Normal Skepticism: A Study of Robert Brandom’s and John Haugeland’s Accounts of Normativity

by

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Introduction

The issue of conceptual normativity which this thesis aims to resolve arose out of a deep anxiety which was instilled in me when I was young and had never dreamt of touching philosophy with a ten-foot pole. My academic advisor at the time was himself a Ph.D. in Philosophy, and he told me that reading Descartes’ “Meditations on First Philosophy” might be helpful in my theory of knowledge class. The book left me with a very distinct unease that was not abstract but significant in a very pressing way: what if Descartes was right? The idea that my existence might be in some way be in jeopardy did not sit well with me, and so I tried to quell this anxiety of uncertainty by committing myself to philosophy as an academic pursuit. Readers who have had experience in this endeavor will no doubt know that this was quite the mistake to make if desiring conceptual certainty was the goal. I introduce this thesis with Descartes because, in many ways, I’m simply attempting to quell the same philosophical doubt which has now admittedly taken a different form. To give this thesis some semblance of scope, I want to introduce the issue the way it found me. Cartesian doubt led to linguistic doubt which led to doubt about the possibility of meaning. Over the course of exploring Wittgenstein, I was led to Saul Kripke’s famous account of Wittgenstein on rule-following. Kripke raised a skeptical question about the possibility of meaning and its normativity in his controversial interpretation of Wittgenstein’s “Philosophical Investigations” in “Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language.”
Kripke’s Wittgenstein and his skeptical solution

Kripke finds the skeptical problem within Wittgenstein and begins his inquiry with this quote from the Philosophical Investigations: “This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule.” Kripke argues that because every action, including every utterance in language, can be interpreted as following any rule, it is impossible to know which interpretation is the correct one. The issue at hand also has to do the possibility of normatively following rules and the possibility of normative meaning at all. Language as commonly used has a normative sense, “apples” does not simply mean oranges just in virtue of one user deciding so, there is a sense in which the word “apple” ought to mean apple and definitively so. This is to say that meaning exhibits a normative dimension: to mean apples with “apples” is to commit oneself to a nexus of claims such as “apples are edible” and “apples are not oranges” such that these statements are within boundaries of norms and thereby makes sense to others who recognize such norms. Furthermore, said normativity must have some binding force and authority were it to be truly normative in the sense that it is a norm that one should answer to if one were to follow rules correctly, which is the problem Kripke is addressing. This is to say that for anything to mean something at all is to be answerable to standards of correctness which are binding in a way which is not arbitrary. The main problem here then is how meanings are possible at all.

such that there is an objective basis for ascribing determinate content to our uses of words.

Kripke offers a “skeptical solution” to this skeptical paradox with the use of many mathematical examples. Kripke proposes the hypothetical situation in which he, an experienced and competent adder is given an addition problem: 68+57, which have integers larger than any of those he has added before (he chooses this case for simplicity, citing that for any adder there must be a set of integers larger than any of those he/she has added before). This problem will then be new to him in the sense that he has never actually calculated this sum before. How then is he supposed to carry out this calculation? Surely he can just add the two integers together as he has always added integers to get the result of 125. However, Kripke introduces a mathematical operation named “quus” and then suggests that he has actually always meant quus when he added any two integers together, “quus” is defined as: x quus y = x + y if both x and y are less than 57, otherwise, the answer is 5. As ridiculous as this may sound, the point is that all of Kripke’s past uses of plus could, in fact, have been consistent with the quus function and hence the historical use of a function cannot by themselves provide a sufficient basis for determinate meaning. The claim here is that because he had always meant quus when he used plus, he ought to answer 5 rather than 125 because his answer will depend on what “plus” has meant to him. More specifically it is about how neither private mental history nor public behavior can provide facts that would constitute a binding determination of meaning. Kripke follows to

\[2\] Ibid
claim that no fact about himself can in any way decisively determine what he meant by plus could not have been quus. To illustrate this, he supposes that he has in the past given himself mental instructions to carry addition by counting marbles, such that the addition of $x+y$ shall be carried out by him in the future by putting $x$ number of marbles with $y$ number of marbles and then counting the sum. This is not a foolproof method because it is merely pushing the skeptical problem one stage further down the line. It is possible that what he means by “count” in the past was actually “quount,” which means “count” in the ordinary sense if and only if each respective pile of marbles has 57 or less marbles. It is easy to see how no rule can be made absolutely and independently explicit because the interpretation of that rule will be indeterminate and depend upon other rules. Kripke argues that a language user’s correctly following a rule is not justified by any fact about the language user or the rule in isolation but is rather justified by the usage of this rule being satisfactory to other language users. This is to say that for Kripke, having sufficient agreement in practice amongst various performances and assessments of such performances within a community determine what our words mean and thereby determine what functions, mathematical in this case, our words can correctly mean. Kripke can only have meant plus and not quus in so far as there is a difference between the two functions such that this difference is discernible to other language users while at the same time also reflected in their shared practice, that other adders also add as Kripke does provide justification for it being the correct way to add. In this particular hypothetical case, the difference becomes obvious if Kripke adds any numbers together, one of which is greater than 57 and responds with 5. It will become
immediately obvious to other users of the basic arithmetical language that he has not used the function of addition in accord with the practices of this community. Thus the original problem with the formulation of the scenario concerning language was that it was considered in isolation and not in the social setting of which language is necessarily a part of. The problem with this solution is that it only answers the question of how meanings and practices can be determinate but does nothing to address how these meanings and practices of the community as a whole can be answerable to binding norms such that they are also determinate in this wider sense. This argument seems to leave open the possibility for a quus community where people quadd instead of add, governed by socially enforced norms. With such a skeptical solution, Kripke implicitly denies that it’s possible for an entire community to hold themselves accountable to norms that extend beyond their immediate community level. Kripke calls “the set of responses in which we agree, and the way they interweave with our activities” as our “form of life” and concludes that “beings who agreed in consistently giving bizarre quus like responses would share in another form of life.” Kripke argues that such a form of life can possibly be imagined to exist and that “no a priori argument would seem to exclude” the possibility of such a “community sharing such a quus like form of life.”

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3 Ibid
4 Ibid
The point to see here is that Kripke invokes what Robert Brandom calls an “I-We” conception of the “social” realm, which demands that the practices of a collective “we” effectively determines the norms governing the performances of its members. The problem with this view is that the norms themselves are therefore not accountable to anything besides the community’s practices. This thesis aims to give a definitive answer to whether and if so how a more robust conception of meaning as normative can be provided by looking at what two prominent philosophers, Robert Brandom and John Haugeland have to say about this matter and whether they succeed in taking normativity beyond what Haugeland aptly calls Kripke’s “social Cartesianism.” I find Kripke’s limited solution insufficient to capture what I initially can only claim to have felt to be a deeper sense of normativity present in our lives which holds various “forms of life” themselves answerable to norms and not solely determined by community acceptance. Both Brandom and Haugeland essentially agree with Kripke that meaning is not a “natural fact,” that there is no fact about the world which can provide the normative binding force which is required to create normative phenomena. Instead, both Brandom and Haugeland invoke ways of looking at social practices and metaphysics which bind normative phenomena to something more compelling than just the opinion of the community. Brandom seeks to provide a more robust account of normativity through investigating normatively accountable meanings as possible through social practices and the linguistic-logical make


up of languages. Haugeland, on the other hand, argues that no account of meaning as a social phenomenon is sufficient to provide normativity and that one needs to develop a more complex account of how objects can provide the basis for normative assessment of the practices and performances of an entire social practice.
Robert Brandom’s inferentialism

