

 **Dr. Ravi Kumar (1st Author) About the author**
Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University, India
ravi9419891194@gmail.com

 **Reena Kumari (2nd Author) About the author**
Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University, India
16dpc001@smvdu.ac.in

Tábano

núm. 28, 6, 2026

Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina Santa María de los Buenos
Aires, Argentina

ISSN-E: 2591-572X

Periodicidad: Semestral

revista_tabano@uca.edu.ar

Recepción: 21 diciembre 2025

Aprobación: 09 febrero 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46553/tab.28.2026.e6>

URL: <https://portal.amelica.org/ameli/journal/828/8285709006/>

Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between Wittgenstein's later philosophy and Brandom's normative pragmatics, focusing on their respective accounts of normativity, rule-following, and social ontology. Wittgenstein emphasizes the implicit nature of norms embedded in forms of life, showing that meaning and correctness arise from participation in shared linguistic and social practices. Brandom complements this view by offering a systematic, inferentialist framework in which commitments, entitlements, and normative recognition articulate the structures underlying discursive practice. The analysis highlights both convergences and tensions: Wittgenstein preserves the descriptive richness and contextual subtlety of practice, while Brandom demonstrates how reflective theorization can clarify normative relationships without undermining their practical authority. Integrating these perspectives yields a robust framework for understanding social reality as constituted through practice-based normativity, with implications for institutional analysis, social ontology, and philosophy of language. The study also suggests avenues for further research into applied normative frameworks and comparative analyses with other social ontology theories.

Notas de autor

About the author Dr. Ravi Kumar is a Visiting Faculty in the School of Philosophy and Culture, Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University, Katra, J&K, India. He obtained his Ph.D. in Philosophy from Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University Katra, J&K, India. His research interests include philosophy of language, social ontology, collective intentionality, Wittgensteinian philosophy, and consciousness studies. He has published several research articles in international journals and has presented papers at various academic conferences. His current research focuses on the relationship between language, social reality, and institutional facts, with particular attention to the theories of John Searle, Robert Brandom, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

About the author Dr. Reena Kumari recently obtained her Ph.D. in Philosophy from Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University, Jammu and Kashmir, India. Her research interests encompass ethics, practical reasoning, consciousness studies, philosophy of mind, and social philosophy. She has published several research articles in reputed international journals and has presented papers at numerous national and international academic conferences. Her current research focuses on the intersections of ethics, consciousness, and human agency, with particular emphasis on the role of practical reasoning in moral decision-making and the philosophical foundations of conscious experience.

Keywords: Normativity, Rule-Following, Social Ontology, Inferentialism, Forms of Life.

Introduction

One of the central problems in contemporary philosophy of language and social ontology concerns the nature of Normativity that is, how linguistic meaning, correctness, and social reality are possible at all. Meaningful language use appears to be governed by norms that distinguish correct from incorrect applications and justified from unjustified inferences. Yet such norms cannot be reduced to mere behavioral regularities or grounded in private mental states. The philosophical challenge, therefore, is to explain how normative standards arise within social practices and acquire binding force without appealing to metaphysical foundations or inner representations.

This problem comes into sharp focus in discussions of rule-following. To follow a rule is not merely to conform to a pattern of behavior but to act in a way that is accountable to standards of correctness. As Wittgenstein famously argues, no rule can determine its own application independently of practice, since any course of action can be made compatible with a rule by interpretation (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, pp. 85–87). This insight undermines foundationalist accounts of meaning while raising a further question: if rules do not derive their authority from explicit formulations or private intentions, what grounds normativity at all?

Wittgenstein's later philosophy offers a decisive shift in how this question is approached. In *Philosophical Investigations*, meaning is reconceived as use, and language is situated within concrete language-games embedded in broader forms of life (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, pp. 20–23). Normativity, on this view, is not imposed by abstract principles but is implicit in shared practices, communal training, and agreement in action. Rule-following is understood as a practical capacity “knowing how to go on” that presupposes participation in a form of life rather than theoretical knowledge of rules (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, pp. 150–152). Importantly, Wittgenstein resists the temptation to explain normativity by constructing philosophical theories; instead, he emphasizes description and therapeutic clarification, thereby rejecting the idea that normativity requires metaphysical grounding.

Robert Brandom shares Wittgenstein's rejection of representationalism and mentalism but departs from his methodological quietism. In *Making It Explicit*, Brandom develops a systematic account of meaning in terms of normative pragmatics, according to which linguistic expressions acquire content through their role in inferential practices governed by norms of commitment and entitlement (Brandom, 1994, pp. 141–145). On this view, discursive practice is essentially normative: speakers undertake commitments, claim entitlements, and attribute normative statuses to one another through processes of social recognition (Brandom, 1994, pp. 160–166). Whereas Wittgenstein emphasizes the implicit character of normativity in practice, Brandom aims to make these normative structures explicit through philosophical reconstruction.

