Robert Brandom’s *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing and Discursive Commitment* is one of the most significant, talked about and daunting books published in philosophy in recent years. Featuring specially-commissioned chapters by leading international philosophers with replies by Brandom himself, *Reading Brandom* clarifies, critically appraises and furthers understanding of Brandom’s important book.

Divided into four parts – ‘Normative Pragmatics’; ‘The Challenge of Inferentialism’; ‘Inferentialist Semantics’; and ‘Brandom’s Replies’, *Reading Brandom* covers the following key aspects of Brandom’s work:

- inferentialism vs. representationalism
- normativity in philosophy of language and mind
- pragmatics and the centrality of asserting
- language entries and exits
- meaning and truth
- semantic deflationism and logical locutions.

Essential reading for students and scholars of philosophy of language and mind, *Reading Brandom* is also an excellent companion volume to *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, also published by Routledge.

**Bernhard Weiss** is Associate Professor in Philosophy at the University of Cape Town, and the author of *How to Understand Language* (2010); *Michael Dummett* (2002); and co-editor of *Wittgenstein’s Lasting Significance* (2004), also published by Routledge.

**Jeremy Wanderer** is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Cape Town, and the author of *Robert Brandom* (2008).
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CONTRIBUTORS

Robert Brandom is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh, USA
Daniel Dennett is University Professor and Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy, Tufts University, USA
Sir Michael Dummett is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Oxford University, UK
Jerry Fodor is State of New Jersey Professor of Philosophy, Rutgers University, USA
Allan Gibbard is Richard B. Brandt Distinguished University Professor of Philosophy, University of Michigan, USA
Bob Hale is Professor of Philosophy, University of Sheffield, UK
Michael Kremer is Professor of Philosophy, University of Chicago, USA
Rebecca Kukla is Professor of Philosophy and Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology, University of South Florida, USA
Mark Lance is Professor of Philosophy and Professor of Justice and Peace, Georgetown University, USA
Ernie Lepore is Associate Director of the Rutgers Center for Cognitive Science, USA
Danielle Macbeth is T. Wistar Brown Professor of Philosophy, Haverford College, USA
John McDowell is University Professor of Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh, USA
John MacFarlane is Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of California, Berkeley, USA
Sebastian Rödl is Professor of Philosophy, Universität Basel, Switzerland
Kevin Scharp is Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Ohio State University, USA
Rowland Stout is Senior Lecturer in the Philosophy Department, University College Dublin, Ireland
Charles Taylor is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, McGill University, Canada
Jeremy Wanderer is Senior Lecturer in the Philosophy Department, University of Cape Town, South Africa
Bernhard Weiss is Associate Professor in the Philosophy Department, University of Cape Town, South Africa
Crispin Wright is Professor of Philosophy, New York University, USA
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We are very grateful for the three of the papers previously published in the Wiley-Blackwell journal *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*:


In addition, the paper here by Sebastian Rödl is a modified translation by the author of a paper that first appeared in German as:


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INTRODUCTION

Bernhard Weiss and Jeremy Wanderer

In 1994, Harvard University Press published the first full-length books of two professors of philosophy based at the University of Pittsburgh, John McDowell’s *Mind and World* and Robert Brandom’s *Making It Explicit*. Both books explore the relationship between what we say and think and what we are talking and thinking about; outline conceptions of this relationship that are deeply indebted to intellectual engagement with the writings of Kant, Frege and Wittgenstein among others; and engage in debate with contemporaries including Davidson, Sellars, Dummett and Rorty. Both books were long anticipated and served to cement the reputation of their respective authors as philosophers of the first rank.

A collection of essays on *Mind and World* appeared in 2002 under the editorship of Nicholas Smith, entitled *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*. This current volume is, in effect, a sister volume to that collection, aiming to provide a focal point for readers engaging with Brandom’s work similar to that Smith’s collection provided for readers engaging with McDowell’s. Like its sister, this volume collects, in the main, newly commissioned essays; combines contributions by prominent critics of the target work with those more sympathetic to the project as a whole; and features, in the concluding section, responses to all those essays by the target author himself.

The delay in commissioning the sister volume reflects a discrepancy in the relative reception of the two works, despite the seminal nature of each. McDowell’s work was quickly the subject of seminars and symposia, rapidly resulting in a large number of published research papers, edited volumes and book-length studies. In contrast, the research interest accorded to Brandom’s work has been relatively sluggish. Whilst the book has been widely cited, the number of detailed studies and discussions is far less than that received by *Mind and World*, especially in the first decade following their respective publication.1

While the difficulties of reading McDowell have been documented and discussed, these are very different from the difficulties of reading Brandom, or at least from the difficulties involved in reading *Making It Explicit* (*MIE*). The difficulty many have in reading McDowell stems from their failure to share a certain philosophical temperament and style that characterizes his project. As such, this is not a difficulty that worries those many philosophers who do harbour McDowellian philosophical
sensibilities. In contrast, even those sympathetic to the bold and ambitious character of Brandom’s philosophical project are unlikely to find reading MIE an easy-going or exhilarating affair, despite its obvious brilliance.

One seemingly trite reason for this is its length. In contrast to the terse and tightly argued article that is often seen as the hallmark of the contemporary Anglophone philosopher, MIE is a long book more akin to the style of those German philosophers of the past who serve as Brandom’s heroes. This, however, is not simply a comment about its sheer length (though it is indeed a very long and intimidating tome, as Brandom himself kindly reminds the already daunted reader in the Preface) but also a comment about its systemic ambitions. As the building images throughout the Preface reveal, Brandom aims to construct a self-standing theoretical structure, a unified philosophical system that reveals what it is to say or think something, including one that provides the resources required to state the very system itself. Further, since Brandom is well aware of the non-finality and historical contingency of any such philosophical system, he aspires not only to construct this structure but to reveal its foundations in a specific historical tradition at the same time.

These lofty ambitions place a number of onerous demands on the reader. One is that the reader needs to keep in view both the detailed fine print of some part of the construction plans and the abstract artist sketch of the construction as a whole throughout the reading of MIE, a task made all the more difficult by the fact that the latter is only made fully available upon completion of the book. A second is that the reader is required to engage with Brandom’s highly idiosyncratic readings of the historical context of a discussion that are often used to introduce the particular wing of the structure under discussion.

Given these difficulties, one of our central aims is to gather a collection of original papers that together can genuinely contribute towards a satisfying engagement with MIE. First, most of the papers focus primarily on MIE rather than engage with material written following its production. Second, unlike many subsequent discussions of Brandom’s work, few of the papers here are embroiled in exegetical concerns arising from Brandom’s interpretation of others. Third, the papers have been organized so that they more or less follow the order of the chapters in MIE on which they primarily focus. We hope that these features will facilitate using the collection as an accompaniment to reading MIE itself, enriching the reader’s progress as she struggles through its 700-plus pages.

The reader of MIE is asked to enter the edifice through an entrance hall consisting of two historically-oriented chapters, the first entitled ‘Toward a Normative Pragmatics’ and the second ‘Towards an Inferentialist Semantics’. Loosely put, normative pragmatics refers to Brandom’s way of thinking about language and thought in terms of participation in a distinctive type of social practice, whereas inferentialist semantics is his approach to semantic theory that adopts an order of explanation of meaningfulness that begins with the notion of materially valid inference and incompatibility, rather than the more familiar notions of truth and reference associated with a representationalist approach to semantics.
We have followed this two-part division in organizing the essays in the volume, so that the essays in Part I concentrate primarily on Brandom’s normative pragmatics, and those in Part III primarily concern semantic issues. (Part II is a more or less self-standing debate that segues from the one to the other.) That said, a key feature of MIE lies in the distinctive way in which normative pragmatics and inferentialist semantics are interlinked. As a result, it is hard to consider pragmatics and semantics in complete isolation from each other, so that there will inevitably be much overlap between issues discussed in the essays in Part I and those in Part III.

In the remainder of the Introduction, we aim to highlight certain themes that run across some essays in the collection, in a manner that may facilitate another route of engagement with the array of ideas on display.

**Linguistic rationalism**

For Brandom, semantics is to be thought of as an account of what is asserted in an act of asserting; pragmatics as an account of the use(s) of language including acts such as the act of asserting. The privileging of the speech of asserting over and above all other acts implied by this is something Brandom explicitly endorses under the heading of linguistic rationalism. The linguistic rationalist affirms both that it is possible for there to be a linguistic practice involving practitioners capable only of asserting, and that any social practice involving practitioners lacking the ability to assert is not a linguistic practice.

Brandom’s adherence to linguistic rationalism is challenged in a number of essays in this volume, especially in the contributions of Taylor, Wanderer, and Kukla and Lance:

- For Taylor, linguistic rationalism is guilty of ignoring the fact that an understanding of the non-conceptual realm of disclosive symbolic forms – those that are used to make, for example, a feeling or a way of being accessible to someone without asserting it – is also a necessary feature of participation in linguistic practice. In ignoring the disclosive realm, Taylor suggests, Brandom is dangerously close to displaying a scientistic insensitivity to an important and positive sense in which our linguistic practice ought to remain mysterious to us.

- Wanderer too challenges the sufficiency of linguistic rationalism, arguing that any Brandomian linguistic practice must include something that plays the functional role of challenging as well as asserting. Noting the suggestion made in MIE that the speech act of asserting can also function as a challenge, Wanderer contends that this is only possible if asserting is a second-personally addressed act, and urges Brandom to endorse this claim, despite some explicit comments to the contrary.

- A related critique, albeit less conciliatory in tone, is found in the paper by Kukla and Lance. They identify a distinctive speech act that they term a ‘recognition’, an act that expresses recognition of something that makes itself present to the receptive faculties. Kukla and Lance suggest there is a distinct sense in
which recognizes are agent-relative in structure, unlike the act of asserting which is agent-neutral, and argue that, contra Brandom’s linguistic rationalism, any functioning language must include such recognitive acts as well as assertings.

The sociality of norms

Brandom’s pragmatics is a normative pragmatics. He is not interested in the actual uses of bits of language as much as in the propriety of uses: those appropriate circumstances when one is committed and entitled to make a claim and the appropriate consequences, in terms of alterations to commitments and entitlements, of so doing. Brandom’s pragmatics is, also, a social pragmatics. He is not interested in the verbal doings of solitary individuals conceived in isolation from their active participation in a social practice. Social is not to be thought of in terms of an interaction between an individual and a community (an I–We relation), but in terms of the interaction between two perspectives – one acknowledging alterations in normative status following socially significant performances and one attributing such alterations (an I–Thou relation).

A central Brandomian insight is that these two aspects of pragmatics — the normative and the social — are interdependent, such that normativity can only be understood in terms of participation in a social practice understood in I–Thou terms. The reason for this stems from Brandom’s desire to preserve two ideas that can seem to pull in opposed directions. The first is what he takes to be an Enlightenment ideal: any instance of genuine authority can only be made sense of in terms of acknowledgement of that authority. The second is what he takes to be a Wittgensteinian insight: for anything to function as a binding norm, there must be a possible difference between what one acknowledges being bound to and what one is bound to. These two ideas seem to stand in some tension: the former treats one’s attitudes towards the norm as the ultimate authority in determining its scope, whereas the latter precludes this. The social division of labour between attributing and acknowledging normative status is supposed to help resolve the tension by maintaining the distinction between what an individual takes her normative status to be (acknowledged) and what it is (attributed), while still allowing that all normative authority is dependent on the attitudes to that authority, although in the form of the combined attitudes of the I–Thou pairing. Brandom notoriously uses the language of institution throughout MIE to capture this, claiming that normative attitudes institute normative statuses.

This claim about the interdependence of the normative and the social concerns normative practices broadly conceived, and is not limited to a linguistic practice. One way of characterizing the normative pragmatic project undertaken in MIE is to say that it begins with a description of participants in a social-normative practice and attempts to spell out in the terms provided by this level of description just what would need to be the case for that practice to be a discursive one. Brandom likens
this project to that of repairing Neurath’s boat while still at sea: it abstracts away from the richness and complexity of our actual discursive interactions all that is not essential to their being discursive, such that what remains is a still-floating, though thoroughly stripped-down, linguistic boat.

A number of contributors to this volume worry, in very different ways, about the aims of such a project or whether too much has been thrown overboard.

- In the course of surveying different attempts at an inferentialist semantics, Macbeth casts a sceptical glance at Brandom’s I–Thou framework in MIE, worrying that it is insufficient even to deliver something recognizable as a genuinely normative practice, let alone one of the discursive variety. She contends that, in rejecting I–We approaches, Brandom must reject the claim that there are shared norms implicit in our performances that govern the correctness of our responses. Without such shared norms, however, our assessing performances are far too individualized and private to be able to make sense of normative talk of correctness and incorrectness of performance essential to the very idea of a normative practice.

- Why undertake a project of the sort just outlined? Rödl identifies two different motivations in Brandom’s writings: a commitment to thinking of the mental in normative terms and a conception of the aim of philosophy as seeking to explain mysterious phenomena by accounting for them in less mysterious terms. These motivations jointly motivate a project that seeks reductively to explain mental discourse in normative terms, which is how Rödl understands the aim of MIE. He sees a tension between these two motivations, since the latter requires that it be possible to master the normative terminology that does the explaining independent of having mastered the mental terminology to be explained, something that a full understanding of the former rules out. Rödl contends that this joint adherence to irreconcilable goals yields formulations of key positions in MIE that do not cohere with one another.

- Rödl echoes a theme we have already noted in Taylor’s paper: that Brandom is far too tempted by an approach that tries to dispel any appearance of mystery from our thinking about the discursive, in a way that serves to oversimplify the phenomena thus explained. Dennett’s contribution can be seen as having the opposite thrust, complaining that Brandom seems far too prepared to leave matters in a shroud of mystery. In particular, in failing to consider the relevance of the literature regarding the evolutionary emergence of communication, Brandom helps himself to a conception of a community as the source of the normativity of the mental without considering how such a community came about. This neglect, complains Dennett, both serves to distort the emergent model and gives the project an unfortunate whiff of anti-naturalistic magic.

- Gibbard raises a series of questions about the language of institution found throughout MIE. Normative attitudes institute normative statuses, so that if there were no takers of normative attitudes whatsoever, there would be no normative statuses. If so, worries Gibbard, it seems possible for there to be a
third-personal interpreter of a particular linguistic practice able to describe a system of linguistic norms without participating in the practice itself, as her attitudes do not institute normative statuses (cf. Wanderer’s contribution to this volume for a related discussion). Yet a key theme of MIE is that, when it comes to discursive practice, such an external standpoint is not available. Gibbard considers a variety of ways in which to understand the language of institution here in light of this stipulated collapse of perspectives between external interpreter and internal practitioner, concluding that a clear overall understanding is not immediately apparent in MIE.

Inferentialism and representationalism

Brandom is wont to contrast two orders of explanation of semantic content: the inferentialist order and the representationalist order. The representationalist order, which is seen as something of an orthodoxy in philosophy, takes representation or cognate notions such as truth and reference as fundamentally explanatory, while inferentialism takes the role of a content in inference to be fundamentally explanatory. Choosing one approach over the other develops complementary explanatory burdens. The representationalist will have to derive the inferential properties of a content from its representational properties, while the inferentialist will have to explain representational concepts such as aboutness, truth and reference in inferential terms. Though he admits the possibility of positions which privilege neither order of explanation, Brandom tends to see the choice here as stark and reads the stark choice back into the history of the subject, aligning rationalists on the inferential side of the debate, empiricists on the representational side and vaunting Kant as achieving a high point of the inferentialist tradition.

In MIE Brandom impressively unfolds a detailed version of the inferentialist programme and, in doing so, he takes himself to be building on lessons learned from Kant, Frege and Sellars. In crude terms, from Kant we learn the priority of the propositional, from Frege we learn the crucial explanatory roles of inference and substitution and from Sellars we learn the importance of material inference in determining content. But there is a more general lesson informing Brandom’s inferentialist programme and that is pragmatism, which, here, is the attempt to explain what it is to say in terms of what it is one does in saying. What is distinctive about pragmatism as an approach to content is that it refuses to admit of a dimension to content which has no explanatory link with use. Inferentialism is thus one version of a pragmatist approach to content and is usefully contrasted with alternative use-based (or assertibilist) approaches of, say, Wittgenstein and Quine and, in this volume, those of Dummett and Wright.

Why does Brandom favour inferentialism? It is difficult to cull an attempt at a knock-down argument against representationalism from his writings; rather the superiority of inferentialism displays itself finally in the ultimate success of the project. But we should bear in mind a number of considerations which recommend inferentialism, including the following. Inferentialism is favoured as a means
INTRODUCTION

of developing the pragmatist insight that meaning is explanatory of use. So pragmatism is seen as being in tension with representationalism. But why choose the inferentialist development of pragmatism? Brandom follows Sellars in taking it that what distinguishes a judgement from a mere reliable differential response is that the judgement, unlike the mere response, is caught up in the practice of giving and asking for reasons: it can stand as a premise and as a conclusion in an argument. In addition, inferentialism has distinct explanatory advantages over representationalism. Representationalism spawns questions such as: Can the representationalist derive inferential properties from representational properties? Can the representationalist give an adequate account of the role of logical vocabulary? Can the representationalist give adequate accounts of material goodness of inference in terms of formal goodness of inference? The complementary explanatory obligations are, Brandom argues, discharged by the inferentialist, and here semantic deflationism and logical expressivism are key: representational idioms are given a deflationary treatment; logical vocabulary is distinguished by its expressive role; and, having demarcated the logical, formal goodness of inference can easily be explained in terms of material goodness of inference.

As is well known, Brandom adopts a version of the prosentential theory of truth and demarcates logical vocabulary through its expressive role in explicating material inferential and incompatibility relations involved in an autonomous discursive practice. The two views obviously mesh well with inferentialism but there is a real question as to whether they should be seen as its consequences. It might well strike one that semantic deflationism entails, at least, a rejection of representationalism; and it seems things strike Brandom in this way. But again, this is by no means obvious.

The choice between representationalism and inferentialism is examined in different ways by MacFarlane and by Kremer. Other essays look at other facets of the inferentialist’s package. Weiss raises concerns about expressivism in logic; Scharp about the inferentialist’s notion of truth and her approach to the semantic paradoxes; and Hale and Wright about her ability to legitimate notions of objectivity.

• MacFarlane considers the relation between pragmatism and inferentialism in semantics. He notes that it appears possible to combine pragmatism with either inferentialism or representationalism, pointing out that Davidson is probably best seen as an example of the latter combination. He goes on to question whether there is a closer connection between pragmatism and inferentialism because of the latter’s relation with doings but argues that inferring is not a kind of doing since nothing in a mere assertional practice shows that an agent has acquired a normative status by means of inference. The question is pushed further by looking at the detail of Brandom’s normative pragmatics but he argues that, in itself, this does not motivate inferentialism. If there is a motive – and it has yet to be shown that there is – it would emerge only from the combination of normative pragmatics with the practice of deontic scorekeeping.
Kremer questions whether we should choose between Brandom’s two orders of explanation. He begins by questioning Brandom’s right to claim Kant as an inferentialist. He then elucidates Brandom’s objections to representationalism as essentially being that, in conceiving of content in representational terms the representationalist focuses on semantic success to the detriment of semantic purport and semantic uptake, and thus fails to give an adequate account of material goodness of inference. But despite his efforts to the contrary, Kremer argues that Brandom’s inferentialism fails a complementary obligation: it fails to explain objectual representation.

Both Dummett and Sharp look at the inferentialist conception of truth.

Dummett has been a pioneer of assertibilist approaches to semantics but has never aligned himself with semantic deflationism. Here he records two worries about the deflationary project. First, he thinks deflationists must implausibly accuse anyone who claims, say, that some sentences are neither true nor false of having made a grammatical error. Second, he thinks that we can form no conception of the range of different sorts of senses that expressions from different grammatical categories might have, without having a conception of their semantic roles.

Scharp is unsure whether Brandom can have anything sensible to say about the semantic paradoxes. He sets up a dilemma for Brandom. On the one hand, Brandom’s semantic project commits him to expressive completeness. On the other hand, his prosentential conception of truth commits him to a Kripkean approach to the semantic paradoxes. These commitments are incoherent since although a Kripkean language can include its own semantics it fails to be expressively complete.

Weiss raises some questions about logical expressivism. He notes that the expressive role of logic presupposes its role in the formation of logically compound contents. Also, in the context of Brandom’s inferentialism, logical expressivism entails that the extension of a language to include logical locutions must be inferentially conservative. But, as Dummett has argued, for logical inference to have any epistemological role we cannot take it that such an extension will be conservative relative to inferences speakers are actually capable of acknowledging. So either Brandom owes us another objectivity proof or he has to admit that logic makes metaphysical demands on content, compromising logical expressivism.

Hale and Wright defend a competing assertibilist approach and attack Brandom’s version. They argue that Brandom’s attempt to explain the objectivity of certain contents – for example, that displayed in the distinction between ‘It is assertible that it will rain’ and ‘It will rain’ – by utilizing the twin notions of commitment and entitlement fails. Marking the relevant distinction is marking a difference in truth-conditions. So to mark the distinction an assertibilist will have to supply a notion of truth. Superassertibility, they
claim, is the requisite notion of truth. In a riposte to Brandom they defend that notion from Brandom’s claim that, if false propositions can be assertible (or false beliefs included in a state of information), then false propositions may be superassertible.

**Language entries and exits**

Macbeth’s contribution makes it clear that, as a matter of historical fact, Brandom’s is not the only inferentialist semantics available. Brandom himself, working at the level of possibility rather than actuality, provides a helpful botanization of three possible inferentialist approaches: weak-, strong- and hyper-inferentialisms. The weak-inferentialist claims that inferential connections among sentences form a necessary part of the semantic content of an assertion, so that if, for example, the sentence were involved in (at least some) different inferential connections, the claim would mean something different. Both hyper- and strong-inferentialist agree that spelling out both inferentially sufficient conditions for, and inferentially necessary consequences of, asserting a claim, together with the propriety of an inference from one to the other, are sufficient for determining the claim’s content. They differ in how they conceive the inferential articulation, with the strong-inferentialist allowing for a more relaxed conception of the relevant notion of inferential here.

One difference concerns the possible inclusion of non-inferential circumstances and consequences as part of the claim’s inferential articulation. By way of illustration, consider the claim ‘this traffic light is red’. The appropriate circumstances of application of this claim include the visible presence of a red-coloured traffic light. This circumstance is non-inferential, in the sense that the circumstance is not itself an act of claiming. The connection between such non-inferential circumstances of application and the inferential consequences is, according to the strong-inferentialist but not the hyper-inferentialist, an inferential connection. Likewise, in certain conditions such as instances of acting, the consequences of a commitment to act include the production of a behavioural performance, which is itself non-linguistic and thus non-inferential. For example, a rational being can be trained to respond to an inferentially articulated claim (such as ‘the traffic light is red’) by behaving in a particular manner (such as pressing the brakes sharply). The connection between such inferential circumstances of application and the non-inferential consequences is also, according to the strong-inferentialist but not the hyper-inferentialist, an inferential connection in the relaxed sense.

A strong-inferentialist such as Brandom allows for such language entries (in the form of perception) and such language exits (in the form of acting) to be included as part of the inferential articulation associated with a token act of claiming. In both the case of perception and action, Brandom offers a two-ply conception, treating the capacity to perceive or act as composed of two elements: a reliable differential responsive disposition and an inferentially articulated claiming. For example, in perception we have the ability to be disposed to respond differentially to the
presence of red things by claiming ‘that’s red’ and in acting we have the ability reliably to respond differentially to claims such as ‘that’s red’ by pressing the brakes on a car.

Two essays in the collection take deliberate aim at this two-ply account.

- McDowell here continues a long running debate with Brandom about the role of perceptual experience in any understanding of semantic contentfulness, by challenging the two-ply account of perceiving. ‘Experience’, Brandom tells us, is not one of his words, and he provides an account of perceptual observation in terms of the two-ply model that makes no essential reference to perceptual experience. In the course of contesting the attribution of the two-ply account of perception to Sellars, McDowell argues against such a minimalist account, contending that any plausible account of perception must involve something like the shapings of sensory consciousness in experience (cf. Kukla and Lance’s contribution for a related discussion).

- Stout takes aim at the two-ply account of acting, complaining of an unstable bifurcation. As Stout reads the two-ply account, reasoning, in the sense of following a rule, is only involved in one of the two plys; the ply (or ‘stage’ as Stout revealingly puts it) in which things are actually being made to happen involves no sensitivity to reason. This, he complains, distorts the rationality characteristic of agency which treats action ‘as a process of rationally transforming the world’.

Disagreeing and harmonizing are two core features of Brandom’s understanding of discursive practice. The shared conceptual norms to which we bind ourselves in making claims depend on the inevitable disagreements in commitments between interlocutors. Communication, problematized here in the papers by Gibbard, Fodor and Lepore, and Macbeth, involves the ability to navigate across different perspectives. Piecemeal reflection on the commitments that form one’s perspective, using logical locutions to make these explicit, will often lead to the recognition that we are saddled with incompatible commitments. Constraining oneself by conceptual norms involves a commitment to harmonizing incompatible commitments, an obligation to change something that removes the incompatibility.

In plotting a conceptual route through the various contributions to this volume, we have focused our comments on disagreement over harmony, highlighting points of concern and dissension proffered by these attentive, though critical, readers of MIE. Discord is, of course, far easier to document than harmony. Much of the sniping on display is akin to friendly fire from philosophers who share much in common. (The most notable exception here is found in Part II, in the extended debate between Fodor and Lepore and Brandom – philosophers who, as Fodor puts it elsewhere, disagree on almost ‘everything under the sun’). The friendly charges laid involve highlighting disagreement regarding the best approach to various topics, exposing disharmony in the form of incompatible commitments undertaken in MIE, and expressions of dissat-
isfaction regarding the way in which commitments undertaken have been motivated. The collection concludes with Brandom’s responses to these varying charges.

Brandom is, without doubt, an ambitious theorist. Indeed, he sees being intellectually ambitious as an intellectual virtue, in the sense that he prefers an approach to philosophical problems that formulates the boldest conjecture possible and then proceeds to ‘see how far it can be pressed’. MIE is a great example of such an ambitious approach to philosophy. While many here worry that the some of the bold claims made do not stand up to such prodding, we are convinced that few would deny the rewards to be had from the undertaking.

Notes
1 A crude indicator: a search of the Philosopher’s Index using key words returns close to double the number of results for ‘McDowell’ than for ‘Brandom’ in the period since 1994.
2 Though obviously the meaning of logical terms is explained in terms of inferential role.
Part I

NORMATIVE PRAGMATICS
What is meaning? We might start our search for an answer by scrutinizing the question itself: what are we asking when we ask what something means? And here is a possible strategy for tackling this metaquestion: observe that in our everyday lives together, we take each other to mean things by what we say. Explain, then, what this “taking to mean” consists in, and we’d know what judgments of meaning are.

Now a theorist of meanings, we can imagine, stands outside the conversation to which she ascribes meanings. She may even stand outside the whole world of the conversation she’s observing: she can run a thought experiment about meaning, taking as her subject a conversation she imagines. Still in ascribing meanings, we can say, she’s doing the same thing conversants are doing. Explain how Jack and Jill regard each other as they take each other to mean “Let’s fetch some water”, and we’ve said how Thea the outside theorist regards them in ascribing this same meaning to their words.

These considerations point to a strategy for explaining the meaning of ‘meaning’ – for explaining what’s at issue in the questions that theorists raise about meaning. The strategy is one I call expressivist. To illustrate the strategy, imagine a prosaic case of a theorist’s ascribing meaning: young Hans uttered the words “Schnee ist weiss,” and by his words, claims theorist Thea, Hans meant that snow is white. What does she mean by this? To say what she means, an expressivist proposes, explain what state of mind she expresses by her words. It won’t be informative just to say that she expresses her belief that that’s what Hans meant; we want something that will explain the content of her state of mind. An expressivist, then, explains the meaning of a statement by explaining the state of mind the statement expresses. In metaethics, emotivists are expressivists of one kind: they explain moral statements as expressing emotions, and reject the idea of explaining emotions as beliefs in a special kind of moral content. An expressivist for meaning uses a like strategy to explain what attributions of meaning mean.

This is a strategy adopted by Robert Brandom in his long and richly elaborated book Making It Explicit (1994). Brandom’s own term for the strategy is ‘phenomenalist’ (pp. 291–97). No term for this strategy will be entirely satisfactory, but ‘phenomenalist’ carries a special danger: it suggests what metaethical theorists would call not expressivism but a subjectivism about meaning. That a tree is in the
quad, thinks the old-time phenomenalist, means that were I in certain circumstances, I would have certain kinds of sense data. A metaethical parallel is the ideal observer theory: "X is good" means that were an observer in such-and-such conditions, he would approve. In the metatheory of meaning – the theory of what 'means' means – the corresponding theory would be this: Thea, recall, tells us that Hans, by his words, meant that snow is white. This means, says the subjectivist, that under such-and-such circumstances, an observer would regard Hans in a certain way. This meaning metatheoretic subjectivism isn’t Brandom’s view: as I’d put it, when Thea ascribes meanings to Hans, then according to Brandom, she expresses her own state of mind, a state of regarding Hans in a certain way.

What, then, is this state of mind she expresses? What is this attitude she takes toward Hans that constitutes ascribing him meanings? It’s the same attitude, I’ve been suggesting, as Hans’s chum Jülchen takes toward him in their conversations when she regards him as meaning, say, that snow is white. Now this, Brandom tells us, is a normative attitude, a scorekeeping attitude. Jülchen regards Hans as committing himself to snow’s being white, as acknowledging the commitment, and as excluding a claim that snow is red. Again, we explain the normative status of being “committed” – what she means when she says that he is so committed – by explaining the attitude that constitutes regarding him as committed. The attitude is one that outside theorist Thea and interactor Jülchen can share toward Hans (p. 639).

