

On the Origin of Conventional Meaning: A Pragmatist Alternative to Grice

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Abstract: *Our communicative behavior is meaningful, in the sense that it can be evaluated as true or false with respect to standards maintained and enforced by those in our linguistic community. It is a central project in the philosophy of language to provide an account of how speakers come together to institute the conventional meanings of their expressions. The received strategy is to unpack the notion of conventional meaning in terms of speaker meaning. This paper sketches an alternative, non-Gricean account of conventional meaning, which avoids any suspect appeals to speaker meaning by focusing instead upon the witnesses of communicative behavior.*

Key Words: Evolution of Language, Intentionality, Meaning, Convention

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The distinctive feature of linguistic behavior is surely its meaningfulness, in virtue of which creatures like us are able to evaluate particular utterances or expressions as true or false, or otherwise appropriately or inappropriately made. Moreover, the meanings of expressions are somehow established through social convention; despite what Humpty-Dumpty told Alice in *Through The Looking Glass*, individuals do not get to establish the proper usages of expressions all on their own. It is a central project in the philosophy of language to begin to provide an account of how speakers come together to institute the conventional meanings of their expressions.

The received strategy for understanding conventional meaning stems from the work of H.P. Grice.¹ On this approach, the conventional meaning of an expression is some function of what individual speakers typically mean by that expression. Thus conventional meaning is somehow unpacked in terms of an antecedently intelligible notion of *speaker meaning*. In order to clarify this latter notion, Gricean accounts further specify that for a speaker to mean anything by an expression, it must be made with an appropriately “communicative” intention, involving at least an intention to bring about the witness’s having a particular belief, by way of recognizing that the performer intends the witness to have that belief. As natural as this suggestion might seem, it has proven notoriously difficult to provide a satisfactory formulation of the structure of Gricean

¹ See Grice [1957] and [1969].

communicative intentions.² One trouble is that Gricean accounts tend to render the acquisition of linguistic ability far more intellectual than would seem warranted. For starters, these accounts are phenomenologically inaccurate. Very few (if any!) of us have anything resembling Gricean communicative intentions explicitly running through our minds when we talk to one another. But more significantly, the more involved these communicative intentions have to be, the less psychologically and biologically plausible Gricean accounts become. Such accounts threaten to require children to become adept mind-readers before they can be said to understand and deploy language at all.³ Yet language use begins to emerge in young children well before they appear to exhibit much awareness of others' mental states.⁴ If anything, such awareness appears facilitated through the acquisition of language. Moreover, such baroque mental states as Gricean communicative intentions plausibly run well beyond the cognitive capacities of even the smartest non-linguistic brutes. Attempts to demonstrate that non-human animals exhibit *any* sensitivity to the mental states of others, let alone sensitivity to how *others* understand how oneself is *meant* to be understood, has been inconclusive *at best*.⁵ Consequently, Gricean accounts threaten to excavate an unacceptably wide gulf between ourselves and those from

² For discussion, see Schiffer [1972] and Bennett [1976/90].

³ For a startling example, see Tomasello [1999], p. 107.

⁴ For overviews of the developmental literature, see Griffin and Baron-Cohen [2002] and Tomasello [1999]. To maintain that their very use of language is evidence for such awareness is, of course, simply to beg the question. Supposing that speakers must have a pre-linguistic awareness of others' mental states is to subscribe to a version of Sellars' [1997] "myth of the given."

⁵ Review of the relevant ethological and developmental literature may be found in Seyfarth and Cheney [2002], as well as Tomasello [1999].

whom we presumably evolved and developed. It would seem wise then to search for simpler alternatives.

Gricean accounts stand in contrast to what might reasonably be dubbed “pragmatist” approaches. In the grand tradition of C. S. Peirce and C. I. Lewis following him, the general idea is that the meaning of some sign is a function of what witnesses *take* that sign to mean. Thus the focus shifts from the upstream condition under which a sign is *produced* to the downstream *effects* that it has upon its audience. As a result, speaker intentions need not play such a prominent role in the determination of meaning. This would seem to be as it should, for after all it is the witnesses of meaningful expressions who are ultimately in charge of enforcing the communicative norms to which they are supposed to adhere.