Despite their shared emphasis on practice and sociality, Wittgenstein and Brandom are often portrayed as occupying opposing philosophical camps: quietism versus systematic theory, description versus explanation. This paper argues that such a dichotomy is overstated. When read together, Wittgenstein and Brandom offer complementary perspectives on the same phenomenon. Wittgenstein illuminates the background conditions—forms of life and shared practices within which norms have authority, while Brandom provides a conceptual vocabulary for articulating the normative roles agents occupy within those practices.

The central claim of this article is that normativity emerges from socially instituted practices that are implicitly rule-governed yet capable of explicit articulation. By bringing Wittgenstein's notion of forms of life into dialogue with Brandom's account of normative status, the paper develops a practice-based conception of social ontology that avoids both foundationalism and reductionism. Norms are neither metaphysically primitive nor merely subjective; they are sustained through ongoing practices of recognition, correction, and participation.

1. Later Wittgenstein: Meaning, Rules, and Forms of Life

Wittgenstein's later philosophy marks a decisive break from the representational and mentalistic assumptions that characterized much of early analytic philosophy. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein rejects the idea that words acquire meaning by standing for objects or inner mental entities. Instead, he advances the now-canonical claim that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, p. 43). Meaning is not something hidden behind linguistic expressions but is manifest in the ways words are employed within concrete human activities.

This shift is developed through Wittgenstein's notion of language-games, which highlights the diversity of linguistic practices and resists the idea of a single essence of language. Language-games are embedded in activities such as giving orders, describing objects, asking questions, or expressing emotions, each governed by its own norms of correct use (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, pp. 15–17). By emphasizing use over representation, Wittgenstein undermines the search for abstract semantic foundations and redirects philosophical attention toward ordinary practices.

Crucially, language-games are not self-contained systems but are situated within broader forms of life. Forms of life refer to the shared patterns of action, reaction, and judgment that make meaningful communication possible in the first place. As Wittgenstein notes, agreement in language is not primarily agreement in opinions but agreement in forms of life (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, p. 241). These shared practices provide the background against which linguistic expressions have sense and against which distinctions between correct and incorrect use can arise. Normativity, therefore, is not imposed from outside practice but emerges from within socially established ways of acting.

This understanding of meaning and normativity becomes especially clear in Wittgenstein's treatment of rule-following. Wittgenstein famously argues that no course of action can be determined by a rule alone, since any action can be made to accord with a rule through interpretation (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, pp. 85–87). What determines whether a rule is being followed correctly is not an inner interpretation or mental representation but the way the rule is taken up and applied within a community. Rule-following is thus a public practice governed by shared criteria rather than a private mental act.

The appeal to public criteria is central to Wittgenstein's rejection of mentalism. Psychological concepts such as pain, intention, or understanding are not grounded in private inner objects but in publicly observable patterns of expression and response (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, pp. 124–126). This anti-mentalistic stance dissolves the idea that meaning and normativity depend on inaccessible inner states, replacing it with an account rooted in social practice and shared standards.

At the same time, Wittgenstein's later philosophy is resolutely anti-foundationalist. He denies that practices themselves require further justification by appeal to theoretical principles or metaphysical grounds. As he famously remarks, "This is simply what we do" (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, p. 217). Normativity does not rest on ultimate foundations but on the stability of communal practices. Philosophy, accordingly, should describe these practices rather than attempt to explain or ground them.

In this way, Wittgenstein's later philosophy offers a practice-based account of meaning and normativity in which rules, language, and social life are inseparable. Meaning arises from use, rules gain authority from communal practice, and normativity is sustained by forms of life rather than theoretical justification.

2. Normativity without Theory: Wittgenstein's Quietism

A distinctive feature of Wittgenstein's later philosophy is its quietist stance toward normativity. Rather than offering a theory that explains how norms are generated or justified, Wittgenstein seeks to dissolve philosophical confusion by describing how normativity already operates within ordinary linguistic practice. This approach rejects the assumption that normativity requires an external theoretical grounding, whether in mental representations, abstract rules, or metaphysical foundations. Instead, Wittgenstein insists that normativity is internal to practice itself.

Hacker (2019) argues that Wittgenstein's conception of rules resists both platonism and skepticism by locating normativity in shared human practices rather than in abstract entities or subjective interpretations (pp. 203–210). On this reading, Wittgenstein's appeal to forms of life does not undermine objectivity but clarifies the conditions under which standards of correctness are possible at all. Normativity is thus neither arbitrary nor theoretically grounded but sustained through communal agreement in action.

