



Thursday, June 26th, 10:30-11:00, room 301

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## **Understanding Cognitive Practices: Between Reductionism and Inferentialism**

**Keywords:** normativity, inferentialism, reductionism, conceptual pluralism, unity of the world picture

Natural science does not discover norms – it discovers regularities, it applies mathematical formulas to establish a system of laws. The difference between the meaning of “law” as social rule and the meaning of “law” as (neuro-)physiological regularity plays one of the central roles in today's disputes within the philosophy of mind and language. The main problem of these disputes can be formulated after famous Dretske's slogan: whether we can make intentional and normative soup out of non-intentional and non-normative bones.

My point of interest is the clash of two renowned accounts of our cognitive abilities (the abilities to produce a linguistic representation of the world in the first place), namely Dennett's reductionism and Brandom's inferentialism. Both thinkers consider themselves as naturalists, both ground the abilities in question in cognitive practices but while the former explains them in terms of operations of mechanisms which emerged during biological evolution, the latter suggests that such explanation will not do justice to normativity and intentionality.

Brandom, together with McDowell and Putnam, forms a group of thinkers which may be called “the pluralists” for they share a claim that we should let ourselves utilize a plurality of conceptual resources to deal with the problem of mind and language for the “space of reasons” is independent of the “realm of (physical) law”. The reason why I select Brandom is the sophistication and elegance of formal means of his argumentation.

On the other hand, I have chosen Dennett out of a bunch of reductionists (like Fodor, Dretske, Millikan, and others) because of the consequence and radicalism of his approach. According to Dennett there is no need to postulate anything more than “as-if” intentionality, namely a system of signal storing and action control mechanisms developed in the process of evolution; our willingness to treat certain beings as intentional agents is an adaptive feature which pays off in more efficient predictions of their behavior. Dennett's account is often rejected as inconsistent. I see it as coherent though highly unintuitive reductionist explanation.

The purpose of my presentation is not only to expose similarities and differences between the two thinkers but also to propose a kind of the middle way between them. It may seem strange for the pluralistic approach is itself the middle way between materialistic monism and dualism in its various forms. However, from my point of view, the pluralists neglect our need of unity of the world picture.