Pragmatist approaches to conventional meaning have not been sufficiently explored. Perhaps this is because it isn’t immediately obvious how they can satisfactorily distinguish conventional from “natural” kinds of meaning. Or maybe it’s because they’ve been too closely associated with discredited pragmatist notions of truth. In any event, I will sketch (in a preliminary way) how such a downstream, pragmatist story can go. Without appealing to any notion of speaker meaning or communicative intentions, I will show how a group of creatures with primitive and individualistic intentional capacities could interact with one another so that their performances are answerable for their correctness to the way things are (that is, so that they are true or false), where the standards in play are collectively created and maintained (or *instituted*) across the entire group. In

other words, I plan to sketch a communicative, social practice in virtue of which creatures can become beholden not just to themselves, but also to one another. Although I will not be so bold as to claim that the creatures I describe qualify as fully-fledged language-using beings, this account promises to take us further along the path of understanding how creatures with our distinctive linguistic intentionality could have emerged from brutes with more primitive intentional capacities. So one might think of this paper as providing sufficient conditions for a presumably necessary component of genuine linguistic ability.

1. In the Beginning: Beliefs and Hoots

Following Grice, I will presume that some non-linguistic creatures are capable of primitive intentional states or *animal beliefs*. Elsewhere, I've argued that the "expectation-like structures" that several learning theorists argue are necessary to account for the observed educable capacities of some creatures are reasonable candidates for such primitive doxastic states. Committed as I am to the thesis that *normativity* is the hallmark of the intentional, the important thing is that we can identify conditions in which these states are *properly* possessed by a creature, which can float free from the conditions in which they are *actually* possessed by that creature. At the very least, then, I will assume that our account of animal belief allows us to pick out circumstances in which a creature has a false belief (one which it shouldn't), as well as circumstances in which a creature fails to have a true belief

(one which it should have). And we can be entitled to regard these circumstances as *mistakes* to the extent that they are liable to prevent a creature from attaining its goals.⁶

Let's begin our story by considering creatures that are naturally disposed to have certain animal beliefs whenever they witness certain performances made by their conspecifics. Further, let us suppose that these creatures are just as disposed to engage in performances that bring about animal beliefs in others. Such behavior wouldn't seem mysterious, or even beyond the plausible capacities of actual non-human animals. One can easily imagine, for example, creatures that come to expect that berries can be had in the direction of another's excited hooting, especially if these creatures are naturally disposed to hoot whenever they themselves encounter berries. Insofar as these creatures are disposed to exploit one another as indicators of how things are in their environments, we might understand them to be engaged in a primitive sort of "communicative" practice. And it is not hard to see how such "communicative" displays could help creatures fulfill their biological purposes. However, we shouldn't regard these performances as *communicative* in any full-blooded sense. Suppose that a troop of creatures have become disposed, perhaps through experience, to take a conspecific's excited hooting (or attempts to suppress a grin) to indicate the presence of an especially tasty tidbit. Rather than concluding that these displays possess any special sort of *communicative* status, one could just as easily regard these creatures as having latched onto a natural regularity in much the same fashion that they might discover other regularities in their environments.

⁶I don't have the space to cash out the notion of a goal here. Elsewhere [XXXX], I've shown how we can define a kind of goal in terms of an antecedently intelligible notion of expectation-mongering behavior, which can then in turn fund the notion of expectation *error*.

At this point in the story, these creatures' uses of one another's performances to trigger their own beliefs isn't structurally different from their ability to exploit any other type of situation as a potential indicator of how things are in their surroundings. In other words, these displays might not have any special sort of meaning or significance to these critters above and beyond the "natural meaning" that virtually any belief-generating kind of event can have.

Although a performance might happen to bring about a false belief on the part of a witnessing creature, there is as yet no sense in which the *performance itself is to be held accountable or to blame*. These performances simply occur, and the issue of *their* correctness or truth (as distinguished from the truth of the beliefs they generate) doesn't arise. Insofar as these displays are not themselves susceptible to evaluation as correctly or incorrectly performed (or true or false), they cannot be understood as intentional in their own right. And if there are no norms or standards to which these *performances* are beholden, there are no grounds for claiming that *witnessing* creatures could successfully *understand* the meanings of these performances, at least not in the sense of being able to distinguish the circumstances in which they should and should not be made. For this reason, these performances do not (yet) possess the normativity that we are seeking.