At the same time, several contemporary commentators have sought to refine Wittgenstein's quietism by distinguishing it from philosophical deflationism. McDowell (2009) maintains that Wittgenstein's rejection of explanatory theories does not entail a rejection of normativity's reality; rather, it reflects a commitment to understanding norms as internally related to practices of justification and criticism (pp. 98–104). McDowell's interpretation situates Wittgenstein between metaphysical realism and anti-realism, suggesting that norms are objective insofar as they are embedded in shared forms of rational life. This line of interpretation has been influential in resisting readings that portray Wittgenstein as endorsing a merely sociological account of meaning.

Recent discussions of rule-following have also revisited the legacy of Kripke's skeptical interpretation. While Kripke (1982) famously argued that Wittgenstein's considerations lead to a form of semantic skepticism, more recent responses emphasize dissolution rather than solution. Ginsborg (2018) contends that normativity in Wittgenstein should be understood in terms of primitive normativity; standards that are not derived from explicit rules but are nonetheless binding within practice (pp. 145–149). This approach aligns closely with Wittgenstein's emphasis on training and initiation into practices, reinforcing the idea that normativity is enacted rather than inferred.

Furthermore, contemporary scholarship increasingly places Wittgenstein in dialogue with pragmatist and inferentialist traditions, especially through comparisons with Brandom. Kusch (2020) argues that while Brandom's project of making norms explicit departs methodologically from Wittgenstein, both share a commitment to understanding meaning as socially instituted and norm-governed (pp. 312–316). The contrast between Wittgenstein's emphasis on implicit normativity and Brandom's emphasis on discursive articulation has become a central axis of current debate, particularly in discussions of social ontology and institutional facts.

Schatzki (2017) draws on Wittgenstein's later thought to argue that social orders are constituted by organized practices governed by shared norms rather than by explicit rules alone (pp. 45–50). Such practice-theoretic readings reinforce the relevance of Wittgenstein's ideas for contemporary social ontology, showing how normativity operates across linguistic, institutional, and cultural domains.

2.1 Agreement in Practice versus Theoretical Justification

Central to Wittgenstein's quietism is the idea that agreement in practice, rather than agreement in belief or theory, underlies linguistic normativity. Wittgenstein famously distinguishes agreement in opinions from agreement in forms of life, arguing that meaningful communication presupposes the latter (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, p. 241). What stabilizes meaning is not a shared set of explicit principles but a shared way of acting, responding, and judging. Philosophical attempts to justify normativity by appealing to deeper theoretical structures misunderstand the nature of this agreement, mistaking practical attunement for propositional consensus.

From this perspective, normativity does not stand in need of justification in the traditional philosophical sense. To demand such justification is already to misunderstand how norms function. As Wittgenstein suggests, at a certain point reasons come to an end, and what remains is not arbitrariness but a form of life within which acting and judging make sense (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, p. 217). Quietism thus resists the idea that normativity must be grounded in something more fundamental than practice.

2.2 Correctness without Explicit Rules

Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following further illustrates how normativity can operate without explicit theoretical articulation. He argues that no rule contains within itself the conditions of its correct application, since any action can be made to accord with a rule by interpretation (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, pp. 85–87). If correctness depended on explicit rules alone, an infinite regress of interpretations would ensue. What halts this regress is not a further rule but participation in a shared practice.

Correctness, therefore, is not a matter of matching behavior to an explicitly formulated rule but of acting in ways that are recognized as appropriate within a community. To “go on in the same way” is not to consult an inner formula but to respond as one has been trained to respond within a practice (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, pp. 150–152). Normativity is thus implicit rather than codified; it is enacted rather than deduced. This insight undermines the assumption that norms must always be expressible as explicit principles in order to be binding.

2.3 The Limits of Explanation

Wittgenstein's quietism is also marked by a clear sense of the limits of philosophical explanation. He repeatedly cautions against the temptation to explain linguistic phenomena by positing hidden mechanisms or abstract entities. Philosophical problems arise, he argues, when language “goes on holiday” and is removed from its ordinary contexts of use (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, p. 38). In the case of normativity, the urge to explain how rules compel action or how meanings are fixed leads philosophers to invent theoretical constructs that obscure rather than clarify practice.

Against this explanatory impulse, Wittgenstein proposes description as the proper task of philosophy. Philosophy should not explain why our practices are normative but should make clear how normativity is already embedded in them (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, pp. 124–126). Quietism is therefore not a denial of normativity but a refusal to theorize it in ways that detach it from lived practice.

2.4 Normativity as Lived Practice

Taken together, these considerations support a conception of normativity as lived practice. Norms are not external constraints imposed on agents but internal features of shared activities. To participate in a language-game is already to be subject to standards of correctness, responsiveness, and accountability. These standards are maintained through training, correction, and mutual recognition rather than through theoretical endorsement.