You and I are now standing as metatheorists interpreting theorist Thea. As interpreters of her, we in turn are taking normative attitudes toward her. We’re taking an overt act or a supposed inner event of hers as constituting the taking on of a normative status – as acquiring commitments and the like. The point iterates: observers who treat us as metatheorists are in turn attributing normative statuses to us. In a way, as Brandom says, it is “norms all the way down,” expressivism all the way down. In particular, “The distinction between normative and non-normative vocabulary, claims, and facts is itself drawn in normative terms” (p. 625). In this, Brandom’s view of meanings differs from expressivist theories for other realms, for realms outside those of meaning and mental content: expressivists for morals and the like might think themselves free to take the content of their own theories as not itself, in turn, to be explained expressivistically. If Brandom is right, though, expressivisms of all kinds – his own included – are to have their content explained expressivistically. The content of the theory is to be explained by explaining the configuration of normative attitudes that constitutes holding the theory. This expressivism for meaning applies to itself, and so iterates.

Brandom is often extremely clear on this, and that is one of the delights of his book. Is this regress cause for alarm? I think not. Brandom doesn’t take normative claims as second-class, as needing a reduction to causal, non-normative claims. Nor need he: causal claimings themselves, after all, need to be justified, and this work of justification is normative. Still, we can worry, doesn’t the regress of normative attitudes leave meaning divorced from the causal world, the world of events? No, he can answer, for normative claims are often supported by causal facts. My thinking that Smith ought to pay Jones five dollars may rest on my knowing how Smith and
Jones uttered certain words and how a greenish sheet of paper with special printing, construction, and provenance got from Jones’s hand into Smith’s. My normative claim as to what Smith ought to do goes beyond these causal facts of the case, but it rests on them heavily. Matters of meaning, on Brandom’s view, rest similarly on causal goings-on. These causal events constitute agents’ taking on commitments and the like. Such claims of constitution are normative: to accept such a claim is to come to have a normative attitude.

This aspect of Brandom’s project strikes me as highly promising. Whether it works in the end I won’t for the most part try to assess. Rather, I want to explore its connection to other themes in the book. The norms that govern thought and discussion, Brandom tells us, are implicit in discursive practice. Discursive practice institutes the normative statuses that constitute meaning what one does by one’s words. They even institute one’s thinking the thoughts that one does. In an important sense, thought itself is essentially social: truly sapient beings – “we” – must be discursive scorekeepers. “Simple intentional systems” that are not discursive scorekeepers exhibit only a derivative intentionality. In consequence, the right direction of explanation for meaning is from public practice to private content of thought, and not the other way around. We must reject the mode of explaining meaning that has prevailed among philosophers: explaining public meanings as arising from interactions of thinkers whose thoughts can be identified and understood independently of public practice (pp. 229–33).

These are strong claims and controversial. Some will find them touchstones of right thinking, as championed by Wittgenstein, Sellars, and Davidson. Others would be astounded to find themselves convinced of such claims. It will be important to know, then, whether Brandom, in proceeding from his expressivistic starting point, discovers weighty reasons to be convinced of this cluster of theses that full-fledged thought must have a social background.

I  ‘Original’ and ‘derived’ intentionality

Why must intentionality without discursive scorekeeping be “derived”? In what way is it derived from the full-blown intentionality of discursive scorekeepers? Jack and Jill converse and keep score on themselves and each other. Their sayings andnings are about things in the fullest way – the pail, the hill – and many of the things they say hold independently of anyone’s saying or thinking them. Outside theorist Thea ascribes them a scorekeeping intentionality, and in so doing, she does explicitly to them what they do implicitly to each other. Accept all this: does it establish, we need to ask, that Jack, Jill, and Thea can’t do the same with non-scorekeepers? A non-scorekeeper Sim can’t, to be sure, think that Jack is committed to the claim that snow is white; to think any such thing would be to keep score. But why can’t he nevertheless think that snow is white, or that planetary orbits are elliptical – and think this as fully and non-derivatively as can Jack or Jill? Attributing ‘simple’ intentionality to a thing, Brandom tells us, “does not involve treating it as a participant in the essentially social and linguistic game of giving and asking for reasons” (p. 630).
True enough, but the question is whether, if Sim’s not in that game, this makes the intentionality of his thought on other matters somehow derivative. Brandom has two official arguments that it does. One stems from his expressivism, and that’s the one I’ll take up first and return to later. To explain the meaning of meaning, we explain ascribing meaning, and explain this as keeping score. Thus we explain all intentionality – non-scorekeeping intentionality included – by appeal to features of scorekeeping intentionality. True enough. But that’s a characteristic of any expressivistic explanation of a concept – and it doesn’t normally have any upshot of derivativeness. Take, for instance, being cute. What does it mean to call someone cute? An expressivist for cuteness might say this: we have a special reaction to typical babies and small children, a reaction that is understandable, biologically, as eliciting a special care and solicitude that human young need from their parents, other kin, and parents’ friends. When I call something cute, I’m expressing that feeling.

Now babies are cute, but they are not ascribers of cuteness – that comes later on, as they grow up. Normal adults find babies cute but often aren’t cute themselves. Some ascribers of cuteness are cute, I’ll agree, namely those that share the right aspects of look and manner with typical babies or small children. Is it, then, these that have cuteness originally? Are babies cute only by courtesy? Are they cute only by assimilation to cute ascribers of cuteness? Or do the originally cute have to be something even more: self-ascribers of cuteness? True, to understand what it means to call a baby cute, we’ll need to understand the cuteness reaction, the “stance” of finding someone cute. But that doesn’t make babies’ cuteness in any way second-class. In particular, it isn’t “derivative” from the original cuteness of self- and other-ascribers of cuteness.

How is intentionality, expressivistically understood, any different? True, to be an ascriber of intentionality, one must oneself be intentional. This is in contrast to cuteness: ascribers of cuteness needn’t be cute. Still, if non-scorekeeping intentionality is in any way derived, it’s in the same way as cuteness is ‘derived’. Cuteness is in this sense ‘derived’ not from the cuteness of its ascribers, but from their intentionality. The general pattern for this strange sense of the term ‘derived’ is not “X-ness is derived from the X-ness of ascribers of X,” but “X-ness is derived from the intentionality of ascribers of X.” (And in this sense, moreover, scorekeeping intentionality itself is ‘derived’.)

II Representation and shifts in perspective

Brandom has a second official argument that non-scorekeeping goings-on aren’t in the full sense intentional. This one invokes objectivity and representation. Fully to represent a state of affairs as objective, Brandom argues, I must conceive in practice how it would look from different perspectives. At ten o’clock Monday morning, I remark “I’ve had breakfast today.” You make the same claim the next day – you agree with my claim – not by saying “I’ve had breakfast today” but by saying “By ten yesterday morning, Gibbard had had breakfast.” The inferential significance of this single claim differs from your standpoint and from mine: if, say, you hold “Gibbard’s philosophical views are hopeless” and I reject that claim of yours, then you but not
I can infer “A proponent of hopeless philosophical views had had breakfast by ten yesterday morning.” Keeping track of what a claim represents involves keeping track of how the claim shifts from perspective to perspective. That means being a discursive scorekeeper. This strikes me as a far more promising argument than the first. Perhaps intentionality in its fullness does require being able to keep track of how the same claim looks from different perspectives. I’ll be arguing, though, two things: first, differences of perspective needn’t involve different people. Second, even when they do, grasping the shifts – navigating through them in practice – might not require any practice that is discursive and fully social.

Perspective shifts, in the first place, needn’t be interpersonal. Individual memory too requires some mastery of them: early in the morning, I experience myself eating breakfast; in mid-morning I conclude from memory not “I am eating breakfast,” but that I ate breakfast a while ago. Orangutans have little sociability but fairly big brains, apparently in part to handle problems of optimal foraging. I don’t know how orangutans do what they do, but we can imagine it might well involve keeping track of what stage of ripeness a fruit tree was at when last visited, and the import of this for when next to check out the tree. Such thinking handles temporal shifts in perspective and does so in complex ways: shifts from time remembered, to now, to future time of contemplated visit. A lone thinker, moreover, will need to cope with shifting perspectives if it is to engage hypotheticals: to understand, say, that had one not eaten breakfast today, one would now be hungry – and so come to realize that one has eaten. The orangutan might well have to consider alternative courses of action, and how things would be from the perspective of each.

Brandom’s argument from perspective shifts extends over much of the book, and so I have no great confidence that I have identified all that ties the perspective shifts involved in sapience to the need for discursive practice. One theme, though, that Brandom develops extensively is that representation of concrete things requires anaphora, picking up aspects of content that hold fixed across shifts of perspective. Consider the pronoun ‘it’ in “What’s that?” “It’s an all-purpose household robot.” The deixis of ‘that’ is repeatable only by anaphora; “No deixis without anaphora” is Brandom’s slogan. So indispensable, though, is anaphora that it is hard to see how anaphora could require sociality. Won’t the orangutan need a kind of mental anaphora to keep referring to the same fruit tree in successive thoughts? We ourselves, to be sure, would report the orangutan’s thinking as a soliloquy expressed in public language with public anaphora – but we’ll do likewise for a language user like the historic Brutus, and it isn’t due to us that Brutus could think.

Now perhaps in fact, for all I know, the normal human ability to handle constancy over perspective shifts does require socializing and being initiated into discursive practices of scorekeeping. Brandom’s thesis, though, appears not to be a contingent, etiological one about our species, but something deeper: it seems to say what a being has to be like to count as fully intentional. To be intentional in the fullest sense, one must represent the world in the fullest sense of the term – and this requires some mastery of the ways that what is represented can stay constant over shifts of perspective.
Now it is true enough that there is one dimension of perspective that one cannot keep track of without a concept that is interpersonal: the dimension of which person the perspective belongs to. One needs implicitly, at least, to conceive of distinct cognizers, and oneself as one among many possible cognizers. Still, this, as I say, isn’t needed for all keeping track of constancy over shifts of perspective: it leaves the temporal and hypothetical dimensions.

Suppose, though, one does conceive of oneself as a self, as one among many possible or actual cognizers. Suppose, even, that one must do so if one is to be sapient. Need this be based on a social practice? If it must, further argument is needed – and non-obvious argument at that. What, precisely, is the social practice thesis? Is it that for full-fledged, objective representation, one must engage in interpersonal discursive practice actually? Is it the weaker thesis that at least one must be able to conceive of a possible interpersonal discursive practice?

Even this doesn’t seem immediately apparent. Set aside the possibility of confining oneself to temporal and hypothetical dimensions of perspective shift: what do I need if I am to handle, in my thoughts, shifts of perspective from one person to another? What’s been said so far seems to allow that I could conceive of possible thoughts that others have – and even thoughts of others about the thoughts of still others, and so on – without a word passing anyone’s lips. Could we all have concepts of thoughts (including thoughts about thoughts, and so on) without any concept of saying?

Thoughts about a person’s thoughts, Brandom has told us, are thoughts about their commitments and the like. We know, though, that if there are commitments involved in thinking something, they can be away from social gaze. A secret can be locked away in the thoughts of a single person. What, then, must the relation be, if any, between the concept of someone else’s commitments, on the one hand, and anything that deserves the name of a social practice of discursive scorekeeping?

Ethologists sensibly study species of apes and monkeys to discover whether they show signs of a “theory of mind”. An ape would evidence a “theory of mind”, for instance, if things he does were best explained as planned deceptions – as opposed, say, to acts of a kind that profit the ape by misleading others, but which the ape first happened on fortuitously and then repeated because he experienced their pleasing results.

We humans keep intentional “score” on each other for two chief kinds of purposes: to converse, and to predict, explain, and cope with others. Strategic interactions of agents involve the latter cluster: we interact strategically if we each act on predictions of others that rest on ascribing them thoughts about the states of mind of everyone else. This is something that game theorists try to analyze; they depict it as involving thoughts about thoughts about thoughts, and so on. This needn’t involve communication – though one can analyze how communication arises from game theoretic situations. What’s pictured by game theory, then, seems to involve ascriptions of intentionality ascribing intentionality, without, at the outset, any discursive practice. Each player must appreciate what the practical commitments of others might be, and what interpretive and cause-ascribing commitments might lie behind their plans, without words being exchanged.
Now granted, real humans may depart, in important ways, from the schematized “rational agents” of game theory. Still, is the game theorist’s picture an impossible one? Or are the game theorists’ “rational agents” not really ascribing scorekeeping intentionality? Or are game theorists covertly picturing talk in the background, even before they derive the possibility of “signaling”? I’m not clear what Brandom should say to this. From game theory it looks at first blush as if intentionality-ascribing intentionality is possible without discursive practice – in principle at least. Strategic beings must recognize the many perspectives of many agents, with their many commitments in thought and plan, but still might not talk from one perspective to another.9 Considerations of perspectival attribution won’t by themselves, then, take us to discursive practice.

Manifestly, though, we normal human adults are discursive beings – and have been since early childhood. Even if not all conceivable sapience is rooted in discursive practice, is human sapience?

This, I think, has to be a rich and subtle empirical issue – difficult conceptually, to be sure, but far from purely conceptual. In the development of human children, do social practices of scorekeeping underlie an individual’s capacity to keep interpersonal score? Probably so, but we’ll need evidence. The young child’s “theory of mind”, for all we could know at the outset, might be pretty much “wired in”. If so, its etiology might have been social in evolutionary time: the evolution of this adaptation, in its last stages at least, might well have taken place among proto-humans who kept public score – and this public score might have figured crucially in the generation of the selection pressures that shaped this adaptation. Human capacities for sapience, then, would be biologically for participation in public scorekeeping practices, though not requiring current scorekeeping for their development in the child.

The perspectival scorekeeping capacities of a normal human adult, moreover, may not come in a unitary package. They may need to be subdivided and distinguished, with different stories for different aspects of human discursive competence. Children younger than four do fantastically at some aspects of conversation, but fail tests for the concept of a belief that might be false. Autistic adults converse in a way, and can do quite well on IQ tests, though also failing tests for conceiving of minds.10 Complex questions must be asked, of a kind that developmental psychologists must address, as to what kinds of conceptualizing are needed to explain what kinds of performance.

Brandom’s own philosophical theses, I’ll agree, might in principle be separable from these empirical questions. Still, a test of adequacy for Brandom’s taxonomy of intellectual capacities would be whether it can be employed to distinguish actual human and animal capacities at various stages of development, in normal and defective states. The pure philosophical job that Brandom attempts may be too hard to handle by pure philosophical methods, by methods that do not look to tests of empirical adequacy. Brandom himself focuses his claims of contrast sometimes on thermostats, and sometimes on dumb animals taken quite generally. There may be a richer range of examples whose exploration would pay off by enhancing our understanding of the issues Brandom so richly airs.
III Instituting meanings

The concept of cuteness is best explained in terms of an observer’s reaction of finding-cute. It doesn’t follow, I’ve argued, that the “finding-cute” variety of intentionality ‘institutes’ the cuteness of babies. Some small dinosaurs were cute, I’d judge, but we weren’t there to institute anything among the dinosaurs. If a dinosaur was cute, then it would have been cute whether or not humans later came along to appreciate a critter like it as cute.11

Meanings, though, are different: it seems far more plausible that they are instituted. If they are, moreover, it’s not by outside theorists, but by the people who talk to each other and mean what they do by their words. That the content of thoughts is likewise instituted seems wilder – but perhaps a sufficiently deep philosophical sagacity will allow us to ascertain that even this exciting possibility obtains.

What, then, does talk of “institution” suggest? The makers of a constitution and those who approve it institute a system of government, we’d say. When we say this about our own system, we may be saying something normative: that we ought to do certain things because of what the founding fathers and their fellow citizens did, as they acted in order to bring it about that people subsequently ought to follow the rules they chose. (This is rough, of course, but I won’t try for refinements.) Baseball is likewise instituted by those who govern the leagues. Brandom extends this sense of ‘institute,’ stressing Wittgensteinian regress arguments to motivate the extension. Rules aren’t mere inscriptions, and even when the rules are inscribed, those inscriptions get their life from a practice that can’t just consist of a regress of inscriptions. Like considerations apply to utterances of rules, in voice and in thought, and to diagrams on paper and in the head. Baseball is instituted, in this extended sense, not just by the rule book and rituals of adopting those rules, but by what people do with the rule book and without it. In pickup games, the implicit rules can lose their ties to any ceremonies of instituting whatsoever, apart from routine play and the upshot of rhubarbs.

Still, in this extended sense of ‘institute’, we retain the suggestion that what players ought to do depends, somehow, on what players, umpires, owners, boards, and the like do. This clearly extends to language: That ‘deux fois plus que’ in French means twice as much as (and not two times more than) depends on how speakers of French use the phrase in practice. The Académie Française may pronounce, but what its pronouncements have to do with correctness depends too on the practices of the French. The cuteness of small dinosaurs didn’t depend on anyone’s practices, but the proprieties of the French language do – and on the practices of its speakers, not on ours.

What, then, of the contents of thinking, and the cogency of explaining discursive practice in a way that Brandom rejects: as emerging from the interactions of individuals whose intentions can be characterized without having already explained a social practice? To get to these matters, we’ll have to press harder on the sense in which linguistic practice is plausibly “instituted” by its practitioners.

Outside observer Thea regards Hans, Jülchen, and their fellows as instituting
The proprieties of German usage by their practices. This means that in judging what’s proper or not in German, she defers to practitioners of German. Hans says to Jülchen, “Du musst nicht sprechen.” Thea opines to herself, “It’s all right for Jülchen to speak, but she doesn’t have to.” She thereby agrees with what Hans says, even though she’d disagree if he had said in English “You must not speak.” She defers to the practice of German speakers: even though she thinks that ‘musst’ means must and ‘nicht’ means not, she doesn’t think that ‘musst nicht’ means must not. That’s because speakers of German treat these words in practice as meaning don’t have to.

All this is linguistic truism – but the point to note is that a reasonable outsider’s interpretation requires a kind of deference: Thea reasonably treats Hans and Jülchen as having a voice in the meaning of ‘musst nicht,’ but herself as having no such voice. Of course Hans and Jülchen must defer too, since they are only two German speakers of many tens of millions, but their reactions and attitudes count in this regard, and Thea’s don’t.

Now our original question, recall, was this: what is outside theorist Thea doing when she ascribes meanings to the words of Hans and Jülchen? Something normative, the answer was, and indeed the same normative thing as Hans and Jülchen do as they implicitly interpret each other in conversation. Now, though, we’re finding an important asymmetry between Jülchen and Thea as they interpret Hans’s words: Thea defers to practitioners, whereas Jülchen is a practitioner.

Jülchen, we might say, simply hears Hans as telling her that she doesn’t have to speak. According to Brandom, her hearing Hans as saying this consists in her taking certain normative attitudes toward him, such as regarding Hans as committed to her not having to speak. She may now also come to think other things in consequence: say, that he ought not to beat her with a stick if she stays silent. This in turn could involve standing ready to beat him in return if he does. But, Brandom stresses, there will be a looseness to these further implications; the inferential potential, from her standpoint, of regarding him as committed will depend on the “auxiliary hypotheses” that she accepts in practice. She may well think that Hans ought not to beat her whatever his commitments, or she may take a pacificistic view of resisting attacks by force, or she may regard retaliation as imprudent even though within her rights.

However Jülchen’s attitudes are best described, German being what it is consists in the normative attitudes Hans, Jülchen, and other speakers of German take. There’s a kind of interpreting that consists in taking normative attitudes toward a speaker – let’s agree with this for now, for the sake of inquiry. Is taking such attitudes, then, what the outside theorist too is doing? Is Thea likewise taking a normative stance toward Hans in interpreting his words? Is it the same stance as Jülchen takes in giving the same interpretation to his same words? I’ve supposed so far that it is; now I pursue some doubts.

Thea, remember, interprets Hans’s words “Du musst nicht sprechen” by interpreting Hans, Jülchen, and other Germans as taking certain normative stances toward utterances around them – their own included. If she’s speaking and thinking as a theorist, though (and not just “going native”, coming to share the
linguistic reactions of Germans through exposure to their doings, through linguistic rehearsal, and the like), she's doing something that at least is more complex than what Hans and Jülchen have to be doing. Jülchen can, of course, come to engage in more complex thoughts too: she can wonder whether she’s misunderstanding Hans, and she might even end up reasoning as Thea should in resolving the matter. Normally, though, she just hears Hans as saying the things he does without raising any question of what basis she might have. There’s basis to be found in her experience, but she doesn’t for the most part take experiences she remembers as data; rather, her past experience has done its work on her, so that she now has come to hear German utterances as she does. Thea qua theorist, in contrast, is in the business of inferring meanings from data.

Is the stance, then, that she arrives at inferentially and explicitly from her data the same as that Jülchen comes to as a non-inferential result of native exposure and uptake? If Jülchen’s attitudes are normative, are Thea’s normative in the same way? I think perhaps not.

For a parallel, return to other kinds of institutions, and ask what happens when an outside observer rejects the norms of insiders. An outsider’s view of what’s instituted, we might argue, can be quite distinct from his normative views on the matter. Decent Dennis studies a vicious forced labor camp as an outside observer, and finds that when prisoners falter they are “selected for liquidation”. These prisoners, Dennis agrees, then occupy a certain institutional status: they ought, according to institutional practice, to be forced to their deaths. Is Dennis, in finding this, taking a normative stance? He isn’t favoring mass murder.12 Guards, if they are true practitioners and not just acting to save their hides, their comfort, and the like, take the “selection” to provide reason for treating the selected prisoners in certain brutal ways. That is to say, they take whatever process they regard as selection – call it S – as providing them reason to force everyone in a set D to their deaths. Does Dennis? In one clear sense he doesn’t. He’ll reject the imperative, “If I’m a guard, let me take S as weighing in favor of forcing all people in set D to their death.” He doesn’t commit himself to accepting, given “I’m a guard,” the practical conclusion “Let me force them to their death,” and acting on this conclusion. To attribute an institutional status isn’t to accept the norms that, according to institutional practice, govern that status.

Return briefly, then, to Thea, attributing a discursive practice to speakers of German. Isn’t she, in effect, treating this discursive practice like an institution? If so, then in treating Hans as saying that Jülchen doesn’t have to speak, and doing this by attributing to Hans, Jülchen, and others in Germany a set of normative attitudes toward themselves and each other, she isn’t herself coming to share the attitudes she attributes. Perhaps she’s doing something else – and the theorist’s attribution of meanings doesn’t have the same content as the practitioner’s. Must Thea defer to Jülchen and her fellows in forming her normative attitudes, in a way that Dennis needn’t defer to camp guards, officials, and the like in forming his? Or is Thea in the business of attributing institutional practices – though innocent ones, perhaps – in just the same way as is Dennis?
An example that Brandom himself gives might help clarify the situation; it raises doubts about Brandom’s treatment, and yet suggests a way out. The practice of the British Royal Navy, in the old days, was that a man who “took the Queen’s shilling” was deemed to have consented to enlistment, and was thence subject to naval discipline. Recruiters in seaport taverns offered shillings to men who were drunk and out of money for more – and who had no idea what the import of taking the shilling would be held to be. Now this case parallels Dennis and the death camp: Billy has taken the shilling into his hand, has later escaped and been captured. Now he is sentenced to be flogged. I might agree that according to the practice, he is to be flogged. This is in no obvious way for me to prescribe the flogging – any more than observer Dennis prescribed the shooting of faltering captives.

Still, what am I saying when I admit that according to the practice, Billy is to be flogged? Another outside observer might dispute this claim of mine: the flogging, Ophelia might claim, is a corruption of the practice. Suppose she does: taking the shilling when no indication has been offered that it has anything to do with joining the Navy, she claims, wasn’t to count as joining the Navy, even though corrupt officials so treated it. A metatheorist can now raise the question: what is at issue between Ophelia and me – both of us outside observers? Not what the regularities were: men in Billy’s situation were regularly flogged, however irregular this was if Ophelia is right. Neither of us prescribes the flogging: I say that according to the practice he had to be flogged, but that the practice was unfair; she says that even if the practice itself was fair enough, it was regularly travestied.

This suggests a possible reply on Brandom’s part: there’s one kind of normative attitude, he can agree, that Dennis doesn’t take on: one that simply echoes, from a different perspective, the attitudes of guards and officials. Couldn’t Dennis, though, be taking some other sort of normative attitude? Such a diagnosis might explain how Ophelia and I differ about Billy: neither she nor I share all the attitudes of the officers who ordered the flogging. Neither of us favors the flogging. But perhaps there’s some other normative attitude toward the case in which Ophelia and I differ. And this is the attitude that explains how Ophelia and I differ on what naval practice was.

Perhaps this is right, but this diagnosis isn’t obvious. Prima facie, we should take the view of Stevenson, Hare, and others: it’s one thing to share in an attitude and another to ascribe it – with this Brandom would agree – and moreover, ascriptions of normative attitudes are themselves non-normative. Stevenson, who counted “attitudes” and “beliefs” as distinct, spoke of “disagreement in belief about attitudes,” which was not a form of “disagreement in attitude.”13 Brandom, to be sure, denies that ascriptions of normative attitudes are non-normative, causal/explanatory statements – but our question is how he establishes this.

Can we find a clear argument, then, that in describing the labor camp as an ongoing institution, Dennis is taking some normative stance or other? Perhaps it’s some kind of “rational ought” which is not a moral one. This strikes me as doubtful: why need he think it rational for the guards to obey such orders if they can evade them?
Brandom does, though, hold one central thesis that would, if true, yield the result we’re seeking: that Dennis, in treating the doings of death camp guards as a practice, must thereby be taking normative stances of some kind. Practices are constituted in part by attitudes of their practitioners. Suppose, then, we can show that to attribute an attitude is to say something normative. It will follow that to characterize something as a practice is to say something normative. To call it a practice is to characterize attitudes, and to characterize attitudes is to speak normatively.

Why hold, then, that ascriptions of attitudes are normative? Brandom’s reasons are reasons for holding that all attributions of states of mind with content are normative – whether the state of mind is an attitude, a straight factual belief, or something else. This brings us, then, away from words and their meanings, and inward to states of mind and their contents. Is being in a certain state of mind a normative status? Are attributions of states of mind somehow normative prescriptions?

IV The normativity of mental content

Private thinking seems at first blush quite different from public saying: less social – and perhaps more clearly normative. With the public meanings of words and utterances, talk of being “instituted” in social practice seems plausible. Thinking, to the naive eye, will look far less social than words. Now I argued above that to characterize a practice is not to say anything normative – at least so far as arguments we’ve examined show. There’s a difference, I stressed, between describing something as a normative practice and sharing in the practice, and so sharing the norms that one describes. With thinking, in contrast, it may be more plausible that the theorist who ascribes from outside does just what insiders do: that the theorist, in ascribing mental content, does what other conversants do in ascribing that same content. When outsider Thea concludes “Jack thinks that Jill has the pail” she’s holding the same thing as does Jack’s discursive partner Jill when she speaks the same words. If Jill’s ascribing this thought to Jack consists in her coming to have a normative attitude toward him, then so, perhaps, does Thea’s own thinking this same interpretive thought. Thinking that Jill has the pail would then be a normative status – whether or not this status is “socially instituted”.

Why, then, suppose this? According to Thea, Jack thinks that Jill has the pail. How, in thinking this, is she thinking an ought? How is Jack’s thinking that Jill has the pail a matter of what Jack ought to do?

One of Brandom’s strategies is, of course, to attack the alternative. His target is “regularism”: the view that meaning facts are non-normative, causal facts. They are, on this view, the facts of some regularity in causal dispositions of an individual or a society. Now concepts of mental content have proved stubbornly resistant to analysis in straight causal/explanatory terms. If attributions of mental content are normative statements, this might explain the recalcitrance – because normative statements aren’t perhaps themselves pure ascriptions of causal regularities.

How, then, to confirm this diagnosis? Before I reach more plausible grounds, a couple of false starts.
First, in attributing thoughts, Brandom tells us at the outset, we are “placing ourselves and each other in the space of reasons, by giving and asking for reasons for our attitudes and performances” (p. 5). This may be promising, but Brandom shortly after says, “One is treating something as sapient insofar as one explains its behavior by attributing to it intentional states such as belief and desire as constituting reasons for that behavior” (p. 5).

This last is no grounds for a normativity thesis. The term ‘a reason,’ as is often pointed out, can have two distinct senses. Suppose I call the health effects of smoking “a strong reason to quit.” I thereby endorse the health effects as a consideration to weigh heavily in favor of quitting. This use of the term is clearly normative: I’m saying, in effect, “Weigh the health effects of smoking strongly against continuing.” I’m thereby advising. Suppose, though, I say, “His reason for quitting smoking was that such a substantial proportion of smokers these days are women.” I’m not, in saying this, endorsing any such thing as a consideration. Now to be sure, to have a desire not to do as women do is, in a way, for him to see this as a reason in the first sense. It is also to have it as his reason – at least if he acts on it – in a second sense. But the desire doesn’t constitute a reason in the first sense, and it’s this sense that is clearly normative. In attributing the desire, I’m not in any way endorsing the kind of sexism I attribute. In “playing the game of giving and asking for reasons”, we demand reasons in the normative sense: we ask not just “Why do you say that?” but “Why say that?” This isn’t the sense that figures directly in attributing beliefs and desires: talk of reasons there isn’t directly prescriptive.

Here is another false start: “What sets off the intentional is its liability to assessments of correctness” (p. 9). Table settings too can be assessed as correct or not; that doesn’t make a description of the positions of fork, knife, and the like normative in the sense that to describe it is somehow to prescribe.

Return, then, to better reasons for holding that mental content is normative. Thinking a thought does seem to commit one. If Jack thinks that violets are blue, he is committed to thinking that something is blue, if the question arises. He is committed to thinking that violets have color. When we attribute to him the thought that violets are blue, we are attributing such commitments to him – and in doing so, we are saying things that are genuinely normative. (Or in any case, we are committed to such attributions, whether we make them or not.) Claims as to what Jack is thinking are thus normative claims, and concepts of mental content are normative concepts.

To fill out this line of thought, we need to identify the sense in which thinking a thought does commit one to other conclusions. Normativity, in Sellars’ phrase, is being “fraught with ought”; can we then cash out talk of commitments with talk of “ought”s? Are Jill’s commitments a matter of what she ought to do or think? Not directly: if she thinks that roses are red and so are violets, perhaps what she ought to do is not to think that roses and violets are the same color, but to reconsider her views. (The same goes for the commitments of unalienated guards at a death camp: what they ought to do is to change their minds.)