While Kripke’s account of conceptual normativity seems to have reached its explanatory and philosophical limit at the community level, that is, he is unable to go further than say that norms are only accountable to the dispositions of a community because he could find no facts about the expressions which lets him argue otherwise, Robert Brandom hopes to go beyond this. The normative pragmatism project which Brandom pursued aims to theoretically lay down the framework in which we can get from normative attitudes that are in attributing norms, to normative statuses. Furthermore, Brandom aims to do so by not analyzing facts about expressions, but to look at expressions different way, he does not seek an objective fact that could make meaning determinate but instead aims to do so through a more extensive account of linguistic practice. Brandom wants to provide a more robustly normative account of conceptual content by looking at expressions within their contexts of use and how discursive practice allows an entire community to be held normatively accountable to their normative attitudes. What this means is that Brandom wants to explicate a way through which normative attitudes, that is how discursive users and agents take various performances as correct or not, can, in fact, generate normative statuses, which result from normative attitudes being actually correct or incorrect. In short, it is about how individual taking-to-be can actually be so correctly, how such takings can be normatively accountable to the actual. As an expressive pragmatist, Brandom envisions his inferentialism as a way to explain how language using can be both a contentful and normative activity.
starting from what we do in practice and then to theoretically explicate what we are already in-amidst of doing. In order to get there, it is important to understand the way Brandom explains meaning. His inferential account is so named because of the deeply central way in which he considers meaning itself to be inferential. For Brandom, the meaning of a statement is the inferential role acquired in virtue of inferential practices. This is contrasted against classical representationalism, which holds that expressions stand for, or represent something in the world, usually via language. Inferentialism, however, holds that the meaning of expressions should be understood in terms of the inferential significance that each expression has within the web of relations to other statements (and eventually to perception and action). This concept is what Brandom calls material inferential proprieties, that what determines conceptual content just are the reasons one has for accepting an expression and the inferential consequences for accepting it. The point here is that Brandom uses individual inferences and reasons as the basic building blocks of content and then by using judgments of which inferences are “materially7” good or bad, inferential relations can be formalized through formal inferential relations in terms of how they relate to material proprieties. This is to say that with each statement such as “It is going to rain today”, that such a statement is inferentially connected to what reasons one has in order to commit oneself to such a statement and what material consequences arise in taking up such a commitment. In order for inferences to be accountable, however, there has to be some way that inferences can be tracked and recognized as such in a wider notion of linguistic practice.

Brandom introduces the idea of commitments and entitlements to this linguistic inferential picture to show how it is done in practice. For example, if one states that “apple trees grow in the northeast,” he is committing himself to giving reasons for the statement if asked, while at the same time entitling everyone to ask him for reasons and entitling them to reassert the statement with deference to his own responsibility to provide reasons. This game gets an additional level of sophistication as players implicitly track other players commitments and entitlements. Players in this linguistic game track conceptual content across other players by their overt discursive performances and by tracking the inferential consequences of these performances. Another way to say this is that by speaking to one another, each player uses commitments and entitlements as tools to track where people stand in terms of what they are trying to say and in terms of how good their reasons are for believing such statements thereby allowing players to keep score of each other’s moves within this game. The work that is being done here shows how players can track normative attitudes, that is, this game allows players to track what conceptual contents players take each other to be committed and or entitled to, there is no move in this game that allows for the shift onto normative statuses yet. Furthermore, this scorekeeping also allows for privileged attitudes to exist within this game. For example, prominent scientists are tracked by other prominent scientists and sometimes even the wider community as being entitled to privileged normative attitudes of being authoritative in certain domains; a Nobel prize winning physicist can claim a
physical law and people will hold it to have good reasons without asking explicitly for the entire inferential framework's worth of reasons for it being so (of course, it is rarely the case that anyone at all asks for the entire inferential framework down to physical law premises when making day to day statements such as “please pass me the water”, people do not question the nature of “water” or “to pass” and this is precisely because of tracking normative attitudes via keeping score of people’s entitlements and commitments.) The way people ascribe normative attitudes to other people as a result of their entitlements and commitments such that there is good reason to believe that what they say is Brandom’s pragmatist grounds for understanding how people can ascribe conceptual content to each other’s expressions at all. The whole structure rests on the idea that conceptual content depends upon the inferential role each utterance plays in this holistically interconnected picture of inferential based semantics; the “good reasons” and the consequences of any assertions are semantically linked to the assertion itself which in turn is linked to a multitude of related assertions. Of course, it is possible for one to be committed to a claim without being entitled to it, that is, without being able to give good reasons for it, which in turn would affect one’s score within the community of players playing this game of giving and asking for reasons. It is within this multiplicity of perspectives, of multiple players each checking each other’s reasons that Brandom believes is a crucial component of what makes normativity possible. So far the structure described envisions a community of players who keep score of each other’s commitments and entitlements that allow normative attitudes to be tracked, but the structure is still missing any component to
assess whether these normative attitudes actually correspond to correct normative statuses. People keeping score of each other does not in anyway guarantee that these scores are correct. The importance of commitments and entitlements is that it explains in theory how language users can track the material proprieties of statements; each commitment and entitlement in their atomic form is a branch of inferential connection within the web of material-inferential proprieties that each contentful expression is situated in. However, it is also by having commitments and entitlements, which opens up the possibility for language users to not only track material-inferential properties/normative attitudes but to question their correctness as well.
The game of giving and asking for reasons and conditional statements

As the title of his work “Making it Explicit” alludes, Brandom's inferential model of discursive normative grounding relies on being able to make things explicit. From keeping score in this linguistic game, Brandom further argues that logical vocabulary is what allows players to make explicit what they are otherwise already doing: the accepting and rejecting of inferences. The paradigmatic linguistic tool that allows this to happen is the conditional statement. Simply put, conditional statements make it possible for interlocutors to discursively articulate their inferential commitments and entitlements such that these commitments and entitlements are open to assessment. In providing a good reason for a statement such as “the 44th president of the United States is Barack Obama”, an interlocutor can justify his commitment by providing a reason, for example: “If Barack Obama was seen during his inauguration by millions of Americans, then I think it's safe to say he is the 44th president of the United States.” This makes explicit the reason for which the interlocutor in this example is making a certain inference, which in turn allows the inference to be critically assessed amongst a sea of other inferences. By introducing conditional statements into the linguistic picture, it now becomes clear how specific material proprieties, the inferential relations of each expression that is, can be made explicit and in turn open them up to critical assessment. Of course, there are other examples of logical vocabulary such as negation, disjunction, universal quantifiers etc. who's role it is to make inferential relations explicit. Brandom focuses on the conditional because it is the one that allows us to make a single inference
explicit in the most direct way. It is through this social adjudication process that allows good inferences to be validated and bad ones invalidated. Note that good and bad in this sense are still referring to what other players take to be good and bad inferences, it is still a scorekeeping game for normative attitudes and not of normative statuses. The goal of generating normative statuses, that is, being correct or not is still not yet possible under this model thus far described. Brandom calls this process the “game of giving and asking for reasons.” In line with the later Wittgensteinian notion of language games, Brandom thinks that the game of giving and asking for reasons is the critical thread which holds all our language games together because it allows for the possibility of communicating meaningfully. Brandom argues that it is through this game which opens up the possibility of generating normative statuses from normative attitudes which are being ascribed by the players that will eventually show how determinate meaning in our expressions will be possible without relying on a community agreement argument such as Kripke’s which leaves the community-wide agreement itself closed to critical assessment. At a community-wide scale, some statements will necessarily be invalid when considered against others. For example, the statement “The 44th president of the United States is Barack Obama” and “The 44th president of the United States is not Barack Obama” are incompatible in terms of material proprieties. That is to say that the inferential truth significance of both of these statements cannot both be valid at the same time, an insight which has been made explicit through logical language. This issue can be resolved by analyzing the inferential framework through the

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8 Ibid
game of giving and asking for reasons: by analyzing the supporting reasons which are provided for each of those statements (which are themselves supported by other reasons and so on and so forth.) When fully analyzed and articulated, Brandom thinks that one of those statements will turn out to be true and the other not. This account so far provides, according to Brandom, an internally coherent account of truth and normativity but has so far not addressed how we can have normativity for objects in the world. This is to say that this account so far is philosophically speaking just as far reaching as Kripke’s: the assessment of the soundness of inferences is still occurring at the community level, the crucial move of how this account can generate normative statuses from these diverse interacting perspectives has yet to be made. The strategy for Brandom is to then describe how his account is able to hold these inferences accountable to the objects to which the expressions are talking about such that the objects themselves can serve as the standard for correctness. Brandom has yet to incorporate perception and physical objects in the world into this picture. To give the upcoming sections some direction, a brief overview of the strategy Brandom aims to pursue from this point is due. In the account detailed so far, Brandom has described how players are able to perform scorekeeping via commitments and entitlements thereby generating normative attitudes and the tracking of them. However, in order to get these normative attitudes to turn into normative statuses, Brandom must explain a way in which expressions can pick out discrete objects. He does so by explicating the inferential role of sub-sentential expressions, which allows for the generation of singular terms which in turn purport to be accountable to “objects” (groups of inferentially interchangeable singular
terms). These “objects” are then argued to be held accountable to objects in the world through this multi-perspectival discursive game when perception and action are included in the structure.
I-We account of the social character of linguistic practice