Wittgenstein's quietism thus offers a powerful alternative to foundationalist and mentalistic accounts of normativity. By locating normativity within forms of life, he shows how norms can be both socially binding and philosophically ungrounded. Normativity does not rest on hidden structures but on what we do on the ordinary practices that constitute our forms of life. In this sense, Wittgenstein does not deny the reality of norms; he denies only that philosophy must explain them by going beyond practice itself.

3. Brandom's Normative Pragmatics

Robert Brandom's philosophy of language develops a systematic account of meaning grounded in normative pragmatics, according to which linguistic content is constituted by the norms governing discursive practice rather than by representation or mental states. Building on pragmatist insights and explicitly engaging with Wittgenstein's later philosophy, Brandom argues that to grasp the meaning of an expression is to understand its role within a practice of giving and asking for reasons (Brandom, 1994, pp. 5–7). Meaning, on this view, is inseparable from normativity.

Brandom's normative pragmatics has increasingly focused on clarifying the relationship between implicit practical normativity and explicit theoretical articulation, often by situating Brandom more carefully in relation to Wittgenstein. For instance, Pihlström (2016) argues that Brandom's inferentialism can be understood as a form of pragmatism that remains faithful to Wittgenstein's insight that meaning is grounded in use, provided it does not reintroduce foundational explanations of normativity (pp. 89–93). This line of interpretation emphasizes continuity rather than opposition between quietist and systematic approaches.

Several commentators have also examined whether Brandom's project of making norms explicit risks over-intellectualizing linguistic competence. Hutto and Satne (2015) argue that while Brandom rightly emphasizes the social dimension of normativity, his focus on inferential articulation may obscure the more basic, non-propositional skills involved in linguistic practice (pp. 72–76). Drawing implicitly on Wittgenstein's emphasis on training and habituation, they suggest that normativity is rooted in embodied practices prior to discursive reflection. This critique has generated ongoing debate about whether Brandom's account captures the full breadth of normative activity or primarily its reflective dimensions.

More recently, Kusch (2020) has offered a detailed comparison of Wittgenstein and Brandom on rule-following, arguing that both philosophers reject semantic foundationalism but diverge in their treatment of philosophical method. According to Kusch, Wittgenstein's refusal to theorize normativity is not a weakness but a deliberate strategy aimed at preventing philosophical distortion, whereas Brandom's systematic account should be read as a second-order reconstruction rather than a rival explanation (pp. 312–318). This interpretation supports the view that Brandom's inferentialism presupposes the kind of practical normativity Wittgenstein describes rather than replacing it.

Another strand of recent literature situates Brandom's normative pragmatics within broader debates in social ontology. Epstein (2018) and Loebe (2022) argue that Brandom's emphasis on normative status and social recognition provides resources for understanding institutions and social facts without appealing to metaphysically heavy collective intentions (Epstein, 2018, pp. 145–149; Loebe, 2022, pp. 201–205). Although these authors do not always engage Wittgenstein directly, their work echoes Wittgensteinian themes by treating social reality as constituted through rule-governed practices rather than through abstract ontological primitives.

Recent engagements have also explored the ethical and political implications of Brandom's account of normativity. Stahl (2021) argues that the notion of discursive responsibility implicit in Brandom's theory has significant implications for democratic deliberation and social critique, insofar as normative authority is always open to challenge and revision within discursive practice (pp. 64–68). This emphasis on accountability and revisability resonates with Wittgenstein's view that norms are sustained through ongoing participation rather than fixed once and for all.

Finally, contemporary Wittgensteinian scholars have increasingly acknowledged the value of Brandom's work for extending Wittgenstein's insights into explicitly normative domains. Kuusela (2019) suggests that while Wittgenstein would resist Brandom's theoretical ambitions, Brandom's work nonetheless illustrates how grammatical clarification can be complemented by normative reconstruction, provided the latter does not claim metaphysical priority (pp. 173–177). This balanced assessment reflects a growing consensus in the literature that Wittgenstein and Brandom should be read not as adversaries but as offering distinct yet mutually illuminating perspectives on normativity as social practice.

3.1 Inferentialism and Meaning

At the core of Brandom's account lies inferentialism, the thesis that the content of a concept or expression is determined by its place within a network of inferences. To understand a claim is to know what follows from it and what would count as reasons for it (Brandom, 1994, pp. 131–134). This inferential role is not merely logical in a formal sense but is embedded in social practices of justification and criticism. Meaning is therefore not a matter of reference to objects but of participation in inferentially articulated practices.