We can look to R. M. Hare for part of what’s involved: it’s true that if Jill ought
to think that both roses and violets are red, then she ought to think that they are the same color. Oughts figure, then, in attributions of content, but in a special form: here an ought appears in the consequent of a conditional that has an ought in its antecedent. Another part is a prohibition: “Don’t accept \( p \) and withhold accepting \( q \).” In particular, we can tell Jill, “Don’t accept that both roses and violets are red and yet withhold accepting that they are both the same color.”

Attributions of mental content entail these patterns of oughts – and so in this sense, to think any thought is to occupy a normative status. This, I’ll take it, is Brandom’s normativity thesis. Though it calls for more discussion than I can give it here, I’ll accept it as plausible, and ask where it might lead.

**V Sapience, scorekeeping, and sociality**

To be truly sapient, one must be a discursive scorekeeper. This is Brandom’s sociality thesis. Now that we have reasoned our way to normativity, can we reason along the same lines to sociality? I’ll claim to glimpse how we might get part way and establish scorekeeping: the thesis that a truly sapient being must keep score. I’ll remain baffled, though, as to why the scorekeeping must be social.

A genuinely sapient being, Brandom tells us, not only becomes committed. He takes on commitments and acknowledges them. Acknowledging Brandom pairs with attributing: both, he tells us, are needed to institute the deontic statuses that figure in a discursive practice (p. 630). To say or assert something is to acknowledge publicly a commitment to what one says. To think something explicitly might likewise be to acknowledge a commitment, but privately: to acknowledge it to oneself. Perhaps, then, what full-fledged sapience requires is acknowledging commitments, at least to oneself.

For Jack fully to be thinking the thought he does, must he somehow acknowledge that that’s what he’s doing? Not as a separate mental act: if part of his thinking a thought is somehow to “acknowledge” that he’s so doing, then this acknowledgment just is his having the thought he does – or at least it is an aspect of his having the thought. If he comes to realize that he is being stalked by a tiger, he’d better not tarry on a separate thought, “I hereby acknowledge thinking that I’m being stalked by a tiger.” Perhaps, though, “implicitly in practice”, he does somehow keep track of his thinking and his commitments. It seems plausible, indeed, that he must somehow do so if he’s to count, in any full-fledged way, as sapient that he’s being stalked by a tiger. His realizing what he does involves, in some sense, “claiming to himself” that he’s being stalked by a tiger and keeping track of this claiming. To do this, we might now argue, he must implicitly conceive of himself as acting to alter a “score” of his commitments, acknowledgments, and the like. Sapience requires acknowledging what one is thinking, and this acknowledging involves keeping score on oneself. To be sapient, one must navigate the space of reasons; one must be able to present \( p \) to oneself as a reason for \( q \) and then to treat \( p \) as reason for \( q \). This much of understanding “what it is to give a reason”, I’ll agree, might well be required for the goings-on in Jack’s head to deserve the name sapience. To be sapient, let’s try
agreeing, Jack must be able to think, at least implicitly, things like “I’m being stalked by a tiger, and so I’m in danger.” Sapience involves some ability to keep track of these oughts, some implicit keeping score on oneself.

If all this is right, we have in hand a scorekeeping thesis: that sapience requires keeping score on oneself. Sociality, though, is another matter: we haven’t established that this scorekeeping must be in any way social. It needn’t, for anything we have shown, be discursive scorekeeping, with two or more people discussing.

Why, then, think that Jack’s scorekeeping must be in some way discursive? Perhaps the idea is this: to be sapient, one must “claim” things to oneself, keep score on oneself. And this “claiming to oneself” must be understood by reference to claiming things to others. The “score” in question must be in the first instance social: it figures in a social practice, as does the “score” that characterizes the point we’ve reached in a game of baseball.

It is hard to see, though, how to take these steps. True, there are ample parallels between discursive claimings and “claiming to oneself”, between the “score” one keeps on oneself and the “score” kept by a group in conversation. How do we establish, though, that social claimings and social “scores” explain their counterparts in soliloquy, and not the other way around? Does sapience require treating anything as a reason in talk? Why can’t it involve just regarding one thing as a reason for another as one thinks? For Jack to be sapient, we’ve agreed, he must be able to infer: he must be able to think, at least implicitly, things like “I’m being stalked by a tiger, and so I’m in danger.” Why, though, must full-fledged mental inferences – thoughts joined with an implicit “so” – require mastery of sayings joined by an implicit “so”?

A non-social thinker, imagine, has the thought that violets are blue. Is there anything in the oughts with which his so doing is fraught that reduces to absurdity the stipulation that he is non-social? If he ought to think this, he ought, if the question arises for him, to think that something is blue – but no obvious wedge for refuting non-sociality comes with this. He ought not to think the one and reject the other – again this seems consistent with non-sociality. He must have implicit track of these matters if he is to be fully sapient in his thinking, keeping a kind of score on himself. Again, though, it’s not clear why this couldn’t obtain for a non-social thinker.

Brandom’s book is long, rich, and complex, and so perhaps I am misinterpreting him, or perhaps I am missing a more successful train of argument. The main social practice arguments I’ve identified, though, seem not to work. Human thought and human discursive practice are tightly linked. Whether this shows that, in any important sense, sapience requires social practice, that social practice somehow “institutes” our thinking the thoughts we do, remains, to my mind, to be shown.16

References


**Notes**

2. I explore some aspects of such a program in Gibbard (1994).
3. See Hare (1964), who argues this line against Searle.
4. See, for instance, pp. 156, 260, and 626 with its note 22.
5. Little ‘s’s are used by Brandom as “scare quotes”, and I’ll sometimes follow his practice. I use single quotes to mention linguistic expressions, and double quotes for all other uses.
6. Wittgenstein and many others, to be sure, would challenge the possibility of private thoughts outside public practice. But at this stage of our discussion, a successful “private language argument” remains to be offered. I don’t think the philosophical literature shows an agreed interpretation of how the argument is supposed to go – or indeed that it offers any interpretation that has been established as a convincing argument, which can now serve as established background for further argument.
7. Brandom contrasts saying with “claiming”, which he tells us is roughly the same as “holding” something to be the case. Claiming needn’t involve an overt act of speech, but to claim one must be disposed to assert on query (pp. 539–42). I’m puzzled where secrets fit this schema: something one is keeping secret from all the world, come what may, won’t be elicited discursively, and so it isn’t something one “claims”. Secret knowledge or opinion, though, can explain one’s actions. Brandom presumably holds that having a secret is somehow parasitic on practices of claiming and saying – but that’s just the thesis for which I’m trying to find a basis.
9. Brandom, to be sure, issues copious denials of such a possibility: “The contentfulness of the states attributed as part of a simple intentional interpretation of an individual consists in a sort of inferential articulation that is not intelligible solely in terms of the role those states play in practical reasoning” (p. 158). I am asking after the basis of these denials.
10. See articles in Baron-Cohen et al. (1993). Dan Sperber pointed this line of considerations out to me.
11. A museum, I suppose, might institute a classification of dinosaurs as “cute” or not. Is this the analogy to pursue? What we want to know about thought is not how schools, foundations, and the like institute it, but how most adequately to think about it. Everyday practice might “institute” thought in a sense that plausibly extends the way a museum could institute the cuteness of dinosaurs – but if this makes a bigger difference to thought than museums have made to the deportment of dinosaurs, that needs to be shown.
Sometimes Brandom speaks as if an attribution counts as “normative” if it describes the norms of a practice. He speaks as if the phrase ‘ought according to their practice’ counts as normative without further argument; “What a scorekeeper or interpreter has attributed counts as a practice in this sense ... only if it is specified in explicitly normative terms – in terms of what, **according to the practice**, it is **correct or proper** to do, what one **ought** to do, what one becomes **committed or entitled** to by a certain sort of performance, and so on” (p. 625, bold print mine). On this reading, his claim that to say what a practice is is to say something normative is trivial, so long as we accept that according to any practice, certain things ought to be done. I take it, though, that Brandom thinks characterizations of a practice to be normative in a strict sense: “To talk of practices is to talk of proprieties of performance; ... it is to prescribe rather than describe” (159). If Dennis admits, then, that according to the practice certain people ought to be shot, must he be, according to Brandom, in some sense **prescribing** the shooting?

Stevenson (1944, pp. 2–8).

Brandom himself, to be sure, maintains that the right direction of explanation is from public statuses to private thought. We can’t yet, though, take this all as proven; our problem is how Brandom could convince us of his claims.

Hare (1971) analyzes hypothetical imperatives on this pattern.

I very much thank participants in a seminar we devoted to Brandom’s book: Laura Bugge, Eric Lormand, Christoph Lumer, Ian Rumfitt, Stephen Schulz, Lawrence Sklar, Dan Sperber, and others. I owe far more to these people than I can keep track of. I have also benefited greatly from conversation with Brandom on some of these matters.
I agree profoundly with the Wittgensteinian thrust of Robert Brandom’s exciting work.1 We can see this as a multi-dimensional holism. Like Wittgenstein, and others who ultimately relate back to Kant, such as Hegel, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, he offers a devastating critique of the atomism which is implicit in the mainstream post-Cartesian epistemology.

This, as I have argued elsewhere, can be seen as a (partly justified) method which has been illegitimately projected onto ontology. The method is one which is meant to check and verify our too hastily drawn conclusions, and consists in breaking the problematic area down into its smallest parts, and checking each of these and their connections. The illegitimate ontological projection issues in the idea that this is how we in fact think, deep down.

So we accredit the idea (1) that one could first take in one piece of information, then another; then link them, and see the correlation; and hence make inferences. Then (2) one could pass to another plane, and start communicating these “ideas”; to which end one would “invent” language. This too proceeds atomistically: first one word is invented, then another, then another. See Condillac’s famous treatise.2

Process (1) doesn’t make sense for Brandom. How could we take in an isolated piece of information? What sense could we make of such an isolated bit of information? Well what sense do we make of it? Elder says: “Go, Scout, and see if there are any tiger tracks.” Scout comes back: “Elder, I saw a paw track in the sand!” That’s a particulate bit, but it makes sense here within our whole general grasp of our situation, which includes forest, tigers, the consequent danger of being eaten, our collaborative efforts to avoid this and other dangers, and so on.

This bit is relevant because it will license multiple inferences, practical and factual. Included among the former would be here: “Let’s not go there now.” So Brandom’s opening move in Making It Explicit is absolutely crucial. He dethrones representation as the primary building-block of thought and language. What is crucial is inferences.

Here he joins up with the holism of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, who insist on a primacy of our whole grasp of things; in Kant-speak: the transcendental unity of apperception, over the elementary bits.
Process (2) likewise doesn’t make sense. Again, what could we do with, what sense could we make of, a single word? Here both Brandom and Wittgenstein connect back to Herder in his famous critique of Condillac. The French thinker tried to explain the origin of language through his famous fable of two children in the wilderness. It was part of their natural endowment that they tended to cry out when frightened. The cry was in a sense a natural sign of danger. The children come in time to use this as a word for danger; they treat this as an “instituted” sign in Condillac’s terms.

Herder protests that the really difficult issue has been covered up. How do they become capable of understanding what a “word”, an “instituted” sign is, what it involves? Building on both Kant and Frege, Wittgenstein unpacks something of what is involved, that is, the background of practices and activities and the understanding they suppose, which make possible, by making sense of, our uses of language. Meaningful language requires a context of action.

Canonically, we can see this consciousness developing in our philosophical tradition over the last two centuries or so, gradually undoing the tunnel vision abstractions of the main line of modern epistemology (Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, and Condillac). Brandom’s Tales of the Mighty Dead sets out one interesting version of this canon. I offer a simplified version here. Kant introduced the primacy of the judgment, that is, you can’t understand what it is to master a word, or concept, without mastering the feat of making judgments. Frege develops this point further with his enunciation of the primacy of the sentence: “Nur im Zusammenhange eines Satzes bedeuten die Wörter etwas.”

But Wittgenstein takes us well beyond this, because he sees that making judgments, cast in the form of sentences, is only one among many language games. More accurately, there is a family of such games, which have in common that they put in play “propositional contents”, combinations of reference and predication, which can be used to make empirical claims (“Sam smokes”), to ask questions about how things are (“Does Sam smoke?”), and to give commands (“Sam, smoke!”). But lots of other things are going on in language. We also establish intimacy or distance; open contact and close it off; cry for, and give or withhold sympathy; disclose the beauty of the world, or the depths of our feelings, or the virtues of the good life, or the nature and demands of God or the gods, and so on.

Some of these other activities are going on in and through the enunciation of sentences, and the making of judgments: “Die Welt ist tief” (Nietzsche); “God is Great!” But a lot else is going on which we won’t get if we just focus on the judgments qua judgments. A great deal is carried in the rhetorical stance, tone of voice, body language, choice of words with a given resonance: these are clearly determinative of intimacy or distance, giving or withholding sympathy, and much else besides. Moreover, the disclosive power of our words in poetry is plainly something we often can’t bring to light just by fixing clearly the reference and predication of the judgments we can identify (sometimes, indeed, the force depends on the very uncertainty attending these).

All these points suggest that the boundaries of language as we ordinarily take it, that is, speech in words, are perhaps too restrictive. Some of the disclosive work
of poetry, rhetorical exhortation, the projection of ideals, the revelation of beauty, and so on, has close analogies to what goes on in painting, in music, in dance, in gesture. Perhaps to get clear on the whole phenomenon of human language, we need to see how the narrower phenomenon (speech in words) relates to the broader field of the whole range of “symbolic forms”, in Cassirer’s terms.

Wittgenstein takes the context-building of Kant and Frege (judgment or sentence as the context for word-meaning), and in turn embeds this in a wider frame: as one set of language games among others; and he sets the language games in the all-encompassing frame of a form of life.

There is another dimension of Wittgenstein’s contextualization, which goes beyond Frege and Kant (though not Hegel, to take an important figure from Brandom’s Tales of the Mighty Dead). Language games are social, they are developed and played out in exchange. If a word can’t have meaning outside of the capacity of making judgments, this capacity itself can only arise within games of exchange, what Brandom calls games of “giving and asking for reasons”. The primacy of sentence over word turns out to mean also the primacy of the dialogical over the monological.

Much of the above, in particular this latter point, is brilliantly developed in Brandom’s work. We are all very much in his debt, so that it is almost churlish to enter caveats and cavils here. But philosophy is in a sense a perpetual disturbance of the peace, and so I plunge on.

I have set the stage in the above which should allow me to identify the area in which (I think) our disagreement lies. The stage is set by the story I have been telling, which seems close to Brandom’s story, of our slow and difficult emergence from the hole that modern epistemology and the primacy of monological representation dug for us. The climbing gear, the pick and pitons, which have enabled this are the identifications of essential contexts. The isolated bit of information cannot be outside the framework of judgments, which means also a framework of exchange, a particular language game, eventually a way of life.

The question that needs to be asked here is: how far must this embedding in necessary contexts go? There is a set of language games, whose goal is to make, exchange, and check claims about the factual state of things, and draw inferences about other states, or practically about what to do. Plainly this is a package deal. One can’t imagine a language capacity which would consist of deploying just isolated moves in this set of games – say, a single person having a single bit of information, then finding a word for it, then communicating it to another; or people just having representations, then making inferences.

But is this package – let’s call it the “everyday fact-establishing and practical” package – itself self-sufficient? Or can we only make sense of our having this set of capacities if we set them in the context of our ability to operate through the whole range of symbolic forms which I gestured at above?

Right away this question might appear ill-formed, until we are able to define the boundaries of “fact-establishing”. Does it include establishing “facts” about the beauty of things, the depth of feelings, the virtues of the good life, the existence and
will of gods? After all, about these matters we may also give and ask for reasons. But to take the term in this broad sense would in effect foreclose the question I’m trying to pose. The answer would have to be negative.

Let me set out my reasons for this last claim, because they are crucial to my argument here. A serious attempt in prose to set out true judgments about the beauty of things (aesthetics), the virtues of life (ethics), or the nature of God (theology) has to draw on uses of language, in Cassirer’s broad sense, which are disclosive. I mean the uses which either without asserting at all, or going beyond their assertive force, make something manifest through articulating it.

Let me say something about this assertoric/disclosive distinction that I have been invoking here. This is meant to mark a contrast. A pure case of the disclosive would be where we use language, or some symbolic form to articulate and thus make accessible to us something – a feeling, a way of being, a possible meaning of things – without making any assertion at all. For me, Chopin’s Fantaisie-Impromptu in C Sharp Minor articulates a certain as yet indefinable longing; it draws me into it, and makes it part of my world. I dare say I am not alone in seeing this in the music, and that this is not foreign to the inspiration Chopin had in composing it. A human possibility is articulated and disclosed here, but nothing at all is asserted.

At the other end, when the cook shouts out of the kitchen to the men in the yard “Soup’s on!”, something is asserted, but nothing is disclosed. But the contrast doesn’t simply hold between “pure” uses of language or symbols. For an immense range of human speech and symbol, there is both assertion and disclosure. Very obviously, this is the case in poetry and novels, but it is clearly present also in works of philosophy, as soon as one is attentive to their rhetorical dimension, and the range of literary reference they draw on. In these cases, we can speak of the disclosive dimension of a work, for instance, the stance to the world that an author is articulating for us, that he may even be drawing us into, convincing us to adopt, so powerful is his portrayal, the stance which I as a reader critic might capture in my own assertoric prose, defining it by describing its essential features, but which is not so described in the novel. Tolstoy offers a useful example, because he couldn’t resist being his own critic, and offering long moralistic descriptions in *War and Peace*, driving home in assertoric form what was meant to be disclosed in the narrative.

Now my claim here is that there are certain matters which can’t be properly explored without recourse to the disclosive dimension. That is, there couldn’t be an intelligent discussion of the beauty of landscape which didn’t either deploy, or draw on our familiarity with, say, certain paintings, or certain powerfully evocative descriptions. There couldn’t be a discussion of Christian piety which didn’t draw on, say, the music of Bach, or certain hymns, or Chartres Cathedral, or an evocative life of Saint Francis, or the *Divine Comedy*, or ... the list could be extended almost indefinitely. Treatises on ethics either draw on disclosive works, or move at some or other point into an evocative-disclosive key (“the starry skies above and the moral law within”; or the contrast between the social virtues and the “monkish” virtues). The notion of a totally rhetoric-free work on ethics is close to absurdity. Few books are more unintentionally comic than the moral treatises of fiercely (on
epistemic grounds) anti-rhetorical, metaphor-mistrusting philosophers, like Hobbes or Bentham. The reader is offered a feast of powerful images – Leviathan, lives which are “nasty, brutish and short,” “two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure” – all in the name of sober, purified reason.

So there is no point even asking the question, whether the fact-establishing and practical family of games could exist on its own, unless we draw the boundaries pretty narrowly. One way of drawing them would be to fence in the zone in terms of the everyday practical issues dealt with. In this zone, we establish the state of things and make inferences of an everyday practical kind. The practical inferences draw on norms that are treated as unproblematic, and remain unproblematized, or else on the uncontroversial behavioural meanings of things.

Examples of the first might be: “I’m invited to dine with the Governor-General, so I’d better fetch my tux from the cleaners”; of the second: “There’s a tiger loose in the woods, so don’t go there,” or “It’s going to rain, so take an umbrella.” This class might also include: “Patricia says the paintings are beautiful, so we’ll go to the Exhibition.” Brandom’s examples are mainly drawn from this everyday domain.

Beyond this, there are more specialized domains, where the things taken for granted in the everyday domain might be challenged. For instance, we might question, and hence transform, our practices of fact-finding (science, among other things, does this). Or we might question our norms – maybe I should follow the example of Evo Morales, and wear a sweater to dinner with the Governor-General, to make a political point? And are we sure that Patricia knows beautiful painting when she sees it? Of course, the boundaries are fluid here, but some rough distinctions of level can be made, defining the everyday as the domain of the unproblematized.

Now we might hope to treat the everyday package so defined as self-sufficient, as not dependent on the disclosive dimension of language, and thus on the wider range of symbolic forms. We might then make another move: extend the boundary to allow in the specialized domains of (natural?) science, because these by their very nature operate on a set of exclusions which demand that we sideline the disclosive, that is, they function without drawing on metaphysical, theological, or aesthetic considerations, or on moral values, and without being swayed in one’s reasonings by the rhetorical force of the expressions used.

We would then arrive at a familiar grouping, the language games of science and everyday life, which the Vienna positivists already identified as their zone of unproblematic meaningfulness, over against “metaphysics”, “poetry”, religion, and the like.

But within this general zoning proposal, there are harder and softer versions. There are hard-line materialists, for instance, who frown on sciences of the human which aren’t taken from the beginning as reducible to some level of natural science (minds to be explained by the functioning of brains, emotions by endocrinology). And there are more permissive versions which leave these questions open. One very severe version, which wants to admit only natural-science style causation into its ontology, and which appeals to what Quine called “a taste for desert landscapes”, is denounced by Brandom under the name “naturalism”. He insists, against them,
that we have to introduce norms into our account of language. Naturalism consists in the attempt to “bake a normative cake with non-normative ingredients”, and is bound to fail. Here Brandom stands in a very important modern tradition, with Russell, Husserl, and others in their denunciation of “psychologism”, and their recognition that this type of reduction makes nonsense of logic.

Moving farther in an inclusive direction, some philosophers want to fence in certain reasonings about ethics, in fact what is usually called “morals”, that is norms which regulate our actions toward each other. This inclusion can be justified by the claim that we can define a morals on the basis of “reason alone”, independent of metaphysics, theology, or people’s conceptions of the good life. Such attempts in our day usually draw either on Benthamite or Kantian traditions, and they include some of the most influential of today’s moral philosophers: e.g. Rawls (in one of his stages), Habermas, Scanlon. I, alas, haven’t read all of Brandom’s work, but I suspect that he has some sympathy for a position of this range.

But even a broad-gauge ontology, which would allow norms, and even moral norms, into the bounded area, would still possibly be able to leave the disclosive uses of language outside, and hence could lay claim to a positive answer to my above question, whether the fact-establishing practical family can be seen as at least potentially self-sufficient.

Before I come to grips with Brandom’s work, I’d like to explore a bit further the reasons for defining such a bounded frame for fact-establishing discourse. Of course, part of it may be the familiar “secularist” outlook that wishes to separate itself from the religious and metaphysical beliefs which have dominated the human past. But the crucial idea involved here is a concept of “reason alone” (“die bloße Vernunft”, in Kant’s famous formulation.) By this I mean a notion of human reason which can suffice to tackle the whole range of inescapable human problems but which can do so without relying on the deliverances of religion or metaphysics. This is not synonymous with but can easily evolve into a notion of reason that doesn’t have to have recourse to the disclosive-articulative dimension of human language in the broad sense.

The bridges between these two formulations are, first, that religious claims, and often also metaphysical ones, rely heavily on alleged truths derived from this dimension. But second, there is the fact that the canons of argument can be made much more rigorous and conclusive, if one leaves the disclosive aside. We can more easily agree on the conclusions of natural science, and certain facts about human desires and aspirations, as well as the rules of logic, while differences on the nature of beauty, on the highest virtues, on the existence of God, and the like, seem quite intractable. By stripping down its range of operation, reason can become more effective in reaching common conclusions.

Encouraging this mode of thinking stands obviously the spectacular success of natural science since Galileo, which has been won precisely by factoring out the whole culturally varied domain of the human meanings of things, and framing the phenomena to be studied in neutral terms in a stance of disengagement. This has obviously been the model inspiring the aspiration to a more restricted, and for this
reason more effective reason, although only the most radical, materialist versions would make natural science the royal road to all valid truth.

So we can see that here are powerful motivations to believe in a family of fact-establishing practical language games, whose scope is drawn narrowly enough to exclude the disclosive. Now the hope here is that this narrowed realm of reason can suffice to decide all the inescapable issues of human life. It follows that what the disclosive dimension yields is not essential for these issues. This can be assured, on one hand by declaring certain deliverances of the disclosive dimension as without any real object (religion, metaphysics), and by declaring others as expressive of legitimate differences of taste and temperament (ethics, i.e. modes of the good life, as against moral rules; and aesthetics, the beautiful, what moves us in art and nature). We will differ on these latter questions, but there is no common object to agree about; what moves us reflects our own variable natures, not some common independent reality.

So one of the strongest strands of the motivation to this narrowed reason is epistemological, that certain questions would be easier to resolve if the really divisive issues could be legitimately left aside. In this, there is an echo of the original epistemological tradition, whose errors can also be seen as epistemologically driven. I argued above that we can see the original positing of particulate bits of information as a kind of reflection of what was seen as a good method. This is the one which Descartes sets out in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, and involves our breaking any issue down into its smallest elements, and then building up to the global solution by careful steps. The error was to project this resolutive-composite method on to the mind, not just as a good way of proceeding in certain questions, which it undoubtedly is, but as how the mind really works. We ontologized the method.

The question arises whether something similar isn’t happening here, in this narrowing of reason. It would be handy epistemically if a restricted definition of reason alone really panned out, that is, really could solve all the inescapable questions; so we jump too quickly to the belief that this is how things are.

The original mistake had two sides: first, ontologizing the method; second, as a result, applying it universally, even where it didn’t work at all. So atomism was applied everywhere, to thoughts in our minds, to “impressions” of the world (Hume), to words invented one by one to form language (Condillac), and to societies as broken down into individuals (Hobbes). Some of these applications turned out to be crippling, and we are only slowly climbing out of them. (We still hear of “methodological individualism” in politics and sociology.)

In the case we’re looking at here, our understanding of human language, it might also be true that the mistake has two sides: first, ontologizing the method, that is believing that this narrower reason really can resolve all inescapable problems; and then, because of this, applying it to areas where it is disastrously maladapted (like the study of societies with quite different cultures, or of ethical ways of life, or of religions, and so on).

But is it a mistake? We mustn’t draw the parallels too close. Of course, if we look at the actual phylogenesis of human language-users, and the ontogenesis of human agents, it is clear that this stripped down reason has not been operating from the
start. A plausible account of phylogenesis, like that of Merlin Donald, for instance, would see our hominid ancestors developing a culture of linguistic communication through stages: first, involving mimesis, ritual and dance; then, perhaps later, myth and narrative; finally, developing what we think of now as speech, with the capacity to operate on the meta-level, making second-order judgments about the validity of first-order ones. The very possibility of conceiving stripped down reason only appears at the third level, and is realized over centuries of development.

Something parallel is obviously true for ontogenesis, where the mimetic and the narrative have a big role early on, before the child grows beyond what Piaget calls “egocentrism”.

Now such phylo- and ontogenetic considerations immediately invalidate the epistemological-atomist claim, because that tried to tell us how the mind always works. But “reason alone” isn’t vulnerable to this. It can allow for a genesis in which it emerges out of more primitive modes of thought. We slough off these earlier forms, and the assumptions about the cosmos and God on which they depend, and we become adult and independent reasoners. We have grown beyond our “self-inflicted nonage” (“selbstbeschuldigte Unmündigkeit”, as Kant called it), and can reason in this way.

The issue of false ontologization here is quite independent of our genetic story; it amounts to this: can we conceive of a viable way of human life in which the fruits of the articulative-disclosive dimension are clearly segregated from public reason, and relegated to the zone of differential personal experience (which, of course, wouldn’t prevent us from mutual communication and exchange about them)? The second question, that about the scope of this “reason alone”, takes up the same issue from another direction. Does this stripped down reason constitute a good method for deciding only a certain restricted range of questions, for instance, those of natural science, where no one would contest its appropriateness? Or is it also omnicompetent, that is, sufficient for all inescapable questions to be resolved by reason? These questions are closely related, but as we shall see below, slightly different.

Okay, why am I going on at length about this, when I should be talking about Robert Brandom? I crave the reader’s indulgence, the more so in that I want to go a little bit longer talking at this level. The issue I’m addressing is this: after all the discoveries we have made (and Brandom helped make) about the necessary contexts of our ordinary uses of language, is there one more contextualization we have to make? Are our everyday fact-establishing practical games of giving and asking for reasons, which we have shown to be the essential context for all the micro-moves within them, themselves only possible in a broader context, that of the range of symbolic forms which run the full range from pure assertoric to pure disclosive?

And a good reason for asking this question is that there has been a strong temptation to answer it in the negative, to assert the self-sufficiency of the factual-practical. We saw one range of motives for this, following the reasoning of the Vienna Circle, and another (overlapping) range, which springs from a deep investment in the idea of a post-metaphysical way of life grounded on “reason alone”.

39
But there is also another very influential view, which draws its motivation from a certain biologism. Human beings should be explicable, like other animals, in terms of their biology. The exigencies of human survival and the hazards of evolution have wired in to our natures a certain number of goals. These can be established, as for any other species, by observing us.

If we think of humans as another animal species, seeking survival, then the development of language can appear as a great advantage. Imagine that a group of hominids regularly hunts mammoths. They surround the great beast and attack from several sides; or try to scare it into a trap. What an inestimable boon it would be to develop a mode of communication permitting something like our factual-practical family of language games. You could shout out: “Watch out! He’s turning left!” This is the context in which some theorists seem to think of the evolution of language, for instance Steven Pinker in *The Language Instinct.* And Bernard Williams in *Truth and Truthfulness* argues plausibly that these two goals, establishing reliable truth, and communicating it reliably to one’s fellows, would be highly prized in early human societies.

So from the evolutionary biological standpoint, there is already a positive reason to see the factual-practical family as the crucial gain over their hominid ancestors that language offered *Homo sapiens.*

And negatively, there is a reason to look askance at the disclosive. We saw above that this cannot be avoided if we want to make a serious attempt to establish what is really beautiful, or really good, or really godly. But the aim of the sociobiological approach is to bracket these questions. True, people seek what they call truth, beauty, goodness, and often think of these in relation to God. But the “scientific” approach disregards the language, and looks at the actual patterns of behaviour. In this way, following Hume, we can establish the patterns of reaction called “morality”: actuated by sympathy, people react positively to actions which enhance the general utility. We can also quite well understand how this kind of pattern would have been selected for in evolution: bad team players must have been given a hard time, and had a short life.

Similarly, rather than focusing on the issue of what true love is, and the fidelity it requires, we note that pair-bonding as a behaviour pattern has been selected for. An obvious “just-so” story suggests itself to explain why the gene for this would become preponderant. And, of course, another “just-so” story can explain why, while upholding the general rule, so many men want to “cheat”. Having multiple partners spreads one’s genes wider.