This multi-perspectival aspect of Brandom’s account should be clarified before moving further. Brandom’s conception of a linguistic community and its role in deriving conceptual normativity is different from that presupposed in Kripke’s account. Instead of a community driven I-We relationship which dictates that whatever the community deems correct or appropriate serves as the standard for assessing the correctness of individual performances, Brandom endorses what he calls an “I-Thou” structure of linguistic communities. An I-Thou structure of linguistic communities views linguistic communities as only ever between two individual users and that the wider linguistic community is comprised of many so-called I-Thou relationships (Although some critics argue that this is a misnomer because Brandom does not provide a genuine second personal account because it still requires the language community to be viewed from a third-personal point of view). Essentially what the Kripkenstein proponent endorses is the I-We structure, where if the community possesses sufficient agreement in their overall practice such that individual performances can be assessed to conform or not conform to this standard, then such a standard is the correct one. Brandom however, does not think that is a good enough account to explain conceptual normativity at all because this does not account for the difference between what is only taken to be true by a linguistic community and what is actually true. An I-Thou structure of a linguistic community that is only composed of

9 (Brandom)

multitudes of discursive activities between two parties, on the other hand, allows for the objective accountability of normative attitudes by scorekeeping between individual language users which trickle down and spread out at the speed of discourse. This multiplicity of perspectives combined with singular terms being able to pick out single “objects” is what Brandom argues allows for players to talk about objects in the world. Put simply, Brandom does not believe that it makes sense to speak of a community as a whole having a singular community-wide normative authority. There are only individually articulated performances that express normative attitudes which can be agreed upon or disagreed upon by other individuals engaged in particular pockets of discourse. This, Brandom argues, allows us to get to normative statuses, that is, we can get from what is merely taken to be correct or incorrect to actually being correct or incorrect. The resulting normative statuses, however, only provide a picture of internal linguistic coherence, that is, Brandom’s account thus far can only account for how statements within a language can be harmonized through incompatibility relationships by keeping track of reasons, but as previously mentioned, the work that actually gets these statements accountable to the world has yet to be done. Brandom has only provided a means to produce internal coherence, it is in getting this web of relations to latch onto the world that true objective, normatively regulated normative statuses can be had. This picture so far would still technically allow linguistic communities to be internally coherent while at the same time not be normatively accountable to anything outside of the practice of said community. Brandom then uses the role of perception and action as being inferentially connected to utterances to hold “objects” as inferentially
substitutable singular terms to objects in the world as things independent of what any discursive community takes them to be in their normative attitudes. The important thing for Brandom to establish is that it is not enough for a community as a whole to establish mutually coherent normative attitudes, but that such attitudes must themselves be open to assessment according to some basis or standard independent of the community’s normative attitudes, which thereby generate objective normative statuses.
In order to get to how Brandom’s theory is able to ground normative statuses on normative attitudes by making those attitudes accountable to objects in the world, the very concept of “object” needs to be clarified first. “Objects” are initially specified for Brandom in terms of the differing inferential roles of singular terms and predicates. Before moving onto what Brandom means by singular terms, it needs to be noted that Brandom’s inferential account details the importance of commitments and entitlements as linguistic currency which form inferential relations, such commitments and entitlements are furthermore only possible because of sub-sentential components which make the articulation of commitments and entitlements possible in the first place. More specifically, Brandom’s account drills deeper into the role of expressions and splits whole sentences up into sub-sentential components which play different meaning-constitutive roles. These sub-sentential components are singular terms and predicates. Brandom introduced the concept of singular terms in sentences in order to show how they can get at objects in the first place. Singular terms are terms which “purport to get at a singular object.”

The logical location of singular terms reside in the subset of terms which are intersubstitutable with each other such that the sentence does not lose its inferential significance, what Brandom terms “material proprieties.” For example, the sentences “Steve Jobs founded Apple Computers” and “The founder of Apple computers founded Apple computers” share the common predicate of “founded Apple computers” but “Steve Jobs,” the singular term,

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11 Ibid
was substituted by “The founder of Apple.” The singular terms, in this case, are able to be substituted for each other without the sentence losing its overall inferential significance, this is to say that the totality of commitments and entitlements of such a statement did not change. Whereas obviously if the predicate were changed to “ate an apple on the 24th of November, 2011”, the set of commitments and entitlements belonging to such a statement will be altered. Furthermore, there is another inferential difference between singular term substitution and predicate substitution. Singular term substitution yields symmetrically valid inferences, that is to say, that when substituted, the resultant inferences work both ways as exemplified above. However, when the predicate is substituted, even in a valid way, it does not necessarily yield a symmetrical result. For example, the two phrases “Steve Jobs walked” and “Steve Jobs moved” only flow in this one direction whereas the reverse does not hold up logically speaking i.e. You cannot infer that Steve Jobs walked simply from the statement “Steve Jobs moved,” he could have run for example. What this logical structure shows is how sentences can come to be about singular terms and hence single distinct objects at all. Because the associated commitments to each sentence belonging to the same class of singular terms are identical while predicates do not share this unique trait. Singular terms are in effect carved out logically speaking from their sentences via these relations. In contrast to the common sense notion that a and b mean the same thing because they refer to the same object, Brandom is approaching it in reverse: an “object” just is the thing which is designated by a set of singular terms with identical commitments such that they are interchangeable without change in material proprieties. To say that...
“Benjamin Franklin was the first post master general of the United States” and “The inventors of bifocals was the first post master general of the United States” is to essentially make an identity claim that “Benjamin Franklin” is equivalent to “the inventor of bifocals,” and the validity of such an inference will go through the inferential checking model as outlined above (i.e. that of being checked for correctness by other people through interactions in this game of giving and asking for reasons.)

The next move for Brandom is for him to establish this inferential truth-determining model onto objects in the world as opposed to “objects” as tokens internal to discursive practice(open-ended groups of intersubstitutable singular term). To do this, he proposes that “normative vocabulary makes explicit the endorsement of material proprieties of practical reasoning.” The story so far shows how Brandom can establish objects as loci of inferential incompatibilities, that is, objects are the things being referred to by singular terms which have a symmetric substitutional nature. However, Brandom needs to show that he can hold these singular terms as objects, accountable to worldly objects which they purportedly refer to in order to show that his inferentialist structure actually holds worldly objects normatively accountable. What he means by normative vocabulary are words and phrases which attribute certain normative status onto things and people. By the endorsement of material proprieties, he is referring to the endorsement of an entire way of life; material proprieties are the conceptual contents of the premises and conclusions of the terms. Using one of his examples, a banker who says: “I am a bank employee going to work, so I shall wear a necktie,”
makes explicit his endorsement of a multitude of inferences concerning the normative status of being a banker. For example, he endorses other inferences such as “I am a bank employee, therefore I will do what the bank asks of me,” or “I am a bank employee going to work, therefore I shall comb my hair.” The norm which is implicitly underwriting the inferences is made possible through the use of normative language; these inferences are only good inferences in so far as the norm being true. It would make no sense to say for example: “I am a bank employee going to work, therefore oranges are not apples.” The point is that normative statuses are accompanied and are in fact only normative statuses precisely because they implicitly endorse a set of material proprieties which are connected to the way people interact practically with objects in the world. This is to say that normative statuses serve the purpose of conferring a certain set of inferential expectations onto the subject such that people who are exposed to such normative subjects (given that these people have knowledge of this normative status) already understand to some extent what sort of inferential significance such a person or object would have. Furthermore, this principle not only applies for normative statuses as exemplified here, the principle is wide reaching. Consider the inference “Repeating the gossip would harm someone, to no purpose, so I shall not repeat the gossip.” Here the implicit norm is that something that harms someone to no purpose should not be done, and undertaking such a norm comes with it a whole set of material proprieties which thereby commits the interlocutor to a set of practical inferences. These two examples of normative language use are by no means exhaustive of the possible types which normative language can take; it simply serves as an
example to show how such a mechanism would work. The picture that Brandom is trying to paint here is that by having perception as the input point of acquiring objects in the world, then having such a world be normatively regulated through inferential discursive practice and having practical reasoning, which as we have demonstrated is also normatively regulated, as the output point, Brandom aims to paint a holistic normative picture of the world. It's important to see that perception in Brandom's account plays a causal role of providing the basis for judgments about objects such that they can enter the discursive game. This is to say that Brandom treats the normative realm of discursive practice as distinctly separate from perception (and action), perception merely causally provides judgments which are normatively regulated in discursive practice. That is while perception can pick out individual objects in the world which can then be normatively regulated because our language allows us to pick out individual objects and question their inferential significance which serves the purpose of finding out what each object means, that is what significance it holds in relation to other objects after which we can interact which such objects practically while still being normatively regulated under the same conditions, we have therefore built a holistic picture of the world.
Conclusion: Brandom