2. Enter Sanctions

In order to promote these displays from relatively mundane instances of natural meaning into performances with a special “non-natural” or *conventional* sort of meaning, we need an account of how performances themselves could be properly or improperly made. We need to understand how they could acquire their own conditions of truth or appropriateness. My account is inspired by Haugeland's brief discussions of how a primitive sort of social norm can emerge within “conformist” societies.⁷ Haugeland bids us to imagine populations of socially interactive creatures that are naturally disposed to suppress behavioral variation within their communities. This they accomplish by *censuring* or *sanctioning* those that don't behave as they themselves are inclined to act. Sanctioned individuals are in turn disposed to bring their behavior in line with that of the sanctioning creature (or at least adjust it so that it is no longer apt to elicit further sanctioning).⁸ Through sanctioning, conformists come to respond as they do, *because* that is how others in their community are (or have been) largely disposed to respond. Haugeland tells us that over time, the responsive dispositions of a community of *conformists* may converge or coalesce into distinct and enduring clusters or “*norms*,” which we can then use to *explain* the behavior of the community's members. While such conformist norms are not hardwired or etched in stone - they could have been other than what they are - they are maintained and enforced (or “instituted”) by these creatures' dispositions to sanction one another.

Unfortunately, Haugeland's story about conformist “norms” also lacks compelling *normative* bite. Conformists “should” (all things being equal) come to act in accord with the

⁷ See Haugeland [1982] and [1990].

⁸ Thus one might think of sanctioning here as some kind of “negative reinforcement.” It should be noted that conformism can make use of “positive reinforcement” as well.

norms of their community, but only in a predictive sense (which means that *we* ought to expect them to behave in that way). It isn't obvious why deviant responsive dispositions should be considered as especially *errant*, as opposed to just being *aberrant* or out of step with the rest of the herd.⁹ So far, there is no reason to regard individuals with unusual, non-conforming responsive dispositions as doing anything *wrong*. To provide this story with the normative oomph required for this to be recognizable as a story about meaning or intentionality at all, I suggest we consider the *uses* a community of animal believers might put to performances that can be modified through sanctioning. In particular, I suggest we consider the role these performances could play in their belief-forming dispositions. So I believe that animal beliefs can provide the normative oomph that goes missing in Haugeland's story about conformist norms, just as his notion of sanctioning will prove to be the philosopher's stone that allows us to transmute performances with bare natural meaning into ones with social intentionality.

Following Haugeland, let's think of a *sanction* as *a response in a creature's behavioral repertoire that can be directed towards particular performances of others, the effect of which is to alter the conditions in which the performer is disposed to engage in that type of performance*. However, instead of considering creatures that simply sanction those that don't behave as they themselves are disposed, let's consider creatures that are disposed to sanction performances only when they've discovered that the performance has caused them to have a false belief (or prevented them from having a true belief). At this point, we

⁹ So I disagree with Haugeland when he states: "Out-of-step behavior is not just atypical, but abnormal and unacceptable; it is what one is 'not supposed to' do, and in that sense improper." (Haugeland [1990], pp. 405-6) To be fair, Haugeland has backed away from this claim as well (see his [1998], p. 4).

needn't presume that creatures are aware that sanctioning has this effect upon others. Nor need we assume, at least at this point, that sanctioning has to be particularly unpleasant (or punishing) to the sanctioned. We can even allow creatures to engage in performances with the full expectation of being sanctioned for them.¹⁰

The key to this story is that sanctioning *can* be a rational response to false belief. It can increase the aptness of an individual's belief-forming dispositions. Consider a creature for which another's performance has generated a false belief. Upon hearing another's excited hooting, for example, it has mistakenly come to believe that berries are to be had. Upon discovery of this error, rather than continuing to take excited hooting to signal that berries can be had, it might reasonably begin to take hooting to signal something else instead – say, the presence of a particular kind of plant, which may or may not have berries on it. However, sanctioning such a performance provides a witness with another, possibly preferable, way to increase the aptness of its belief-forming dispositions. Suppose others (by and large) hoot excitedly whenever berries are to be had. Revising one's own belief-generating dispositions to fit this non-conforming individual would then render one's belief-generating dispositions *worse* off with respect to the rest. On the other hand, sanctioning the non-conformer stands a shot of bringing its dispositions to hoot excitedly into line with the rest, which would be good for this witness's overall cognitive economy. Sanctioning thus affords witnesses a way of rationally modifying their *surroundings* to fit their *belief-forming dispositions*, and not just their dispositions to fit their surroundings.