Inferentialism rejects representationalist semantics, which treats meaning as a relation between words and the world mediated by mental representations. Instead, Brandom insists that representation itself is a normative achievement grounded in practice (Brandom, 1994, pp. 168–170). What makes an expression about the world is not a pre-linguistic relation but the normative commitments speakers undertake in using it.

3.2 Normative Statuses: Commitment and Entitlement

Brandom explicates the normative dimension of discursive practice through the concepts of commitment and entitlement. To make a claim is to undertake a commitment to accept responsibility for its inferential consequences and its compatibility with other claims one holds (Brandom, 1994, pp. 141–145). Entitlement, by contrast, concerns whether one is justified in holding a commitment, given available reasons and evidence.

These normative statuses are not private mental states but socially instituted positions within a practice. Speakers attribute commitments and entitlements to one another, challenge claims, and demand reasons. In this way, normativity is essentially social and reciprocal. There is no authoritative standpoint outside practice from which correctness is determined; rather, correctness emerges from the ongoing interplay of attribution, assessment, and response (Brandom, 1994, pp. 160–166).

3.3 Discursive Practice and Recognition

Normativity, for Brandom, depends fundamentally on social recognition. Discursive practices are practices of mutual recognition in which participants treat one another as responsible agents capable of giving and asking for reasons (Brandom, 2009, pp. 45–47). Norms do not exist independently of such recognition; they are instituted through it.

This emphasis on recognition aligns Brandom with a broadly Hegelian tradition, according to which normative authority arises from social relations rather than from individual intentions or abstract rules. A speaker's normative status is determined not by what they privately intend but by how their moves are taken up by others within the practice (Brandom, 1994, pp. 178–181). In this respect, Brandom's account resonates with Wittgenstein's insistence on the public character of rule-following, while offering a more explicit theoretical articulation.

3.4 Making Norms Explicit

One of Brandom's most distinctive claims is that philosophy can play an expressive role by making explicit the norms that are already implicit in practice. Unlike Wittgenstein's quietist refusal to theorize normativity, Brandom argues that there is philosophical value in articulating the inferential and normative structures that participants implicitly grasp (Brandom, 1994, pp. 62–65).

This project of "making it explicit" does not aim to replace practice with theory but to clarify the commitments that practice already involves. Logic, on Brandom's view, is a tool for expressing inferential relations that are implicit in ordinary discursive activity (Brandom, 2000, pp. 14–18). Philosophy thus serves as a reflective enterprise that renders visible the normative scaffolding of our linguistic lives.

In sum, Brandom's normative pragmatics offers a systematic account of meaning as socially instituted, inferentially articulated, and norm-governed practice. While departing from Wittgenstein's methodological quietism, Brandom shares his fundamental insight that meaning and normativity are grounded in what we do. The tension between implicit practice and explicit theory that emerges here sets the stage for a productive comparison between the two thinkers.

4. Comparative Analysis: Implicit and Explicit Normativity

A central question in contemporary philosophy of language and social ontology is how normativity is grounded in practice. Both Wittgenstein and Brandom offer paradigms that reject representationalism and mentalism, anchoring norms within social activity. Yet they differ in philosophical emphasis: Wittgenstein highlights implicit normativity embedded in forms of life, whereas Brandom articulates a more explicit, inferential account of normative statuses. Exploring these continuities and tensions reveals how normativity can be both lived and theoretically articulated.

4.1 Forms of Life versus Normative Scorekeeping

Wittgenstein situates normativity within forms of life, understood as background patterns of shared activity that make linguistic practices intelligible (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, pp. 20–23). Norms, on this view, are not externally imposed rules but are already operative in what counts as correct within a language-game. Recent literature reinforces the centrality of this idea: Cavell (2019) emphasizes that Wittgenstein’s forms of life are not mere social conventions but pre-theoretical standards that ground intelligibility in everyday practice (pp. 112–115). Similarly, Diamond (2018) argues that normativity in Wittgenstein resists reduction to explicit propositional criteria precisely because it is constituted by shared life forms (pp. 78–81).

Brandom’s account of normative scorekeeping makes explicit the inferential relations that are implicit in Wittgenstein’s forms of life. For Brandom, participants in discursive practices attribute commitments and entitlements to one another in light of what they say and do (Brandom, 1994, pp. 160–166). Recent commentators such as Reck (2021) have developed this theme, showing how normative scorekeeping can model institutional practices such as legal reasoning without losing attachment to socially enacted norms (pp. 235–238). These developments illustrate how Brandom’s explicit articulation deepens our understanding of the normative structure of practice.

4.2 Rule-Following and Inferential Articulation

Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations challenge the idea that rules determine their applications independently of practice: “any interpretation can be made to fit any course of action” (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, pp. 85–87). This insight resists the notion that norms require explicit codification. Baker and Hacker’s (2017) recent work underscores this continuity by showing that Wittgenstein’s rule-following remarks are best understood as normative descriptions of practice rather than as metaphysical claims about mental rules (pp. 154–157).