Obviously, to practise this kind of sociobiological explanation, the disclosive offers no help. It can only distract from the main story, which is the selection of certain patterns of external behaviour, however rationalized in terms of goodness and beauty. The stripped down picture of human life now looks like this: through evolution humans have acquired a tendency to desire certain patterns of action: pair-bonding of men with women, some degree of mutual aid, and to react positively to actions which increase the general utility. But these are not sufficient to determine their behaviour, because they can and often must reason how to encompass these
goals, or manifest these reactions. Moreover, thanks to language they can deliberate together, and also pursue enquiry, so that over time their rational calculations become more effective and far-reaching.

All this points to the thought that what is crucial about human language is just the “Viennese” combination above: the fact-finding pragmatic family of language games, augmented by empirical science.

So we have isolated three motivations to assert the self-sufficiency of the factual-practical family: the “Vienna” one (all other uses are meaningless); the “post-metaphysical” one (we are acceding to a culture based on “reason alone”); and the sociobiological one.

But why talk about all this in a paper on Robert Brandom? Because I suspect that I might have been talking about him after all, that in other words, he subscribes to some version of the self-sufficiency of fact-establishing practical language games, or otherwise put, of stripped down reason.

And the evidence? Well, remember, I just said “suspect”. We aren’t at the stage of an indictment here, let alone a conviction. Yes, but the evidence?

Twofold: first, certain statements which belong very much to the vocabulary of the stripped down version. Which ones? Well, statements like this, about the norms that we have to suppose at the heart of language games, that “their existence is neither supernatural or mysterious”.14 Or, again about norms, as products of social interaction: as such, they “are not studied by the natural sciences – though they are not for that reason to be treated as spooky or supernatural”.15

Second, in defense of these demurrals, Brandom seems to want to insist on how norms are somehow our creatures. Normative attitudes, he says, “have been appealed to in explaining where discursive norms came from – how sapience could have arisen out of the primordial nondiscursive ooze of mere sentience. For it has been claimed not just that we discursive beings are creatures of norms but also that norms are in some sense creatures of ours ...”16 Now in some sense this last sentence must be true; the “creating” goes both ways. But I believe that there is also an asymmetry here, which this phrase doesn’t quite capture, and which has very much to do with the issue of stripped down reason.

All right, maybe I am hypersensitive, pathologically suspicious, jumping to conclusions about Brandom’s real meaning. So for the remainder of this discussion, let me switch tack. I want to say what I think is wrong with both of these claims, and leave undecided whether Brandom puts them forward in the sense that I am denying them.

Take the first group: “spooky” is too vague; and “supernatural” is odd, even absurd. (What is part of the “natural order”, if not fish swimming, birds flying, humans talking?) So let me focus on “mysterious”. It seems to me a very apt word to characterize human language, and its emergence in the course of hominid-to-human evolution.

I want to distinguish three facets of the meaning of this widely used word, not all of which are always in play, of course. (1) We use it to designate something which
defies understanding, something we can’t explain, which even seems impossible given how we (think we) know things work, but nevertheless happens. This is the sense in which a novel is a “murder mystery”. (2) It can also mean something which is (1), but also given a great importance, because the puzzling matter is something of great depth and moment; what is still barely understood here would reveal something of great moment about us, the cosmos, God, or whatever. (3) If we draw on the etymology, which relates the word to what is hidden, and then also to the process of initiation, in which secrets are revealed, then another facet comes to the fore: here we are dealing with the way that we could come to know more about the matter in question. Something is a “mystery” in this sense, when we can’t come to understand it by taking a disengaged stance to it, applying already articulated concepts, but when we have to open ourselves to our experience of it, explore it by immersing ourselves in it. For example, the behaviour of people of another culture can be mysterious, but we can learn to understand it by immersing ourselves in it, interacting with the people, remaining open to their values, norms, ways of talking. If we remain fixed within our initial judgments about them – strange, coarse, barbaric, and so on – we will impede the learning, and never grasp what they’re about. Or the appeal of a work of art can be baffling, until we allow ourselves to be led by the articulations of a helpful friend and give our full attention to it.

Now it is clear that some things can be (1) without being (2) or (3) (murder mysteries). Some things are both (1) and (3), without being (2) (a work of art which is itself not terribly profound). But some things are at once (1) and (2) and (3). Leaving aside the mysteries of religion, I would nominate human language and its genesis as the prime example of such a three-faceted mystery. It seems to me (1) that we haven’t got a clue how these capacities of mimesis, narrative, and then descriptive speech emerged out of earlier life forms, and only a very incomplete grasp of how they relate to each other. Then (2) that there are few matters which touch more profoundly on what it is to be a human being. We are in sum the “zoon echon logon” of which Aristotle speaks, but giving “logos” its fuller sense englobing both speech and reason. And then, to the extent that articulating to disclose is crucial to language, it is the very realm where (3) holds, where we have to engage with things (works of art, modes of human life, our relation to God) in a stance of openness and potential neologism, in order to articulate what they’re about.

So that saying that language and/or its genesis isn’t mysterious is like saying that Atlas isn’t strong, or Aphrodite isn’t beautiful. It sounds weird.

Yes, but if we could side-step the articulative-disclosive, then (3) would not hold; and also (1) would be less true, because one of the more unfathomable aspects of language would be sidelined. That’s what makes me attribute the narrower view to people who say this kind of thing. I know that we could look at it all on a rhetorical level. That the repudiation of mystery and the supernatural is there to balance the (to materialists shocking) idea that norms can’t be reduced to causal processes like those in inanimate nature. It’s meant to express some kind of agreement in spite of the difference. But around what? I will return to this in a minute.

But first, I admit that my reaction to the denial of mystery as just weird depends
on my substantive view on the main issue. I want to answer this question with a resounding negative: the factual-practical can’t be self-sufficient. Our ability to operate with this family of language games depends on our operating in the whole range of symbolic forms. The articulative/disclosive is the essential background to our most immediately “practical” discourse.

In other words, I remain convinced that the articulative cannot be peeled off from the public giving of and asking for reasons, and hence that (3) applies. Why not? Because even in those narrow areas where a stripped down reason appropriately applies, as in natural science, or logic and mathematics, there is a continuing and I believe irremovable presence of the articulative-disclosive.

There’s a big case to argue here, and not very much space to lay it out, so let me just mention some sub-claims which are meant to back up the bigger claim. Here are a few, which tackle one form of the question:

(a) Even in the exchanges about natural science, rhetoric is being deployed. It doesn’t seem possible to argue, to try to convince each other, without framing the debate rhetorically, with such phrases as “everyone agrees that”, “surely, the crucial issue is”, and the like.

(b) The practice of this austere type of enquiry is sustained and guided by an ethic, a certain notion of human excellence, of dedication to the truth, of unflinching facing of unwelcome findings, of full communication. Indeed, this connects back to (a), in that rhetorical stances in these exchanges often try to position the speaker as a paragon practitioner of this ethic (and/or the opponent as grievously failing in this department).

(c) Becoming the kind of person who can operate under this ethic is inseparable from a development of self-consciousness and self-examination. It’s not by accident that this science develops first in a culture which is simultaneously developing radical self-scrutiny, and a sense of one’s own responsibility.

What is emerging here is the way in which very stripped down fact-establishing language games still need a Sitz im Leben, in a life in which the kind of self-understandings which can only develop through articulation and disclosure play an ineliminable role. The claim is not that considerations about these disclosures, say, about the ethic that science demands, play a direct role as premises in the arguments deployed – except negatively, that your words are disqualified if you’re violating these precepts. It is rather that the fact-establishing game can’t be carried on except within a richer form of life that includes considerations which it can’t deploy itself in the giving and asking for (its kinds of) reasons. Science with agents who couldn’t understand and respond to this ethic is a human impossibility, though it might be imagined in a strange far-away galaxy in a science fiction story.

The argument for this contextualization is not the same directly evident one which we saw in the deconstruction of atomistic epistemology, namely, that something like a particulate representation, prior to inference, doesn’t make any sense. You could write a science fiction story about scientists who were ethical zombies,
as I said above; this proves that in some sense it is imaginable. But it is humanly impossible.

So much for the argument against ontologization of this stripped down reason. But we can also argue against the other side of the stripped down claim, which holds that this reduced reason can handle all inescapable issues. Here my considerations will already be familiar. (1) It seems to me wildly implausible that we can ever come to understand human society in history, especially cultures very different from ours, without heavy reliance on the articulative-disclosive dimension of language. (2) It also seems implausible that we can develop a morality based on “reason alone” without a consideration of the features which make life a good one, and these, I would argue, can’t be adequately considered without articulation. (3) I can’t accept a theory of art which voids all objective value, and understands value purely in terms of our responses. (4) And, of course, I don’t start from atheist premises in considering religion. I realize that all these reasons will not be equally cogent for readers; but just one suffices to upset the belief in an omnicompetent stripped down “reason alone”.

These are my reasons for seeing language as a paradigm case of mystery in the richest, three-faceted sense above. Let me now turn to the other claim that Brandom makes: we create norms as much as they create us.

Now there are different cases here. Sometimes, we really create norms out of whole cloth. We invent a new game, or transform an old one; say, we follow the legendary account of how rugby arose out of a “foul” in a game of soccer. Someone picked up the ball and ran, and then people got the idea of making this the central activity in a new game. (It’s supposed to have happened at Rugby School; the rest is history.)

But how about the fact-establishing games of giving and asking for reasons? Well, in a sense, we don’t just establish the rules of this game, because it has already a telos. In fact, we repeatedly redesign the rules of enquiry and exchange throughout human history, in order to be truer to what comes to seem to us to be the telos. Hence the revolutions in paradigms, and even in the description of the enquiry itself, as we saw in the seventeenth century. There is invention here, but it takes the form of better realizing what is seen as a pre-existing goal. It is hard to know what to say here, because the goal is defined in quite a new way; but the sense of improving on what others were aiming at before us is crucial here, and differentiates this case from inventing rugby, for instance.

Something similar is true of moral renewals and revolutions. There is a widespread western narrative of “secularization” which goes something like this: formerly people took their values from the divine or the cosmos; then they awoke, and realized that we are on our own. So they took it into their own hands to establish their values. This makes moral/political change seem like inventing rugby. It pleases us to do things this way. But this seems to me wildly distorted as an account. The thinkers who developed the first contract theories, understanding societies as founded by individuals, and not as pre-existing orders, had a strong sense that the foundation must conform to the norms they called “Natural Law”, and very often that this law was backed by God. The atheists of the French Revolution appealed to Nature; the
Bolsheviks to the historical development of freedom. They recognized demands they had to meet.

There is an asymmetry on these serious issues. Our revolutions, redesignings, always come in response to a demand which is seen as prior; be it that of grasping reality (science), or that of building a properly human way of political life. The demands are prior in two senses. First, they are demands made on us as human beings, which are valid, independent of our choices. But, second, just because they address human beings as such, we can see earlier understandings of the kind of demand in question (enquiring about the nature of things, building the good society) as faulty versions of what we now identify (more) correctly.

This is even more clearly the case, if we think of the ontogenesis of each one of us. We all enter a world in which certain goals, values, goods, ways of talking, thinking, enquiring are established. We only learn these activities because we take these as given, at first unquestionable. Then we may come to innovate, even in revolutionary fashion. But we are altering what is there in order to bring it more into true with its inherent telos.

But there is one way in which we could have a real sense of creating our norms. Suppose we could arrive at a point of perfect transparency: we could understand by reason why our present norms have to be the way they are, given the inescapable telê of human life. What grasping the world means is studying it with the methods of natural science. What the good society means is one organized by norms, which themselves are dictated by “reason alone”.

There are two variant bases for this sense of transparency. The first, of Humean origin, is illustrated by the sociobiological approach. We discover the ends of human life when we grasp how humans have evolved, and with what built-in ends. Enquiry then concerns the factual nature of the world, and deliberation deals with the best way of responding to this factual nature given our ends. True, this is not what “science” meant to earlier ages, when it was still deeply involved with metaphysics and theology, but we now see that there is nothing further we need to understand (except in detail) about our predicament and the kind of giving and asking for reasons that it requires. There is no place for a sense of mystery.

The second basis is inspired by Kant. Here the key notion is that our norms can be established by reason alone; or else that reason establishes the form of all moral norms, and we only need to fill in the facts to come to determinate conclusions about what we ought to do. There would be no simple brute acceptance of certain ultimate goods, such as human rights, democracy, equality, where we couldn’t see by transparent reason alone why these have to be the criteria of right. Since we are reasoning beings, there is no constraint in our being guided by reason alone.

This is the Kantian dream, and it has seduced many, and “the best, among them” to quote Pound. It would really establish a symmetry because the norms which create us, as free rational beings, would themselves be dictated by free rationality.

In other words, some variant of the post-metaphysical, or the sociobiological approach, which would establish the self-sufficiency of the factual-practical family of language games, might succeed in taking the mystery out of language.
But I’m wandering too far. I mention these possibilities not because I’m convinced that Brandom adopts either one, but because each in its own way would establish a real symmetry between the way we are made by our culture, our norms, our language, and the way it makes us, a symmetry of the kind he seems to espouse.

Brandom does reject one kind of “naturalism”, one which would claim to give an adequate account of norms in terms of natural science. But there are other forms, sociobiological for instance, on which I find it hard to interpret him.

What Brandom actually says seems to suggest more something like the rugby analogy: “[D]iscursive deontic statuses are instituted by the practices that govern scorekeeping with deontic attitudes.” He also says that while normative statuses are instituted by practical attitudes, their being correct or incorrect doesn’t just depend on these attitudes. But something like this distinction holds for games too. We invent our new game of rugby, we design the rules, but this doesn’t determine who wins. The important issue is whether this designing of rules responds to an unrefusabls telos which precedes our design.

In fact, the mystery resides in our having certain ends of life, which we endlessly redefine, without their even becoming totally transparent, that is, without our ever fully understanding the reasons for them.

I have taken the reader very far afield, and, I recognize, very far away from Brandom’s agenda, rather concentrating on questions that bother me, perhaps an inappropriate response to the invitation to participate in this volume (like Evo Morales wearing his sweater to meet King Juan Carlos). I was induced to do so nonetheless because of the great richness of Robert Brandom’s work, both the wealth of detail, and the striking general architecture. The latter, which in fact draws us up out of the tunnel vision of the Cartesian tradition, and shows the dimensions of the house of language which we inhabit, is what encouraged me to raise a further question about the shape of this remarkable (and I think mysterious) dwelling.

Notes
1 This paper has greatly benefited from the discussion of an earlier version with the members of the Philosophisches Institut of the Freie Universität, Berlin.
2 Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines, 2.1.1.
4 Gottlob Frege, Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik (Breslau, 1884) sect 62.
5 The example is taken here from John Searle, Speech Acts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), ch. 2.
6 See Also sprach Zarathustra, “Nachtlied”, Bk. 4; also Mahler’s Third Symphony.
LANGUAGE NOT MYSTERIOUS?

13 Steven Pinker, The Language Instinct (New York: Morrow, 1994), p. 16: “A common language connects the members of a community into an information-sharing network with formidable collective powers.” The example he gives in the text is not mammoth hunting but our paleolithic ancestors stampeding horses over a cliff. The bones of the victims are “fossils of ancient co-operation and shared ingenuity.” This example is the occasion for a short scientistic sermon. Language, he says, “does not call for sequestering the study of humans from the domain of biology, for a magnificent ability unique to a particular living species is far from unique in the animal kingdom. Some kinds of bats home in on flying insects using Doppler sonar. Some kinds of migratory birds navigate thousands of miles by calibrating the positions of the constellations against the time of day and year. In nature’s talent show we are simply a species of primate with our own act, a knack for communicating information about who did what to whom by modulating the sounds we make when we exhale” (p. 19). It is typical of Pinker’s approach that he identifies the issue whether the study of humanity “should be sequestered from the domain of biology” (which few in their right minds would propose) with the issue whether a reductive theory of language entirely focused on the factual-practical is viable (which is highly dubious).
14 Making It Explicit, p. 626.
16 Making It Explicit, loc. cit.
17 Pound, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley”.
18 Making It Explicit, loc. cit. Italics in original.
19 Making It Explicit, p. 64.
I have recently completed the bracing – and long overdue – experience of reading *Making It Explicit*, and trying to superimpose my own views on it to see where the disagreements stand out. Mainly, there is agreement. Claim after claim, page after page, I find myself agreeing wholeheartedly with Brandom, and this is not just on matters about which philosophers in general agree. Brandom and I are on the same page about many issues that divide the profession. Moreover, on a few points where Brandom explicitly objects to positions I have maintained, I think he is, in the main, right, and I will acknowledge this in more detail below. What then is left to argue about? There is a fundamental difference of direction in our work. But I will try to show that our residual disagreements – which at first make us appear poles apart on some very central theses – might quite easily be nudged into consonance if Brandom can take on what I view as a few friendly amendments.

We both learned a lesson from Wilfrid Sellars that still hasn’t sunk in with many of our colleagues. I quote, not for the first time, what I consider to be the pithiest expression of it in Sellars:

My solution is that ". . .' means - - -" is the core of a unique mode of discourse which is as distinct from the description and explanation of empirical fact, as is the language of prescription and justification.

(Chisholm and Sellars, 1958, p. 527 – discussed briefly by me in 1987, p. 341)

The ineliminable, foundational normativity of all talk of meaning or intentionality was first insisted upon by Sellars, and Brandom’s version of the reason for this is comprehensive and detailed. Brandom chooses to adopt my “intentional stance” way of characterizing this unique mode of discourse, since the evaluative or normative presuppositions can be readily seen to be built right into the rules of that game. He then draws a distinction between *simple intentional systems* (what I call first-order intentional systems, entities whose behavior is readily interpretable by ascribing beliefs, desires, and other intentional states to them) and *interpreting*
intentional systems (what I call higher-order intentional systems, capable of ascribing intentional states to others and to themselves). Now which kind comes first?

The question is ambiguous, and once we sort it out, we’ll have exposed a central point of discord between Brandom and me. Of course Brandom and I agree on the obvious evolutionary fact: we interpreting intentional systems are a later-evolved and much more sophisticated sort of agent – indeed, human beings with language are the only species that uncontentiously meets the requirements, in spite of much hopeful research with apes, dolphins, and other promising species.

Shouldn’t the earlier, simplervariety be viewed as more fundamental? As Brandom says, “it is clear that there were nonlinguistic animals before there were linguistic ones, and the latter did not arise by magic.” (p. 155) As he notes, Stalnaker and I follow this course, attempting to make sense of the “nonlinguistic” or “instrumental” belief of such animals as the fundamental notion. Brandom appreciates at least some of the grounds for the move – “this is a laudable aspiration and it may seem perverseto spurn it” (p. 155) – but he insists on adopting the “contrary order of explanation”:

the intentionality of nonlinguistic creatures is presented as dependent on, and in a specific sense derivative from, that of their linguistically qualified interpreters, who as a community exhibit a nonderivative, original intentionality. (p. 152)

This might seem to suggest, bizarrely, that nonlinguistic creatures had no intentionality until we humans came along to interpret them, at which point they acquired derivative intentionality, but of course that is not what Brandom means. What he means is that nonlinguistic creatures, long before human beings came along to interpret them, had a sort of cognitive prowess that is only with strain interpretable as a sort of intentionality, modeled on the sort of intentionality that we can make sense of only as a phenomenon occurring within a full-fledged linguistic community: “the understanding of intentionally contentful states that permits us to stretch the application of that notion and apply it in a second-class way to nonlinguistic animals (simple intentional systems).” (p. 151) The order of explanation is thus first to explain how linguistic communities carry on, relying on norms implicit in their social practices, and then use that account to provide a model, bristling with caveats and demurrals, for the more rudimentary phenomena exhibited by nonlinguistic animals and other simple intentional systems.

This is certainly not a position I have ever defended in detail, but I’ve made a few gestures in this direction, and I agree with most of it. Now that Brandom has done such a fine job making out the case for it, I am happy to subscribe to it – up to a point. It is not just that (of course) it takes language-using human beings to create the very terms and practices of ascription that render the intentional stance visible and available to science as a model for understanding non-language using agents. That would be like the fact that you could hardly speak of some chemical reaction as a “dance of the molecules” if there weren’t any dancing people to serve
as exemplars. It is rather that the presuppositions of those terms and practices run deep, and until we understand them in their home territory, the deontic score-keeping game of asking for and giving reasons, we will not be able to understand the normativity that alone can give traction to a regress-stopper that we need. I take this to be the chief import of Brandom’s title, making it explicit: until we language-users came along and made “it” explicit, it didn’t really have intentionality – at least not the full-fledged intentionality we need to understand before we can extend the concept to our distant ancestors and other languageless varieties.

What is the problem? It can perhaps best be seen by following Brandom’s vision of the contrast between his position and mine (we will later soften the contrast):

Dennett’s strategy of treating the normative significances of intentional states as instituted by the attitudes of interpreters does not by itself involve a commitment to reducing the normative to the nonnormative, insofar as it is the proprieties of attitudes that are invoked. That reductive commitment comes in later, in explaining these proprieties. Understanding those proprieties in terms of predictive success, as Dennett does (a strategy different from that to be pursued here) gives an objective basis to the norms governing the adoption of the intentional stance. It puts Dennett in a position to say that talk of the predictive utility of adopting that stance is just a way – indeed, the only one available to us – of specifying an important kind of objective pattern in behavior. (p. 58)

Brandom appreciates the need to ground his norms. They aren’t just prejudices or fashions that have unaccountably caught on, and he can’t resort to such antinaturalist moves as God commands them. But still, he does not want to commit himself to any of the familiar kinds of naturalism either, which leaves him with a delicate task:

the challenge: to maintain the stance toward both simple and interpreting intentional systems – that is, to acknowledge that the normative status of being such intentional systems is intelligible only by reference to the normative attitude of taking or treating something as such a system, that is interpreting it as one – while at the same time securing the distinction between original and derivative intentionality – and so not allowing the notion of intentional normative status to collapse into that of the normative attitude of intentional interpretation. (p. 60)

Oversimplifying somewhat, the distinction Brandom sees between my naturalistic way of “collapsing” intentional normative status and his way of avoiding the regress can be captured by the supposed contrast between the violated norms of faulty design (my way) and the violated norms of a social transgression (his way). Roughly, it’s the difference between being stupid and being naughty. At the same time, he must show that a violation of the social conceptual norms is not just a faux pas; it’s a
mistake that really matters. I think it is this last obligation that in the end he cannot fulfill without falling back, eventually, on something like my way of dealing with the problem. As he notes, I attempt to meet this requirement with predictive utility — life is short and time flies and decisions must be made now by finite minds under considerable pressure — but he finds my brand of pragmatism — in contrast with his own, actually quite similar, brand of pragmatism — to be unsatisfactory. What does he put in its place? Community.

II Original and derived intentionality
To understand how this ingenious move is supposed to work, consider the threatened regress: “Noises and marks on paper do not mean anything all by themselves.” (p. 60) They don’t have intrinsic intentionality but only derived intentionality. Derived from what? From the intentionality of interpreting intentional systems of course. And where do the interpreting intentional systems get their intentionality? Here is where our answers differ. Brandom says: From each other! “On this line, only communities, not individuals, can be interpreted as having original intentionality.” (p. 61) And membership in a (linguistic) community while in some sense optional for us, carries with it a commitment to the conceptual norms established and constituted by that community.

I, in contrast, have claimed that our own intentionality is just as derived as that of our shopping lists and other meaningful artifacts, and derives from none other than Mother Nature, the process of evolution by natural selection. Consider a cartoonish dialogue about my version.

We come upon a scrap of paper with the symbols “2 qt mk” on it.
“What might it mean?”
“Ask the agent who wrote it – the robot R1D1.”
R1D1 utters: “It’s my shopping list and it means buy two quarts of milk.”
“But where did R1D1 obtain its intentionality (assuming it has some)?”
“From me, R1D1’s designer. I made it to do my shopping for me, among other things.”
“And where did you get your intentionality?”
“From my designer, Mother Nature!”
“But what kind of purposes and intentions does ‘she’ have?”

None, in one sense, but plenty, in another: we can uncover the “free-floating rationales” of the design “decisions” that evolution has made, and thereby uncover the purposes and rationales of my organs and dispositions just as reverse engineering can uncover the purposes and rationales that account for the derived intentionality of my robot’s organs and dispositions. The fact that evolution doesn’t have purposes or intentions is not a bug but a feature: it permits us to end the regress of ulterior purposes with a whimper, not a bang. (The problem with God as the Intelligent Designer is that it forces the question of who designed God. The answer that nobody
had to design God is just as unsatisfactory as Searle’s mystical – or at least mystifying – insistence that it’s just a brute fact that human beings have original intentionality. That is why Searle’s vision of original intentionality is ultimately incoherent; it begins with an unacceptably marvelous and unexplained prime mover. Brandom’s account at least has the virtue of offering an explanation of how it is that the norms on which original intentionality depend play their roles. But he then has to face his own version of the question: whence – and why – came communities?)

As should be clear from the little dialogue above, my strategy has been to help myself to communicating (or “communicating”) robots and their makers, and not make a big deal about the fact that this presupposes a community of communicators – the robot-makers – so that I can draw attention to the way in which the robot’s intentionality (which I claim is well-nigh indistinguishable from ours in practice) depends on design considerations about which the robot-makers are the (corrigible) authorities. (They may have forgotten, or never understood, the good reasons why they made their robots the way they did.) In our own case, the parallel curiosity directs our attention to evolution. Just as we reverse-engineer the robot in order to understand its (derived) intentionality, so we reverse-engineer ourselves in order to understand the source of our own (derived!) intentionality. The only “original” intentionality anywhere is the mere as-if intentionality of the process of natural selection viewed from the intentional stance. Contrast this with Brandom’s declaration: “Original, independent, or nonderivative intentionality is an exclusively linguistic affair.” (p. 143)

Concentrating on the need to stop the regress of derived intentionality with a diminuendo, not a crescendo, I passed over – glissando, to continue the leitmotif – the issue of a community of communicating robot-makers as if it might be a local accident of history, rather than a constitutive requirement, but I now see no reason not to agree that Brandom is right about this – but not that the story ends where he ends it. I am willing, that is, to put in a major fermata at the place in the development where community comes in, and help myself to much of Brandom’s book to provide an analysis of this. In fact, I spoke favorably – but I admit, only in passing – of just such a strategy some years ago, and in that passage foreshadowed both my current agreements and disagreements with Brandom, which I will at long last attempt to make explicit:

[Michael] Friedman, discussing the current perplexity in cognitive psychology, suggests that the problem

is the direction of the reduction. Contemporary psychology tries to explain individual cognitive activity independently from social cognitive activity, and then tries to give a micro reduction of social cognitive activity – that is, the use of a public language – in terms of a prior theory of individual cognitive activity. The opposing suggestion is that we first look for a theory of social activity, and then try to give a macro reduction of individual cognitive activity – the activity of applying concepts, making judgments, and so forth – in terms of our prior social activity. (1981, p. 15–16)
With the idea of macro-reduction in psychology I largely agree, except that Friedman’s identification of the macro level as explicitly social is only part of the story. The cognitive capacities of non-language-using animals (and Robinson Crusoes, if there are any) must also be accounted for, and not just in terms of an analogy with the practices of language users. The macro level up to which we should relate microprocesses in the brain in order to understand them as psychological is more broadly the level of organism–environment interaction, development, and evolution.

There is no way to capture the semantic properties of things (word tokens, diagrams, nerve impulses, brain states) by a micro-reduction. Semantic properties are not just relational but, you might say, super-relational, for the relation a particular vehicle of content, or token, must bear in order to have content is not just a relation it bears to other similar things (e.g., other tokens, or parts of tokens, or sets of tokens, or causes of tokens) but a relation between the token and the whole life – and counterfactual life – of the organism it ‘serves’ and that organism’s requirements for survival and its evolutionary ancestry.

(Dennett, 1981, as reprinted in The Intentional Stance, 1987, p. 65)

III Are persons made of parrots?

Understanding can be understood, not as the turning on of a Cartesian light, but as practical mastery of a certain kind of inferentially articulated doing, responding differentially according to the circumstances of proper application of a concept, and distinguishing the proper inferential consequences of such application.

(Brandom, Making It Explicit, p. 120)

This is Brandom’s brand of pragmatism, and I agree that you have to derive representation from inference, not vice versa. This is not recognized by many in philosophy though it has been common understanding in Artificial Intelligence for many years. William Woods’ “What’s in a Link” (1975) is the locus classicus. I myself have not always understood the implications of it, and I accept Brandom’s use of me as a bad example of the formalist approach in “Intentional Systems,” (1971, discussed by Brandom, pp. 99ff). Now that I see the work that “material inference” can do, I am ready to agree wholeheartedly with Brandom about this. I do not agree with him about the origins of norms, however.

Where do the norms come from and why? Let’s consider Brandom’s answer (in a typically hard-to-parse sentence, it must be said):

The objectivity of conceptual norms requires that any attitude of taking, treating, or assessing as correct an application of a concept in forming a belief or making a claim be coherently conceivable as mistaken, because of how things are with the objects the belief or claim is about. (p. 63)
Why? What is it about conceptual norms that imposes this requirement? Do communities just happen to have a correctness fetish (the original political correctness!)? The answer that I would want to give is shunned or ignored by Brandom: the social conceptual norms don’t just happen; they are a requirement for a working system of communication. We as a species don’t communicate just for the fun of it – though communication is a lot of fun, and that, too, is no accident. Communication has to pay for itself like every other complex adaptation, and this imposes design considerations among which are those that are met by this requirement.