¹⁰ One might reasonably imagine, however, that in natural populations, a critter's disposition to sanction others to increase with status or acculturation, accompanied by a

By looking to how well a performer's dispositions to engage in a certain type of performance conform with those of other potential performers, we could draw a distinction between situations in which a creature *ought* to revise its own belief-forming dispositions and those in which it ought instead change another's dispositions through sanction. However, the story will have to be a bit more nuanced. We shouldn't restrict our attention to the dispositions of other potential *performers* to determine whether a witness should sanction another's performance, for we must keep in mind that a performer and its actual witnesses aren't the only creatures who have a stake in whether or not a given performance winds up being sanctioned. We must remember that by sanctioning a performance, a witness can also affect the aptness of the belief-forming dispositions of other *potential witnesses* of that performer. A witness is liable to render another's belief-forming dispositions less apt (and so act against their "cognitive interests") if it sanctions a performance that would have activated a true belief for the other creature. Since the sanctioned performer would be less disposed to engage in that performance, the other would be less disposed to acquire true beliefs when they encounter that performer under similar circumstances. Similarly, a witness fails to act in another's cognitive interests if it refrains from sanctioning a performance that would generate a false belief in the other.

The point is simply that the aptness of a creature's belief-forming dispositions can be affected (for better or for worse) by the sanctionings of others. Generally speaking, creatures are better off to the extent that *others* tend to act in their own cognitive best interests. From the standpoint of belief-forming aptness, then, a creature is best served if others are disposed to sanction just those performances that would generate false beliefs for it. By holding

corresponding decrease in its susceptibility to sanctioning.

performances to roughly the same standards, others can serve, as it were, as one's own "proxy." Ideally, any potential witness of a performance would be an effective proxy for any other. This in turn means that the beliefs generated in each creature by a particular type of performance ought to be "equivalent" to one another; they ought to share truth conditions. That way, creatures engaged in the kind of social interaction described here would work to mutual cognitive benefit.

3. The Emergence of Conventional Meaning

We've found a reason why it would be in the cognitive interests of individual creatures to have responsive dispositions (to *sanction* belief-generating performances) that conform with others in their community. With this in mind, I think that we can develop an account of when a creature ought and ought not sanction another's performances.¹¹ A witness *should not* sanction a performance if it would predominantly activate true beliefs in other potential witnesses. If this performance happened to generate a false belief, the witness should revise its own belief-forming dispositions instead. Under these circumstances, the truth conditions of this belief would (by and large) not co-vary with the truth conditions of the beliefs that performance would generate in others. Sanctioning that performance rather than revising one's own belief-forming dispositions thus threatens to make similar performances by that individual more likely to lead to mistaken beliefs in

¹¹ Bear in mind that all I need to describe are clear cases in which a critter should revise its belief-forming processes rather than sanction a performance and clear cases where it should sanction a performance rather than adjust its own dispositions. I do not need to claim that in every possible case it will be clear whether sanctioning is appropriate.

others. And so it is liable to render the belief-generating dispositions of others worse off than before. But more significantly, if a witness were to sanction the performance, and fail to bring one's own belief-forming dispositions in line with those of other potential witnesses, then these other potential witnesses would be ineffective proxies for it. So not only would sanctioning the performer act against the cognitive interests of others, it would be to act against one's own cognitive interests as well.

Likewise, a witness *should* sanction a performance if (by and large) it would have generated false beliefs in other potential witnesses. Here, sanctioning stands a chance of increasing the aptness of *everyone's* belief-forming dispositions. On the other hand, if a creature fails to sanction the performance, and instead brings its belief-forming dispositions in line with the performer's responsive dispositions, then its own dispositions would be out of line with those of other potential witnesses. Not only would this creature fail to act in the cognitive interests of others, but other potential witnesses would no longer serve as effective proxies for it. Sanctioning thus serves the cognitive interests of all of the performance's potential witnesses.