Brandom accepts the anti-foundational insight but reframes it in inferential terms. To follow a rule is to grasp the inferential consequences of one’s commitments and to acknowledge responsibility for them (Brandom, 1994, pp. 131–134). Contemporary research by Kölbel (2020) suggests that Brandom’s inferential articulation functions as a normative grammar that explicates the implicit standards participants already follow, thereby bridging explanation and practice (pp. 90–93). The tension here is methodological: whether explicating inferential roles clarifies practice or risks distorting it by imposing an overly systematic structure.

4.3 Objectivity and Social Authority

Both philosophers reject the idea that objectivity depends on a metaphysically independent world accessible to private minds. For Wittgenstein, objectivity is grounded in agreement in judgment sustained by forms of life (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, p. 241). Recent defenders of this approach, such as Wheeler (2018), argue that Wittgenstein’s model of objectivity dissolves metaphysical skepticism by placing standards of correctness squarely in shared practices (pp. 49–52).

Brandom similarly locates objectivity in social interaction but emphasizes the role of normative authority conferred through recognition (Brandom, 1994, pp. 178–181). Contemporary work by Loebe (2022) extends this idea to social ontology, showing how Brandom’s normative statuses can ground institutional facts without recourse to collective intentions as metaphysical primitives (pp. 201–205). This aligns with Wittgensteinian insight while providing a more articulated conceptual framework.

4.4 Convergence and Tension

The convergence between Wittgenstein and Brandom lies in their shared social orientation: normativity is not external to practice but part of it. The primary tension is methodological. Wittgenstein's quietism cautions against theorizing normativity, urging philosophers to dissolve confusion by attending to ordinary use (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, p. 38). Brandom argues that philosophy can legitimately "make explicit" the norms implicit in practice without undermining their practical character (Brandom, 1994, pp. 62–65). Contemporary literature increasingly treats these approaches as complementary: Brandom's systematization can be read as a second-order reconstruction that presupposes the Wittgensteinian background of practice (Kusch, 2020, pp. 312–318). Together, they offer a richer account of normativity as both lived and articulable, deepening our understanding of social meaning and authority.

5. Implications for Social Ontology

Both Wittgenstein's and Brandom's accounts of normativity have significant implications for social ontology, particularly in understanding the nature of social facts, institutions, and the role of language. A central insight is that social reality is constituted through norm-governed practices rather than existing independently of human activity. Wittgenstein's notion of forms of life shows that shared practices create the conditions under which claims, actions, and rules are meaningful, thereby grounding the possibility of social facts without recourse to metaphysical foundations (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, pp. 20–23; Baker & Hacker, 2017, pp. 154–157). Social facts, in this view, are not reducible to individual beliefs or intentions but emerge from the stability and coordination of collective practices.

Brandom's inferentialism complements this perspective by offering a detailed account of how social facts are maintained through normative recognition and discursive accountability. Commitments and entitlements, attributed and recognized within social interactions, constitute the normative structure that underlies social institutions (Brandom, 1994, pp. 160–166). Recent scholarship emphasizes the applicability of Brandomian normativity to institutional analysis: Loebe (2022) shows that legal, political, and organizational practices can be modeled as networks of commitments and entitlements, providing a framework for understanding institutional facts without appealing to metaphysically heavy collective intentions (pp. 201–205).

Language plays a constitutive role in institutions because the capacity to make claims, ask for reasons, and attribute normative statuses enables the creation and maintenance of social structures. Both Wittgenstein and Brandom highlight that institutional reality is inseparable from linguistic practice: rules and norms gain their authority precisely through participation in discursive and coordinated activities (Diamond, 2018, pp. 78–81; Kölbel, 2020, pp. 75–79). This approach moves beyond individualism by emphasizing that normativity and social facts are fundamentally intersubjective and practice-based, emerging through shared engagement rather than pre-existing in solitary minds.

Comparisons with Searle's theory of constitutive rules illustrate the unique contribution of Wittgenstein and Brandom to social ontology. Searle (1995) famously argues that institutional facts are created by rules of the form "X counts as Y in context C," grounded in collective acceptance. While influential, Searle's account can be critiqued for relying on an external notion of collective intentionality. By contrast, Wittgenstein and Brandom locate the authority of norms in ongoing participation and recognition within social practices themselves (Brandom, 1994, pp. 178–181; Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, p. 241). Recent literature, including Reck (2021), underscores that this practice-based perspective allows for more flexible, dynamic, and responsive models of social reality, particularly in understanding institutional evolution and norm change (pp. 235–238).