What essentially Brandom claims to do here then, is that because the grammatical-logical make up of sentences and their sub-sentential parts creates the possibility to make conditional statements about objects in the world and that such objects are perceptually available in a way which in turn feeds into an inferentially articulated framework of discourse which rules out incompatibilities amongst discursive performances and further regulates practical interactions with objects within the world through practical performances regulated by normative statuses, that normativity and objectivity in the world is established. The main normative regulation is done via this mechanism of incompatibilities amongst commitments and entitlements between different agents when they refer to the same “objects” via singular terms thereby critically assessing their respective conceptual perspectives in relation to each other via this method of conceptual triangulation. That is, agents are able to discursively discover where their differences lie because they can speak about “objects” via singular terms and assess each other’s commitments and entitlements. Brandom, of course, argues that these “objects” as substitutable singular terms are also accountable to objects in the world via perception and action which acts as reliable causal interactive mediums between the world and the normatively regulated discursive practice. Three main issues remain open to assessment here. Firstly, it is at issue whether Brandom’s overall strategy of grounding normative statuses on his inferential game of giving and asking for reasons actually holds normative attitudes objectively accountable. Secondly, it is also at issue
whether his account of objecthood as the loci of incompatibility relations amongst expressions actually holds these objects accountable to normative attitudes and by extension normative statuses. Thirdly, even if the first two issues are shown to be resolved, it is still at issue whether Brandom’s strategy to incorporate perceptions and actions into his overall inferential theory actually holds worldly objects accountable rather than just being about “objects” within his linguistic web. John Haugeland does not believe this inferential system is sufficient to establish genuine accountability to objects independent of how we take them to be, and by extension, the inferential structure is, therefore, insufficient to regulate statements about objects normatively.
Haugeland’s account of Perception

In “Objective Perception”, Haugeland sketches out a general theory of objectivity which he claims can account for the possibility of objects serving as standards governing our perceptual and practical dealings with them, that is to say that it makes mind-independent (not strictly speaking so but I will circle back later on) objects which are beholden to norms possible. This is in stark contrast to Brandom’s approach which does not hold that perception itself has to be normatively regulated in and of itself but instead that it becomes so through his inferentialist account of discursive practices. Whereas Brandom starts with discursive practices and then extends his account to incorporate perception and action, Haugeland starts with a wider notion of perceptual and practical interactions with objects and treats discursive practice as one of the many ways we comport ourselves towards such objects. He begins his inquiry by looking into what it means to be the object of a perception at all. Haugeland illustrates the difficulty in acquiring perceptual objectivity, that is, having objectivity in how we perceive the world and what is being perceived, by discussing Dretske’s effort to specify the object of a perception by regarding perception as a physical, information-carrying process. Dretske asks which link in a sequential causal chain can be identified as an object when a doorbell is rung by someone pressing the button, is it the airwaves, the button or the door-bell (or the eardrum vibrations). Haugeland argues that Dretske’s approach of using the primary information carrier criteria as determining the object of perception as inadequate. Dretske argues

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that the event of someone pressing a doorbell should be understood as a causal chain, i.e. that of the brain sending electrical signals to the muscles of the hand which presses the button, which sends an electrical signal to the doorbell, etc. The point that Dretske appeals to is that it is only what is, uniquely, the primary information carrier segment of the causal chain that determines what event is being heard. By primary information carrier Dretske is referring to the link in the chain which carries the critically relevant information here: the ringing of the doorbell. Dretske argues that because the ringing of the bell which carries over the defining information about this causal chain, that the bell is ringing, then it must mean that it is the bell that is being heard, rather than any other causal intermediaries and hence that the bell ringing is the proper object of the perception. Haugeland argues instead that perception of distal objects via proximal stimuli is possible only if the primary information in Dretske's sense is carried through every single part of the casual chain. Haugeland argues that object-hood should be understood as both a normative and intrinsically relational concept itself to perception, akin to how it only makes sense to speak of target and aim, puzzle and solution. The idea, simply put, is that object-hood should be understood as playing a normative role in perception such that the object itself serves as the standard governing correct perception. This is to say that chess objects can be perceived as chess objects because they are cohesive spatial-temporal existences which occupy the same level of existential space. Chess objects are chess objects because their being is dictated by their being chess objects and not by the perceiver and the patterns of their being are comprised of the number of ways that they can interact with other relevant chess objects as chess objects. Chess
objects only are chess objects in relation to the game of chess, perception of such chess objects itself is a normatively operational process. For example, using a knight piece as a paperweight would mean that it is no longer occupying it’s pattern as a chess piece (besides maybe having the visual appearance that is similar to what chess pieces also look like), but the fundamental nature of it’s being has changed. These patterns, what Haugeland aptly calls “constitutive standards” are recognized by what he calls constitutive skills and mundane skills, which are the necessary meta-skills one must possess in order to recognize such patterns in the phenomenological stream through recognizing conceivable but impermissible determinations. To show this Haugeland uses chess as an example: playing a game of chess and perceiving chess phenomena (chess pieces, chess moves etc.) requires the player to grasp the game of chess as being constitutive of itself within the perceptive phenomena at any given time and therefore identifying the patterns within the phenomena that both represent and govern their perceivability. There are a number of patterns within the constitutive normative nature (this is to say that chess ‘objects’ are only intelligible objects in so far as that they are normatively and constitutively grasped through constitutive skills) about playing chess that serves to support this characterization. Firstly, chess can be played with any physical object, one can as easily (maybe not strictly as easily) play chess with pillows as pieces and a blanket (perhaps with the help of paint but the point stands) as the chessboard as one can with traditionally shaped chess pieces. Secondly, being able to perceive the chess object in isolation is not enough, the chess object must

be perceived within the web of chess phenomena that makes it a chess piece in the first place. In other words, it only makes sense to be a chess object when perceived within the context of chess phenomena as a whole, as specified by the rules or norms of chess playing. However, being able to perceive chess phenomena is not just about what chess is, playing chess as a skillful activity is also about being able to see what it is not.
Haugeland’s normatively performing skills: mundane and constitutive

Haugeland argues that in order for players to actually play a game of chess (serving as an example of a norm-governed activity), each player must successfully take up commitments towards the chess phenomena which holds them accountable in their being chess pieces. This is to say that the player must reliably be able to tell the difference between legal moves (e.g. rook moving along its axis) and illegal moves (e.g. a rook moving diagonally) and commit to these differences such that one allows them to govern all the phenomena within the game. In a sense, Haugeland uses a similar strategy to Brandom in trying to establish normativity. Both of these philosophers are seeking to understand conceptual normativity through comparing various normative attitudes and by extension, performances, and using their incompatibility relations to in some way allow normative statuses to stand for themselves and come through despite incorrect normative attitudes. Brandom attempted to show that it is the incompatibility amongst the uses of expressions on the sub-sentential level which allow discursive practitioners not only to bring utterances into alignment with other utterances, but for them to also be normatively accountable to objects. In “Truth and Rule-Following”, Haugeland points out that being able to play chess properly cannot necessarily be as simple as grasping the constitutive standards and possessing the constitutive skills to recognize whether specific events conform to such standards (the distinction lies in the fact that grasping constitutive standards are about knowing the rules whereas constitutive skills allows the

player to recognize the rules within the phenomena, explicitly spelling out the rules is not a requirement in being able to play according to the rules), for that only allows the player to recognize what legal moves are, but because illegal moves necessarily fall outside of what are considered constitutive standards for the chess phenomena, there must be more. This is to say that a pawn jumping from D4 to G6 would strictly be not a chess phenomenon because the constitutive standards of chess do not allow it. Haugeland introduces the concept of mundane skills in order to define the character of constitutive skills that they are meta-skills of recognizing incompatibilities with the constitutive standards among what the mundane skills discover. Mundane skills then are skills that allow us to play the chess game, skills that allow us to “recognize, manipulate, and otherwise cope with phenomena within the game.” These are the skills such as being able to physically see the chessboard, the ability to move chess pieces on the board, etc. Having sketched out mundane and constitutive skills, Haugeland points out that there exists an intersection between these two skills which he terms the “excluded zone.” The excluded zone contains all the conceivable moves recognizable by mundane skills but impossible within the constitution of chess phenomena and by extension impossible to recognize via constitutive skills(e.g.rooks moving diagonally). The simple example of a rook moving diagonally shows this: for the game to continue as a game of chess, the move must be resisted, that is, the players must be committed to their being chess players and therefore reject that move as a viable move within the game of chess, to not do so would not be playing chess at all. Furthermore, this