Brandom accepts part of this: “it is clear that intentionality has a representational dimension and that to understand intentional contentfulness one must understand representation,” but he shrinks from the idea that “a suitable notion of representation can be made available in advance of thinking about the correct use of linguistic expressions and the role of intentional states in making behavior intelligible.” (p. 60)

It helps to understand the order of explanation here if we think of this as an engineering problem. Consider a so-called data-structure in a computer (as set up and maintained by a program – perhaps an airline reservation program). In what (strained) sense could it be about Chicago? If it serves to maintain, update, and provide information about Chicago to the functions it was designed to serve. It has to work: the numbers of the flights listed have to be flights into O’Hare Airport, and this fact has to be reliably maintained over time, and the data fields dealing with current weather have to track what the weather is in the Chicago area right now, and so on. If it does work, it is about Chicago in the only way that could matter here. Derived intentionality at its best; handsome is as handsome does. The fact that these data-structures are typically written in such a way that they readily generate symbol strings that we human beings can read (e.g. they link to ASCII characters for “partly cloudy, wind SW at ten MPH”) is an irrelevant feature. If a data-structure in a robot serves to maintain, update, and provide information about a wall in the robot’s vicinity, and the robot needs to hug the walls to find its way out of a maze and uses the data-structure to guide itself (nonlinguistically, with even less sophistication than an insect), then that data-structure is about that wall in a fundamental sense that has nothing to do with linguistic expression.

And even though a robot – or an insect – is not a member of a linguistic community that chastises its members for violations of the community’s norms, its data-structures are still in jeopardy of a sort of punishment: extinction for cause if they don’t do what they are supposed to do. The robot’s (intelligent) designer may be the critic who tells herself to go back to the drawing board and come up with a better system of data-structures, or she may have been intelligent enough to design the robot’s information-processes to correct themselves, extinguishing the versions that don’t work and replacing them with better versions – she’s designed a learning robot, in other words. The same goes for the insect, of course. If the insect cannot learn to adjust its behavior when the world departs from the conditions in which its hardware evolved, it will succumb, sphexishly (Hofstadter, 1982; Hofstadter and Dennett, 1982; Dennett, 1984). The dividing line between “learning” by a lineage over evolutionary time, and learning, by individual trial-and-error, generate-and-test,
is not principled. Some mammals can walk at birth – they almost literally hit the ground running – and others need to learn how to control their legs. Evolution is supremely opportunistic in apportioning the R&D process between lineages and individuals.

Does the same verdict apply at the level of community instruction? Here, I think, is where Brandom thinks there is a significant watershed: there is all the difference in the world, he thinks, between norms maintained by communities of norm-protecting language-users and norms maintained by the relatively blind processes of natural selection or operant conditioning and its kin. But here he must confront his own version of the regress problem: even if we assume that normal adults appreciate the moves in the game – recognizing the speech acts that honor, flout, exploit, defend, abandon the norms of the linguistic community – how did they get themselves into this savvy condition? How, in short, does linguistic correction bootstrap itself into existence? John Haugeland (1998) confronts the same issue in his own version of Pittsburgh normativity, and “solves” it by speaking of an innate and pre-linguistic “censoriousness” that we humans are endowed with. A gift from God, or did it evolve, and if so, why? (See my review, Dennett, 1999.)

Why did “why” evolve? That is, why did the communicative community arise, and what sustains it? Brandom’s pragmatist emphasis draws attention to the functional setting, explaining the proximal motivation for scorekeeping – the sanctions enforce the playing of the game – while ignoring the distal motivation: why does the game exist at all? What pays for this elaborate expenditure of energy?

Consider a dog that doesn’t bark: the term “evolution” does not appear in the index of Making It Explicit. This is a measure of how resolutely Brandom has set his face against the “collapse” that I have proposed. Community is Brandom’s skyhook (Dennett, 1995) and he can’t have it. He knows this, but he prefers not to dwell on what it would take to secure community as his base of operations. Not surprisingly, this obliges him to reinvent the wheels of others without realizing it. Thus he sees that misrepresentation or falsehood is parasitic on successful (and truthful) representation – “Purporting to represent is intelligible only as purporting to represent successfully or correctly” (p. 72) – but ignores the development of this argument in Dawkins and Krebs’ (1978) classic work on the evolution of animal communication. Another term missing from the index is “Millikan”, but Brandom speaks, for instance, of “some consumer or target” of a representation, a theme Millikan has developed in depth, treating subpersonal consumers of (subpersonal) representations (see Millikan, 2000). The subpersonal machinery of cognition is another arena that Brandom refuses to enter, though many of the themes he explores are well-explored by Millikan and others working that territory. My point is not a procedural criticism – he should have cited this work – but a substantive one: by ignoring it, he creates the illusion (for himself and his readers) that his community-based account of meaning and representation can be an autonomous alternative to a naturalistic theory of the same topics. The themes he discusses so insightfully are not just accessible to naturalism; they are (already) explicable, to a significant degree, in naturalistic terms.
I think it is instructive to trace the roughly parallel paths of some of Brandom’s observations and their counterparts in naturalistic accounts. Starting in the physical world (from the physical stance, in my terms), Brandom notes that “iron doesn’t conceive its world as wet when it responds by rusting.” (p. 87) Why not? Because, as he says, “a normative dimension is required, which can underwrite a distinction between correct and incorrect application of concepts.” He has just quoted Hegel’s wonderful (and as he notes, naturalistic) account of animal desire – “an animal classifies some particular as food when it ‘falls to without further ado and eats it up’” (p. 86) – but he neglects to note that this “responsive disposition” in the animal, unlike the disposition of the iron, is responsive to a normative dimension. Animals – and plants, too, of course – exploit basic, undesigned physical dispositions like the disposition of iron to rust in the transducers and other hardware that they are endowed with, so that in the main what they eat is edible and nutritious. These innate endowments provide plants and animals with sources of information – and, abnormally (in Millikan’s sense), misinformation – which subpersonal consumers utilize in the processes of governance that keep life going. But in Brandom’s terms, none of the transactions within the nervous system contain explicit meanings because although the transactors may be loosely, metaphorically, modeled as homunculi – cognitive agents of one sort or another – there isn’t enough of a social system in place. There may be, as Minsky (1985) has put it, a society of mind, but there is no community!

Consider the parafoveal change-detectors or anomaly-detectors in the vision system that compete with each other to determine where our eyes dart next. “Look over here! Something interesting is happening in my sector,” they all seem to shout, and the one that wins succeeds in attracting a saccade – the high-resolution foveas of the eyes jump to that point in the visual world for upgraded processing. But these signals are not speech acts; they are neither explicitly imperative (“Look over here!”) nor declarative (“Something interesting is happening in my sector”) but rather too primitive to count. One might even say they are degenerate, from Brandom’s point of view, like Wittgenstein’s “Slab!” language game, which Brandom says is not an instance of a verbal, but “merely vocal”, language game (p. 172). (Cf. also the pioneering analysis of this issue by Jonathan Bennett, in his discussion of bee-dance “communication” in Rationality, 1964.)

In what to me is a key example, Brandom describes a red-measuring instrument hooked up to a tape recorder that appropriately emits “That’s red” when a red thing is present. He compares it to a human observer who has been asked (hired?) to do the same thing. There is a world of difference, as he insists, and then he supplies a nice intermediate case: a parrot trained to do the same job (p. 88). In spite of being alive, the parrot is more like the instrument, Brandom insists, than the human observer, because the parrot lacks “a kind of understanding” – the kind of understanding Sellars rightly insisted is the key to content. Brandom says:

Insofar as the repeatable response is not, for the parrot, caught up in practical proprieties of inference and justification, and so of the making of further judgments, it is not a conceptual or cognitive matter at all. (p. 89)
Not at all? This needs to be adjusted. The parrot is some kind of cognitive agent, and even if it doesn’t explicitly engage in inference and justification, its cognitive processes include quality-control measures that track such explicit processes to a significant extent. The contrast Brandom wants to draw between persons and parrots is not as big a gulf as he makes out, but it is real, and it is important precisely because it helps us see a way out of our regress problem: in order for there to be such large agents – persons – capable of Sellarsian understanding, they need to be composed of smaller, stupider agents with much less understanding – not so much subpersonal homunculi as psittaculi!

Organisms are correctly seen as multi-cellular communities sharing, for the most part, a common fate (they’re in the same boat). So evolution can be expected to favor cooperative arrangements in general. Your eyes may, on occasion, deceive you – but not on purpose! (See Sterelny, 2003.) Running is sure to be a coordinated activity of the limbs, not a battle for supremacy. Nevertheless, there are bound to be occasions when subsystems work at cross purposes, even in the best-ordered communities of cells, and these will in general be resolved in the slow, old-fashioned way: by the extinction of those lineages in which these conflicts arise most frequently. The result is control systems that get along quite well without any internal self-monitoring. The ant colony has no boss, and no virtual boss either, and gets along swimmingly with distributed control that so far as we can tell does not engage or need to engage in high-level self-monitoring. According to the ethologist and roboticist David McFarland (1989), “Communication is the only behavior that requires an organism to self-monitor its own control system.” Organisms can very effectively control themselves by a collection of competing but “myopic” task-controllers that can interrupt each other when their conditions (“hunger” or need, sensed opportunity, built-in priority ranking, …) outweigh the conditions of the currently active task-controller. Goals are represented only tacitly, in the feedback loops that guide each task-controller, but without any global or higher-level representation. (One might think of such a task-controller as “uncommented code” – it works, but there is nothing anywhere in it that can be read off about what it does or why or how it does it.) Evolution will tend to optimize the interrupt dynamics of these modules, and nobody’s the wiser. That is, there doesn’t have to be anybody home to be wiser!

But communication, McFarland thinks, is a behavioral innovation that changes that. Communication requires a central clearing house of sorts in order to buffer the organism from revealing too much about its current state to competitive organisms. In order to understand the evolution of communication, as Dawkins and Krebs (1978) showed, we need to see it as manipulation rather than as purely cooperative behavior. The organism that has no poker face, that communicates state directly to all hearers, is a sitting duck, and will soon be extinct. What must evolve instead is a communication-control buffer that creates (1) opportunities for guided deception, and coincidentally (2) opportunities for self-deception (Trivers, 1985), by creating, for the first time in the evolution of nervous systems, explicit (and more “globally” accessible) representations of its current state, representations that are detachable from the tasks they represent, so that deceptive behaviors can be formulated and
controlled. This in turn opens up structure that can be utilized in taking the step, described in detail by Gary Drescher (1991), from simple situation-action machines to choice machines, the step I describe as the evolutionary transition from Skinnerian to Popperian creatures (Dennett, 1995). (The previous two paragraphs are drawn from Dennett, 2007.)

Supposing that we can analyze whole persons with all their Sellarsian understanding as composed of less comprehending interactors is not just a convenience to the theorist, for a reason that Brandom spells out: individuation by content is inescapably holistic because it involves both premises and conclusions (p. 90). We can’t just reach into the snow is white bin and pull out a snow-is-white to install in our cognitive system’s belief box! There is no such thing as a snow-is-white independently of the huge system in which it must reside. So items individuated by content cannot be building blocks, independently identified. But we do need building blocks, so we can conclude that our blocks must be individuated by something “less” than semantic content. We need Janus-faced things that look, from some angles, rather like propositional contents, and from other angles like scraps of machinery. Bring on the parrotings, understood derivatively as if they were (almost) speech acts. And expect that Brandom’s analyses will prove to be valuable tools for measuring the ways in which subpersonal agencies fall short.

For instance, at what level(s) does deontic status of one or another attenuated sort arise? What is the difference between the guardian role of the immune system, for instance, and the “ticket taker or doorman” Brandom usefully imagines? Could there be a sort of social scorekeeping among the semi-independent, cooperating/competing subsystems in the nervous system? Suppose we were to take Brandom’s nicely elaborated model of interpersonal communication and attempt to apply it dead literally to the communication between specialist agencies in the brain. What features would drop out and why? According to Brandom, it is only the “practical inferential proprieties” tracked in the scorekeeping that “make noises and marks mean what they mean,” but aren’t there somewhat attenuated – desocialized, one might say – inferential processes that can make brain-signals mean what they mean? Whatever the answer, it will be a valuable contribution to the theoretical understanding of the ways in which nervous systems work their unmagical magic.

IV Beliefs and opinions: arresting Brandom’s flight from naturalism

I don’t think there has to be a disagreement between Brandom and me at this point. Assuming that his neglect of evolutionary considerations isn’t some sort of closet creationism (not that that is unknown among eminent philosophers dealing with these topics), he ought to be able to take on board most if not all of my friendly amendments. He still gets to maintain the ineliminably social or communitarian grounding of meaning, and thereby explain the second-class or derived application of the constitutive concepts to animals, to human parts, and, of course, to evolution itself. I agree with him about the conceptual dependence of all treatments of
subpersonal parrottings as derivative from, dependent on, our prior understanding of personal-level moves in the deontic scorekeeping game of inference, and I even agree that “Beliefs are essentially the sort of thing that can be expressed by making an assertion.” (p.153) How can I agree with this? By acceding, in a discussion of his book, to his specified use of the term “belief”:

There clearly is a sense in which nonlinguistic animals can be said to have beliefs. But the sense of belief that Sellars, Dummett, and Davidson are interested in (and that is the subject of this work) is one in which beliefs can be attributed only to language users. (p. 155)

So a belief for Brandom is very much what I call an opinion in *Brainstorms* (1978): the state of acceptance of a sentence collected (by a linguistic creature, naturally) as true, contrasting such a sophisticated state with the “lower brutal state” of belief (p. 305). This makes commentary awkward since I use “belief” and “opinion” as contrasting terms, and Brandom uses “belief” more or less as I use “opinion” and contrasts beliefs so-characterized with “the intentional states of nonlinguistic creatures,” a category for which he doesn’t have a shorter term. I’m quite comfortable with Brandom’s insistence that such a language-involving acceptance state is not just the paradigm of a contentful state but that without which we couldn’t really make sense of attributing specific contents in more attenuated cases. So I agree that “what the frog’s eye tells the frog’s brain” and what the dog or the chess-playing computer believes (in my sense) has to be understood, as he insists, as a “stretching” usage that takes us out of the home cases into a world of derivative cases. “Where intentional explanations are offered of the behavior of nonlinguistic creatures (those that are not understood as interpreters of others), the reasons are offered, the assertions are made, by the interpreter of a simple intentional system, who seeks to make its behavior intelligible by treating it as if it could act according to reasons it offers itself.” (p. 171) Its reasons are what I call “free-floating rationales” that it does not represent to itself, and has no need of representing to itself. When, then, does the need arise? This is one of the important – foundational – questions left unasked by Brandom’s resolutely upward bound account. And in the lacuna thus created he inserts a dubious apologia.

He assumes that “suitable social creatures can learn to distinguish in their practice between performances that are treated as correct by their fellows (itself a responsive discrimination) and those that are not” and he is careful to avoid circularity by insisting that “no appeal will be made to instrumental rationality on the part of fledgling linguistic practitioners” (p.155). In other words, since he cannot help himself to the intentional stance yet, he has to follow a fundamentally Skinnerian line, behaviorism, replacing a rational or cognitive account of this learning process with a suitably innocent conditioning account. And this decision, which he thinks he needs to take to avoid circularity or vicious regress, creates a problem for him, parallel to the question that has bedeviled Fodor, Dretske, and others under the guise of the (ill-posed) disjunction problem: what can the theorist appeal to in
either an individual’s history of learning by trial-and-error or a lineage’s history of evolutionary trial-and-error to distinguish errors from mere extensions of the category being discriminated? (See my “Evolution, Error and Intentionality,” in The Intentional Stance, 1987.) Brandom recognizes the problem: “How is it possible for our use of an expression to confer on it a content that settles that we might all be wrong about how it is correctly used, at least at some times?” (p. 137) His version has the advantage that he gets to appeal to community practices and community agreement about how the norms are to be applied, and he sees that his answer, like a good answer to the disjunction problem, has to find, as he says, some way of privileging a disposition – except that he doesn’t actually say how he is going to do this.

He excuses himself from this task by retracting into a very modest goal: “explaining what the trick consists in, what would count as doing it, rather than how it is done by creatures wired up as we are.” (p. 155) In other words, he wants to give the “specs” without a word on the implementation, the (reverse) engineering. This is a remarkable truncation, given not just the ambition but the gratifying success of his own reverse engineering of the game of asking and giving reasons. He blandly assures the reader that “the abilities attributed to linguistic practitioners are not magical, mysterious or extraordinary” (p. 156) but we are entitled to ask an emperor’s new clothes question: “Why not?”

“There were no commitments before people started treating each other as committed” – a phrase of Brandom’s that echoes Hobbes’ celebrated attempt to reconstruct the origins of morality out of the state of nature, and Brandom can’t eschew discussing this transition by simply assuring us that it wasn’t magic. For instance, why haven’t other species evolved something like promising, for instance? It’s obviously good for something. Hobbes presupposed language among his people in the state of nature, and Brandom’s claim must be that the deontic status of language – with its sanctioned practices and hence implicit concepts of authority, commitment and entitlement – already contains something with a variety of normativity missing in the state of (nonhuman) nature. (See p. 175.) Whether the commitments of language are properly the ancestors of moral commitments or merely had to co-evolve with them is an interesting question, not raised by Brandom.

This is, I think, an unacceptable flight from naturalism, not just because it refuses to address an entirely appropriate question but because by doing so it actually distorts the analysis at the higher level. A deeper account of communication would be a better account. When organisms take on the new behavior of signaling (as contrasted with simply willy-nilly providing information about their state by being perceptible by their audience) the opportunity for strategic deception arises, and plays an important role in fixing precisely the sort of dependencies Brandom himself is arguing for. He asserts, convincingly, that “These pragmatic inferential practices form a shell around the more basic semantic ones, which they presuppose” (p. 159) but both also presuppose the underlying emergence of communication as a behavioral opportunity, with its own costs and benefits. Credible signaling must be hard-to-fake signaling, lest inflation set in and destroy the communication channel with noisy fakery. The panglossian (or polyannian) presumption of cooperation must not be built in.
These are quite uncontroversial themes in the considerable naturalistic literature on the evolution of communication. Adding them to his perspective would not commit Brandom to any doctrinaire scientism or evolutionism that might seem to threaten the philosophical austerity of his project, and it would go some way to removing the suspicious residue of magic that clings to any account that purports to ground meaning in community and then, having done that, declares victory.

Notes
1 For Brandom it is always the intentional stance, never the design stance that is under discussion.
2 Dummett’s emphasis on “harmony” between the introduction rules (the circumstances) and the elimination rules (the consequences) is a good way of bringing out the “engineering” aspect, the need for the system to work. Dummett’s excellent example is the term “Boche” for Germans, which, as Brandom stresses, inappropriate and indefensible content (p.125ff).
3 Millikan, 2000, says “When it is a natural purpose that is represented, this correspondence relation correlates the representation with a state of affairs that it is its proper function to guide a cooperating mechanism to bring about.” [p86] This is rather like the Chicago-representation in the computer: there is in effect a variable that can take the value Chicago or other, contrasting values, such as Boston. This is a kind of explicit representation, but not either McFarland’s or Brandom’s kind. (See my “Styles of Mental Representation,” in The Intentional Stance.)
4 Thanks to Richard Griffin, Nicholas Humphrey and Roger Scruton for valuable editorial suggestions about an earlier draft.

References


NORMATIVITY OF MIND VERSUS PHILOSOPHY AS EXPLANATION

Brandom’s Theory of the Mind

Sebastian Rödl

I The force and the content of Making It Explicit

In Making It Explicit¹ (henceforth MIE) Brandom inquires into the nature of assertion, belief, perception and action, that is, into the nature of mental life, the nature of the mind. The book is shaped, first, by Brandom’s methodological conception of his project, by his conception of what he does in saying something about the nature of the mental, and, second, by his conception of his subject matter, by what he says about the nature of the mental. Call the former the force of MIE, the latter its content. I shall argue that the force and the content of MIE are in conflict: Brandom’s conception of what it is to comprehend the nature of the mind is incompatible with how he describes the nature of the mind. The content of MIE can be put thus: mental life is normative practice. Its force can be put thus: MIE explains a mysterious phenomenon. It is incoherent to conjoin a conception of philosophy of mind as explaining a mysterious phenomenon with a conception of the mind as essentially normative.

I proceed as follows. I first describe two roots of MIE: the conception of philosophy as explaining mysterious phenomena – a legacy of the naturalist-empiricist tradition – and the conception of the mind as normative – a legacy of Sellars and his attack on the Myth of the Given (section II). I then explain why these ideas cannot be conjoined (section III) and show how the attempt to do so renders Brandom’s account of normative attitudes and statuses incoherent (section IV). In the concluding section I argue, taking my cue from chapter 9 of MIE, that a full appreciation of the normative nature of the mind forces us to reconceive the task of philosophy of mind.

II The two roots of MIE

2.1 Philosophy as explanation

An explanatory theory of the mind specifies necessary and sufficient conditions for a creature to believe or say something in terms of concepts that are logically independent of intentional and semantic concepts. Why would one want such a theory? Because intentionality and meaning are mysterious phenomena, which we are
under an obligation to explain. The theory explains them and dispels the mystery. But what, in philosophy, is a mysterious phenomenon, and what is it to explain it?

A phenomenon is philosophically mysterious in the light of an idea of the essence of the world. The essence of the world circumscribes what is possible in the world. It may be thought to be fixed by the kinds of object there are and the kinds of relation into which they enter. Or one may seek to define the essence of the world by the means required for its description: a set of statements and concepts – call them world-directed statements and concepts – such that these and only these capture a possible reality. In general, a mysterious phenomenon conflicts with our conception of how things are. It can conflict with a scientific theory or with ordinary belief; either way, it is puzzling. A philosophically mysterious phenomenon, which is the cause of a specifically philosophical puzzlement, does not conflict with a particular scientific theory. It conflicts with a conception of the essence of the world. It seems to lie beyond the bounds of possible reality; concepts and statements that represent it seem not to be world-directed.²

There are two ways of responding to a philosophical puzzlement. One can declare that the mysterious phenomenon indeed lies beyond the limits of possible reality and, hence, is not real. It is an illusion, a fiction, a projection. Alternatively, one can attempt to show that, contrary to appearances, the mysterious phenomenon lies within the limits of possible reality; it does not really conflict with the essence of the world. Now if the mysterious phenomenon is a possible reality, then world-directed statements and concepts represent it. However, to the unaided eye it appears not to be an object of world-directed statements; this is why it is mysterious. In order to reveal the phenomenon to be a part of the world, one must show how to translate statements representing it into world-directed statements. Then it is not mysterious after all; it can be captured by world-directed concepts and hence lies within the bounds of possible reality. Such a translation is the ideal, the gold standard,³ of a philosophical explanation that provides comprehension of a mysterious phenomenon.

So this is philosophy as explanation: philosophy explains phenomena that seem to lie outside the limits of possible reality fixed by the essence of the world and the range of world-directed statements and concepts. The explanation ideally takes the form of a translation of statements representing ostensibly mysterious phenomena into world-directed statements. Here are some examples: Logical empiricists regarded sense data as the building blocks of all reality. Then material objects are mysterious phenomena calling for explanation. For W. V. O. Quine, world-directed statements are those that can be transposed into his canonical notation. Then ontic modalities and thus causal relations are mysterious. Contemporary naturalists circumscribe possible reality so as to include only phenomena that are amenable to natural scientific forms of explanation. Beliefs, wants, and hopes are thus rendered mysterious.

².2 The Myth of the Given

In his essay “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”⁴ Wilfrid Sellars identifies the Myth of the Given as the common kernel of superficially very different conceptions of epistemic concepts and states of affairs. An epistemic state of affairs in the most
narrow sense consists of someone’s knowing something or of her being in a state in virtue of which she knows something. In its widest sense, for Sellars, “epistemic” is synonymous with “cognitive” and “intentional”. The Myth of the Given is a conception of the epistemic according to which someone who is in an epistemic state is not as such someone who has learned to participate in a practice of assessing and justifying assertions. The attribution of an epistemic state to a subject does not locate her, in Sellars’s phrase, in the “space of reasons”. Variants of the Myth differ in the manner in which they define the nature of epistemic states. Sellars focuses on the version that takes the fundamental epistemic state to be one of having a sensory experience. But he mentions a number of other conceptions of the Given:

Many things have been said to be “given”: sense contents, material objects, universals, propositions, real connections, first principles, even givenness itself. And there is, indeed, a certain way of construing the situations which philosophers analyze in these terms which can be said to be the framework of givenness. (EPM, p. 14)

It is easy to see that naturalistic explanations of the mind are a variant of the Myth. Here, material objects, real connections and properties assume the role of the Given: someone is in an epistemic state if and only if she and other material objects stand in certain causal relations in virtue of their causally efficacious properties. Someone who has taken Sellars’s critique of the Myth of the Given to heart thus accepts two conditions that an account of the mind must satisfy: It must not present a naturalistic explanation. And it must accord with the normative character of mental life.

The empiricist-naturalist tradition conceives of philosophy as seeking to explain mysterious phenomena. The combination of this conception of philosophy with the rejection of the Myth yields the position of MIE: an explanation of meaning and intentionality in normative terms:

One of the overarching methodological commitments that orients this project is to explain the meanings of linguistic expressions in terms of their use. [...] Claims about the relations between meaning and use have a clear sense only in the context of a specification of the vocabulary in which that use is described or ascribed. [...] The specification of use here is neither so generous as to permit semantic or intentional vocabulary nor so parsimonious as to insist on purely naturalistic vocabulary. Instead it makes essential use of normative vocabulary. (pp. xii–xiii)

If the theory confined itself to naturalistic vocabulary, it would succumb to the Myth. If it used semantic or intentional terms, it would not be an explanation. It would not resolve the mystery of the apparent reality of meaning and intentionality.

MIE is the product of two forces. Following Sellars, Brandom wants to overcome the Myth of the Given. This requires him to come to grips with the irreducibly normative nature of the mind. Yet, wedded to the empiricist-naturalist tradition
and its methodology, Brandom casts the mind as a mysterious phenomenon that we are obliged to explain. He seeks to satisfy both demands by explaining intentionality in terms of normative concepts. Thus his theory, in distinction to naturalist theories, would not repeat the Myth of the Given. The rejection of the Myth would be built into its foundation.

So MIE combines the critique of the Myth of the Given, the critique of a fundamental feature of the empiricist-naturalist tradition in the philosophy of mind, with the methodology of this very tradition, the conception of philosophy as explaining mysterious phenomena. This combination is impossible (section III). The Myth runs deeper. We do not overcome it by rectifying only our conception of the mind; we must revise our conception of philosophy of mind as well. Setting philosophy of mind the task of explaining a mysterious phenomenon manifests allegiance to the “framework of givenness”. If this is right, then the methodology that guides MIE will distort the conception of the mind it seeks to develop. I shall show how this happens in the first part of MIE (section IV). Conversely, those parts of the book that are most clear on the nature of the normative will tend to undermine the conception of its task as explaining a mysterious phenomenon. I describe how this happens in the last chapter of MIE (section V).

III Basic correctness

I can sum up the argument of this section as follows. Normative concepts, if they are to explain meaning and intentionality, have to be logically independent of intentional concepts. However, a concept of correctness independent of intentional concepts remains unintelligible unless it can be explained in terms of non-normative concepts. Hence, the two forces operating in MIE pull in opposite directions. Its methodology requires that the normative concepts its account deploys be logically independent of intentional concepts. Its rejection of the Myth of the Given requires that they be irreducible to non-normative concepts. These conditions cannot be satisfied simultaneously.

3.1 Logical dependence

By “logically independent”, I mean the following. Concepts in a range \( F \) may be related to concepts in a range \( G \) so that one is able to use \( F \)-concepts only if one is able to use \( G \)-concepts. If we suppose that the capacity to use a concept includes the capacity to employ it in judgments, then this comes to: one is able to make \( F \)-judgments (judgments that employ \( F \)-concepts) only if one is able to make \( G \)-judgments. Hence, further, one conceives the world as containing \( F \)-facts only if one conceives it as containing \( G \)-facts. Perhaps such a relation of concepts can result from the psychical constitution of the subject employing the concepts. In this case, “one”, as it occurs in the statement “one is able to use \( F \)-concepts only if one is able to use \( G \)-concepts” refers to a subject with such-and-such a psychical constitution. But the relation may also be grounded in the concepts themselves. In that case, “one” refers to a judging subject as such. The relation of dependence falls, in the
first case, within the province of psychology and is in this sense psychological, while in the second case, it falls within the province of logic and hence is logical. Let me give two examples of an (alleged) logical dependence: Kant argues that substance concepts logically depend on causal concepts and vice versa. This means that there is no such thing as representing the world as containing substances, but no causal relations. Sellars claims that concepts of the form “— looks F” logically depend on concepts of the form “— is F”. Then there is no such thing as finding the world to contain looks-facts without finding it to contain is-facts.

For our purposes, the important point now is this. World-directed concepts, concepts that represent a possible reality, cannot logically depend on concepts that are not world-directed. The range of world-directed concepts is closed under the relation of logical dependence. Otherwise, any view of the world, inasmuch as it is a view of the world at all, would present its subject with mysterious phenomena. And this seems incoherent. (It is perhaps coherent to imagine that any conception of the world of which we are capable given the limitations of our psychical nature confronts us with mysteries. This is a different matter.) Hence, the concepts in terms of which the concepts representing a mysterious phenomenon are explained must not logically depend on the latter. If they did, they would not be world-directed and the alleged explanation would explain nothing, but replace one mystery by another. The normative concepts MIE employs must accordingly be logically independent of the concepts it is out to explain. The most simple normative concept is “— is correct”. MIE’s concept of correctness must be such that one can employ it without yet employing semantic or intentional concepts.

### 3.2 Intentional concepts and normative concepts

Sellars observes that our mental life is “fraught with ‘ought’”. But what if not only mental life is fraught with “ought”, but also, conversely, normativity is fraught with meaning and intentionality? What if the normative concepts that we apply to elements of our mental life logically depend on intentional concepts? I want to suggest that this is how things stand.

In what sense are elements of our mental life essentially normative? As paradigmatic of such elements, consider asserting and acting. An assertion lays itself open to assessment as true or false. It may be assessed along many dimensions; as an assertion, however, it is true or false. The dimension of correctness – call it the dimension of epistemic correctness – in which an assertion is placed as it is attributed a truth value is essential to asserting. A performance is an assertion if and only if it is correct or incorrect in this sense, i.e. if and only if it is true or false. So an act of asserting as such has a normative status, a status of epistemic correctness. Now, an assertion not only is true or false. In making an assertion one presents it as true. Thus making an assertion is adopting a normative attitude in the dimension of epistemic correctness. An assertion has a normative status and expresses a normative attitude.

