



Routledge Studies in Contemporary Philosophy

NORMATIVE SPECIES

**HOW NATURALIZED INFERENCEALISM
EXPLAINS US**

Jaroslav Peregrin



Normative Species

This book is about rules, and especially about human capability to create, maintain and follow rules, as a root of what makes us humans different from other animals. The leading idea is that scrutinizing this capability is able to tell us who we humans are and what kinds of lives we live. It elaborates Wilfrid Sellars' visionary observation that "to say that man is a rational animal, is to say that man is a creature not of habits, but of rules"; and it builds on the ideas of Sellars' and Brandom's inferentialism, in a novel naturalistic way.

The main tenet of inferentialism is that our language games are essentially rule-governed and that meanings are inferential roles. Jaroslav Peregrin sees the task of reconciliation of inferentialism and naturalism as centered around the problem of naturalization of rules. He argues that the most primitive form of a rule is a cluster of normative attitudes. We humans are specific by our tendency to assume peculiar attitudes to what we do, and to do so in a specific way, which turns the attitudes into "normative" ones. This self-reflective structure characterizes our ability to build systems of interconnected rules, which have come to constitute our natural niche. Furthermore, Peregrin shows how our most important system of rules – that constitutive of our language – helped to lead us to our current position of rule-following, ultra-social, rational, and discursive creatures.

Normative Species will be of interest to scholars and advanced students working in philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, social ontology, cultural evolution and cognitive science.

Jaroslav Peregrin is a professor at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Hradec Králové, Czechia, and the research professor at the Department of Logic of the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences. He is the author of *Doing Worlds with Words* (1995), *Meaning and Structure* (2001), *Inferentialism* (2014), *Reflective Equilibrium and the Principles of Logical Analysis* (together with V. Svoboda, 2017) and *Philosophy of Logical Systems* (2020). His current research focuses on logical and philosophical aspects of inferentialism and on more general questions of normativity.

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Preface

The intellectual journey that led me to this book began in the 1980s, when I was engaged with formal semantics. I was excited about the possibilities offered by its abundant apparatus, but at the same time I was embarrassed by what I perceived as its naive philosophical grounding. It seemed to me that most of the formal semanticists took the theories as straightforward depictions of how words are fastened to the entities that are their meanings, the apparatus of possible worlds etc., expressing something hidden behind the facade of the natural world, something that served as some kind of metaphysical structure of the world. (Cresswell's, 1973, book *Logic and Languages* can be seen as an example of this stance being expressed explicitly.)

I felt that formal semantics needed a more solid philosophical background, which led me to write my book, *Doing Worlds with Words* (Peregrin, 1995). One of the crucial questions I kept asking myself during the work on the book, of course, was *What is meaning?* I was unsatisfied with theories which took language as a set of labels stuck to meanings – a picture that Quine dubbed the “museum myth”. I was looking for an alternative and I found the basis for one in the writings of Wittgenstein and Quine. This is what was embodied in my book, but I still was not fully satisfied.

Shortly after its publication, I got hold of Bob Brandom's (1994) book *Making It Explicit*. I was bewitched: this was the theory of meaning that I had always wanted to pursue if I had only been able to put it together like Brandom had! For a time I became a zealous soldier of the inferentialist army. In 2001, I published a book reconciling my ex-love, formal semantics, with my new one, inferentialism (Peregrin, 2001). This period culminated in my book *Inferentialism* (Peregrin, 2014a), where I tried to put together two partly independent strands of inferentialism: the philosophical and the logical.

However, even as I was working on this book, I started to realize that I saw some of the topics differently from Brandom. The crucial issue was

naturalism, to which I tended to subscribe (following in the tracks of my previous philosophical hero, Quine) and which Brandom did not seem to be particularly concerned about. I always took philosophy as being continuous with science, the two enterprises cross-fertilizing their ideas, thereby working toward new insights. I was disappointed to see that Brandom did not care about science very much and saw philosophy instead as being something orthogonal to it.