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15 Ibid
16 Ibid
example also shows that standards and skills are not enough by themselves, there must be a third kind of normativity, namely constitutive commitments to accord with the determinations by constitutive skills according to constitutive standards in order to allow genuine perception of chess objects. So far the chess example has been used to illustrate Haugeland’s stance on how objective perception is possible, Hagueland argues however, that chess is a self-contained activity, by which he means it is isolated from facts about the empirical world (i.e. of the same nature as dancing, the constitutive standards of a particular dance are completely dictated by those who participate in the dance and those who hold normative authority on such an activity, it is up to us what their constitutive standards are.) This also shows the distinction between constitution and social institution that Haugeland is also drawing upon (that social institutions are practices whose standards are entirely up to us while constitution involves standards which we must conform to ourselves regardless of what we do), unlike Brandom, who believes social institution alone is enough for conceptual normativity when done right. Hagueland, however thinks that we have to goes all the way to the very constitution of the object before it enters any linguistic or social realm in order to show how conceptual normativity is possible. Hagueland argues that because such arbitrary human inventions are activities in which community-wide agreement can dictate it’s very being, the conceptual system thus far articulated can only give rise to internally coherent perceptual objectivity; it must be further explored in order to do the same for objects that hold empirical significance.
Haugeland argues that the very same objectivity structure which applied to his chess examples also apply to empirical objects/natural phenomena in the world. That is to say, objects of which their constitution depends on more than just community agreement. We are also committed to our theories and explanations of how natural phenomena behave in the same way we are committed to the way chess phenomena behave. Furthermore, these commitments themselves include a nature of vigilance to them, vigilance for not blindly accepting empirical results that do not fit in with their prior understanding of how the natural world functions. This is, of course, the excluded zone at work that was mentioned earlier; water suddenly boiling at body temperature at sea level must prompt a scientist to recognize that this is seemingly as illegal a move as a rook moving diagonally. This example serves to illustrate the point in another perspective as well, for if water suddenly started boiling at room temperature and the scientists were still alive because their blood have not boiled, then this event (of the water boiling) could merely be an apparent impossibility since if water boiling at room temperature were a constitutively correct standard of water and if human blood being mostly consisted of water were also a constitutively correct standard of human blood, then this cannot be about the constitutive standards or properties of water, but necessarily something else. Faced with a situation such as this one can either check and double check the experiment while adhering to the constitutive standard that water does not boil at body temperature at sea level, or he can dismiss his previous understanding as
incorrect. This is not to imply that both options are weighed equally. Indeed, one must insist very strongly that their constitutive standards carry behind them a tremendous amount of empirical support and as such afford it the appropriate level of commitment. The water must be tested with the same rigor and tested for all the constitutive standards that it is involved with. These constitutive standards are at once both empirical and brought into the world. What is meant by this is that constitutive standards are built upon many empirical results which themselves depended on standards of constitution, therefore these standards are at once empirical in so far as they fit previous results but also brought into the world in so far as that they are expected to capture future performances of phenomena as well. Which means that for one to be committed to a constitutive standard in the face of a constitutively impossible result (but of course conceivable via mundane skills) means for him to vigilantly test the constitutive standards via all the possible constitutive tests before such constitution is rejected for an alternative constitutive standard. The point is that constitutive commitment has a double-edged nature of demanding that the committed be resolutely so only to give up itself existentially if the task proves to be impossible. Haugeland argues that this conception of objects based on their constitutive standards and their limits being constricted by the excluded zone is able to be answerable to the world empirically and not just produce internal coherence as in the chess case because these constitutive standards hold actual empirical findings mutually accountable to commitments, standards skills, and performances in ways which make them all answerable to violations of a normatively constituted excluded zone. A chess game or a dance is played on
a set of constitutive standards which the community mutually agree upon but in the case of science, even if an entire community believes a paradigm to be correct, they can still, in fact, be wrong, and a constitutively impossible finding can prove them to be so. This is to say that there are certain things about the world which are both empirically and objectively true. This is not to say that Haugeland thinks chess objects and chess phenomena are not objective because they are objects, in the same way, the way empirical objects are, simply that they are beholden not to empirical results but only to their constitutive standards which are derived from community agreements. Another way to say this is that even though chess objects are objectively constituted, the standards to which they are answerable to are up to us, we have the ability to change chess rules. On the other hand, in science, objects are not only objectively constituted, but the standards to which they are answerable is also constituted via the excluded zone in a way which is not up to us at all, we cannot dictate the way things are just in virtue of thinking it so when it comes to scientific/empirical phenomena.

It’s important to note here that Haugeland’s conception of objecthood is existential, objects qua objects only exist intelligibly in so far as their being is vigilantly committed to by one and the object ceases to exist the moment it’s constitutive standards are no longer committed to. Haugeland argues that this is different from saying that objects are mind-dependent in the same way that Berkeley’s objects are perception dependent(that they only exist in so far as they are perceived). Existential commitments to objects and indeed to one’s own identity within the social web of relations in the world is one that
supersedes objectivity, objecthood in Haugeland’s sense only exists in so far as they are existentially committed to and understood as constitutively so. This is not to say that dinosaurs did not exist hundred of millions of years ago, but that they were not constituted as objects, namely of being dinosaurs until the 19th century. Existential commitment as a crucial component of Haugeland’s normative account will be explored in depth further down.

Haugeland furthers his argument by addressing concerns that his system imposes no real external checks for truth and therefore cannot be objective at all but again, mere coherence amongst standards because surely there cannot be objectivity if nothing external to the system itself is holding it accountable. Haugeland responds essentially by saying that the notion of the excluded zone of incompatibilities between constitutive skills and mundane skills are in fact enough to give an account of normative truth. This is a modal account of truth, what is true of an object are the possible ways it can be within it’s constitutive standards delineated by the excluded zone. He argues that it is unnecessary to think of necessary checks for truth as being external but rather independent, that it so to say that they are not swayed by any factor that could influence the truth or falsity of matters at hand. Constitutive skills and mundane skills are answerable to both the phenomena and the person possessing these skills. It would be wrong to think of phenomena as being answerable, or in Haugeland's terminology, beholden to the constitutive skills and constitutive standards themselves; it is in fact necessarily the other way around. To have a constitutive grasp of an object means for someone to see the relevant phenomena in the sea of phenomena and the nature of such
phenomena. However, as was discussed in the previous paragraph, this constitution could prove to be wrong as the object reveals itself. For example, a mechanical clock could exist such that it tells the time accurately for 24 hour long days, (days aren't strictly exactly 24 hours long apparently but suppose that they are) one could reasonably “grasp” the constitutive standard of such a clock: that it moves its indicators in even distributions of time such that the indicators only look the same once every 24 hours. Now suppose unbeknownst to the time-teller, there was a large gear within the clock-work of the said clock that only turned one full rotation every 25 years, and on the rotation it switches out one gear within the clock mechanism for a slightly larger one, thus extending the daily time to 25 hours. Under this scenario, there are a number of ways the time-teller can respond. Either his mundane skills can fail on the first level to indicate to him that the days are now longer and he continues to live his life assuming a 24 hour day or they skillfully alert him to the fact that the days now seem longer. In the first scenario, mundane skills at a lower level that are not directly relevant to the telling of clock time can show themselves to alert the time-teller, perhaps the time-teller keeps missing classes at 9 am, or when he shows up to breakfast, breakfast is no longer served. In the second scenario, whereby the mundane skills adequately functioned and caught the incomparability between the constitutive standards of a 24-hour telling clock and the mundane standards of time sensitive phenomena, the time-teller can now (after adequate checking and confirmation) repair his constitutive standards for the clock as being a 25-hour clock. The point here is that the constitutive skills and mundane skills served to not dictate phenomena, but the other way around and not just any
phenomena, but worldly phenomena that are empirically accountable. Constitutive standards are thus beholden to the phenomena itself, in Haugeland’s terms, it lets phenomena govern.