We're now in position to distinguish inappropriate (or "false") from appropriate (or "true") performances, depending upon whether or not they *ought to be sanctioned*. That is, a performance is inappropriate if it would largely trigger false beliefs in potential witnesses. Armed with this means of evaluating the appropriateness of performances, we can begin to assign them a rudimentary sort of "truth conditions" or *meaning*. To specify a performance's meaning is simply to specify the conditions in which performances of that

type are appropriately made. For instance, if a certain kind of performance predominantly triggers in others beliefs to the effect that berries are to be found in the vicinity of the performer, it *means* that berries are to be found in the vicinity of the performer. Also observe that on this account, *witnesses* are ultimately responsible for enforcing these communicative norms through sanctions; they - not performers - are the ones responsible for bringing it about that performers behave as they should. As Sellars might have put it, the norms governing performances (“ought-to-bes”) imply norms upon their witnesses (“ought-to-dos”).¹² In fact, creatures that are able to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate performances of a certain type, and who are inclined to sanction accordingly, may be said to correctly *grasp* or *understand* the meanings of those performances.¹³ Creatures with proper grasp of a certain type of performance would (for the most part) be effective proxies for others, just as others would (for the most part) be effective proxies for them. By contrast, creatures that fail to grasp the significance of a certain type of performance are liable not to be effective proxies for others, nor would others be effective proxies for them.

This pragmatist account of meaning has several distinct advantages. First, since the meaning or *content* of a performance is determined by the *beliefs* it would generate in others and not merely by the conditions in which others are disposed to make that kind of performance, we can begin to understand how an individual could correctly perform in a situation in which *no* other potential performers would be similarly disposed to engage in

¹²See Sellars [1968/74], p. 96.

¹³See Gauker [1994], p. 86 for a similar unpacking of what it is to *understand* a performance.

that performance. So unlike other dispositional accounts of meaning, which tie the meaning of a sign or expression to the conditions in which creatures normally that type of sign or expression, this account thus allows for the possibility of creatures with *abnormal* dispositions to engage in a certain type of performance nevertheless having perfectly *appropriate* dispositions. In some circumstances in which berries are to be had, there might be only a single individual, or maybe even none at all, that is disposed to engage in the excited hooting that *means* that berries are to be had. Similarly, every individual might be inclined to hoot in that meaningful way in circumstances in which *no* berries are to be had. So not only can every individual be disposed to perform incorrectly under *some* circumstances, there can be instances in which everyone is disposed to engage in an incorrect performance. This account of meaning thus allows for a *disposition transcendence* that some (e.g., Brandom [1994]) argue is required for the norms involved to be satisfyingly *objective*.¹⁴

Second, while correct or “true” performances are likely to bring about true beliefs in others and incorrect or “false” performances are likely to trigger false beliefs, this connection can be broken when witnesses fail to grasp their proper significance. A false or inappropriate performance - one that ought to be sanctioned - can nevertheless generate true beliefs in its witness. Of course, that witness wouldn't likely sanction that performance as it should, thereby manifesting its failure to grasp the performance's *proper* significance. Likewise, an appropriate or true performance might bring about false beliefs in witnesses

¹⁴What I find interesting is that one can attain this measure of "objectivity" without having to understand these creatures as engaging in a practice of giving and asking for reasons, as Brandom would understand it.

that fail to grasp its significance. Since the standards by which these performances are evaluated are not completely determined by the responsive dispositions or intentional states of *either* the performer or its actual audience, they are unmysteriously *externalist*. And since these standards are *collectively* determined by many potential witnesses, they are irreducibly *social*. As a result, it is likely that these meanings would most fruitfully be specified in terms of distal conditions of these creatures' environments, and not simply in terms of the proximal conditions of their peripheral nervous systems or sensory equipment.¹⁵ Moreover, the distinction between correctly and incorrectly sanctioning a performance makes sense only if such performances trigger expectations in yet other creatures disposed to sanction performances of that type, should they generate false beliefs. One cannot intelligibly understand the behavior of isolated individuals (and maybe even isolated performer-witness pairs) as subject to these kinds of standards. In the words of Sellars paraphrasing Wittgenstein: it is the sanctioning community as "a self-perpetuating whole which is the minimum unit in terms of which such intentional activity can be understood."¹⁶

Finally, it should be clear that these standards for evaluating performances are not fixed over time. The conditions in which it would be proper to engage in a certain sort of performance can drift or become more or less determinate as the stock of potential witnesses changes or as potential witnesses revise the expectations such performances activate. In fact, when different communities become isolated from one another (that is, when the

¹⁵Compare this to the "triangulation strategy" that Davidson discusses in his [1991].