Already in 2014, I published a paper summarizing some ideas about the evolutionary origin of rules that thereby suggested a naturalistic basis of inferentialism (Peregrin, 2014b). Some of the ideas also found a way into my 2014 book. Since that time, I have taken my mission to be to provide a basis for a naturalized version of inferentialism. During that time I also returned to my work on the philosophy of logic, explaining logic and its laws from a naturalistic perspective; I published two books – Peregrin and Svoboda (2017) and Peregrin (2020b). The present book, then, is the culmination of my naturalistic reconsideration of inferentialism.

There are many people who have helped me, directly or indirectly, to shape the ideas laying the foundation of this book. Let me mention at least a few. First of all, my colleagues from the Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Hradec Králové, where we have launched the great project of the naturalization of inferentialism: Ladislav Koreň, Preston Stovall and Matej Dobňák, as well as our oversea collaborators Ulf Hlobil and Mark Risjord. Certainly I must also give thanks to Bob Brandom, the long-term interaction with whom I owe for the development of many of the ideas presented in the book. I am also grateful to my friend and colleague from the Department of Logic of the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Vladimír Svoboda, who is a tireless and invaluable critic of all my new ideas. I am also grateful to Bartosz Kaluziński for detailed critical comments on the manuscript.

This book presents the results of the research project *Inferentialism Naturalized: Norms, Meanings and Reasons in the Natural World* developed at the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Hradec Králové in Czechia, supported by the research grant No. G20-05180X of the Czech Science Foundation. It has swallowed up parts of my recent papers that addressed some of the topics integrated into this book, usually in a somewhat reworked form. In particular, [Chapter 6](#) is based on the paper “Normative Attitudes” (in L. Townsend, P. Stovall and H. B. Schmid, eds.: *The Social Institution of Discursive Norms*, Routledge, New York, 2021, 121–137). [Chapter 7](#) incorporates a small part of “Normativity between Philosophy and Science” (forthcoming in

Philosophical Psychology), while [Chapter 11](#) contains a small part of “Logic and Human Practices” (M. Blichá and I. Sedlár (ed.): *The Logica Yearbook 2020*, College Publications, London, 2021, 162–182). [Chapter 12](#) is then based on “Inferentialism Naturalized” (*Philosophical Topics* 50, 2022, 33–54), and finally [Chapter 15](#) follows “Human World” (*Analítica* No.1, 2021, 20–34).



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Introduction

This book is about rules, and especially about the human capability to create, maintain and follow rules as a root of what makes us humans different from other animals. Indeed, it is meant as an elaboration of Wilfrid Sellars' visionary observation that "to say that man is a rational animal, is to say that man is a creature not of *habits*, but of *rules*". I am convinced that scrutinizing this capability will let us understand who we humans are and what kinds of lives we lead.

The base camp of the intellectual journey that this book undertakes is inferentialism – the doctrine foreshadowed by Sellars and brought to full fruition by Robert Brandom. The core of the doctrine is the conviction that what we call the meaning of a linguistic expression is not something represented by the expression, but rather its inferential role. This presupposes that our language games (or at least some "central" ones) are essentially rule-governed, and hence that to understand language with its semantics is to understand (certain kinds of) rules and (a certain kind of) rule-governance. And it would seem that in so far as we humans can be characterized as linguistic creatures, we can also (and maybe more aptly) be characterized as a normative species.

Moreover, it seems that it is not only language, but many other specifically human amenities that presuppose rules or are directly decomposable into various complexes of rules. It seems, indeed, that rules have managed to erect spaces within which we humans assumed our "unnatural" forms of life and which differentiate us so much from other animals. From this viewpoint, rules and complexes of rules start to look as something like the true key to our peculiar nature.