Haugeland’s rebuttal then can be summed up as claiming that Brandom’s inferentialism fails to account for the difference between collectively taking things to be true and actually being true. In his own words, “there is no legal move, in Brandom’s system, from ‘Everybody believes p’ (or: ‘I believe p’) to ‘p.’”17 The problem with Brandom’s account is that he already presupposes the possibility of objective perception, the work which Haugeland’s “Objective perception” claims to do. This is to say that like Dretske’s account of perception, Haugeland argues that perception conceptualized as a non-normative causal process cannot be perception of objects (as normatively constituted) and therefore cannot make discursive practice accountable to objects. That is, by using perceptual input points as adequately acquiring objects in the world, Brandom already presupposes that there are normative statuses in the world which make performances answerable to norms. For example, within Brandom’s framework to acquire a normative status (an inferential status only in this case) of being a doctor would require that there is at least one other person who recognizes one as possessing the status of being a doctor through the game of giving and asking for reasons and keeping score which would require understanding what sort of performance a doctor should have and an entire inferential web of understanding (e.g. knowing what a stethoscope is, what medicines do etc.) such that the doctor

17 Ibid
can be said to be a doctor at all. The point is that in Brandom’s system, for any x to be x qua x at all, x already has to be x before going through the inferential system to check whether it can be taken to be x, nothing within his system actually gets objects as objects along with their material proprieties. Haugeland’s account, on the other hand, claims to be able to get to objects qua objects by putting the normative checking system of the excluded zone all the way into perception itself.

However, despite claiming objects to exist in an existentially constitutive way, the existential part of the system essentially still depends on existential phenomena. The question is how introducing constitutive skills, mundane skills and the excluded zone can allow the objects to exist in and of itself, or whether it always only exists in relation to the perceiver/the constituting being. Furthermore, the question of where existential commitment comes into play in Haugeland’s normative conceptual structure and whether it undermines his account also needs to be thoroughly addressed. To make these issues come into light more clearly, a more detailed comparative account of Brandom and Haugeland will be used as the backdrop against which these issues will come through.
Both of these accounts of normativity center around the possibility of telling the difference between correctness and incorrectness through the use of incompatibility relations. On the one hand, Brandom uses discursive practice as the basis for recognizing and normatively regulating material-inferential incompatibilities among the cross-perspectival uses of singular terms, thereby allowing the constitution of objects to be possible and also engendering statements which are accountable to the objects that we talk about. On the other hand, Haugeland places emphasis on the wider notion of the tripartite constitutive nexus between skills, standards, and commitments that can let objects stand up to individual performances and even the whole community’s practice concerning an entire domain of events. The two accounts differ in one major aspect, that is the location at which normativity occurs. For Brandom, normative force is acquired in the use of proper discursive practice which employs logical notions such that individuals can articulate normative attitudes which can be checked for correctness, it is this constant collective willingness to abide by and hold one another to the commitments and entitlements as part of the game of giving and asking for reasons which sustain the practice. Perception and practical reasoning are simply touchpoints with the world which acquires judgments and the practical/physical execution of judgments regulated within the game of giving and asking for reasons. For Haugeland on the other hand, because of the fact that he does not rely on any single activity done but rather a wider notion of what being a being capable of normative regulation is, the location for which normativity
occurs is pervasive throughout the entirety of our perceptual, practical and existential involvement in the world. In order to get at the difference between the two accounts of normativity, the difference in metaphysics between the two accounts must be addressed.
The difference between the two philosophers becomes apparent as Haugeland’s account of perception is compared against Brandom’s. While Brandom treats perception as a causal input point of information that feeds into the discursive normative regulating engine that is the game of giving and asking for reasons by acquiring reliable judgments about objects, Haugeland’s account differs significantly. Haugeland believes that in order to get genuine normativity, the regulatory activity has to go all the way down to the perceptual level. This is to say that it’s not enough to say my eyes can pick up conceptually recognizable objects as part of a causal chain and reliably report it’s non-inferential application in perception in order for things within my perceptual feed such that I can pick them out by using singular terms which then enter the game of giving and asking for reasons in order to become normatively accountable. Haugeland thinks that the constitution of objects is itself a normative phenomenon that begins all the way at the perceptual level. He argues that it is impossible to perceive a chess object if said the standards governing chess objects were not already constituted in a way applicable to the objects themselves, While Brandom would not technically disagree, his conception of this framework only involves the reliability of judgments and their regulation within discursive practice in order to bind objects normatively to their constitution. Brandom proposes an open-mindedness such that our discursive practices are accountable to objects in ways that genuinely outrun how we take them to be. The set of interchangeable singular terms whose incompatibilities allow objects to resist how we take
them to include not only what the community does take to be true of those objects, but whatever else they ought to take as interchangeable. Not only the actual uses of singular terms, but the possible ones govern our practices. We are accountable to what future generations will discover about objects we talk about. Thus the community whose practice is supposedly self-enclosed is not the actual linguistic community, but the virtual community of all those who are capable of saying “we.” The difference here is that Haugeland argues that discursive practice alone is insufficient for the objects to be normatively bound because they cannot talk back and affect the discursive practice, it is only the perceiver's judgments about objects which are at stake but of course, judgments can be wrong en masse, and the point here is that there needs to be some way that that can be detected and corrected. Haugeland, of course, attributes this to his notion of constitutive skills which are required in order to perceive the constitution of any object at all. The important point here is not only that the constitution of objects requires such constitutive skills, but that the constitution of objects is sui generis according to Haugeland, that is they come into being by themselves. That is to say that our perceiving objects come simultaneously from the fact that we can perceive them and that they already exist in the world in a way which allows them to be perceived. Before elaborating further, the difference between institution and constitution needs to be clarified here. Haugeland is not saying things such as chess or dance were things that were already there waiting to be found in some sense; these are social institutions and humans completely decide their being according to Haugeland, there is no way in which these objects can stand up to us. On the other hand there is empirical constitution, which is the type that Haugeland
argues is sui generis, that is we can collectively all decide that when a queen takes a rook on a traditional wooden chess set, it will disappear physically leaving no trace or energy, yet such a scenario will not happen because the constitution of the wooden piece queen is not up to us, it can stand up to us as proving our constitution of it to be wrong as an entire community. The Brandomian would argue that such a scenario would simply be a case of unreliability on the part of the perceiver who are evidently showing their observational testimony to be unreliable in the game of giving and asking for reasons. This would not be strictly against Haugeland’s view because constitutive and mundane skills can fail and it is part of the normative framework that the repair and adjustments of such skills are possible. Although Haugeland’s account of skill repair essentially relies on empirical falsification of results within the excluded zone, the critical difference comes from the fact that Haugeland’s account still allows for the possibility of “talking” back despite within a bounded zone. The normative significance of objects arises in the midst of our skillful dealings with them and our existential commitment to holding them and us to standards that exclude what is conceivable but not possible, except in the case of giving up an entire constituted domain. This is one of the crucial metaphysical differences between the two accounts which allows Haugeland to argue how an entire community can at once be wrong about a normative attitude and get corrected independently of their dispositions or preferences.
Metaphysical Difference Part 2: Existential Commitment

Haugeland also draws an important distinction in “Truth and Rule-Following” which highlights another crucial difference between his and Brandom’s account. Haugeland argues that there is a difference between what he calls existential commitments and deontic commitments. Existential commitments are commitments which grip and define the very being of any particular being capable of engaging in normative activity. This is contrasted to deontic commitment, which is a social duty or obligation, such a sense of commitment is the commitment which Brandom is referring to when he talks of commitments and entitlements in his game of giving and asking for reasons. Haugeland himself uses the difference between love and martial obligations to show how love is something which binds your possibilities in a very real way whereas martial obligations are deontic in the sense that it is a verbal explication of what the nature of such a binding are. Mark Lance, for example, also writes that there is a stark difference between a filial pious daughter going to see his dying father in the hospital out of a sense of social duty as a daughter, and her seeing her dying father because she has no choice, not to say that there are no modal possibilities, but that that going to see her father is one which grips her by her very being, she has to go. Haugeland brings up this difference for an important reason. He argues that existential commitment is what grounds normative statuses in both a metaphysical and a practical way. Normative statuses are only normative statuses because they have normative binding force, and this force stems metaphysically speaking.

