), but there is no space to discuss these at length.

ing of harmony (minimally) as the criterion of logicality, any rules that fail to satisfy the principle of harmony should not count as conferring meaning to a expression *qua* logical constant. The most straightforward interpretation of this idea is that the principle of harmony is a constitutive principle of any deductive system, and thus logic at large. Accordingly, any purportedly meaningful pair of rules can be evaluated against the normative standard set by the principle of harmony. Indeed, like metaethical constitutivists, logical inferentialists typically argue for a substantive normative claim—namely, that intuitionistic inference rules are better, or more justified, than its classical counterparts—based on this constitutive principle.

The relation between the rule-based conception of ethics and logic go beyond these superficial similarities. As I will show in the following sections, there is a certain kind of *identity* between the subject matter of ethics and logic.

4.2.2 Dialogical Constitutivism

My account, which I call *Dialogical Constitutivism*, has the same general shape as Korsgaard's constitutivism about practical normativity:

1. The normative necessity of conforming to the principles of discursive rationality (i.e. the principles of immanent reasoning) comes down to the necessity of being a discursive agent.
2. Discursive moves require an discursive agent; so the necessity of being a discursive agent comes down to the necessity of making discursive moves.
3. The necessity of choosing and speaking is "our plight: the simple inexorable fact of the human condition."

My claim is that semantic normativity is grounded on constitutive principles of discursive agency, which are the principles of immanent reasoning. To be a *discursive agent* is to be the autonomous and efficacious author of her moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons. In particular, we constitute ourselves as autonomous by making dis-

cursive moves in accordance with the principles of immanent reasoning, which, as it will be shown, really just can be identified with the categorical imperative.

Why should we think that the principles of immanent reasoning are constitutive principles of discursive agency? Again, according to Korsgaard, an agent is characterized by two features: *autonomy* and *efficacy* of her movements. As we saw, autonomy (i.e. to act in accordance with the categorical imperative) is what allows us to be efficient (i.e. to act in accordance with the hypothetical imperative). Accordingly, a specifically discursive agent as one that makes discursive moves autonomously and efficiently. Discursive moves, in turn, involve either endorsing a claim (via action, most obviously asserting) or challenging a claim (by asking). So, the question is: what principles allow us to assert and ask in an autonomous way? In other words, what principles allow us to ensure that the rules according to which we assert and ask are universalizable?

Now, recall that the principles of immanent reasoning are *symmetry*, which says that particle rules are player-independent, or fixed for both parties in the dialogue, and *harmony*, which says that the proponent can only state elementary propositions already conceded by the opponent. The categorical imperative, when transposed to the semantic key, yields the following prescription: When I apply a certain conceptual norm (in stating or challenging), I must will it *universally*, i.e. that the same can be done by any arbitrary agent. It is my contention that the dialogical constraint of symmetry and harmony guarantee this for any meaningful dialogue. Symmetry guarantees this at the play-level, in the sense that for any choice one player (X) makes within the dialogue in accordance with the particle rules, the same choice must be available for the other player (Y) if Y were to be in X's position. Symmetry therefore guarantees that particle rules for any expression is universalizable, at least according to both parties engaged in the dialogue.

The dialogical rendering of intrinsic harmony, as secured by the Socratic rule, is player-dependent. On first glance, this seem to run counter to the universalizability of rules demanded by the categorical imperative. But this is too quick. While the Socratic rule prescribes that the two parties have different roles within a given dialogue—namely, the proponent has the duty to defend the thesis and the opponent has the right to challenge it—the role within a dialogue (of being the proponent or the opponent) is not indexed

to any particular person. For example, Jill might be the proponent for some thesis and Jones the opponent in one dialogue, but the roles must be, in principle, reversible. In other words, structural rules like the Socratic rule are player-dependent but nonetheless *anonymous*, in the sense that it does not privilege any particular individual.

There is yet a deeper reason to think that the Socratic rule is a constitutive principle of discursive agency. What the Socratic rule ensures it that the proponent must ground the reasons for endorsing the thesis on what the opponent concedes during the dialogue, that is, in their interaction structured by the particle rules. In other words, the proponent is not allowed to bring additional information to the dialogue by stating an elementary proposition. This secures a kind of analyticity immanent to the dialogue itself: no dialogue could ever vindicate a thesis that is stronger—i.e. outstrips the information already contained in—the concessions (or the premises). Without the Socratic rule, the proponent would be able to win any play by simply stating the conclusion they are looking for!

This brings to the fore another important point about the nature of dialogues: the possibility of a dialogue hinges on one party defending or endorsing a thesis by giving reasons, and the other party challenging it by asking for reasons. Without the parties playing their respective roles, dialogues could not possibly get off the ground. This is why symmetry on its own is insufficient as the sole constitutive principle of discursive agency. Since the Socratic rule is a constitutive principle of any nontrivial dialogue and discursive moves would not be possible to make in the first place without the possibility of a dialogue, harmony is a constitutive principle of discursive agency.

