

Normative Pragmatism and the Language Game of Music

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This article extends the scope of Brandom's normative pragmatism and its linguistically-oriented concept of sapience to cover the problems of sapience or understanding in art, with particular focus on music. To achieve this, the transition from the "acoustical space" to the "musical space" is portrayed as a matter of seeing the acoustical norms, such as the circle of fifths, as norms participating in the formation of expectations and emotions based on them along the lines suggested by Meyer and Huron.

In his project of *normative* pragmatism, Robert Brandom¹ rejected the *naturalist* concept of knowledge as based exclusively on reliable differential responsive dispositions and replaced it with a complex, linguistically- and socially-oriented picture in which understanding is not reduced to the ability of reliable responses to external impulses that we share with parrots, lichens, and thermometers, but is elevated, in a roughly Hegelian way, to a complex social status of undertaking inferential commitments and being recognized as such by others. Hence, a parrot's crying out the word "red" might be as reliable response as possible, but it still would not qualify as a sign of understanding because a parrot does not commit himself to anything in the sense that he is not prepared to infer, e.g. that red things are also colored but not green, and, more importantly, nobody expects him to do so. In Brandom's (and Sellars's) idiom, it is exactly the participation in this "game of giving and asking for reasons" that distinguishes sapient from mere sentient creatures and reliable responding devices.

Taking advantage of this explanatory frame, Andrew Bowie, in his book on modernity and music, transposed it to the context of art, arguing that, as far these traditional domains of sapience are concerned, "there are serious difficulties in Brandom's project."² Such an accusation, of course, might be somewhat misplaced since Brandom – in the best tradition of analytic philosophy, as Bowie does not forget to mention – favors theoretical philosophy (particularly logic and semantics) to that of aesthetics, to the extent of leaving the problems of art completely aside.

But this is exactly what seems to be Bowie's point. If we take into account, as he suggests, a singing bird instead of a talking one, the question arises as to what exactly it is that bird has not committed itself to (as opposed to a singing human), and there seems to be no suitable answer since music and art in general are "forms of articulation" which "show something intelligible that resists translation into discursivity."³ Hence, there might exist creatures sapient in the traditional, but not in Brandom's discursive, sense; as a result, his criterion of sapience appears to be inadequate.

I work on the assumption that to deal with the problems of art – like the one mentioned by Bowie – within the framework of Brandom's normative pragmatism, one has to take into account its self-proclaimed twofold role of heir to both the *normatively*-oriented transcendentalism of Kant and Hegel and the *naturalistically*-based classical pragmatism of James and Dewey. This requires considering not only the *demarcation question*, which is the above-mentioned problem of the definitional difference between sentient and sapient creatures, but also the *emergence question*, which concerns the possibility of transition from sentience to sapience.

According to Brandom⁴, these questions⁵ are more easily answered individually, as transcendentalism did by finding demarcation in a priori structures of our reason without bothering to explain their naturalistic origin, or, inversely, as shown in the classical pragmatism that, in his account of experience as an evolutionary process of adaptation to the environment, left completely aside the vast qualitative difference in capacities between sentient and sapient beings. The real challenge is to answer the questions of both demarcation and emergence at once because an easy solution to one makes the other more difficult.

In the light of this, my paper has two interconnected goals: The first is to sketch the possible answer to both demarcation and emergence questions as transposed to the field of art, with particular focus on music. The second is to show how this answer relates to Brandom's "game of giving and asking for reasons" as a combination of the rationalist criterion of sapience with the pragmatist concept of knowledge as a specific kind of practice (namely, that of inferentially articulated claiming and asserting).

The overall aim is to answer Bowie's objections to the pragmatist's approach to art within Brandom's conceptual framework while avoiding the usual one-sided treatments of music that take it either as being totally reducible to adaptive experience (serving, e.g. for sexual selection, as Darwin⁶ suggested, or non-adaptively exploiting the adaptive sources of pleasure as Pinker's⁷ "auditory cheesecake")⁸ or designating it by simple "fiat" as one of the most powerful manifestations of Spirit by using some impressive, but unconnected, metaphors. Considering the wide-ranging ambitions of Brandom's philosophical system, this last aim is also important, particularly if one takes seriously Dewey's statement that "there is no test that so surely reveals the one-sidedness of a philosophy as its treatment of art and esthetic experience."⁹