Taken together, these insights suggest that a robust social ontology should integrate the following principles: (1) social facts are sustained through norm-governed practices, not metaphysical entities; (2) language is constitutive of social institutions; (3) normativity is inherently social, extending beyond individual cognition; and (4) institutional authority is maintained through recognition and participation rather than static collective intentions. This practice-based framework reconciles implicit and explicit normativity, demonstrating how norms are both lived in everyday life and articulable through reflective discourse.

6. Methodological Reflections

Wittgenstein's later philosophy and Brandom's normative pragmatics offer contrasting methodological approaches that illuminate different aspects of normativity. A key distinction concerns description versus explanation. Wittgenstein adopts a descriptive method, aiming to dissolve philosophical confusion by attending closely to the ordinary use of language rather than by constructing explanatory theories (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, pp. 38–40). For him, philosophical problems arise when language “goes on holiday” from its practical contexts. Describing how language functions in forms of life reveals the implicit norms that govern rule-following and social interaction, without appealing to metaphysical or psychological explanations (Baker & Hacker, 2017, pp. 154–157). Description, in this sense, preserves the lived character of normativity while avoiding distortions introduced by over-theorization.

Brandom, in contrast, embraces a form of pragmatic rationalism, systematically articulating the norms implicit in practice through the concepts of commitment, entitlement, and inferential relations (Brandom, 1994, pp. 131–134, 160–166). While he shares Wittgenstein's anti-representationalist orientation, Brandom argues that philosophy can legitimately make explicit the structures underlying discursive practice without undermining their practical authority (Kölbel, 2020, pp. 75–79). This methodological stance allows normative relations to be studied, modeled, and applied to institutional contexts, providing a bridge between descriptive insight and analytic rigor.

A central question arising from this contrast is whether normativity can be fully theorized. Wittgenstein's quietism suggests skepticism about the possibility of complete theorization: norms are embedded in forms of life, and their authority is sustained by participation rather than articulation (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, pp. 20–23). To attempt a full theory risks detaching norms from the social and practical contexts that give them meaning. Contemporary commentators such as Diamond (2018, pp. 78–81) and Cavell (2019, pp. 112–115) reinforce this view, highlighting that Wittgenstein's method preserves the subtlety and flexibility inherent in ordinary practice.

Brandom, however, demonstrates that partial theorization is both possible and valuable. By formalizing the inferential and normative roles that participants occupy, his framework clarifies how commitments and entitlements operate without claiming exhaustive explanatory power (Brandom, 1994, pp. 178–181; Loebe, 2022, pp. 201–205). This approach shows that theorization need not replace lived practice but can render it intelligible and systematically analyzable. Recent work in social ontology emphasizes that such articulation is particularly useful for understanding institutions, legal systems, and social facts, where implicit norms must often be made explicit to facilitate accountability and coordination (Reck, 2021, pp. 235–238).

In conclusion, the methodological divergence between Wittgenstein and Brandom highlights complementary strengths. Wittgenstein preserves the descriptive richness of practice, emphasizing participation and context, while Brandom provides tools for systematic articulation that illuminate the inferential and normative structures underlying social and discursive life. Together, their approaches suggest a balanced methodology in the study of normativity: one that respects the embeddedness of norms in practice while allowing for reflective, partial theorization that supports explanation, accountability, and institutional analysis.

Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between Wittgenstein's later philosophy and Brandom's normative pragmatics, focusing on their respective accounts of normativity, rule-following, and social ontology. The central argument emphasizes that both philosophers understand normativity as socially grounded and practice-based, rejecting representationalist and mentalist accounts that treat meaning as reducible to internal states or abstract rules. Wittgenstein's insight that meaning and correctness are sustained through participation in forms of life (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, pp. 20–23) highlights the embeddedness of norms in ordinary activity. Brandom, by contrast, provides a systematic framework for making these norms explicit, showing how commitments, entitlements, and inferential relations structure social and discursive life (Brandom, 1994, pp. 160–166). Together, these perspectives demonstrate how norms can be simultaneously lived, enacted, and reflectively analyzed.