The trouble is, alas, that rules and rule-following are a shadowy business. For a long time, philosophy did not pay enough attention to them, and now, when it does, there is a confusion of tongues. Many philosophers (and some scientists) talk about rules and normativity, but how exactly they understand these terms often remains obscure. Therefore, it would

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seem that elucidating rules in their capacity of constituting the space of our peculiarly human form of life appears to me to be a very urgent enterprise.

This book is an attempt to throw some new light on us humans from this peculiar angle. It starts out by giving consideration to two twentieth-century philosophers who took the concept of rules seriously before it became a mainstream of philosophy – Wittgenstein and Sellars (Chapters 1 and 2). Their struggle with rules nicely reveals the complex problems that this concept, and the general concept of normativity, harbors. One important lesson from both these thinkers is that there is necessarily something like “implicit rules” – rules that are not a matter of any sentences or other kinds of symbolic articulation. At least some rules must thus be able to reside directly *in* behavior; though they can be made explicit later (or not). In my view, the conclusion that not every rule can be a linguistic affair is indicated, among others, by the fact that language itself is constituted by rules.

In the introductory chapters, I review the discussions regarding rules as they stand, using the terminology in the – sometimes divergent – ways in which it is to be found. But, as I want to present a coherent theory of normativity, I need to put all of this on a more unified foundation. This brings about the necessity of analyzing the very concept of rule, together with other concepts related to it. This is what I undertake in the next three, “stage-setting”, Chapters 3–5. I argue that if rules are not always supported by a language, and if even human rationality, as Sellars suggested, is supported by rules (rather than the other way around), rules and the ability to follow them may have to do with the very differentiation of our species from the other ones. Therefore, the analysis of rules and rule-following may reveal to us a lot about our nature, i.e. the nature of the individuals of the genus *Homo sapiens*.

It is also necessary to stress that the framework of our investigation is a broadly naturalistic one, which poses several restrictions on the means that we can use toward our purpose of analyzing the concepts of rules and rule-following. We cannot, for example, situate rules into a supernatural realm independent of the natural one. Our task is to find a place for rules in nature (where, however, *nature* is construed broadly enough to encompass humans and human communities).

As rules cannot be generally identified with linguistic items (such as imperative sentences) and must be sought “within” behavior, the crucial question is what kinds of behavioral patterns amount to rule-following. And here I think it is crucial to pay attention to *normative attitudes*, the kinds of pro- and con- attitudes to human behavior, which are sensitive only to the *kind* of behavior (not to who is its source and target) and which we humans ubiquitously assume. I argue (in Chapter 6) that the most rudimentary kind of implicit rules are simply normative attitudes resonating across a society. Then I document (in Chapter 7) that such a

view can be supported by some evidence concerning both human ontogeny and phylogeny.

The concept of normative attitudes is heavily used by Brandom, but in his story, it belongs to the realm of the normative not reducible to the realm of the natural. In contrast to him, however, I argue that the attitudes are at bottom natural phenomena, which thus interconnect the two realms. The attitudes, I maintain, are capable of rendering something as right or wrong – thus grounding normativity – without themselves being right or wrong. In this way, I reach a naturalized version of Brandomian normativism and inferentialism, according to which the realm of the normative is embedded into the realm of the natural.

Chapter 8 presents my conjecture concerning the development of the concept of correctness, especially the way in which correctness might have gained a certain independence from our actual attitudes, so that something may be correct despite it being generally held for incorrect (or vice versa). In my view, though correctness could hardly start otherwise than as the direct result of positive normative attitudes (hence, as what the bulk of the members of the relevant community hold for correct), it must have emancipated itself from this direct dependence. This is likely to have happened by means of a process in which normative attitudes retreated from determining an ultimate correctness to determining the *criterion* of the correctness. The common agreement thus no longer determines what is correct and settles for determining criteria – and thus, we may fail to know what is correct, despite there being a fact of the matter regarding this.

