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Navigating norms as responsive and responsible agents

(Commentary to Jan Bransen: Educatability)

We agree with Bransen that it is important to distinguish the role of the observer from that of the participant. In the discipline of developmental psychology, this distinction is often collapsed, leading to an emphasis on individualistic processes of theory construction or simulation when trying to account for the emergence of social understanding. In spite of this, research from a more relational, participatory, orientation has been conducted (e.g., Carpendale & Lewis, 2004, 2006; Fogel, 1993; Greenspan & Shanker, 2004; Hobson, 2002; Racine & Carpendale, 2007a, 2007b; Reddy, 2008). Although we welcome Bransen's target article as a related take on these issues, we are concerned that Bransen may take this argument too far, obscuring the extent to which norms can be studied and also the lines between younger and older children and human and nonhuman primates. In our commentary, we discuss the ontogenesis and phylogenesis of normativity and suggest that consideration of developmental and comparative matters shows ways in which educatability might also cause problems for Bransen's argument for dissolving the problem of human uniqueness. We conclude that the chief value in Bransen's article may lie in reminding researchers of the easily overlooked grounding that our natural reactions, capabilities and human practices play in the investigation of our humanity.

Normativity is the aspect of being human that Bransen focuses on in distinguishing humans from other species. This, it is claimed, dissolves the problem of human uniqueness because, according to Bransen, normativity is a response-dependent property—or, as we would put it, a relational rather than an individualistic property. Accordingly, “the problem of man's uniqueness is not a scientific, but an ill-conceived normative problem” (p. 6). With this much we agree and have come to similar conclusions ourselves (Racine & Carpendale, 2007a; Racine, Leavens, Susswein, & Wereha, 2008; Susswein & Racine, 2008). Being a responsible agent emerges in our relations to others in the way that we treat each other and ask for as well as give reasons for our actions (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004, 2006; Racine et al., 2008). Although claims have been made that other species may have norms to some degree (e.g.,

Whiten, Horner, & de Waal, 2005), we agree that humans differ from other species in living fully embedded in systems of normativity, of giving and expecting reasons for actions. Persons live in a world of reasons, a “space of justifications” (Forst, 2005, p. 67).

However, Bransen assumes that because normativity is only visible from a participant's point of view, it cannot be studied through scientific research. And it turns instead on whether we “are capable of addressing this agent as a being entitled to ask for reasons for our...reactive attitudes” (p. 6). Bransen states that if we assume “the observer's point of view to anything at all in our world, it would turn out to be a world devoid of responsible agents and their actions” (p. 4). And that although scientific research has had success in taking up the observer's point of view, its disadvantage is the “consequence of radically eradicating responsible agency from our world” (p. 4). It seems to follow from this that Bransen must assume that aspects of developmental psychology as well as other fields of study concerned with norms such as anthropology are not possible.

Perhaps this depends on what is meant by science. It is true that much of science, especially natural sciences, concerns causes not reasons. In the causal world of natural science, how do we find room for reasons? In Brandom's (1994, p. 626, emphasis in original) words, “Norms ... are not objects in the causal order. Natural science, eschewing categories of social practice, will never run across *commitments* in its cataloging of the furniture of the world; they are not by themselves causally efficacious—any more than strikes or outs are in baseball.” This presents a problem for explaining, for example, how we get from neurons to norms. Yet this is exactly a problem addressed in developmental psychology. That is, how is it that normativity emerges in human development? Arguably, normativity was the main problem that Piaget grappled with throughout his career (Smith, in press). There are many different types of norms, variously grouped by different authors (Smith, 2006; von Wright, 1963), ranging from logical norms through rules and conventions to moral norms. This opens up questions for developmental psychology con-

cerning the explication of these various forms of norms, and the developmental processes through which humans become engaged in their normative worlds. Bransen considers but seems to then attempt to block this avenue of inquiry. However, although our ability to study others depends on certain capabilities, it does not follow that we cannot study norms. And if, however, science is broadly construed as systematic inquiry then it is not clear why normativity cannot be studied. Although in developmental psychology norms tend to be overlooked or reduced to causes, they can and should be studied (Smith, 2006).

Bransen himself provides an observation of a child making a mess in an office as an illustration of normativity. He uses this example to suggest that we would not treat a child as a responsible agent in this situation and thus would not hold a child responsible for her behaviour. That is, our natural reactions would show that the child's behaviours are not yet governed by norms, at least in this setting. But how do we know this? By fiat? The developmental—and also comparative—psychologist is often quite interested in such “marginal” cases where it is not clear that an agent is acting in accord with a rule as opposed to following one (Wittgenstein, 1958, 1969). And the causes of this transition can be studied without one being reduced to the other (Huemer, 2006; Susswein & Racine, 2008). Unfortunately, Bransen's article cannot help us understand the transition from non-normative to normative behaviour in human development. Nor can it tell us whether such a transition is possible for nonhuman animals if they were treated as responsible agents who might also hold others responsible for their behaviour. He again seems to rule it out by fiat. But we suggest that Bransen's conception of education as an invitation to be human is quite telling in this regard and might be used to make sense of the capabilities of nonhuman animals such as Kanzi and other enculturated bonobos (e.g., Savage-Rumbaugh, Fields & Taglialatela, 2001; Savage-Rumbaugh, Fields, Segerdahl & Rumbaugh, 2005).