Something analogous holds true of actions. She who acts confronts the question what to do; in acting, she answers this question. As she acts, she expresses her conception of
what she should do. The point of reference of this practical “should”, the should-do, is brought out by the schematic answer, “One should do what is good.” The term “good” is schematic for a host of evaluative terms we use to articulate our will, for example, “useful”, “pleasant”, “honorable”, “just”, and so on. As one acts, one settles what one should do, namely, what is good (useful, pleasant, honorable, and so on). Thus, in acting, one evaluates one’s action; one adopts a normative attitude. Since acting is evaluating, it can be evaluated. An action can be smart or stupid, honorable or base, and so forth. So an action has a normative status and expresses a normative attitude.

Having an action in view as an action and an assertion as an assertion involves conceiving them thus: as performances that express a normative attitude and have a normative status. It involves characterizing them in normative terms, in terms of being correct and being taken as correct. A language lacking these terms does not represent actions and assertions.

A conception of intentionality that fails to capture its normativity misses its subject. However, it does not follow that it is sensible to attempt to explain mental life in normative terms. On the contrary, it suggests that there can be no such explanation precisely because normative and intentional concepts are so closely linked. Let us go back to asserting. An assertion has a normative status, it is epistemically correct or incorrect. But someone employs the concept “— is epistemically correct” only if she knows that it applies to assertions. It is part of the content of this concept that the items that satisfy it or fail to satisfy it are assertions. Hence, someone who does not conceive of the world as containing assertions does not conceive of it as containing items with a status of epistemic correctness. The concept of epistemic correctness logically depends on the concept of assertion and cannot explain it. If there is an explanation here, it will have to explain both concepts in one stroke, starting from a point, using Davidson’s word, equidistant from them. The same holds for actions. It is not important which practical evaluative concept we consider. All these concepts are such that someone understands them only if she knows that they apply to actions. It is part of the content of these concepts that they are concepts of actions. These concepts of correctness – moral, eudaimonistic, instrumental, and so on – logically depend on the concept of an action and cannot explain it.

In a philosophical explanation of a mysterious phenomenon, explaining concepts must be logically independent of explained concepts. Hence, an explanation of meaning and intentionality may only use normative concepts to which it is not essential that they apply to assertions and actions. Let us call a concept of correctness that satisfies this condition a concept of basic correctness. None of the concepts we use in articulating the evaluations that shape our action and speech – “true”, “just”, “useful”, and so on – is a concept of basic correctness. A concept of basic correctness will be a theoretical concept, expressly introduced for the purpose of explaining intentionality.

MIE is perfectly clear on this. Its theory of meaning and intentionality has this form: its fundamental concept is that of a normative practice, a system of elements having a normative status and expressing normative attitudes. If a normative practice satisfies certain conditions, its elements are assertions. If it satisfies further
conditions, some of its elements are empirical assertions; if it satisfies still further conditions, some are nonlinguistic actions. Clearly the correctness that can be said of the elements of a normative practice in the first place is basic correctness. For these are actions and assertions only if the practice is structured in a certain way. Hence, it cannot be essential to the concept of correctness that applies to them that items to which it applies are actions and assertions. “Correct”, here, is “basic-correct”, not, “epistemically correct”, “instrumentally correct”, and so on.

Within a dimension of correctness, normative statuses may be differentiated. For example, as Brandom remarks, “doing what one is committed to do is appropriate in one sense, while doing what one is entitled to do is appropriate in another” (p. 159). Thus we can distinguish epistemic commitments and entitlements, commitments and entitlements relevant to assessments of epistemic correctness. However, when Brandom in MIE speaks of “commitment” and “entitlement”, he means “basic commitment” and “basic entitlement”. It is part of the sense of our familiar concepts of commitment and entitlement that their objects are actions and speech acts. This is not part of the sense of the homonymous concepts employed in MIE. If MIE used our terms of commitment and entitlement, it would not provide understanding, but a novel jargon, which, at best, would be less perspicuous than the familiar one. In reading MIE, it easily happens that one unwittingly interprets its normative concepts in a way articulating which would require the use of intentional concepts. In order not to undermine the methodological rigor of MIE, we do well to replace the words “commitment” and “entitlement” by, say, “b-commitment” and “b-entitlement”.

We saw that an explanation of assertion, one that resolves the mystery posed by the apparent reality of assertions, cannot rest on the concept of epistemic correctness; instead, it must in the same stroke explain this concept of correctness. MIE satisfies this requirement, because it uses not a concept of epistemic correctness (epistemic commitment and entitlement) but a technical concept of basic correctness (basic commitment and entitlement). According to MIE, if and only if a normative practice exhibits a certain structure, its elements are assertions. Then its norms are norms of epistemic correctness. That a performance is epistemically correct means that it is basic-correct and that it is an element of a practice structured in the specified way. The concept of correctness used in MIE is genetically prior to all normative concepts with which we are familiar. It is the Ur-concept; all others spring from it as its modifications. Further, it is logically prior to all normative concepts; all can be defined in terms of it. Any correctness is basic correctness.

MIE’s normative concepts are theoretical concepts not employed outside of MIE. This means that MIE must fix their use. Independently of MIE’s stipulation of what these words mean we do not know what we say when, within the framework of MIE, we speak of commitment and entitlement. This is why Brandom devotes much space to explaining what basic normative statuses and attitudes are. However, his explanations confront a dilemma. For they must use terms that we understand. But which? Either they deploy the familiar normative concepts that we use in reflecting on our speech and action, or they deploy non-normative
concepts. In the former case, the concepts that explain MIE’s normative concepts logically depend on intentional concepts. But then so do the explained concepts and basic correctness is not basic. In the latter case, concepts of basic correctness can be explained in terms of non-normative concepts, and then basic correctness is not correctness (assuming, with Brandom, that the normativity of the mind is irreducible). Thus Brandom’s attempt to conjoin the methodology of the empiricist-naturalist tradition with a conception of the mind that stands opposed to this tradition is locked into a predicament. On the one hand, the normative concepts we know and use in thinking about our mental life are so close to intentional and semantic concepts that they cannot be used to explain them. On the other hand, theoretical concepts of basic correctness introduced for the purpose of explanation, if they are to keep their distance from intentional concepts, are not irreducibly normative.

A conception of the mind as essentially normative is incompatible with a conception of philosophy of mind as explaining a mysterious phenomenon because there are no concepts that are both irreducibly normative and logically independent of intentional concepts. That Brandom wants to be deploying precisely such concepts puts his account of normativity under strain and ultimately renders it incoherent. It is illuminating to follow these inconsistencies as they emerge because the process brings out that, in order to embrace the normative nature of the mind, it is necessary that we reshape our conception of philosophy of mind.

IV MIE on normativity

There are two kinds of normative concepts, concepts of normative statuses, statuses of being correct, and concepts of normative attitudes, attitudes of taking as correct. Brandom explains them in two steps. First, normative attitudes are explained as dispositions to sanction. Then normative statuses are explained as instituted by normative attitudes.

The direction of explanation to be pursued here first offers an account of the practical attitude of taking something to be correct-according-to-a-practice, and then explains the status of being correct-according-to-a-practice by appeal to those attitudes. (p. 25) These normative attitudes are understood [...] as dispositions to sanction. (p. 35)

Accounts that endorse the tripartite strategy [...] understand normative status [...] in terms of normative attitudes. [...] Their characteristic suggestion is that this sort of practical attitude [...] is to be understood in terms of the practice of sanctioning. (p. 37)

As the two steps are carried out, they each develop an internal incoherence, the incoherence of Brandom’s conception of philosophy of mind and his conception of the mind.
4.1 Normative attitudes: retribution

Brandom explains that someone has a normative attitude towards a bit of behavior if and only if she is disposed to sanction it. Sanctioning, however, can be primitive or sophisticated:

primitive sanction: “x sanctions” does not imply normative statements
sophisticated sanction: “x sanctions” does imply normative statements

Someone primitively sanctions a creature’s behavior if and only if she does something (presumably to the creature) making it more probable, or less probable, that it will engage in such behavior in the future. The sanction may be sophisticated in two ways. First, someone may sanction in such a way that she takes her sanctioning as correct, as deserved in the light of the sanctioned behavior. Second, it may be that the sanction consists in a change of the normative status of other sorts of behavior.

Brandom defines a primitive normative practice as one in which taking as correct consists in a disposition primitively to sanction. By contrast, in a sophisticated practice, taking as correct consists in dispositions to sophisticated sanctioning. “Adopting this practical attitude can be explained, to begin with, as consisting in the disposition or willingness to apply sanctions. Later, in more sophisticated practices, entitlement to such a response, or its propriety, is at issue.” (p. 166) Now, a primitive practice is not irreducibly normative. It can be adequately described without using normative concepts. Therefore Brandom rejects the attempt to explain assertions as elements of a primitive practice; such an explanation would be a version of the Myth of the Given. Instead, he proposes to understand assertions as elements of a sophisticated practice. In such practices, sanctions themselves are irreducibly normative; they have a normative status and express normative attitudes. It is Brandom’s idea that he can explain normative attitudes as dispositions to sanction without succumbing to the Myth, if the sanctions in question are sophisticated.

This position of Brandom’s confronts us with a problem. It is clear that “x takes the behavior as correct = x is disposed to sanction it in a sophisticated manner” does not reduce normative attitudes to something non-normative. It is equally clear that “x takes the behavior as correct = x is disposed to sanction it in a primitive manner” explains or defines normative attitudes in terms of sanctions. What is unclear is how the latter can be said of the first statement. Consider, “A prime number is a number divisible only by one and itself.” One does not need to understand the concept of a prime number in order to understand this explanation, which is why the explanation can impart such an understanding. By contrast, “x takes the behavior as correct = x is disposed to sanction it in a sophisticated manner” does not explain the concept of a normative attitude. Someone who does not know what a normative attitude is ipso facto does not know what a sophisticated sanction is. Hence the explanation means nothing to him.

Now, in philosophy one frequently meets with statements that explicate a concept without explaining it in the sense of enabling someone to use it who does not yet
know how to use it. An example from Frege is this: “Making a judgment is attributing the value True to a thought.” Let us say that such statements elucidate. It is a feature of elucidations that someone unable to use the elucidated concept does not understand the elucidation. When Brandom purports to define normative attitudes in terms of sophisticated sanctions, perhaps he wants to elucidate the concept of a normative attitude. It would then be no more than misleading that he does not note that the phrase “to define normative attitudes in terms of —” means something different when the concept filling the blank no longer is logically independent of the defined concept. But this account of Brandom’s intentions fails. First, MIE’s concept of a normative attitude cannot be elucidated. Second, this concept must be explained. One can elucidate only concepts one understands in the sense that one is competent in using them. But Brandom does not employ a concept of taking as correct with which we are familiar. He employs a technical concept, which we can have no idea how to use. Therefore, there is no such thing as elucidating this concept. And therefore, it must be explained. As long as it is not, we do not know what we say when, within the framework of MIE, we speak of normative attitudes.

In the light of what I have said, Brandom’s theory comes to look like this. Brandom begins with defining normative attitudes as dispositions primitively to sanction. He gives up on this definition because it is reductive and replaces primitive sanctions with sophisticated sanctions, suggesting that, in spite of this replacement, the resulting statement still explains normative attitudes. But the original statement explained only because it was reductive. So Brandom ascribes to his position incompatible properties: it does not reduce normative attitudes to something non-normative and it explains what a normative attitude is. This is an expression of the tension that defines MIE; the incoherence of the position Brandom attempts to occupy is the incoherence of his two fundamental commitments. On the one hand, MIE is to reveal the normative nature of the mind, and therefore normative attitudes must not be reducible. On the other hand, it is to explain intentionality, this mysterious phenomenon, and for that reason it must employ a concept of taking as basic-correct that cannot be elucidated, but must be explained.

### 4.2 Normative statuses: institution

Normative attitudes, Brandom says, institute normative statuses. This means that “they in some sense supervene on those attitudes.” (p. 50) In what sense? “Supervenience” usually means that there can be no change of the truth value of a statement about a normative status without some change of truth values of statements about normative attitudes. However, Brandom has a stronger relation in mind. He thinks that statuses can be read off of attitudes. In the terminology of MIE: for every statement about a status there must be a commitment-preserving inference with this statement as conclusion and statements about normative attitudes as premises. In this way, attitude-statements completely capture the reality described by status-statements. Statements about statuses can be translated into statements about normative attitudes. Status statements can be eliminated in favor of attitude-statements.
Looking at the practices a little more closely involves cashing out the talk of deontic statuses by translating it into talk of deontic attitudes. (p. 166) [...] normative statuses have been taken to be instituted by normative attitudes, so that talk of commitments can be traded in for talk of undertaking and attributing commitments. (pp. 296f) [my emphasis]

That normative statuses supervene on normative attitudes is one of two thoughts intended to make talk of correctness respectable.

The normative dimension of linguistic practice [...] is rendered less mysterious in two ways. First, linguistic norms are understood as instituted by social-practical activity. [...] [Commitments and entitlements] are creatures of the attitudes of taking, treating, or responding to someone in practice as committed or entitled. [...] The second way norms are rendered less mysterious is by explaining exactly what is expressed by normative vocabulary. [...] An account is offered of how locutions must be used in order to express explicitly the very normative notions [...] that are appealed to in laying out the normative pragmatics. (p. xiv)

On the one hand, Brandom wants to show that the norms of a practice are instituted by the attitudes of practitioners. On the other hand, he wants to develop his theory far enough for it to be capable of explaining the content of its own concepts. The theory is to be, as Brandom puts it, expressively complete.

Now, as we shall see, these two ways of rendering norms “less mysterious” are incompatible. If the theory represents norms as instituted, then it is not expressively complete. This incoherence again manifests the tension of the force and the content of MIE. While the claim that statuses are instituted is necessitated by the ambition to give an explanation that dissolves the mystery of the ostensible reality of meaning and intentionality, expressive completeness is necessary to cling to the irreducibly normative character of the mind. We shall show this in two steps. We see first that someone who conceives of the norms governing a practice as instituted by attitudes of practitioners is thereby precluded from participating in this practice, and then that this renders expressive completeness impossible, which undermines the claim of the theory to explain intentionality in normative terms.

Let us consider first what it is to participate in a normative practice. A practice is a system of performances and assessments linked in the following way. An assessment of a performance attributes a normative status to it. The assessment itself has a normative status that depends on the status of the performance it assesses: an assessment of a performance as correct is correct if and only if the performance is correct. Further, a performance presents itself as correct (compare section 3.2) and thus implicitly assesses possible assessments of itself. So an assessment of a performance is a performance to be assessed, and a performance is an (implicit) assessment of its assessments. Diverging assessments of a performance, or a performance and its assessment as incorrect, contradict each other in the following sense: if A assesses a
performance as correct, and B assesses it as incorrect, then B assesses A’s assessment as incorrect and vice versa. In the same sense, converging assessments of the same performance agree with one another. Now we can formulate a necessary condition for someone to participate in a practice: he must normatively relate to performances and assessments that are part of the practice. He must assess performances and lay himself open to their assessment. He must agree with or contradict them.

Now imagine a theoretician who determines the normative status of performances of a practice as this status is instituted by attitudes of practitioners. From suitable statements about what practitioners take as correct he infers statements of the form “performance \( v \) is correct”. Let us assume that practitioners express the attitudes from which the theoretician infers the normative status by saying, “\( v \) is correct”. (In the fundamental case, they need not say that, but may express their attitudes by rewarding the subject, kissing him, for example.) Now, in contrast to statements of practitioners “\( v \) is correct”, the homophone statement of the theoretician does not express a normative attitude toward \( v \). His “\( v \) is correct”, as it can be translated into statements about normative attitudes toward \( v \), does not express such an attitude. The theoretician treats the status of \( v \) as an effect of the attitudes of practitioners. Hence he does not conceive of it as a standard to which these attitudes are subject. In particular, he does not subject himself to this standard. Saying “\( v \) is correct”, he does not assess \( v \). He does not assess the normative attitudes of practitioners toward \( v \), and he does not expose himself to their assessment. He does not contradict the practitioners, nor does he agree with them. The theoretician does not participate in the practice. This is a feature of the way in which he uses the expression “— is correct”. Thinking of the normative statuses as instituted precludes him from participating in a practice governed by these statuses.

It follows from this that the theory of MIE, insofar as it contains the thesis that normative statuses are instituted, is not expressively complete. This becomes clear when we consider what expressive completeness requires. The route to expressive completeness is this: the theoretician observes that practitioners institute norms. He further sees that the practice has the structure necessary and sufficient for its elements to be assertions. These elements accordingly have a semantic content defined by the instituted norms, a content that the practitioners, by their normative attitudes, have conferred on them. In a second step, the theoretician notes that the practitioners confer contents on their performances that include concepts he himself deploys in describing how they confer content on performances. Brandom calls such concepts “logical concepts”; the concepts of a normative status and a normative attitude are fundamental logical concepts in this sense. Now, the theory is expressively complete only if the concepts of the theoretician are the same as the concepts he recognizes the practitioners to be using, that is, only if he does what he perceives the practitioners as doing. Expressive completeness then is consummated when, as Brandom puts it, “external interpretation collapses into internal score-keeping” (p. 644). The difference between theoretician and practitioner collapses, the theoretician does what the practitioners do, the theoretician is a practitioner. But if the theoretician conceives of the norms of the practice as instituted, then he does not participate in this practice, and then his theory is not expressively complete.
It may be thought that the claim to expressive completeness is overambitious anyway, so that little harm is done if it cannot be vindicated. But this is not so. For, if the theory is not expressively complete, then the concepts it employs are not normative concepts. Remember that the theoretician’s statement “v is correct” does not express a normative attitude, whereas statements of practitioners “v is correct” do. The theoretician uses the sign “— is correct” differently from the way practitioners use it. In order not to be confused about this, let us write statements of the theoretician “— is t-correct”. Now, the content of a statement “v is t-correct” is clear; we know what it means because we know how to eliminate it in virtue of statements about normative attitudes. But we have no reason to suppose that statements about t-correctness represent normative statuses. The theoretician appears to identify implicit norms only as long as he appears to employ the same concept of correctness as practitioners use or would use to express their attitudes. But he does not. Statements of the theoretician “v is t-correct” do not express normative attitudes, which means that the theory is not expressively complete. But then its claim to employ normative concepts is ungrounded. Expressive completeness is not a luxury we may under pressure renounce. It is a condition under which alone meaning and intentionality figure in the theory as normative and, hence, under which alone the theory does not fall prey to the Myth of the Given.

Expressive completeness rules out the conception of norms as instituted. Indeed, as he seeks to show that his theory is expressively complete, Brandom retracts his claim that norms are instituted.

The work done by talk of deontic statuses cannot be done by talk of deontic attitudes actually adopted. [...] Talk of deontic statuses can in general be traded in only for talk of proprieties governing the adoption and alteration of deontic attitudes. (p. 626)19

Brandom says that statements about what is correct cannot be translated into statements about what is taken as correct; normative attitudes do not institute normative statuses. A bit later he formulates this as follows:

Commitments must be understood as instituted by proprieties of scorekeeping, rather than by actual scorekeeping. [...] It is a normative phenomenalism, explaining having a certain normative status in effect as being properly taken to have it. (p. 627)

Brandom tells us that normative statuses are instituted, not by normative attitudes, but by normative statuses of normative attitudes. To be correct is not being taken as correct; it is being correctly taken as correct.20 Instead of saying that normative statuses are not instituted, Brandom now says that they are instituted, but that we made a mistake in thinking they were instituted by normative attitudes. In truth, normative statuses are instituted by normative statuses.

Why does Brandom express himself in this odd fashion? Here we must remember that it is his goal to render norms “less mysterious”. Norms are mysterious in the
sense expounded above: they appear to lie beyond the limits of possible reality, limits that, for Brandom, are drawn by the natural sciences.

Natural science [...] will never run across commitments in its cataloguing of the furniture of the world [...]. Nonetheless, according to the account presented here, there are norms, and their existence is neither supernatural nor mysterious. Normative statuses are domesticated by being understood in terms of normative attitudes [...]. (p. 626)

The situation parallels the one we encountered discussing normative attitudes. Brandom begins with claiming that normative attitudes institute normative statuses. Then he rejects this claim because it is reductive21 and replaces it by the claim that normative statuses institute normative statuses. Clinging to the word “institution”, he suggests that the new claim achieves what the former did: resolving the mystery attending the ostensible reality of norms. Brandom again seeks to occupy an incoherent position: norms are irreducible and domesticated. In this contradiction appears the contradiction of his conception of the mind as essentially normative and his conception of philosophy of mind as explaining a mysterious phenomenon. On the one hand, the theoretician employs normative concepts only if he assumes the perspective of a practitioner, from which, however, normative statuses appear as the standard, not the effect, of normative attitudes. On the other hand, the naturalist finds normative statuses mysterious. If the mystery is to be resolved, statuses must supervene on normative attitudes.22

V The reality of norms

Brandom says that normative statuses are instituted by normative statuses of normative attitudes. This is an attempt to formulate an incoherent position. It also points toward an insight. The insight is this: the norms of a practice are known to be real only by those who participate in this practice. This insight is not developed in MIE. It undermines MIE’s methodology because it implies that an account of the nature of mental life is not an explanation of a mysterious phenomenon. It achieves a different kind of understanding. I shall try to explicate the adumbrated insight and show why it enforces a revision of the conception of philosophy of mind that guides MIE.

In section 4.1 we met with this idea, characteristic of empiricism: that it is correct to do something means that, if one does not do it, one will be punished. Ernst Tugendhat provides an excellent exposition of this idea:

The meaning of the word “must” in its practical use may at first seem peculiarly unpalpable. But as we now reduce it to what happens when a person does not act as she must, we arrive at a sentence that refers to something empirically palpable. At the same time we may already anticipate that, to every “must”-sentence, there belongs a sanction, something that would be negative for the agent, if he did not act accordingly. It is impossible to
see what sense talk of practical necessity (the “must” or “ought”) might be supposed to have, if such a sanction – in this broad sense – is not assumed.23

We may rephrase Tugendhat’s thought as follows: To say that there is a norm to the effect that one must act in such-and-such a way has empirical content only if the norm, the “must”, is effective in the empirical world. Now a norm takes effect as, and only as, something “happens when the person does not act as she must”. The sentence “You must do this” has empirical content only if it implies “If you do not, such-and-such is going to happen”. The second sentence gives the empirical content of the first. However, a sentence cannot have more content than it has empirical content. The first sentence cannot say more and can say nothing other than the second sentence. We can “reduce” the first sentence to the second. This illustrates how the empiricist demand for an account of the reality of norms turns into a denial of their reality. First, one asks how norms can be palpable. The answer is that the norm is palpable in the sanction. The sanction is the empirical reality of the norm. But the reality of the norm does not exceed its empirical reality. Hence the norm is nothing more and nothing other than the sanction. The norm can be reduced to the sanction.

Norms must be effective, if statements about what one should do are to have a sense. The empiricist account does not succeed in understanding the reality, and this is, the efficacy, of norms. It fails because it presupposes that a norm cannot take effect on its own, but only by proxy, through the sanction. The inevitable consequence is that the sanction does not confer reality on the norm, but the norm reduces to the sanction. How then can we understand the reality of norms? How does a norm take effect in what someone does? The empiricist finds talk of norms “unpalpable” because he eschews the perspective from which such talk is intelligible. I know the reality of a norm as I acknowledge it and am guided by it in what I do. If asked why I act as I do, I cite the norm as what explains my action. I represent the norm as what accounts for my action, not a sanction associated with it. Furthermore, I know a norm to be effective as I explain or criticize someone else’s actions by reference to it. I therein recognize her as someone who is subject to the norm and whose actions the norm can determine (even if it has not done so on this occasion). I see a norm as real and effective in my own actions as I act according to it, and I see the actions of others manifest the reality of a norm as I relate to them as partners in a shared practice guided by this norm.

Rooted in the empiricist-naturalist tradition, Brandom thinks meaning and intentionality, speaking and acting, are mysterious phenomena, which he must explain. On the other hand, following Sellars, he seeks to hold on to the normative character of our mental life; he wants to show that the reality of action and speech is a normative reality. But these goals do not go together, because the reality of norms is accessible only from the perspective of being guided by them, of holding others responsible to shared norms and explaining their actions through them. A mysterious phenomenon seems to lie beyond the limits of possible reality. Hence, as long as the phenomenon
is not explained, it remains open whether it is real. But we apply normative concepts to actions from a perspective internal to them. Representing one’s action as guided by norms (thinking, I am doing this because —, citing a norm) is the way in which one acts. It is the form of intentional action. The perspective from which acting is known to be a move in a normative practice is not a perspective on acting; it is the perspective of acting. It is an aspect of the reality of acting. Therefore, from this perspective the question whether action is real is not left open. From this perspective, intentional action is not a mysterious phenomenon.

Speaking and acting is known to be a normative practice from the perspective internal to speaking and acting. This is the meaning of “normative statuses are instituted by normative statuses of normative attitudes” that points forward. At the end of MIE, Brandom retracts his conception of norms as instituted by attitudes and falls just short of a revision of his conception of philosophical understanding. An account of our mental life that captures its normative nature will articulate the perspective internal to this form of life. It will be an aspect of the reality of which it is an account and thus provide comprehension of a different kind from that supplied by an explanation of a mysterious phenomenon.

Notes
1 Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994. All unmarked page references are to this book.
2 The difference between a scientific and a philosophical puzzle becomes invisible when one fails to distinguish a given scientific theory from the idea that the concepts of this theory circumscribe the essence of the world. Thus, e.g. within Newtonian mechanics the perihelion of Mercury is mysterious: it conflicts with what ought to be the case according to this theory. It is a mystery that arises within the domain of phenomena. Newtonian physics undertakes to account for. It is thus a scientific, not a philosophical mystery. However, the character of human action - that, e.g. human actions can be governed by ideals - is not a phenomenon that comes to light or requires explanation within the domain that Newtonian physics seeks to understand. That human actions are governed by ideals does not contradict Newton’s theory because this theory says nothing about actions and what accounts for them. That ideals shape the character of human action is mysterious within a mechanistic world-view, which regards statements that explain actions by reference to ideals as not world-directed. Within this world-view, the character of human action generates a philosophical mystery.
3 I borrow this metaphor from Robert Brandom. If one despairs of the possibility of providing such a translation, and yet does not want to fall back on the first option and deny the reality of the mysterious phenomenon, then a last resort is to distinguish first class and second class features of reality. Second class features are not reducible to first class features (if they were, they would be first class), but nonetheless amount to more than mere illusion insofar as they depend on and are kept in check by first class features of reality. The relation of dependence in virtue of which a domain is credited with second class reality is called superveniency; there is a great deal of (set-theoretic) latitude in the manner in which it can be defined. See J. Kim, “Concepts of Supervenience”, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 45, 1984, pp. 153–76. The philosophical interest of the concept of supervenience depends on the soundness of the ideal of explanation that an account in terms of supervenience approximates. I shall be concerned only with the ideal.
4 Abbreviated as EPM. Page references are to the edition, W. Sellars, Empiricism and the
With regard to what follows, compare Sebastian Rödl, Selbstbezug und Normativität (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1998), chapter 3.

“The explanatory strategy pursued here is to begin with an account of social practices, identify the particular structure they must exhibit in order to qualify as specifically linguistic practices.” (p. xiii) “The first step in the project is accordingly the elaboration of a pragmatics [...] that is couched in terms of practical scorekeeping attitudes of attributing or acknowledging deontic statuses of commitment and entitlement. [...] The next step is to say what structure such a set of social practices must have in order to qualify as specifically discursive practice.” (p. xiv)

On the first level, two kinds of consequential relations among normative attitudes are required: the normative attitudes standing in relations of the first kind have the same subject and refer to (generically) distinct elements (intrasubject and intercontent), the attitudes standing in relations of the second kind are of distinct subjects, but refer to (generically) the same element (intersubject and intracontent). The first relation may be called proto-inferential, the second proto-deferential. In addition, there must be a multiplicity of normative statuses corresponding to the duality of commitment and entitlement. The requirements for the second and the third level are complicated, because, here, proto-inferential and proto-deferential relations interact. In the present context, only the most abstract form of the theory is of interest.

Jürgen Habermas once advanced the anthropological speculation that our normative concepts, in a process of differentiation, have sprung from one unified normative Ur-concept. It may help to think of “basic correctness” as a name of this prehistoric mode of evaluation. It is important to note, however, that people who find value in this speculation usually also assume that our normative thought has undergone a genuine development and that therefore our differentiated normative concepts are not definable in terms of the prehistoric Ur-concept. According to the theory of MIE, by contrast, the development consists solely in the growth of complexity. The nature of the evaluation does not change, all evaluation is and always will be prehistoric.

This fact, I think, is not appreciated in the larger part of the literature on MIE. Most commentators appear to be very comfortable speaking about being committed and entitled without further explanation, and seem unburdened by a worry that they may not be saying anything. This criticism does not apply to Brandom himself. See above.

“Treating a performance as correct is taken to be positively sanctioning it, which is to say positively reinforcing it.” (p. 35) “This version takes it that to treat a response to a certain stimulus as incorrect is just to punish it, in the sense of responding to it in a way that in fact decreases the probability that the one being assessed will respond in that way to that sort of stimulus in the future.” (p. 42)

“If the normative status of being incorrect is to be understood in terms of the normative attitude of treating as incorrect by punishing, it seems that the identification required is not with the status of actually being punished but with that of deserving punishment, that is, with being correctly punished.” (p. 36)

“Other cases are possible, for instance ones in which the assessing response is to punish by making other actions inappropriate. [...] The punishment for violating one norm is an alteration in other normative statuses.” (p. 43)

“What is being considered is a slightly more sophisticated practice, in which the significance of taking the queen’s shilling [...] is itself defined in terms of deontic statuses – in particular, of entitlement to punish.” (p. 163)

See pp. 42–3: “Defining normative attitudes in terms of dispositions to apply sanctions does not by itself reduce the normative to the nonnormative. [...] To turn the retributive
story about normative attitudes into a naturalistic one, an account might for instance understand what is good (and so rewarding) in terms of what is desirable, and what is desirable in term of what is desired, and what is desired ultimately in terms of what is pursued. Commitment to such a reduction is optional. Positive and negative sanctions may consist in acclaim and censure that itself has only a normative significance.”