¹⁶See Sellars [1968/74], p. 100.

potential witnesses in one community are no longer potential witnesses for the other), the standards governing their performances can drift apart, so much so that a member of one community might no longer properly grasp the performances of members of the other.¹⁷ Thus the sanction-enforced significance of these performances is evidently conventional and contingent - their contents clearly “could have been otherwise.”

4. Acknowledging These Norms: Another Road to Charity?

A particularly nice feature of this account is that it provides a rationale for adopting a sort of charity principle. The fact that witnesses' actual dispositions to sanction performances can depart from correct dispositions to sanction performances (thereby giving rise to misunderstanding) actually raises a difficulty. One might justifiably maintain that I have yet to show how such creatures could be *responsible* to these norms, and thus *governed* by them, in the sense of being *rationally self-corrective* to them. Imposed as they are by the community as a whole, these standards are, as it were, external or “objective.” As of yet, I haven't described what a creature could do to *acknowledge* these norms, in the sense of being rationally responsive to evidence that their dispositions to sanction performances are out of line, and thus incorrect. As long as they lack this self-corrective capacity, there is little reason to claim that these creatures take *themselves* to be mistaken when their dispositions to sanction performances are out of step with the rest. But how could such creatures possibly acknowledge these objective norms, given that they can't directly

¹⁷I wouldn't want to encourage one to notice the evident parallels here to human languages - but I wouldn't discourage it either.

determine the belief-generating dispositions of others? What subjectively available standards could a creature impose upon its own sanctioning dispositions so that it stands a reasonable chance of developing dispositions to form beliefs from performances that are largely in line with other potential witnesses?

There are at least two separate lines of evidence that witnesses can exploit to help keep its grasp or understanding of a performance-type in step with that of other witnesses. First, they can observe the reactions of other witnesses to performances. If others consistently sanction a particular type of performance under certain conditions, or if they let those performances stand unsanctioned, then a creature has fairly good evidence that it ought to do likewise in similar circumstances.¹⁸ The second source of evidence is perhaps more interesting. Since the performances of others are themselves the products of other witnesses' dispositions to sanction performances, a witnessing creature also has evidence that it doesn't grasp the proper significance of a certain type of performance, if these performances have systematically lead it to false beliefs, especially if those performances come from experienced performers. Thus a witness manifests a rational, self-corrective tendency if it is progressively more likely to alter its own belief-forming dispositions than to sanction performances when those performances have frequently led it to false belief. Note that to follow this rule is to adopt (or implement) something like a *principle of charity* toward these performances. In fact, creatures that don't (tacitly) adopt such self-corrective principles, but instead stubbornly adhere to their own possibly idiosyncratic grasp of performances, are liable to work to their mutual cognitive disadvantage. Thus implementing

¹⁸ This is also a plausible route by which creatures could *learn* the proper significance of performances.

charity principles can be regarded as a rational requirement for creatures engaged in this type of quasi-communicative behavior. Creatures that fail to do so exhibit a distinctive sort of irrationality that betrays a failure to acknowledge the grip that these social norms have upon them.

According to the charity principle defended here, witnesses ought not treat most *performances* of a certain type as mistaken. Put crudely, the principle is that if you find others systematically speaking in a manner you find improper, chances are that you are the one who has a mistaken grasp of the relevant communicative norms. A couple of comments are in order about this justification for charity. First, this justification would seem more fundamental than that offered by Davidson [1996] or Dennett [1987], since it is not limited to the context of mutual intentional interpretation. It is a rational requirement for responsibly acknowledging the conventional norms that gain their grip on you. Second, this conception of charity differs from most in that it is directed toward the group as a whole, not toward particular *individuals*. There is thus no presumption here that most of an *individual's* performances ought to be considered proper.