In Chapter 9, I explain that while some of our rules are self-standing, more interesting rules are what I call *integrative* – rules which are operative only in concert with other rules. Such systems of rules, also known as institutions, have the peculiar property, which, I believe, can be best portrayed as creating “inner spaces”. Such “spaces” are remarkable in that they open, for us, the possibilities to carry out brand new kinds of actions. (Once you enter the “space of football”, built of its rules, you can *score goals* and do other things that are not available to you outside of the space.) And it is here where our specific human form of life originates: we have moved from the realm of nature into the complex of such normative spaces that we have built and that let us live our “unnatural” lives.

All of this must be, of course, set into the framework of evolution theory – the ultimate framework of explanation of everything that happens in the animal realm, including the sub-realm of us humans. This is what I do in Chapter 10. A remarkable thing is that rules provide for the swift circulation of “cultural inheritance”: the thing is that, as we have an uncanny knack of not only submitting to the pressure of normative attitudes but taking them as what “ought to be” and thus join others in enforcing them (assuming corresponding normative attitudes), we get the

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rules (and the institutions and practices that the rules founded) handed down from generation to generation, without any direct genetic support.

Once the framework of evolution theory is in place, we can look at the specific human form of life also in terms of the concept of *practice*, which I do in [Chapter 11](#). We humans not only do things but at the same time keep assessing our doings as right or wrong (often along more than one dimension). Thus, our practices have come to consist of (at least) two layers: on the lower layer we simply produce, on the upper one we evaluate; and this upper layer makes the behavior on the lower one into *acting*. The two levels are not really separable, they mingle into a complex whole. And our human predicament is that instead of just coping with the world and with each other, as other animals do, we engage in a labyrinthine collection of practices.

In [Chapter 12](#), I try to also shed some light on the nature of the “space of meaningfulness” in which our linguistic practices evolve and flourish. I argue that it is the structuring of our (proto-)assertions by means of the relationships of inferability and incompatibility that equips our utterances (and consequently their vehicles, sentences and their parts) by their semantics. I try to illustrate how an instinctive ejaculation of sounds could have been turned into rule-governed displays and then further into a system of linguistic utterances interlinked by inferential and other relationships, making their vehicles into meaningful expressions. In this context, I also address, in [Chapter 13](#), the origins of logic. As I see it, the logical particles of natural language result from our tendency to make explicit the inferential rules that are originally only implicitly governing our language games.

Then I turn my attention to several remaining topics that I think should be elucidated in the light of the conclusions reached up to this point. In [Chapter 14](#), I address the concept of cooperation. I subscribe to the view that it was the need of intensified cooperation that has brought us humans on the trajectory that alienated us from other animal species so quickly that we became nature’s oddity. Our language and our reason, I maintain, arose from interpersonal interactions, leaving deep marks on them. Also our moral rules, in many respects the most important rules we have, have emerged out of the primordial soup of cooperation.

The next concept I pay attention to, in [Chapter 15](#), is that of freedom, which is, beyond doubt also something that is characteristic of us. In comparison to other animals, we are free in the sense that in every conceivable situation, we have a much vaster repertoire of behavior to display; but in the end, this is *not* what we call freedom. Freedom, in our human sense, has to do with rules. To be free in this sense, an individual must abide by rules and is free if he or she has a say in which rules to abide by.

The last concept, addressed in [Chapter 16](#), is that of an objective world. The question is how it is that individuals, at first communicating only in

terms of unarticulated hoots, come to live in a shared objective world, talking about it and arguing what is true about it. In my view, the answer to this question can be derived from the process described in detail in [Chapter 8](#) – the process where the concept of correctness (and also that of truth which is a species of correctness) parts ways with the concept of common agreement; to be correct (true) is no longer to be generally held for correct (true), but rather to be justified by methods that are generally held for correct. In this way, something may be the case despite its generally being taken to not be the case. The objective world defies intersubjective agreement.

In the final chapter, [Chapter 17](#), I summarize the fictive journey I have tried to depict in the book: the journey from our age of innocence, when we did not know what is right and what is wrong, to our life as a fully normative species.

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