I have thus far argued that the principles of immanent reasoning are the constitutive principles of discursive agency. Therefore, making discursive moves that violate these principles undermines one's discursive agency, and thus such moves cannot be said to be properly discursive. This is why, for example, drawing inferences using concepts like *tonk* and 'Boche' are all-things-considered irrational. In other words, these conceptual norms are defective because we can abide by them only by violating principles of immanent reasoning. But violating those principles diminish our autonomy, and by extension, our efficacy as discursive agents.

Conceptual norms are genuinely normative if and only if we can abide by the princi-

ples of immanent reasoning when we make discursive moves in accordance with them. So, the normativity of conceptual norms (i.e. semantic normativity) is grounded on constitutive principles of discursive agency. What, then, grounds these constitutive principles? The answer is that these constitutive principles are genuinely normative for us because, whether we like it or not, we must make discursive moves and an event would not count as a discursive move unless it is made autonomously and efficiently by the discursive agent, i.e. by acting in accordance with the constitutive principles of discursive agency.

4.2.3 Semantic and Practical Normativity are One

Since discursive moves (of stating and asking) are kinds of actions, it is now apparent that conceptual norms are really just special kinds of practical norms; it is rather misleading to speak of semantic normativity and practical normativity as separate categories. In fact, Kantian maxims—which are typically evaluated against practical or ethical norms—can themselves be interpreted as inference rules—which are subject to semantic or conceptual norms. Recall the examples I gave in the preceding section:

1. I want my weapon for myself $\vdash$ I will keep my weapon
2. I want your weapon for myself $\vdash$ I will refuse to return it
3. You have run mad and may hurt someone $\vdash$ I will refuse to return your weapon

1. and 3. are valid inferences in general, while 2. is not. The rough reason is that, when read as inference rules, 1. and 3. produce corresponding particle rules that respect symmetry and harmony, while 2. cannot be rendered as particle rules while respecting symmetry and harmony. I will not go into the formal explanation for this since these examples cannot be adequately rendered in the standard dialogical framework.³ Nonetheless, an informal reflection would help us understand why this is so. 1. (and, more contentiously,

³It is possible to do so within the Immanent Reasoning approach developed by Rahman et al. (2018), as it allows us greater flexibility when dealing with material dialogues such as these due to the expressive power endowed by Martin-Löf's Constructive Type Theory. But this step is beyond the scope of the present work.

3.) can be rendered as particle rules that respect symmetry: it does not matter which party in the dialogue states and which party challenges the statement for the validity features to be reflected in the play. But, for 2., we could not render the inference rule into particle rules that maintain player-independence. A similar point could be made about the requirement of harmony. Whereas, in the case of 1. and 3., the conditions for applying the consequent is ‘contained’ within the antecedent, the same cannot be said with respect to 2.

These two points jointly imply that 1. and 3. count as meaning-conferring rules, while 2. is incoherent. It is not merely incidental that 1. and 3. turn out to be good maxims, whereas 2. is a bad one. “Like ethics,” Frege remarked, “logic can [...] be characterized as a normative science” (Frege, 1979, p.128). The founders of the Erlangen school of Dialogical logic took this one step further, claiming that *logic has its roots in ethics*.⁴ I would like to suggest that logic and ethics are *one*, in at least two senses: first, that semantic normativity and practical normativity have the same source, which is constitutive principle of agency, i.e. the categorical imperative. Secondly, on one hand, meaning can only be constituted in actions (i.e. in dialogues), but also on the other hand, actions are not intelligible as actions without concepts. The latter point is lesson from Anscombe (1957). This is to say that a discursive move is an action and that action itself is a discursive move.

Asserting something that is incoherent (i.e. to violate the principles of immanent reasoning) is therefore the same thing as acting in an unethical way; to act unethically (i.e. to violate the categorical imperative) is to undermine the coherence of the conceptual content of the action. In either case, the act of irrationality diminishes the agent’s own autonomy and efficacy, that is, it undermines the agent herself qua agent.

4.3 The *Shmagency* Objection

My strategy to grounding semantic normativity assumed that it is in some sense inescapable for human beings to make discursive moves. The necessity of following the principles of immanent reasoning comes down to the necessity of being a discursive

⁴cf. Lorenzen (1969) and Martin-Löf (2015).

agent, and the necessity of being a discursive agent comes down to the necessity of making discursive moves, which is inescapable for discursive beings like us. Enoch (2006)'s influential objection targets this last step of the reasoning. He writes,

“If a [constitutivist] theory is going to work for agency, then, it is not sufficient to show that some aims or motives or capacities are constitutive of agency. Rather, it is also necessary to show that the “game” of agency is one we have reason to play, that we have reasons to be agents And this, of course, is a paradigmatically normative judgment. . . . [I]f we need a normative judgment . . . in order for the constitutive-of-agency strategy to kick in, then the constitutivist strategy cannot give us the whole story of normativity.” (Enoch, 2006, p. 186)