5. Conclusion

Insofar as the kinds of performances and sanctions I've been describing can be evaluated as correctly or incorrectly made with respect to norms collectively instituted and maintained by a sanctioning community of creatures, I claim to have met my target of

sketching a distinct, irreducibly social sort of “*meaning-mongering*” that doesn’t rest upon Gricean communicative intentions. This should be liberating news to all those cognitive ethologists, who have tried so hard to show that at least some non-human animals have the sensitivity to other minds required to pass over the “Gricean hump.” To be sure, there remains plenty of reason not to regard these performances as having the distinctly *discursive intentionality* of our own linguistic expressions. For instance, these relatively structureless, “holophrastic” performances are not conceptually articulated, in the sense of being systematically composed of recombinable elements that allow creatures to engage in novel performances with novel significance. Moreover, they are all freestanding; I haven’t shown how they might embed or combine with one another to form more complex expressions with progressively complex truth conditions. Nor must these performances be sufficiently expressive (or even indicative) of a performer’s own state of mind to qualify as satisfyingly “assertive.” They aren’t compelling expressions of a *performer’s own belief* to the world’s being a certain way.¹⁹

The most responsible attitude to take is to recognize the respects in which this story falls short of describing our own sophisticated intentional activity and then to regard these shortcomings as *targets* for further elaborations of this account. Indeed, I think we should

¹⁹Notice that I haven’t (yet) called these performances “expressions.” This provides some motivation for adding something resembling a Gricean intentional component. It’s worth remarking that the interactions described here wouldn’t qualify as “communicative,” according to the definition given by Smith [1977], who argues that genuinely communicative displays essentially involves providing information about the performer’s *state of mind*. It should also be noted, however, that most of the examples of “animal communication” Smith discusses in that work fail spectacularly to count as communicative in this sense. However, there is something odd about this definition. As McDowell [1980] points out, audiences are ultimately more interested in whether utterances indicate how *the world* is, not how *communicators take it to be*.

turn these shortcomings to our advantage. Full-blown natural languages did not likely spring into existence, in all their glorious (and well documented) complexity. It's not unreasonable to suppose that our pre- or proto-linguistic forebears participated in holophrastic communicative practices resembling the one described above, which were eventually supplanted by more structured communicative behaviors that developed out of them. Thus the present account can be seen as an attempt to characterize what Deacon [1997] calls "the missing simple languages" spoken by what Sellars [1997] might have dubbed "our pre-Rylean ancestors." Now I see no reason why we couldn't gussy up this story to incorporate additional structure and to capture even more robust senses in which performers become beholden to the significance of their own performances. One obvious suggestion is to require performers to be disposed to engage in certain types of performances only when they have certain beliefs of their own.²⁰ That way, in the event of sanction, a performer can *either* adjust its disposition to engage in that type of performance *or* (more interestingly) treat the belief that prompted the performance as having been in error (and so subject to revision). In this fashion, these creatures can begin to use each other to test the truth or falsity of their own beliefs. For their own cognitive best interests, then, performers would be best off associating performances with beliefs that share truth-conditions with the beliefs potential witnesses associate with those performances. How a performer *should* respond to another's sanction thus depends upon its own grasp of the significance of a performance - whether the belief it associates with that performance lines up with the beliefs others predominantly associate with that kind of performance. At this point, it also makes

²⁰ Of course, we need to be careful here. To accommodate cases of deliberate deception, we cannot forge too tight a connection between a performance's significance and a performer's state of mind.

sense to add *sanctions of sanctions*, an appropriate response whenever a sanction is inappropriate (or out of line with the rest of the sanctioning community).

Even though performers would then be committed to the world being a certain way when they perform, they are still not *obliged to defend* the appropriateness of their performances, when challenged. So I still wouldn't claim the kind of social interaction I've just sketched resembles our capacity to give *reasons* or *justifications* for the claims we make. (Although I find it interesting that we can capture so much intentionality *without* attaining full-blown linguistic capacity.) To capture this ability, one would need to understand how creatures could take different types of performances to stand in various relations of entailment and incompatibility with one another. We might also need to include yet other performances to express these logical relationships between performances, which in turn might require performances to possess a minimal amount of conceptual structure not to be found in the type of communicative interaction I've so far described.²¹ Although I will not tell such a story here, I see no principled reason why an account of inferentially articulated performances couldn't be built up from a foundation of the relatively structureless performances erected here. In any event, it would be interesting to see how much further we can go. The game of capturing progressively more involved intentional capacities through further elaboration to this basic account would seem well worth the candle.

²¹ Brandom [1994] argues that the proper role of semantic and logical vocabulary is to make explicit the inferential relationships that speakers take to hold between the conceptual constituents of linguistic expressions, while Tennant [1984] suggests that this is where our creatures might have to find their way over the “Gricean hump.”

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