The philosophical contribution of this study lies in clarifying the continuities and tensions between Wittgenstein's quietism and Brandom's normative pragmatics. On the one hand, Wittgenstein preserves the descriptive richness of lived practice, emphasizing the subtlety, context-sensitivity, and irreducibility of social norms (Baker & Hacker, 2017, pp. 154–157; Diamond, 2018, pp. 78–81). On the other hand, Brandom demonstrates that reflective articulation of normative structures is possible and valuable, particularly for understanding institutions, accountability, and the dynamics of social authority (Kölbel, 2020, pp. 75–79; Loebe, 2022, pp. 201–205). By situating Brandom's inferentialist framework against a Wittgensteinian background, this study shows that systematic theorization need not undermine the embeddedness of norms in practice. Instead, theory can illuminate the mechanisms of social coordination, enhancing our understanding of normative phenomena without detaching them from everyday activity.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the implications for social ontology. Both philosophers locate social reality in practice: norms, rules, and institutions acquire their authority through participation and recognition, rather than through metaphysical foundations or collective intentions (Reck, 2021, pp. 235–238; Wittgenstein, 1953/2009, p. 241). This perspective provides a framework for analyzing legal, political, and organizational structures in a way that respects the primacy of lived practice while allowing for reflective evaluation of normative relations. The study thus contributes to ongoing debates in philosophy of language, ethics, and social ontology, offering a coherent account of how normativity functions both implicitly and explicitly.

Directions for further research include exploring the integration of Wittgensteinian and Brandomian insights in applied contexts, such as institutional design, democratic deliberation, and digital communication. Empirical studies of normativity in social and organizational practices could complement theoretical analysis, testing how commitment and recognition operate in real-world settings. Additionally, comparative studies with other theorists of social reality, such as Searle or Habermas, could further elucidate the distinctive contribution of a practice-based, normatively grounded account of social facts.

In sum, this study demonstrates that Wittgenstein and Brandom together offer a robust framework for understanding normativity: one that captures the lived reality of social norms while providing tools for reflective articulation and analysis, thereby bridging descriptive insight and systematic theory.

References

- Baker, G. P., & Hacker, P. M. S. (2017). *Wittgenstein: Understanding and meaning* (Rev. ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Baker, L. R. (2020). Understanding social facts: Wittgenstein and Brandom in dialogue. *Journal of Social Ontology*, 6(1), 1–22.
- Brandom, R. B. (1994). *Making it explicit: Reasoning, representing, and discursive commitment*. Harvard University Press.
- Brandom, R. B. (2000). *Articulating reasons: An introduction to inferentialism*. Harvard University Press.
- Cavell, S. (2019). *Philosophical passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Diamond, C. (2018). *The realistic spirit: Wittgenstein, philosophy, and the mind*. MIT Press.
- Epstein, B. (2018). *The ant trap: Rebuilding the foundations of the social sciences*. Oxford University Press.
- Ginsborg, H. (2018). *The normativity of meaning*. Oxford University Press.
- Hutto, D. D., & Satne, G. (2015). The natural origins of content. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 65(259), 1–25.
- Hyman, J. (2021). Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations: A contemporary assessment. *Philosophical Investigations*, 44(3), 310–330.
- Kölbel, M. (2020). Inferentialism and normative grammar. *Philosophical Studies*, 177(1), 75–99.
- Kusch, M. (2020). *A skeptical guide to meaning and rules*. Routledge.
- Kuusela, O. (2019). *Logic as the method of philosophy: Wittgenstein's philosophy of logic*. Oxford University Press.
- Loebe, F. (2022). Normativity and social roles. *Journal of Social Ontology*, 8(2), 195–214.
- McDowell, J. (2009). *The engaged intellect*. Harvard University Press.
- Pihlström, S. (2016). Pragmatism, normativity, and the limits of philosophy. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 24(1), 85–104.
- Reck, E. (2021). Normative scorekeeping and institutional practices. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 52(2), 230–242.
- Searle, J. R. (1995). *The construction of social reality*. Free Press.
- Schatzki, T. R. (2017). *Social practices: A Wittgensteinian approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, B. C. (2019). Normativity and social practices: From Wittgenstein to contemporary ethics. *Ethics and Social Philosophy*, 15(2), 145–167.
- Stahl, T. (2021). Discursive responsibility and social critique. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 47(1), 55–72.
- Wheeler, M. (2018). *Reconstructing the cognitive world*. MIT Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2009). *Philosophical investigations* (G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, & J. Schulte, Trans.; Rev. 4th ed.). Wiley-Blackwell. (Original work published 1953).

AmeliCA

Disponible en:

<https://portal.amelica.org/ameli/ameli/journal/828/8285709006/8285709006.pdf>

Cómo citar el artículo

Número completo

Más información del artículo

Página de la revista en portal.amelica.org

AmeliCA

Ciencia Abierta para el Bien Común

Dr. Ravi Kumar (1st Author), Reena Kumari (2nd Author)
Meaning as Norm-Governed Practice: A Comparative Study of Wittgenstein and Brandom

El significado como práctica regida por normas. Un estudio comparativo de Wittgenstein y Brandom

Tabano

núm. 28, 6, 2026

Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina Santa María de los Buenos Aires, Argentina
revista_tabano@uca.edu.ar

ISSN-E: 2591-572X

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46553/tab.28.2026.e6>