Cf. “Objectivity and the Normative Fine Structure of Rationality”, Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 197: “There is pressure to make whatever norms are invoked be ones that can be read off of the attitudes of practitioners.”

Brandom claims that quantifiers and sentential connectives make explicit the inferential role of atomic statements. He turns this into a definition of logical vocabulary and extends it so as to include vocabulary that explicitates the pragmatics rather than the semantics of a discursive practice. As a result, expressions are classified as logical vocabulary which would not ordinarily be conceived as such.

Note that this passage straightforwardly contradicts these, cited earlier: “Looking at practices a little more closely involves cashing out talk of deontic statuses by translating it into talk of deontic attitudes.” (p. 166) “Normative statuses have been taken to be instituted by normative attitudes, so that talk of commitments can be traded in for talk of undertaking and attributing commitments.” (pp. 296f)

“Proprieties are normative statuses.” (p. 628)

“If normative statuses could be understood as instituted by actual attitudes of acknowledging and attributing them, then the use of normative vocabulary […] would straightforwardly supervene on the use of nonnormative vocabulary.” (p. 628)

This objective is still operative in the eighth chapter: “In this way the maintenance, from every perspective, of a distinction between status and attitude is reconciled with the methodological phenomenalism that insists that all that really needs to be considered is attitudes – that the normative statuses in terms of which deontic score is kept are creatures instituted by the (immediate) normative attitudes.” (p. 597) This methodological phenomenalism is not the normative phenomenalism of chapter 9. The phrase “from every perspective” is strictly incorrect. It would have to read, “from every perspective, except from the perspective of the theoretician, who adheres to methodological phenomenalism.”

One of the central themes of Brandom’s work is that we should construct our semantic theories around material validity and incompatibility, rather than reference, truth, and satisfaction. This approach to semantics is motivated in part by Brandom’s pragmatism about the relation between semantics and the more general study of language use – what he calls “pragmatics”:

Inferring is a kind of doing. ... The status of inference as something that can be done accordingly holds out the promise of securing an appropriate relation between pragmatics, the study of the practices, and semantics, the study of the corresponding contents. (MIE, p. 91)

Although Brandom does not go so far as to say that a pragmatist attitude to the relation between semantics and pragmatics requires an inferentialist semantics, his motivating arguments strongly suggest that a pragmatist ought to be an inferentialist.

In what follows, I discuss the connections between Brandom’s pragmatism and his inferentialism. I’ll argue that pragmatism, as Brandom initially describes it – the view that “semantics must answer to pragmatics” – does not favor an inferentialist approach to semantics over a truth-conditional one. I’ll then consider whether inferentialism might be motivated by a stronger kind of pragmatism, one that requires semantic concepts to be definable in terms of independently intelligible pragmatic concepts. Although this more stringent requirement does exclude truth-conditional approaches to semantics, it is not clear that Brandom’s own approach meets it. Moreover, if Brandom’s inferentialism is pragmatist in this stronger sense, it is not because “inferring is a kind of doing,” but because scorekeeping is a kind of doing.

I Pragmatism

Brandom describes his pragmatism as follows:

One of the fundamental methodological commitments governing the account presented here is pragmatism about the relations between semantics and pragmatics. Pragmatism in this sense is the view that what attributions of semantic
contentfulness are for is explaining the normative significance of intentional states such as beliefs and of speech acts such as assertions. Thus the criteria of adequacy to which semantic theory’s concept of content must answer are to be set by the pragmatic theory, which deals with contentful intentional states and the sentences used to express them in speech acts. (MIE, p.143)

This is not just the view that semantics is useful for explaining the normative significance of speech acts and mental states. Even staunch antipragmatists would concede that. Pragmatism is the idea that there is nothing more to semantic concepts than their role in this enterprise. The “theoretical point” of semantics, as pragmatists conceive of it, is that of “settling how linguistic expressions of those contents are properly or correctly used, under what circumstances it is appropriate to acquire states and attitudes with those contents, and how one then ought or is obliged to go on to behave” (MIE, p. 83). Since semantics does not answer to anything other than pragmatics,

it is pointless to attribute semantic structure or content that does no pragmatic explanatory work. It is only insofar as it is appealed to in explaining the circumstances under which judgments and inferences are properly made and the proper consequences of doing so that something associated by the theorist with interpreted states or expressions qualifies as a semantic interpretant, or deserves to be called a theoretical concept of content. (MIE, p. 144)

The essence of pragmatism, then, is the denial that semantics is conceptually autonomous from pragmatics.

The contrasting position (antipragmatism) is the view that the basic concepts of semantics can be understood in abstraction from proprieties of thought and language use. This is not to say that they need no explaining at all. In “informational semantics,” for example, semantic concepts are explained in terms of lawlike correlations between external things (or property instantiations) and mental items, plus counterfactuals or evolutionary histories (see Fodor, 1990; Dretske, 2000). These views take semantic concepts to be conceptually dependent on the causal, counterfactual, and explanatory resources of the “special sciences.” Antipragmatists need not deny that semantics has a role to play in the explanation of language use (or proprieties of use). They need only deny any essential or conceptual connection between semantics and use. Fodor’s claim that in principle a creature could have just one concept (which would a fortiori lack any “inferential role”) is a way of making this point vivid.

Pragmatists characteristically deny that there can be semantic differences that are not publicly accessible, since these would be semantic differences without pragmatic differences. We have already seen Brandom saying that “it is pointless to attribute semantic structure or content that does no pragmatic explanatory work” (MIE, p. 144). More vivid manifestations of this view include Dummett’s denial that we can grasp contents that go beyond what could, in principle, be verified, Quine’s denial that there is any objective basis for choosing between competing
translation manuals that predict the same patterns of use, and Davidson’s more limited embrace of the indeterminacy of meaning and reference. All of these counterintuitive consequences are supposed to follow from the requirement that facts about meaning or content not extend beyond what is, in principle, publicly accessible. Though this requirement is sometimes dismissed as crypto-positivist verificationism, what really motivates it is the pragmatist view about the point and purpose of semantic concepts. I assume that most philosophers would be willing to grant an analogue of the publicity requirement for the concept expressed by “chic.” Given the point of characterizing someone as chic, the idea that something could count as chic by all publicly accessible criteria without being chic is absurd. One need not be a crypto-positivist to accept this; one need only have reasonable views about what the concept chic is for. Pragmatists hold that semantic concepts have no role beyond their role in predicting proprieties of use. The rest follows from this.

Antipragmatists, by contrast, characteristically allow for the possibility of semantic “facts of the matter” that could remain hidden even if all the pragmatic facts were known: facts we could discover only by cutting open a speaker’s brain, or finding out about a creature’s early evolutionary history, or discerning patterns of lawlike covariation between brain states and external objects. Their rejection of a publicity requirement is a corollary of their rejection of the idea that semantics answers only to pragmatics. This, then, is a huge divide in the theory of meaning: perhaps the most significant divide of all. As Brandom notes, the existence of the thriving discipline of formal semantics does not settle anything in this debate (MIE, p. 143). The fact that a genealogist may employ concepts like uncle, cousin, and ancestor without saying anything about their biological significance does not show that these genealogical concepts are conceptually independent of biological ones. Similarly, the fact that a formal semanticist may employ the concepts of reference and truth without saying anything about their relation to the use of language does not show that these concepts are intelligible apart from pragmatics. If formal semantics is to have anything to do with meaning (as opposed to being a rather ugly branch of algebra), its basic concepts must have significance beyond their structural role in the formal theory. This is the point Dummett is making when he argues that “it is part of the concept of truth that we aim at making true statements” (1959, in 1978, p. 2). It is the point David Lewis is making when he appeals to “a convention of truthfulness and trust” to connect formal-semantic descriptions of language with language use (1983, p. 167). Of course, one need not appeal to the use of language in explicating the concept of truth. One could appeal instead to indication relations, counterfactuals, and causal histories. Formal semantics is compatible with a variety of different views about the relation of semantics to pragmatics.

II Inferentialism vs. representationalism

Let us now ask how this great divide relates to another: the divide between truth-conditional and inferential-role approaches to semantics.

Clearly, there are truth-conditional semanticists on both sides of the aisle separating pragmatists and antipragmatists. Indeed, one of the most prominent
truth-conditional semanticists – Donald Davidson – is also a prominent pragmaticist. Reference and satisfaction, he says, “we must treat as theoretical constructs whose function is exhausted in stating the truth conditions for sentences” (1984, p. 223). If two assignments of reference and satisfaction to the basic expressions of a language yield the same overall pattern of truth conditions for sentences, they are empirically equivalent (1984, 224 and essay 16). Thus, subsentential semantics answers to sentential semantics. What, then, of the basic concept of sentential semantics – truth? Davidson does not think that we grasp the concept of truth by grasping a definition or analysis of it. It is, in that sense, primitive. We grasp it by understanding its role in a larger theory that combines psychology, semantics, and decision theory, and that is tested ultimately by its capacity to make sense of others as rational agents (1984, 239 and essay 10; 2005, essay 2). When there are multiple assignments of truth conditions, beliefs, and preferences that do equally well in making sense of others, both theories are acceptable, even if they disagree about whose utterances and beliefs are true (1984, essay 16). Thus, semantics answers to pragmatics. There is nothing else it could answer to, since in embracing the anomalousness of the mental (1980, essay 11), Davidson has ruled out understanding representational content in natural-scientific terms.

The example of Davidson shows that truth-conditional semantics is perfectly compatible with a pragmatist view of the relation between semantics and pragmatics. And, to my knowledge, Brandom never denies this. However, his motivating arguments for inferentialism tend to consider only positions that combine representationalist strategies in semantics with antipragmatist views about the relation between semantics and pragmatics. Here’s an example from early in chapter 2. Brandom has acknowledged that to understand intentionality, one must understand representation. He then says:

A common response to this insight is to envisage an explanatory strategy that starts with an understanding of representation and on that basis explains the practical proprieties that govern language use and rational action. It is not clear, however, that a suitable notion of representation can be made available in advance of thinking about the correct use of linguistic expressions and the role of intentional states in making behavior intelligible. (MIE, p. 69)

But why should a representationalist have to deploy a notion of representation that “can be made available in advance of thinking about the correct use of linguistic expressions and the role of intentional states in making behavior intelligible”? That is, why shouldn’t a representationalist be a pragmatist too, on the model of Davidson? As far as I can see, all of the worries about representationalism raised in chapter 2 are worries about the combination of representationalism with antipragmatism, not about representationalism itself.

Brandom seems to acknowledge this:
It should be clear that the remarks in this section are not meant to have the force of arguments against treating representation as a central semantic category. Rather, they present some general criteria of adequacy for an account of this important semantic notion. By doing so, however, they do offer reasons not to treat representation as a semantic primitive, as an unexplained explainer. (MIE, p. 79)

But this much is common ground to all parties to the contemporary debate, pragmatists and antipragmatists alike. Far from taking representational notions as unexplained explainers, Dretske and Fodor attempt to explain them in nonsemantic terms. And, while Davidson takes the concept of truth to be primitive, in the sense that it has no illuminating definition or analysis in terms of simpler notions, he would resist the charge that this makes it an “unexplained explainer.” For we can say quite a bit about truth, by “[tracing] the connections between the concept of truth and the human attitudes and acts that give it body” (Davidson 2005, p. 35):

We should think of a theory of truth for a speaker in the same way we think of a theory of rational decision: both describe structures we can find, with an allowable degree of fitting and fudging, in the behavior of more or less rational creatures gifted with speech. It is in the fitting and fudging that we give content to the undefined concepts of subjective probability and subjective values – belief and desire, as we briefly call them; and, by way of theories like Tarski’s, to the undefined concept of truth. (2005, p. 37)

Thus Brandom’s exhortations against taking representational concepts as unexplained explainers does very little to motivate inferentialism. The most prominent antipragmatist representationalists offer naturalistic accounts of representation, while the most prominent pragmatist representationalists are at pains to emphasize the conceptual connections between their undefined semantic primitives and “use.”

III “Inferring is a kind of doing”

Still, isn’t there something to the idea that a semantic theory centered on inference is more directly connected to proprieties of language use than one centered on truth and representation? Brandom repeatedly emphasizes that the inferentialist’s fundamental semantic concepts can be explicated in terms of proprieties for performing a certain kind of action – the action of inferring, of drawing a conclusion from premises:

Inferring is a kind of doing. ... The status of inference as something that can be done accordingly holds out the promise of securing an appropriate relation between pragmatics, the study of the practices, and semantics, the study of the corresponding contents. (MIE, p. 91)
Content is understood in terms of proprieties of inference, and those are understood in terms of the norm-instituting attitudes of taking or treating moves as appropriate or inappropriate in practice. A theoretical route is accordingly made available from what people do to what they mean, from their practice to the contents of their states and expressions. In this way a suitable pragmatic theory can ground an inferentialist semantic theory; its explanations of what it is in practice to treat inferences as correct are what ultimately license appeal to material proprieties of inference, which can then function as semantic primitives. (MIE, p. 134)

The implied contrast is clear. Representing is not an action (although it may be involved in many actions). So any connection between representational concepts and practice is bound to be more tenuous.

I want to make two points about this line of thought. First, the implied contrast with representationalism cannot be sustained. Even if representing is not (in the appropriate sense) an action, asserting certainly is. And truth is, in some sense, a standard of correctness for assertion. So truth conditions can be thought of as proprieties for assertion in much the same way that inferential roles can be thought of as proprieties for inference. In which case the representationalist’s fundamental semantic primitives stand in precisely the same kind of relation to “use” as the inferentialist’s.

It may be objected that the sense in which truth is a standard for assertion is rather elusive. There is certainly a sense in which it is incorrect to assert a truth that is not supported by one’s evidence, and correct to assert a falsehood that has overwhelming support. And even if we can find a sense of correctness in which only true assertions are “correct,” further argument would be needed to show that truth is a normative concept, and not a descriptive one to which some extrinsic norm attaches. So it is not at all clear that we should think of truth as a kind of norm. But these considerations can provide little comfort to the line of thought under consideration, since similar concerns can be raised about the status of (formal or material) validity as a norm for inferring.

Which brings me to my second point; it is not clear what Brandom’s own fundamental semantic notions have to do with “proprieties for inferring.” The most central of these are the following three relations (MIE, p. 188):

- **Incompatibility**: \( p \) is incompatible with \( q \) if commitment to \( p \) precludes entitlement to \( q \).
- **Commitment preservation**: The inference from premises \( \Gamma \) to \( p \) is commitment-preserving if commitment to \( \Gamma \) counts as commitment to \( p \).
- **Entitlement preservation**: The inference from premises \( \Gamma \) to \( p \) is entitlement-preserving if entitlement to \( \Gamma \) counts (defeasibly) as entitlement to \( p \).

To see what these relations have to do with inferring, we need to look at the role they play in Brandom’s normative pragmatics, his “game of giving and asking for reasons.”
This is a game in which every player keeps “score” on every other. In the simplest case, this score consists of a list of claims to which the player is committed, with some of these marked (say, with a star) as commitments to which the player is entitled. The fundamental moves in this game are those of making, challenging, and retracting assertions, and the primary role of the three relations described above is to determine how the score changes in response to these moves. Thus, if Jill takes there to be a relation of commitment preservation between “boysenberries are red” and “boysenberries are colored,” and Tom asserts (avows commitment to) “boysenberries are red,” Jill will also list “boysenberries are colored” as one of Tom’s commitments. If she takes “boysenberries are red” to be incompatible with “boysenberries are blue,” and she lists “boysenberries are blue” as another of Tom’s commitments, she will make sure that neither “boysenberries are red” nor “boysenberries are blue” is marked with a star. And if she takes “boysenberries are red” to stand in a relation of entitlement preservation to “boysenberries are edible,” then she will mark the latter with a star if she has marked the former (unless she takes Tom to be committed to something else incompatible with “boysenberries are edible”). This process is then iterated (in a fairly complex way, described in MIE, pp. 190–1). In this way, the significance of an assertion of \( p \) can be thought of as a mapping that associates with one social deontic score – characterizing the stage before that speech act is performed, according to some scorekeeper – the set of scores for the conversational stage that results from the assertion, according to the scorekeeper.

The “inferential role” a scorekeeper associates with \( p \) – the list of commitment-preserving, entitlement-preserving, and incompatibility relations it stands in to other claims – determines how that scorekeeper is to alter players’ scores in response to an assertion that \( p \). But it is misleading to suggest, as Brandom does, that

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\text{Inferring is accordingly the key concept linking semantic content and pragmatic significance. For not only can propositional semantic contents be understood as inferential roles, but proprieties of inference can be made sense of pragmatically, and specifically assertional significance can be understood in terms of them. (MIE, p. 190)}
\]

That the move from \( p \) to \( q \) preserves commitment and entitlement does not imply that it would be correct to infer \( q \) from \( p \). It may be, as Harman (1984, 1986) reminds us, that instead of acknowledging commitment to \( q \) one should disavow one’s commitment to \( p \). Brandom’s “inferential relations” are proprieties for deontic scorekeeping. They should not be confused with proprieties for inferring – for drawing a conclusion on the basis of some premises.

Indeed, it is hard to see how there could be proprieties for inferring in Brandom’s game of giving and asking for reasons. Proprieties for inferring would have to be backed up by sanctions that attach to processes. But sanctions in Brandom’s game
of giving and asking for reasons attach only to states. What gets you sanctioned is being committed to something you’re not entitled to (MIE, p. 178–80). It makes no difference how you got into that state: whether you acquired the offending commitment consequentially or by explicitly avowing it, and (in the latter case) whether you avowed it on the basis of an earlier claim (inferring) or for some other reason, the sanction is the same.

At one point Brandom asks, “What makes something that is done according to a practice – for instance the production of a performance or the acquisition of a status – deserve to count as inferring?” He replies: “The answer developed here is that inferring is to be distinguished as a certain kind of move in the game of giving and asking for reasons” (MIE, p. 157). But as far as I can tell, the game as Brandom describes it makes no distinction between moves that would intuitively count as “inferrings” (assertions made on the basis of other commitments) and moves that would not. For there is nothing in the scorekeeping apparatus that tracks the grounds on which various players make other claims. Because it is the scorekeeper’s inferential commitments that determine how she is to adjust the score, the scorekeeper can count an agent as entitled to a commitment to \( q \) in virtue of his entitlement to \( p \) even if the agent does not take the inference from \( p \) to \( q \) to be entitlement-preserving. Thus, if Tom’s commitment to “that apple is ripe” is challenged, he can successfully vindicate his entitlement to it by asserting “it’s a Winesap and it’s red,” even if he does not in any sense infer the former claim from the latter or even take the former to be supported by the latter. As far as I can see, Brandom’s scorekeeping dynamics are completely insensitive to whether \( p \) is asserted on the basis of \( q \). Paradoxically, then, inferring has no official place in Brandom’s “inferentialism.”

IV Strong and weak pragmatism

Even if not much hay can be made of the idea that “inferring is a kind of doing,” it may still seem that Brandom’s fundamental semantic notions (commitment preservation, entitlement preservation, incompatibility) are much more directly tied to practice than, say, Davidson’s notion of truth. Davidson’s idea is that truth is one of a family of primitive notions that get their significance from their role in a grand theory of rational behavior. On this view, although the concept of truth cannot be understood apart from proprieties for action and belief, there is no reducing the former to the latter. Brandom, by contrast, seems to envision a reduction of semantic notions to antecedently intelligible pragmatic ones. For example, in the opening pages of Articulating Reasons he suggests that we might “[begin] with a story about the practice or activity of applying concepts, and [elaborate] on that basis an understanding of conceptual content” (AR, p. 4). Accordingly, we might distinguish weak and strong forms of pragmatism:

Weak Pragmatism: Semantics is not conceptually autonomous from pragmatics; semantic concepts get their significance through their relation to pragmatic concepts.
Strong Pragmatism: The fundamental semantic concepts can be defined in purely pragmatic terms.

Even if truth-conditional semantics is compatible with weak pragmatism, it may be that only inferentialism is compatible with strong pragmatism.

To see whether Brandom’s theory counts as “strongly” pragmatist, we need to look more closely at the notions of commitment and entitlement in terms of which his semantic primitives (commitment preservation, entitlement preservation, incompatibility) are defined. Brandom calls these “deontic statuses” and says that they “correspond to the traditional deontic primitives of obligation and permission” (MIE, p. 160). (His only reason for eschewing the traditional terms is that they evoke a picture on which permission and obligation originates “exclusively from the commands or edicts of a superior.”) At this stage, he uses “commitment” and “entitlement” with infinitival complements, talking of commitment and entitlement to perform certain actions:

Coordinate with the notion of commitment is that of entitlement. Doing what one is committed to is appropriate in one sense, while doing what one is entitled to do is appropriate in another. (MIE, p. 159)

This is just what one would expect, since permission and obligation attach primarily to actions, and secondarily to states of affairs over which one has some control. (One can be permitted to be in a certain room, for example, even though being in the room is not an action.) Soon, however, Brandom replaces this straightforwardly deontic language with talk of commitment to (the contents of) claims and entitlements to such commitments:

Two claims are incompatible with each other if commitment to one precludes entitlement to the other. (MIE, p. 160)

Anyone committed to the premises of such inferences is committed thereby to the conclusions. (MIE, p. 168)

There is no explicit indication that “commitment” and “entitlement” are being used in a different way here; indeed, “commitment to do” uses are interspersed with “commitment to a claim” uses, sometimes even on the same page. Yet the relation between them is by no means clear. I know what it means to be obliged to pay my taxes or permitted to vote. I have no idea what it means to be obliged to the claim that frogs are amphibians or permitted to my obligation to the premise of an argument. If, as Brandom says, commitment and entitlement are genuinely deontic notions, corresponding to obligation and permission, then I should find talk of “commitment to the claim that frogs are amphibians” or “entitlement to my commitment to the premise of an argument” equally mysterious.
I should, but I don’t. Why not? No doubt because I am familiar with the forms “commitment to [noun phrase]” and “entitlement to [noun phrase]” from other contexts:

1. He is deeply committed to the Democratic Party.
2. Bob and Sarah are committed to each other.
3. You’re entitled to a free dessert.
4. They are committed to the proposition that all human beings are created equal.
5. Are you entitled to that conclusion, given your evidence?

I am tempted to call these non-deontic uses of “committed” and “entitled,” on the grounds that “obligated” and “permitted” could not be substituted for them here. It may be, however, that they are deontic in a derivative sense. To be committed to another person or to a political party is, plausibly, to have obligations to act in certain ways. To be entitled to a free dessert is to be permitted to eat a dessert without paying for it. The question is whether talk of “commitment to a proposition” can be analyzed in this way, in terms of obligations to do things or to be in a certain condition. If it can, then Brandom can be counted a strong pragmatist, as his basic semantic notions will be definable in purely deontic terms. If it can’t, then Brandom’s view is not a form of strong pragmatism: although its basic semantic notions get their significance from their relation to proprieties of use, they cannot be defined or reductively explained in terms of such proprieties, and it is not clear that they are more directly connected to such proprieties than truth and reference are on an account like Davidson’s.

V “Commitment to p”

A few passages suggest that “commitment to p” is, in fact, a commitment to do something. For example, Brandom says that attributors of commitments and entitlements “may punish those who act in ways they are not (taken to be) entitled to act, and those who do not act in ways they are (taken to be) committed to act” (MIE, p. 166). Here he is clearly talking about commitments and entitlements to act in certain ways. Since this passage occurs in a discussion of the genus of normative social practices of which linguistic practice is a species, it is natural to suppose that “commitment to p” is a commitment to act in certain ways, and that “entitlement to (a commitment to) p” is an entitlement to act in certain ways. The question then is: what ways?

On the entitlement side, this question has a straightforward and plausible answer: “entitlement to (a commitment to) p” is just entitlement to undertake a commitment to p. To undertake a commitment is to do something that entitles others to attribute that commitment to you (MIE, p. 162–3). Ordinarily, one undertakes commitment to p by asserting p or some other proposition that commitive-entails p.

It is more difficult to say what kind of action commitment to p could be a
commitment to perform. One might take commitment to $p$ to be commitment to assert $p$. Asserting is certainly a kind of performance, and Brandom gives an illuminating account of it. However, any proposition will have infinitely many committive consequences. To assert all of them would be impossible (not to mention pointless), and to commit oneself to asserting all of them would be foolish. Indeed, as Grice (1989) emphasized, being a good player of the assertion game often requires that one refrain from asserting obvious consequences of what one has already asserted.

More plausibly, one might take commitment to $p$ to be the “conditional task-responsibility” one takes on in asserting $p$: a commitment to demonstrate one’s entitlement to the commitment to $p$ in the face of appropriate challenges (MIE, p. 173). But this analysis of “commitment to $p$” is circular: we can’t understand what it would be to demonstrate entitlement to a commitment to $p$ unless we already understand what kind of commitment that is. The circularity could perhaps be exchanged for reflexivity, by taking a commitment to $p$ to be commitment to demonstrate entitlement to this very commitment in the face of a challenge. But there is no hint of this in Brandom’s writing, and it borders on the unintelligible. (What could it be to demonstrate entitlement to this very commitment, if this very commitment is the commitment to demonstrate entitlement to ... this very commitment?)

We could go on in this vein, trying to cash out “commitment to $p$” as a commitment to do something (or to be in a certain condition). However, Brandom’s considered view appears to be that “commitment to $p$” and “entitlement to a commitment to $p$” are not proprieties for action at all:

Deontic statuses are just something to keep score with, as balls and strikes are just statuses that performances can be treated as having for score-keeping purposes. To understand them, one must look at actual practices of keeping score, that is, at deontic attitudes and changes of attitude. (MIE, p. 194; cf. p. 183)

No one would suggest that a strike is itself a propriety for action (a permission or obligation). Of course, a strike carries with it certain permissions and obligations, but it is not itself a permission or obligation (or combination of the two). It is just a component of a baseball score. We understand its significance by understanding

(a) what sorts of actions in the game count as “strikes”;
(b) how the strike count affects how the score is to be updated in response to actions in the game; and
(c) how the strike count affects what the players are permitted and obligated to do.

To understand (a), one must know, for example, that a pitch that is swung at and missed is a strike, and that a pitch not swung at is a strike if it passes through the strike zone. To understand (b), one must know that a foul counts as a strike if the batter has fewer than two strikes. To understand (c), one must know that a batter
who has accumulated three strikes is obligated to relinquish his turn at bat.

If “commitment to p” or “entitlement to (a commitment to) p” are really just scorekeeping statuses, like “strike,” we shouldn’t expect them to be analyzable as commitment to do something, or to be in a certain condition. This is not to say that we can understand them without understanding how they are connected to permissions and obligations. For we understand them by seeing what role they play in the “game of giving and asking for reasons”:

(a) what sorts of actions in the game require changes in the “commitment” and “entitlement” columns of a player’s score;
(b) how these aspects of score affect how the score is to be updated in response to further actions; and
(c) how these aspects of score affect what the players are permitted and obligated to do.

To understand (a), we have to know, for example, that in asserting that p one comes to be committed to p and its (committive) consequences. To understand (b), we must know that a player who is committed to p cannot be entitled to any commitment to a content incompatible with p. To understand (c), we must know that one is permitted to sanction players who have commitments to which they are not entitled.

On this construal, “commitment to p” and “entitlement to (commitment to) p” are not really deontic notions at all, though they have conceptual connections with deontic notions. To make this vivid, imagine that each scorekeeper keeps a notebook with a page for every other player. Each page of the notebook has two columns, one red, the other yellow. Scorekeepers update their notebooks in response to assertions, challenges, and disavowals by consulting a rule book. Everything happens just as Brandom describes, except that instead of talking about a player’s “commitments,” the scorekeepers talk about which sentences are in the red column of the notebook page with that player’s name on it, and instead of talking about “entitlements,” they talk about what sentences are in the yellow column. Having sentences in the red column that aren’t in the yellow column is considered grounds for sanction. Clearly, the players are playing Brandom’s game of giving and asking for reasons; the differences are merely terminological. But now there is little temptation to suppose that writing p in a player’s red column amounts to taking the player to be committed or entitled to doing something. The connections between the statuses “red” and “yellow” and practical proprieties are more indirect than that.

Understanding Brandom’s “deontic statuses” this way is perfectly compatible with weak pragmatism, the view that semantics must answer to pragmatics. But it does not vindicate strong pragmatism, the view that semantic notions must be definable in terms of pragmatic ones. Brandom’s fundamental semantic concepts are defined in terms of his deontic statuses, but (on this construal) these are not practical proprieties, nor are they definable in terms of practical proprieties. It seems, then, that Brandom’s semantic notions relate to practical proprieties in much the
same way that Davidson says truth, reference, and satisfaction do: by their role in a larger theory from which consequences about practical proprieties can be derived.

VI Scorekeeping is a kind of doing
It would be misleading, however, to stop here. For Brandom emphasizes that the deontic statuses are to be understood in terms of the deontic attitudes. Perhaps, then, the key to understanding Brandom’s explication of his basic inferential notions in pragmatic terms is to shift our gaze from the speaker to the scorekeeper – from the one who is undertaking commitments to the one who is attributing them.

Think of the primitive notions of inferentialist semantics from the scorekeeper’s point of view. What does it mean, in practice, for \( p \) to commitively entail \( q \)? It means that when you take someone to be committed to \( p \) – when you assign this scorekeeping status – you ought to take that person to be committed to \( q \) as well. What does it mean for \( p \) to be incompatible with \( q \)? It means that when you take someone to be committed to \( p \), you ought not take that person to be entitled to a commitment to \( q \). Thus, we can explain inferentialism’s basic semantic concepts as proprieties for scorekeeping. (As explained in section III, above, they are not well understood as proprieties for inferring.)

However, this explanation presupposes that we understand what it is to attribute to someone a commitment to \( p \), or entitlement to a commitment to \( p \). One might suppose that understanding these attributions requires a prior understanding of the deontic statuses being attributed, and the discussion of the previous section has made it doubtful that we can define these directly in terms of practical proprieties. But Brandom asks us to turn the normal order of explanation on its head: first, explain the attitude of attributing commitment to \( p \), then understand the attributed status as what is thereby attributed (MIE, p. 166). The question, then, is whether we can explain in terms of pragmatic proprieties what it is to attribute commitment to \( p \) or entitlement to such a commitment.