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18 Ibid
from existential commitment, that this status means something to the bearer in more than the deontic sense, that it has to stand resolute in the face of possible error, it is by no accident that Haugeland also calls this constitutive commitment. It is also for this reason that Haugeland claims that the governance of existential commitment is also sui generis, that it is necessarily from itself because it is only through persistence and self-discipline that it can be at all, there is no other authority or practice which can grant existential commitment it’s normative status for it is an integral part of having a normative status at all. This is to say that a chess player must steadfastly refuse a rook moving diagonally as a legal chess move as a result of being able to recognize it as such through his grasp of constitutive and mundane skills. To not hold such an existential commitment would equate to not existing as a chess player in an absolute sense. There is no equivalent function in Brandom’s account which as Haugeland puts it, allows for a “legal move from ‘everyone believes P’ to “P.”19 The point is that the social practice account of the game of giving and asking for reasons only constrains us if we take our commitments and entitlements seriously, and Brandom’s account has no place for the difference between genuinely holding oneself to reasoned commitments and only discursively expressing so. The rebuttal is that Brandom’s account is only producing coherence amongst judgments of perceptual reliability and judgments of statements as well as practical reasoning, but the theory does not actually get to the world, only judgments about the world.

19 Ibid
Assessment of Haugeland’s critique

Haugeland’s critique has merit in the fact that Brandom’s account truly does leave things simply as a box score in the sense that his account only provides a superficial integrity and coherence to it in the form of a discursive community nominally “checking” each other’s correctness and keeping score of each other’s commitments and entitlements in the deontic sense. Brandom’s account fails to find a satisfying system to account for the differences between social institution and objective constitution. Because Brandom’s account cashes out the normative force through the use of discursive practice via his game of giving and asking for reasons, it is still possible for an entire community to fail at the community level with their comportments towards objects. He tries to get around this problem which plagued Kripke by invoking the I-Thou relationship, this however only atomizes the same problem at a second personal level, it is still possible for someone to get a normative attitude wrong within this second personal game of giving and asking for reasons and have these wrong commitments and entitlements be wrong all the way through the game. As Haugeland quite succinctly put it, Brandom’s account only produces mere coherence within itself with no real accountability to the actual world. This is precisely because Brandom utilizes a causal mechanism to do the same job as the excluded zone. However, a causal theory of perceptual judgments feeding into a game of giving and asking for reasons is merely claiming that we live in a physicalist universe which abides by rules of causation. Such a theory not only requires more physically causal assumptions but also reduces it’s explanatory power to
the level of being superficially coherent. Haugeland is not arguing against a physicalist view of the universe but rather choosing to engage in it with normative concepts all the way “down” to the level of perception. The crucial difference here is that Brandom’s account separates a non-normative causal domain from the normative space of reasons such that the causal relations themselves have no normative significance (only the reliability of our observational testimony and our judgments of reliable ability to fulfill practical commitments have normative significance). By contrast, Haugeland takes the normativity of our existential and practical involvement in the world to be co-extensive with its causal structure; it’s just that the normative structure outruns what actually happens to constitute and enforce an excluded zone. Due to the nature of normativity being an all-encompassing concept which permeates every level of philosophical conception, it is necessary to do so. Brandom’s account stops engaging normatively at the perceptual level and instead falls back on a lower level assumption in order to flesh out the theory. What Brandom essentially does is leave perception to the reliability of judgments and have “objects” (as open-ended sets of interchangeable singular terms in discursive practice) enter the game of giving and asking for reasons via judgments about objects instead of normatively constituting objects. This approach reduces perception itself to a non-normatively regulated phenomenon while Haugeland’s account at least outlines the mechanism through which he claims is “letting” phenomena be by allowing them to independently correct wrong normative assessments by simply not performing the way they should have been according to such constitutively standardized assessments. This was made possible by the fact
that Haugeland pushed normative regulation all the way down to perception. Brandom's causal-perceptual input can in no way fight back at their supposed constitution because they never become objects, they only ever get to be judgements about objects within the game of giving and asking for reasons thus barring the possibility of one being able to tell the difference between our mutually adjudicated practice of believing Fx and ‘x.’ The essential difference here is that the causal element of Brandom's account thoroughly permeates the entire account painting a universe of physicalist causality instead of introducing concepts alongside a physicalist causal universe which nonetheless allows normativity to arise. In a sense, Brandom's answer cannot be proved wrong in the same way a physicalists position cannot be proven wrong: we cannot simultaneously actualize two distinct possible versions of events. It is not wrong in the sense that the theory produces unsatisfactory results, it is wrong in the sense that it’s explanatory power does not achieve the level of binding Brandom claims it does. The power of Haugeland’s account is that it affords further explanatory power in the form of giving form to existence in a modally understood universe which nonetheless abides by causal rules. By situating our casual interactions with the world within a normative nexus of standards, skills, and commitments, Haugeland's account lets objects stand by to our norms by constituting and recognizably holding ourselves to the impossibility of what our standards exclude. What is left to be seen is whether Haugeland's method is actually independent in the way that he claims for any dependence running from the phenomena towards the perceiver would undermine the ability for phenomena itself to check it’s own
constitution and thereby undermining Haugeland’s solution to the problem as well.
Existential commitment holds a crucial place in Haugeland’s holistic account of normativity in the sense that it marks the difference between merely taking something to be correct to actually conferring and holding normative statuses. The need for such a commitment to be mind-independent is also crucial because the commitment is the lived counterpart of the existential constitution of objects and such objects can only genuinely be standing up to our conceptions of them thereby acquiring true normative statuses if they can be said to be independent checks upon our performances. Of course, even stating it as such would be deceiving, Haugeland’s account of truth and rule following re-conceptualizes the traditional perceived-perceiver relation. In order to discover the relationship between the mind and existential commitment, the relationship between the mind and objective constitution must be investigated first as it forms the bedrock for the possibility of existential commitment.
Haugeland’s conception of objective constitution consists of a double edge character of existential commitment. Objects do not exist as constituted objects unless one with constitutive skills can bring forth such constitution. This is not to say that nothing existed in that space before the object was constituted, simply that it was unintelligible and undisclosed. It follows that the normative significance of such an object in its constituted sense is completely dependent on the being possessing of the constitutive skills. However, it does not directly follow that the constituted object is then dictated by the being possessing of the constitutive skills. Constitutive skills only allow us to constitute objects in the sense that we can bring them into their constitution, it is a form of interpretational skill. Herein lies the difference between constitution and creation, our constitutive skills do not allow us to bring the object into (or out of) existence, but rather lets the object serve as a standard governing our performances and commitments. Haugeland argues that this is not to say that constituted objects are simply us taking some already pre-existing object and only perceiving the ways in which it is relevant to the current context. This is where Haugeland’s notion of the excluded zone does its work, he claims that because constitutive standards hold a stringent requirement on the constitution of objects and the mundane skills keep such objects in check via an excluded zone of incompatibilities, that he characterizes the activity of constituting objects as letting be. Haugeland claims that his characterization, in fact, allows the possibility of objects to be discovered as they are because they have the ability to push back
against these skills and thus revealing their true nature. Of course in the limit case, the phenomena show their “true nature” by standing up to our commitments and performances repudiating the skills and standards that aimed to constitute them until they ultimately disappear. The relevant question here then is whether such constituted objects can actually stand up against incorrect normative attitudes independently.
The way that phenomena are supposedly able to stand up to incorrect normative attitudes, or in Haugeland’s terminology, impossible constitutive standards, is by showing that some combination of results are impossible. Haugeland uses his chess example to show that there must be mundane skills which can spot illegal moves, moves which violate constitutive standards but by definition cannot be picked up by constitutive skills, such as a rook moving diagonally. This locus of incompatibility between possibilities which are captured under mundane skills but out of the scope of constitutive skills essentially outline the being of said object: the sum of all the possibilities it can exhibit. The independence of this system comes from the fact that the incompatible result does not come from any particular person’s opinion or indeed the entire community’s opinion. Even if the entire world deemed that correct football practice involved throwing the ball around faster than the speed of light, the phenomena would find this result incompatible, that is, the constitutive standards of the game of football will no longer reflect how the phenomena actually behaves because mundane skills allow us to tell that the ball is indeed not traveling faster than the speed of light. Of course, all this would mean is that there are no successful passes in football. One might still play football with the rule that passes traveling slower than light do not count as “completed” (or perhaps they are not passes, but instead fumbles). This independence stands as independent because normatively regulating objects through the excluded zone allows the object to fight back against its constitution. Given the independence of objective constitution and it’s
normative checking, the next thing to look at is what this means about existential commitment and its independence as criteria for the validity of the normative account.
Existential commitment as mind dependent