Savage-Rumbaugh and her colleagues have carefully studied a group of bonobos raised in close contact with humans for over two decades and have documented the emergence of quite surprising capacities. Capacities that many have assumed are uniquely human. Savage-Rumbaugh and others who work in this unique setting certainly seem to treat Kanzi, Panbanisha, Nyota and some of the other bonobos as agents who are entitled to ask for and be given reasons for action. Now, certainly Kanzi and his kin are far removed in their social cognitive and linguistic capabilities from adult humans, but they may be quite similar to younger children. What are we to make of such apparent feats and are they relevant

to the claims advanced in the target article? And as Huemer (2006, p. 209) remarks in a related vein, “At some point we are justified in saying that the child is now following a rule, but there is no single moment when we can say that now, ‘for the first time,’ the child is following a rule.” It is just as absurd to say that today a child hoped for the first time (Wittgenstein, 1958). The issue of the transition from causes to norms is relevant in the present context not because there is some uncertainty about where to draw the line between the child or even the ape who is following or not following a rule. But the point is not a technical one as Bransen sometimes seems to imply (e.g., pp. 4-5) but rather a logical one. The problem is not to find more adequate theories of the relation between norms and causes but rather to “acknowledge that reasons, like causes, are part of our everyday world” (Huemer, 2006, p. 206).

As we understand him, part of what Bransen labours to do in his target article (see pp. 5-6) is to work through and possibly dismiss various principled ways of establishing response-dependency. He considers various procedures, the role of expertise, reasoning by analogy and then arrives at the fact that all of such applications presuppose and are grounded on our natural reactions. To put this differently, Bransen (p. 6) adds that “the normativity involved in the detection of appropriate addressees should be determined in ways that radically precede the detection of the first appropriate addressee.” We agree that “investigating the bounds of the human being is not an enterprise of finding empirical data, but an enterprise of determining normative facts.” But we would make this point in the context of the Wittgensteinian reminder that conceptual clarity is a prerequisite of fruitful empirical or theoretical work. Such work in fact presupposes that there is agreement in how concepts are used, including relevant psychological concepts like agency and responsibility. This conceptual nexus is logically related to—grounded in—our natural human reactions and ways of being. However, far from this excluding empirical research, such work is possible when the meanings of concepts are scrutinized and clarified. That is, the radically pre-empirical nature of concepts like personhood does not put empirical science out of business.

We can also still consider normativity to be part of the natural world without reducing it to causes. That is, normativity may emerge through interaction with others and this interaction is part of the natural world, although perhaps it is not considered so by some who talk about naturalism. We should be cautious about our use of the term ‘naturalism’ because it often is used only when referring to causal processes. However, we want to talk about humans developing within the natural world, and

it is essential to recognize that such development is embedded in interaction with others. This is the engagement with and responding to others that Bransen notes.

Engagement in human practices is precisely what Savage-Rumbaugh and colleagues assume is critical for the development of humanlike capacities in their bicultural bonobos. It is here that Bransen's notion of "education as an invitation to be human" may perhaps provide a helpful metaphor upon which to consider the transition from causes to norms and the transition to normativity more generally. Human caregivers of human infants or possibly even bicultural apes both find themselves in a position of teaching and training more generally their charges. Children and possibly apes do not follow rules but rather exhibit behaviour that can be trained to accord with the rules that human adults have the freedom to follow or to do otherwise. And Bransen's emphasis upon our responses to others is a powerful reminder of our natural reactions and ways of being that Wittgenstein (1958, § 286) and others have highlighted:

"What sort of issue is: Is it the body that feels pain? – How is it to be decided? What makes it plausible to say that it is *not* the body? –Well, something like this: if someone has a pain in his hand, then the hand does not say so (unless it writes it) and one does not comfort the hand, but the sufferer: one looks into his face."

In conclusion, it is important that researchers take note of the grounding that our natural reactions, capabilities and human practices provide to the investigation and understanding of our humanity. Our human uniqueness is in many ways attributable to our uniquely human capacities and social practices. However, drawing relatively sharp boundaries between younger and older humans and human and nonhuman animals is not easy to do. And in this sense we are not sure that Bransen dissolves the problem of human uniqueness as much as presents a particular view on our human uniqueness. In any case, we continue to believe that research conducted on adequate conceptual foundations will not run afoul of the issues that Bransen raises in his target article if we understand them correctly. We agree though with the importance of "taking normativity seriously as *normativity*" (p. 6, emphasis original). As Wittgenstein (1958, § 1) has noted, "explanations come to an end somewhere" —and that somewhere is the bedrock of normative practices, which have their roots in natural human reactions.

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