To sharpen the point, Enoch asks us to imagine a skeptic who acknowledges that agency indeed is governed by some constitutive norm, but still asks, “Why should I be an agent? . . . Why should I act?” (Enoch 2006, p. 179). This skeptic is content being a *shmagent*—a nonagent who is very similar to agents, but who lacks those features of agency that give rise to agency’s constitutive norm. Schmagents are also perfectly content to perform *shmactions*—nonaction events that are very similar to actions” but that lack those features of action that ground practical norms and reasons (Enoch 2006, p. 179). Enoch thinks that constitutivists must show that the skeptic ought to be an agent rather than a shmagent, but that no such account could possibly be given according to the constitutivist strategy: Constitutivism derives normativity from the nature of agency itself, and any such norms will be genuinely normative only for agents (and not for shmagents), as the normativity is only intelligible from the standpoint of an agent. Thus, Enoch concludes, “normativity will not come from what is constitutive of action” (p. 171).

Korsgaard would respond to Enoch’s accusation by appealing to the fact that agency is inescapable: even choosing not to act is a form of action. Katsafanas concurs, claiming that the “core idea” of constitutivism is that “the authority of universal normative claims arises from a certain form of inescapability” (2013, p. 47). But an immediate worry comes to mind. If action is indeed inescapable, then the fact of inescapability appears to under-

mine the normative significance of actions themselves. Recall the Kantian bifurcation of things that are subject to self-determined (and thus rational) norms and others that are subject to causal laws, which are not self-determined. If the normativity of norms are ultimately grounded on the fact that we cannot choose to escape agency, then the constitutivist explanation seems to contradict the very Kantian division of the world, since it denies, at the foundation, that actions are self-determined. A similar point has been made by Enoch himself.

I think there are two plausible lines of replies. The strategy pursued by Korsgaard is to appeal to the neo-Aristotelian idea that categories of objects are individuated by their respective *telos* (or function), and that these *telos* provides a normative standard of assessments for object qua members of their category.⁵ The obvious next step is to analyze the *telos* of human beings as exercising our rational agency. This is certainly a plausible path,⁶ but it should be noted that to pursue this strategy is to move away from the Kantian explanation for normativity as autonomy and efficacy.

The other approach, which is the one I think holds more promise, is to double down on the Kantian explanation for normativity. In fact, it would be hard to see how the shmagency objection could apply to constitutivism about semantic normativity. The reason is quite simple: the only point of view from which we can ask questions about agency (i.e. make discursive moves) is that of the discursive agent. So, the shmagent's question, "Why should I be a (discursive) agent?" cannot be rendered intelligible without presupposing that the shmagent is actually not a shmagent after all! What all of this rests on is the Kantian assumption that the transcendental conditions for agency are autonomy and efficacy. And unfortunately, there is no space available to examine this fundamental assumption on which our discussion has been based.

⁵Cf., for example, Foot (2001).

⁶There are many issues plaguing these theories, starting with the oft-cited idea that neo-Aristotelian naturalists commit the naturalistic fallacy, i.e. deriving 'ought' from 'is.'

4.4 Conclusion

This investigation began with the acknowledgement of the inferentialist's need to account for objectivity in order to avoid rampant relativism according to which any conceptual norm we will automatically count as genuinely normative. Brandom's own account of objectivity was found to be unsatisfactory (Chapter 1). Then, we turned to the debates in logical inferentialism which deal with this precise issue. I argued that intrinsic harmony provides a normative standard internal to the inferentialist theory (i.e. it does not appeal to any kind of objective reality), but it was found that the principle is not grounded on substantial fact/principle (Chapter 2). Then, I have shown that a proper appreciation of the dialogical constitution of meaning shows that intrinsic harmony is part and parcel of meaningful communication between discursive subjects, for logical and non-logical expressions alike. (Chapter 3).

In this chapter, I have identified the source of semantic normativity as the constitutive principles of discursive agency. We are subject to conceptual norms that we will, but these norms are themselves constrained by those constitutive principles. The constitutive principles were analyzed as the principles of immanent reasoning: that is, *symmetry* of particle rules and *harmony* that arises as a structural feature of the dialogue as a result of the coordination between the two parties involved in it. These principles allow us to weed out certain expressions governed by defective rules, such as 'Boche' and *tonk* on count of their undermining our very own discursive agency.

By identifying the principles of immanent reasoning as the constitutive principles of discursive agency, I tried to show that it is possible to account for the irrationality of certain norms without appealing to objective facts about the world; in other words, only by using the theoretical primitives afforded to the inferentialist meaning-theoretic project. In doing so, I have tried to chart the middle path between the dogmatism of the representationalist approach to meaning and the relativism that plague so many inferentialist theories of meaning.

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