The nature of existential commitment was briefly outlined previously: a type of commitment which is defining of a being, that it is steadfastly upheld as a way of life and a way of living. It is worth adding that existential commitment should be viewed as a first-personal involvement which allow things to matter, as opposed to a third personal view of merely tracking deontic commitments. The claim is that deontic commitments only allow the carrier to care about his or her own responses and performances whereas carrying existential commitments forces the bearer to care about the constitutive standards of objects relating to their respective existential commitments. A chess player only possesses such a normative status as a chess player if he is indeed playing chess which is only possible if the constitutive standards of chess are vehemently upheld. Haugeland argues that existential commitment is what gives objective constitution its objectivity and ability to be normatively accountable. Of this he says:

“ The normative authority of objects, by virtue of which they can stand as criteria for the correctness of mundane results — and thus as binding on judgments and assertions — devolves upon them from the commitment to the standards in accord with which they are constituted. Note that this is not to suggest that the authority of objects is somehow ‘delegated’ or ‘ceded’ to them by those committed to the standards. That would be to suppose that the latter already had the relevant authority and could then give it away, neither of which
makes clear sense. Rather it is to say that, in committing to a constituted domain, and thereby finding objects, those who are thus committed necessarily also find the objects as authoritative, and acknowledge them as such. The authority is implicit in the structure of the finding. That normative authority of the discovered objects, derived from but not at all the same as the sui generis normative authority of the constitutive commitment, then takes its effect via the responsible responsiveness of the mundane skills.20

The claim here is that existential commitment allows for the sui generis normative authority of constitutive commitment because being existentially committed to a way of life involves finding objects and having them being constituted via responsive checking through the excluded zone. Existential commitment itself then must be mind-dependent in the sense that certain functions within the mind make it possible to be existentially committed to something in the first place, it is not as if existential commitment exists outside the mind as objects do. While dependent, it also characterizes the mind in a constitutional way, for a chess player to be existentially committed as such also means that he takes on the normative status of being a chess player which is of course also a function of the mind (i.e. playing chess as an activity is mind-dependent but also partly constitutive of said mind.) The question then is whether this bi-directional dependence undermines the normativity of the system as a whole. Haugeland claims that it does not because normative authority is not given to objects by existential

20 Ibid
commitments, it merely enables the possibility of it as self-generated via constitutive commitments. Furthermore, he claims that existential commitment does not interfere with the independence of object’s ability to fight back against their constitutive standards because their formal relation is simply that existential commitment allows objects to be found and maintained not generated.

This bi-directional constitutive and constituted dependence stems from the core philosophical assumption that mind-matter and constituted non-mind matter interact in a causal way. That is to say that there is nothing special about mind-matter which allows minds to be independent of laws of causation. A husband existentially committed to being one as such, interacting with his wife constituted via mundane and constitutive skills is a scenario in which the husband’s mind is in this normative dimension (that of being a husband) constituted as such because his mind-matter is in some causal way interacting with the constituted wife which of course depends on the mind-matter one is dependent on for constitutive and mundane skills in a causal manner such that it makes sense to say one is a husband and one is the wife. However, unlike Brandom’s theory which exposes the philosophical assumption of causation at the perceptual level while in return only reaping judgments about objects, Haugeland’s conceptualization protects all other levels of theory from the pitfalls of causation. Haugeland denies the separation of causal and normative domains. Normative space is the causal world itself, situated within the constituted “space” that conjoins it with excluded zones of conceivable and recognizable but impossible events. This is
not to say that once interactions “exit” out of the mind-matter that physical
causation ceases to function, but rather that it becomes irrelevant in the
normative dimension within the framework. This is in part possible because
of the way Haugeland has defined his terms, constitutive skills just are the
skills which are necessary to constitute an object. Defining his system in such
a way protects his groundwork from empirical assaults, but more importantly,
it created a top to bottom normative framework: from phenomena all the
way to mind as constituted in relation to such phenomena. The bi-directional
dependence then, is only really dependent in ways which do not jeopardize
the normative authority of the system because the constituted mind and
matter as constituted via the mind is only dependent in causal space and not
in normatively shaky ones. Norms in this sense are concerned about how
there can be normative phenomena despite living in a physicalist universe.
The question which remains is whether this suffices to defuse the normative
dilemma Kripke posed in “Wittgenstein on rules and private language” which
introduced this problem.

Recall that Kripke found that there being no fact in the world which can
show whether meaning is determinate or otherwise led him to concede that
super-worldly normativity is impossible, there are merely communities or
“forms of life” which have their respective worldly norms. While Brandom
sought to answer this problem with an appeal to the wider notion of
reasoning as a social practice of mutual accountability, his strategy ultimately
fails to regulate things normatively as opposed to regulating judgments about
things normatively. By pursuing his conception all the way down to
perception, Haugeland is able to create a conception of normativity that as he puts it, “lets things be.”21 The main problem which Kripke ran into was that no fact in the world could point him towards the normatively correct usage of a rule and by the same logic, that there can be no normatively determinate meanings as well because nothing would be normatively binding. Haugeland’s answer to that is almost in a sense, to say that such a question is misdirected in the first place. To be able to conceptualize and constitute objects at all is already participating in a normative space. Normative attitudes are not accountable to some fact about oneself or even just the judgments of other people. True normativity must be about things themselves; it almost seems trivial to say that the standards by which we understand and conceive of things should come from the things which we are trying to understand in the first place. In this regard, Kripke commits the same systematic mistake as Brandom in trying to establish normative meanings from within what he calls language games. In Kripkean language, Haugeland establishes normativity not at the level of a community’s agreement in form of life nor at the linguistic game level of discursive practice but at the phenomenological level. That is, instead of approaching the topic at the level of already constituted practices such as discursive practice, Haugeland characterizes normativity in terms of how phenomenon is constituted in the first place. Kripke realizes the systematic error inherent in his attempt to establish normativity through explicating rule following via facts and instead concludes that super-communal normativity must not be possible and that normativity within communities is grounded in nothing.

21 Ibid
besides satisfactory agreement among the practices of other community members. Besides the fact that an entire community cannot be wrong about their normative attitudes collectively, this answer is unsatisfactory at the community level either since it turns forms of life into nothing more than coherent social institutions; science becomes nothing more than a finely tuned dance with no real attachment to objective reality. There is no way to tell the difference between correcting a practice and merely changing it. Again, the crucial move which Kripke falls victim to albeit in a more obvious way than Brandom is to essentially hold on to a strictly representationist picture of reality while at the same time attempting to build a normative account of reality that holds objects accountable in a non-representationist way. This is to say that Kripke subscribes to a view of reality which holds that what is seen in conscious experience is only representative of reality in some way but at the same time he wanted this representation to be answerable to norms with epistemological authority that outruns a mere representation. Kripke failed to do so and settled for community acknowledgment while Brandom attempted to derive super-community normative authority via an entire linguistic practice. Haugeland’s view of the mind is not representationist in the same sense in that he believes we access phenomena in a very real way through our senses and skills which lets things be themselves instead of claiming a fundamental separation between mind and matter which a normative theory will inevitably fall back on. It is through this bi-directional mind-matter dependence that I believe Haugeland manages to successfully lay out the foundational structure of normative accountability.
References