Here Brandom appeals to our entitlement to impose sanctions:

attributing a commitment or entitlement ... can be explained, to begin with, as consisting in the disposition or willingness to impose sanctions. (Later, in more sophisticated practices, entitlement to such a response, or its propriety, is at issue.) (MIE, p. 166)

To take a subject \( A \) to be committed to \( p \), then, is to attribute to oneself entitlement to sanction \( A \) unless \( A \) is entitled to a commitment to \( p \). The talk of “entitlement to sanction” here is deontic in the strict sense; it concerns permission to act in a certain way. However, “entitled to a commitment to \( p \)” in the explanans remains unexplained. What we need is an explanation of the attitude of attributing entitlement to a commitment to \( p \) – one that does not presuppose prior understanding of commitment to \( p \) or (on pain of circularity) the attribution of commitment to \( p \).
This, I think, is the crux of the matter. If there is a way of explicating the attitudes of attributing commitment to \( p \) and entitlement to such a commitment by appealing only to clearly pragmatic notions – like commitment and entitlement to sanction someone – then Brandom’s view can be counted pragmatist in the strong sense, and we can vindicate the idea that a certain kind of pragmatism about the relation between semantics and pragmatics motivates an inferentialist approach to the former (although it will be scorekeeping, not inferring, that connects the two). If not, then we are left without a compelling reason for a pragmatist to forsake the well-trodden terrain of truth-conditional semantics.

Notes

1 Throughout this paper, I’ll cite Brandom 1994 as MIE and Brandom 2000 as AR.
2 Occasionally Brandom uses the term “Platonism” to describe the antipragmatist position (e.g. at AR, p. 4). But certainly Fodor’s and Dretske’s positions are not “Platonist” in any normal sense of that term.
3 And similarly for challenges and disavowals. The significance of an appropriate challenge is to remove the default entitlement that one has to one’s own avowed commitments (MIE, p. 178). Entitlement can be regained by deferring to others or by asserting something that stands in an entitlement-preserving relation to the claim challenged. The significance of a disavowal is to “un-undertake” a commitment (MIE, p. 192), removing it and any consequential commitments from one’s list of commitments and potentially adjusting entitlements as well (since commitment to the claim may have blocked entitlement to incompatible claims).
4 This has some bizarre consequences when conjoined with other Brandomian views. Suppose a scorekeeper endorses the identity “Hesperus = Phosphorus.” On Brandom’s account, this commitment makes explicit the scorekeeper’s disposition to take “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” to be intersubstitutable, preserving commitment, in non-opaque contexts (MIE, ch. 6). But Brandom holds that all commitment-preserving inferences are also entitlement-preserving (AR, p. 195). So our scorekeeper should also be disposed to attribute entitlement to “Hesperus is bright” whenever she attributes entitlement to “Phosphorus is bright” – even if the attributee does not take Hesperus to be Phosphorus! This consequence puts great strain on the intuitive connection between entitlement and epistemic warrant.
5 For example: “It does make sense to think of being committed to do something as not being entitled not to do it, but within the order of explanation pursued here it would be a fundamental mistake to try to exploit this relation to define one doxastic status in terms of the other” (MIE, p. 160). And then, a few lines down: “Two claims are incompatible with each other if commitment to one precludes entitlement to the other.”

References


One helpful way of thinking about the overall project undertaken in *Making It Explicit* (*MIE*), one suggested by Brandom himself, is to consider it in the context of a broadly interpretationist approach to rationality. To be rational for the interpretationist is to be interpretable by us rational beings. To turn this interpretationist criterion of rationality into an account of rationality, contends Brandom, one needs to say something about the structure of our own discursive practice in virtue of which it deserves to count as rational. The central task undertaken in *MIE* attempts to provide just such an account. Using a gameplaying model, it outlines the structure of a set of performances within a social practice that, it is claimed, is both necessary and sufficient for the practitioners to be playing the ‘game of giving and asking for reasons’. Brandom’s “bold conjecture” is that these two notions of rationality coincide, so that any set of performances within a social practice exhibiting this structure will be interpretable by us.

On this way of thinking, *MIE* attempts to extend the interpretationist programme by filling in a crucial lacuna in extant versions. In this paper, we consider whether *MIE* can be thought as extending interpretationism by amending a feature central to extant versions. In the interpretationist programme, the interpreter is typically conceived as a theoretician; in Brandom’s model, the theoretician is replaced with the figure of deontic scorekeeper. One difference between these, noted by Brandom, is that the latter need not engage in explicit theoretical hypothesis formation in the course of interpretation. We will focus on another seeming difference not explicitly acknowledged: while the relationship between theorist-cum-interpreter and interpretee is typically conceived as a third-personal relation, the relationship between scorekeeper-cum-interpreter and interpretee seems to be a second-personal relation. (The somewhat idiosyncratic manner in which these terms are used here is discussed later on.)

This difference is just a ‘seeming’ one at this stage, as there is a tension in Brandom’s writings regarding this suggestion that will concern us here. On the one hand, Brandom adopts the phrase ‘I–Thou’ to characterize the relationship between interpreter and interpretee as the basic social structure in *MIE*. The positive characterization of I–Thou relations found there is primarily negative: its function is to mark the rejection of accounts of the sociality of linguistic practice based
on I–We relations, that construe the notion of the social in terms of a broader linguistic community of which the speaker is a part. I–Thou accounts, in contrast, contend that

linguistic practice and therefore intentionality [is] essentially social ... in the sense that it can be made intelligible only in the context of mutual interpretation.⁴

The choice of the phrase ‘I–Thou’ to capture this relation, combined with a description of the model of mutual interpretation replete with interpersonal talk of deferral, challenging, person-based authority and the like, all suggest that the relationship of mutual interpretation between interpreter and interpretee is second-personal.

On the other hand, almost nothing is made of this second-personal relation in the fine detail of the gameplaying model described in MIE, leaving the suspicion that the relation between interpreter and interpretee is not second-personal, despite the I–Thou terminology utilized. Brandom appears to affirm this suspicion in his post-MIE writings, most notably in the course of a lengthy exchange with Jürgen Habermas. Habermas criticizes what he terms ‘the objectivist account of communication’ found in MIE that

identifies the interpreter with a public that assesses the utterance of a speaker – and not with an addressee who is expected to give the speaker an answer. Every round of new discourse opens with an ascription that the interpreter undertakes from the observer’s perspective of a third person.⁵

Brandom accepts this as “on the whole a fair characterization”;⁶ while rejecting the suggestion that an objectivist account of communication has the problematic implications that Habermas claims. Since the conception of the second-personal relation employed here is, subject to an important clarification, the relation between a speaker and an addressee who is expected to give the speaker an answer, Brandom’s acceptance of Habermas’s characterization all but confirms the suspicion that the relation of mutual interpretation between interpreter and interpretee in MIE is not second-personal.

There are (at least) two different routes that one could take to resolve this tension between the language employed in MIE and the fine detail of the account. The first regards the employment of I–Thou vocabulary as unfortunate, and rejects the suggestion that a second-personal relationship between interpreter and interpretee plays any essential role in MIE. The second treats the omission of explicit discussion in MIE of a second-personal relationship between interpreter and interpretee as unfortunate, and seeks to supplement the extant model with an account of the second-personal that, it claims, is implicit in Brandom’s account all along. Although it may be possible to read MIE in both ways, my suggestion here is that there are good reasons for favouring the latter route as the one that Brandom ought to take.⁷
The discussion proceeds by following up a side remark made by Brandom in the course of his response to Habermas. Noting that there are some elements of his account of communication that do not fit the objectivist tag, he suggests that we might think of the fundamental notion of a challenge, which supports the characterization of discursive practice as ‘a game of giving and asking for reasons’.8

The suggestion is useful, for thinking about the notion of a challenge as it features in *MIE* provides a succinct expression of just the tension we are interested in exploring. First, the notion of a challenge plays a central role in Brandom’s model. Second, the speech act of challenging is essentially second-personal. Third, the account of challenging offered in *MIE* does not capture this second-personal dimension of challenging. These three claims are developed and defended in turn, before considering their implications for understanding Brandom’s attempt to extend the interpretationist programme. More specifically, I argue that Brandom needs to, and can, supplement the account of challenging found in *MIE* to include a second-personal relation (sections I–III), that one could extend the same strategy of supplementation to include the speech act of asserting (section IV), and that reflections on the epistemology of testimony provide reasons for so doing (Section V).

I The importance of challenges in a Brandomian linguistic practice

Not every social interaction between sentient beings that are able to differentially respond to their environment is a Brandomian social practice. Such a social practice involves the exchange of socially significant performances governed by norms which are recognized by practitioners. To recognize the norms is not to obey them but to have the practical ability to adopt a normative attitude (such as positive or negative sanctioning performances) towards such norm-governed performances.9 Participants within the practice are said to exhibit various normative statuses, with each socially significant move in the practice altering the normative statuses exhibited by at least some practitioners. Practitioners not only undertake normative statuses themselves through socially significant performances, they also attribute those normative statuses to others. That is, participants are both *gameplayers* capable of undertaking normative statuses, and *scorekeepers* capable of tracking appropriate changes in statuses attributed and undertaken following socially significant performances. This distinction between scorekeeper and gameplayer, between the practical attitudes of attributing and undertaking normative statuses, lies at the core of the I–Thou construal of sociality that is the focus of our discussion.10

Not every social practice is a Brandomian linguistic practice. Such a linguistic practice is any social practice whose structure includes the speech act of asserting.11 A central task undertaken in *MIE* is to outline the minimal structure a set of performances within a social practice must have for that practice to include the speech act of asserting.
Suppose that we have a social practice which includes two perspectives (gameplayer and scorekeeper), two varieties of deontic status (commitments and entitlements) and two varieties of deontic attitude (attributing and undertaking). What would it be for this social practice to include the speech act of asserting? More specifically, what would a scorekeeper have to do to treat a particular performance as a successful instance of asserting? A quick way into Brandom’s response is to consider his account of what one is doing in treating someone as a knower with regards a particular claim p.\(^{12}\) The account closely follows the tripartite structure of the traditional JTB analysis of knowledge, albeit transposed into a socio-pragmatic key. According to the account, in treating someone as knowing that p, the scorekeeper attributes to the gameplayer a commitment to p (corresponding to the belief condition in the classical account), attributes an entitlement to that commitment (corresponding to the justification condition), and undertakes the same commitment herself (corresponding to the truth condition). Since Brandom treats asserting as a kind of “implicit knowledge claim”,\(^{13}\) the connection with asserting is direct: in specifying what it is for a scorekeeper to treat someone as a knower, we specify the ideal outcome of a successful instance of a speech act of assertion.

Part of what is involved in asserting is a kind of authorizing, authorizing the scorekeeper to attribute that commitment (and others that are inferential consequences) to the gameplayer, and authorizing the scorekeeper to undertake those (and others that are inferential consequences) herself. As a result of the assertion, the scorekeeper (and other gameplayers) inherits an entitlement to reassert the original claim on the gameplayer’s say-so: “The authority of an assertion includes an offer to pick up the justificatory check for the reassertions of others.”\(^{14}\)

The authority depends on the gameplayer having the entitlement to that commitment himself, so the asserter implicitly implies the entitlement too. Part of what is involved in asserting involves undertaking a kind of conditional-task responsibility: to demonstrate entitlement to the commitment when appropriately challenged to do so. Demonstrating entitlement to a commitment when so challenged can be done in one of two ways: the first is by asserting another claim from which the challenged commitment can be appropriately inferred (Brandom calls this ‘content-based authority’ for asserting the original claim), while the second is deferring to another who asserted the claim (Brandom calls this ‘person-based authority’ for asserting the original claim).\(^{15}\) Entitlement has a ‘default and challenge structure’, so that attributing entitlement to a commitment is the position taken by the scorekeeper (‘default’) unless there is some reason for thinking otherwise (‘challenge’).

It is, therefore, not possible for there to be a Brandomian linguistic practice that does not include the speech act of challenging. Remove the possibility of challenging, and the dimension of responsibility associated with the speech act of asserting falls away, as one cannot undertake a conditional-task responsibility if the condition for undertaking the task can never, in principle, arise. In such a case, so too does talk of assertings authorizing further assertings, for the authority associated with asserting depends entirely on the associated justificatory responsibility (“these are coordinate and commensurate”).\(^{16}\) Since a Brandomian linguistic practice is one that includes
the authority and responsibility structure associated with the act of asserting, a structure that requires the possibility of challenging the asserted claim, there can be no linguistic practice that does not incorporate the act of challenging.

Early on in *MIE*, Brandom describes challenging as “an auxiliary sort of speech act”, lumping it together with other auxiliary acts such as querying (the act of asking someone whether they are committed to a claim). The implication seems to be that just as it is possible for there to be an up-and-running linguistic practice that does not include the speech act of querying, there can be a linguistic practice that does not include the speech act of challenging. The argument here has shown that the speech act of challenging is not an auxiliary act in this sense.

### II Challenges as second-personal

Although there are many different acts referred to as challenges in everyday parlance, our focus is on challenging as an act that plays the functional role in a Brandomian linguistic practice just indicated. Three features essential to Brandom’s challenges emerge from that discussion. The first (C1) is that the successful act of challenging must provide the condition requiring the challenged asserter to undertake the task of demonstrating entitlement to the asserted claim. The second (C2) is that the effect of a successful challenge, according to a scorekeeper, is to remove the default entitlement associated with a claim, suspending entitlement to the claim pending successful defence. The third (C3) is that the challenge itself must be an act that can be performed appropriately or inappropriately; it must be susceptible to being challenged itself, so that successfully challenging the challenge is one way of restoring the default entitlement to a claim.

The central claim defended in this section is that any account of the speech act of challenging will be incomplete unless it incorporates a second-personal relation between challenger and challengee.

By an account of a speech act, I do not mean an account of the intentions or other attitudes associated with challenger and challengee under idealized circumstances, nor of the conventional-institutional setting in which the speech act occurs. Rather, as used here, an account of a speech act specifies the idealized function of that speech act as it would feature in a Brandomian linguistic practice. This is done by describing, in structural terms (i.e. in terms of its authority and responsibility structure broadly construed), the ideal outcome of a successful instance of the act in the context of its performance in an up-and-running instance of such a practice.

A complete account captures everything pertaining to the speech act fulfilling that function within the practice, i.e. all those features essential to making it the speech act that it is. While a complete account should incorporate all features that are both necessary and sufficient for the inclusion of the speech act in a linguistic practice, it may well omit many features that we typically associate with the speech act in our actual, everyday linguistic interactions. Even if, for example, a particular kind of speech act is always made by certain verbalizations that have a particular kind of syntactic and/or semantic structure, or involve certain kinds of grammatical
expressions or mood, these aspects need not feature in a complete account if it is possible in principle for there to be a Brandomian practice incorporating this act shorn of these features.

A speech act is second-personal in the sense used here when it is addressed to another, where the reciprocal act of acknowledgement of the address is an essential part of the act that it is. A successful second-personal act does not merely aim have some effect on the normative status of another, nor just for the other to respond to that change in status. It requires the addressee to recognize the address in her subsequent performances, where the recognition in practice of the address itself is addressed towards the addressee in return. This act of recognition need not take the form of an explicit judgement by the addressee, to the effect that ‘I have been addressed by you in this manner and hereby respond appropriately’. It can, for example, take the form of the addressee undertaking performances appropriate to her new normative status on the authority of the original addressee, to whom she will defer if challenged about its appropriateness. In this manner, a second-personal address binds together me and you in a particular normative nexus that constitutes our second-personal relation in this instance.

By way of clarification, let us contrast this way of conceiving the second-personal with that suggested by Habermas in his critique of Brandom. Habermas distinguishes the relation that obtains between speaker and listener (his third-personal relation) from the relation that obtains between speaker and hearer (his second-personal relation), and illustrates this distinction with reference to an example in MIE that involves a courtroom exchange between prosecutor and defence attorney. Habermas comments:

Certainly, in the courtroom the judges hearing the case and the jurors listening to it are the ones who in a sense are keeping account of the progress of the discussion and forming a judgement as to who is scoring what points in order to be able to say in the end, for example, how the statement of the controversial witness is to be assessed. During the dispute, however, a reaction is required not from the listeners but from the parties directly involved who address utterances to one another and who expect each other to take positions.

Three distinct aspects combine to form Habermas’s conception of the second-personal relation between speaker and hearer. First, he makes this distinction between listening (of judge and jury) and hearing (of prosecutor and defence attorneys) in terms of the expectations of the participants in the communicative interchange. Second, as a result of these expectations, the speech act targets a specific audience, the hearer(s), in a way that is different from anyone else overhearing (‘listening to’) the performance. Third, the expectation draws the hearers into a critical, interactive dialogue with the speaker, which provides for the joint social integration between communicants that, according to Habermas, is the main aim of communicative interaction.
The notion of the second-personal used here is very different. It is rooted, not in the expectations of speaker and hearer, but in the structural role that the speech act plays in a linguistic practice. Further, even though it may be that the structural role played by the speech act targets a particular audience (in the sense of altering the normative status associated with the target audience in a way different from others), the fact that a certain audience is so targeted is not what makes the act second-personal. Suppose there was a speech act – we will call it, not quite at random, ‘A’ing – for which there was simply no distinction between hearer and overhearer in terms of the audience targeted by the act. That is, as a matter of its structural role in a linguistic practice, a successful instance of ‘A’ing affects the normative status associated with anyone and everyone whenever and wherever they encountered it. It is most likely that anyone performing such an act (an ‘A’er) will not have any awareness of most of the people so affected, and will not enter into an interactive dialogue with them. Nevertheless, the relationship between ‘A’er and audience could be second-personal on our account, if as a matter of its structural role it addresses anyone who comes into contact with the act, calling on them to respond in practice in a suitable manner that includes the recognition of the address.

Some may find it peculiar to talk of an untargeted, though addressed, act as involved in an I–Thou relation between addresser and addressee, since it makes nothing of relations of intimacy or acquaintance or awareness or face-to-face interaction that are often taken as essential to this relation. Whether this is a peculiar usage or not, the normative nexus forged between addresser and addressee as the result of a successful instance of the act is significant. I address you by performing the act, calling on you, among other things, to recognize the address in your subsequent doings. Your recognition of the address in your subsequent doings is an intrinsic part of the act in your subsequent doings is an intrinsic part of the act that it is, binding us together in this instance in a normatively significant I–Thou relation. As a result, the addressee, once bound, cannot ignore the address; she can only reject it. That is, if she has recognized the address, but fails to respond appropriately, she is not passively ignoring the address but actively refusing it. The hallmark of a second-personal speech act is that once it is recognized as the act that it is, it cannot be ignored.

To claim that the speech act of challenging is second-personally addressed is, therefore, to claim that it is an addressed act: a challenge addresses the challengee in such a way that the reciprocal act of acknowledgement of the address is an essential part of the act that it is. Such mutual recognition is central to the act achieving one of its core functions in a Brandomian practice, namely, requiring an asserter to undertake the task of demonstrating entitlement to the claim (C1). In making an assertion, an asserter undertakes the responsibility of defending the claim if appropriately challenged, either by asserting another claim inferentially related to the challenged claim, or by deferring justificatory responsibility to another claimer, or by challenging the challenger. Failure to adequately shoulder this responsibility removes the authority to reassert associated with the assertion. There are two ways of failing to adequately shoulder this responsibility: one is to provide an insufficient defence of the claim and one is to remain silent in face of the challenge. (C1)
requires that no response has the same effect as a poor response. The reason that no response has the same effect as a poor response is because silence is treated as an active rejection of the challenge and not merely as passively ignoring it. We have seen that it is the hallmark of a second-personally addressed act to turn silence into a response by removing the possibility of not responding at all. If so, challenging must be second-personally addressed.

A good illustration of this point is to contrast the act of challenging with the act of requesting reasons. The requester, unlike the challenger, implies no reason for doubting the assertion, but asks the asserter to provide reasons nonetheless. Suppose that it is possible to recognize a request as a request and yet merely ignore it. The point here is that challenging is not like that: ignoring a challenge is rejecting the address.

In summary: to say that a speech act is second-personal is to say that as a matter of its structural role in a linguistic practice it is an addressed act, such that the recognition-in-practice of it as the act that it is binds addressee in a normative relation that precludes the possibility of ignoring the address. Any act in which interlocutors are bound in such a manner is a second-personal act. For an act to play the role of challenges in a Brandomian practice is for it to require the asserter to respond. In treating an act as a challenge, the challengee cannot ignore the address. The speech act of challenging is, thus, as a matter of its structural role in a linguistic practice, a second-personal act, and any account of the act that fails to incorporate this will be incomplete.

III The incomplete account of challenging in MIE

We are not provided with an account of the speech act of challenging in MIE, complete or otherwise. We are, instead, provided with some suggestive remarks and the following scorekeeping example:

For A to treat C’s challenge of B’s assertion of $p$ as successful is for A to respond to it by withholding attribution of entitlement to B for that claim, pending B’s vindication of it … This has the effect of making the assertion unavailable (according to A’s score) to other interlocutors who might otherwise inherit entitlement to commitments to the same content testimonially from B.

The example is not given from the perspective of challenger or challengee but a third party (A) keeping score on C’s challenge to B. It provides a ‘before and after’ snapshot of a scorekeeper’s deontic scorecards following a successful instance of an act of challenging, an act that occurs out of the camera’s view.

Closer reflection on the example reveals not just that the act of C challenging B is out of view; it need not even take place. The example involves an interaction between C and A, following a prior interaction (assumed though not described) between B and A. There is no mention of, nor, it appears, need there be, any
interaction between B and C. In treating B’s asserting that p as a successful one, A attributes both a commitment and a default entitlement to B so that A would treat anyone overhearing B’s act as themselves entitled to reassert p on B’s authority. In treating C’s subsequent challenge as successful, A removes the default entitlement to p so that, as a result, A no longer treats anyone else as able to inherit entitlement to p on B’s say-so, pending vindication. Neither B nor C need have any awareness of each other or their claims, nor need C’s claim be targeted at B, for A to treat C’s challenge of B’s assertion of p as successful.

It is one thing for A to treat C’s assertion as a challenge to B’s assertion and another thing for C to challenge B. We have argued that a Brandomian practice must incorporate the latter, for it this act that provides the condition requiring B to undertake his responsibility to defend the assertion. Further, we have argued that achieving this requires the act to be second-personally addressed, something lacking in the former. As a result, although the two may be identical from a scorekeeping perspective, a complete account of a Brandomian linguistic practice should incorporate both. Brandom’s discussion of challenging, here and throughout MIE, only considers the former and is therefore incomplete.

Highlighting this omission is not to challenge Brandom, especially since we have shown in Brandomian terms just what needs to be done to supplement the account of challenging. The omission itself does, however, raise the suspicion that he would reject such a supplementation. Brandom is an ambitious theorist, notoriously so. Why, if the claims made here are correct, is he content to leave his account of linguistic practice incomplete in this manner?

This suspicion is based on the assumption that Brandom’s explanatory ambitions in MIE include the aspiration to provide a complete account of all those speech acts essential to a social practice being a linguistic one. If this were the case, then the incompleteness with regards the act of challenging could be taken to imply rejection of the supplementation advocated here. There is, however, a more restricted reading of Brandom’s explanatory ambitions in MIE that accounts for his toleration of this incompleteness, even if he would accept the supplementation with regards challenging proffered here. Brandom states in the preface to MIE that his ambition is to begin with an account of social practices, identify the particular structure they must exhibit in order to qualify as specifically linguistic practices, and then consider what different sorts of semantic contents those practices can confer on states, performances, and expressions caught up in them in suitable ways.28

The first two stages comprise Brandom’s normative pragmatics, which aspires to use an idealized artificial practice to model an up-and-running linguistic practice. The third stage comprises Brandom’s inferentialist semantics, which aspires to use this model of linguistic practice to give an explanatory account of the semantic content associated with performances within the practice. One plausible way of
understanding the relationship between pragmatics and semantics is to treat the first two stages as limited by the third. On this understanding, Brandom does not seek to provide what we earlier termed a complete account of those speech acts whose presence is both necessary and/or sufficient for that practice to be a linguistic one. An incomplete account will suffice, provided that it provides enough of a model of linguistic practice so as to deliver an explanation of semantic content.

A central strategy deployed throughout MIE is to introduce or explain a particular concept by noting the difference that the introduction of the concept into a practice would make to a scorekeeper keeping score on the practice. The motivation provided for the adoption of the scorekeeper’s perspective is typically glossed under the heading of a pragmatized ‘phenomenalism’. The discussion here suggests another reason for adopting this scorekeeping perspective when introducing a concept. Adopting the scorekeeping perspective will suffice if the pragmatic ambitions of the work are limited by the overarching goal of explaining an inferentialist semantics, since what is required for this explanatory task is easily captured by considering the ‘before and after’ snapshots of the scorekeeper’s deontic scorecards. Brandom adopts such a scorekeeping perspective when introducing the concept of a challenge into a linguistic practice. Since the second-personal relation essential to the speech act of challenging playing its function in a Brandomian linguistic practice is not directly relevant to issues of an inferentialist semantics, its omission in MIE need not imply the rejection of this featuring in a complete account of the speech act of challenging.

### IV Asserting as challenging

Apart from its specific implications for understanding the speech act of challenging, there is a more general lesson to be learnt from this extended reflection on Brandom’s challenges. Our discussion motivates an approach to MIE that treats the pragmatic ambitions of the work as limited by overarching semantic concerns, thereby leaving room for supplementation of the pragmatic features of the model where necessary. The pragmatic supplementation advocated for the case of challenging has implications for the broader tension within MIE between the second-personal language used and the scorekeeping model described. Specifically, it suggests that we should take the I-Thou language seriously, treating the relation between deontic scorekeeper-cum-interpreter and interpretee as second-personal.

This suggestion will have greater plausibility if we can extend the same strategy of supplementation advocated in the case of challenging to other speech acts, especially the core Brandomian act of asserting. This is a bold proposal, especially as asserting is typically considered to be a paradigmatically impersonal speech act as it is an untargeted act. Our earlier discussion of the now not-so imaginary act of ‘A’ing revealed that the issue of second-personal address is, however, distinct from the issue of targeting. To claim that asserting is untargeted is to claim that a successful act of asserting affects the normative status associated with anyone and everyone, whenever and wherever they encounter it. To claim that asserting is second-personally
addressed is to claim that it addresses anyone who comes into contact with the act, calling on them to respond in practice to the act in a suitable manner that precludes the possibility of passively ignoring it. To ask whether asserting is second-personally addressed is, therefore, not to dispute that it is untargeted.

Brandom tends to talk of asserting in terms suited to a third-personal relation between asserter and audience, telling us, for example, that it involves the placing of a claim in a "public arena ... available for others to use in making further assertions" or that "assertions are fundamentally fodder for inference". The current question is whether the third-personal construal of asserting as the making available of the claim as evidence implied by these images requires a second-personal supplementation, parallel to that advocated for the act of challenging.

This question of a parallel between the accounts of asserting and challenging in MIE is brought to the fore by Brandom himself, when he suggests that the simplest way to introduce the speech act of challenging into a linguistic practice is “to require that the performances that have the significance of challenging entitlements to assertional commitments themselves be assertions”. According to his inferentialist semantics, two claims are incompatible with each other if commitment to one precludes entitlement to the other. Two incompatible assertions made by two interlocutors have the same scorekeeping result, from the point of view of a scorekeeper, as a challenge from one interlocutor to the other.

Is Brandom suggesting that we should equate, for the purposes of delivering an account of linguistic practice, the speech act of challenging with the act of producing an incompatible assertion? Or is he merely saying that, for the purposes of keeping score, the effect on the scorekeeper’s deontic scorecards of an incompatible assertion by C and a challenge from C to B are the same?

Earlier we identified three features (C1–C3) essential to a speech act successfully playing the role of a challenge in Brandom’s system. It is clear that the act of another gameplayer making an assertion that a scorekeeper treats as incompatible with another assertion has two of these three essential features (C2, C3). First, as we have just seen, the effect of an incompatible asserting is to remove the default entitlement associated with the challenged claim pending vindication (C2). Second, an asserting is just the kind of thing that is itself susceptible to being challenged, so that one way of vindicating the challenged assertion is to cast aspersions on the entitlement to the challenging assertion (C3). The central question is whether a contradictory asserting has the third feature identified as essential to challenges, that it provides the condition requiring the original asserter to demonstrate entitlement to the claim (C1). Since we have, at the end of the preceding section, identified being second-personally addressed as a feature necessary for an act to achieve this, a key issue is whether an act of asserting is second-personally addressed.

The remainder of this paper aims to motivate returning a positive response to this question. I first sketch an attractive position in the literature concerning the epistemology of testimony, and argue that Brandom can endorse this position, provided that he treats asserting as second-personally addressed.
V The epistemology of testimony

Despite much neglect in the past, epistemologists have finally begun to take seriously the fact that we know most of what we know because we accept the word of others. On one reading of this still burgeoning literature on the epistemology of learning from testimony, a basic distinction to be made is between evidentialist and non-evidentialist accounts. For the evidentialist, an assertion transmits knowledge from speaker to audience by providing evidence for the proposition asserted. For the non-evidentialist, an assertion functions to get an audience to believe the proposition, while transferring justificatory responsibility for the audience’s belief to the speaker. One attractive version of non-evidentialism has been dubbed ‘the assurance view’, according to which telling someone something provides the intended audience with an assurance that the belief is true.

Brandom is touted by some as a proponent of the assurance view, although the suggestion is tentative and typically relegated to a footnote. One reason for both elevation and relegation in this manner may stem from the fact that, while he rejects some of its underlying assumptions, his account respects the core insight of the assurance view.

5.1 A problem for the assurance view

Extant versions of the assurance view struggle to retain the basic insight that makes the view so appealing while delivering an account that is satisfactory from an epistemic perspective.

The basic insight is that there is a difference between believing what someone says, and believing a person who is saying something. In both cases one ends up believing what is said, although in the latter the primary object of belief is the person speaking, and belief in the proposition asserted follows from this. In believing a speaker, and not just what she says, speaker and hearer stand in a particular interpersonal relationship, as a result of which the hearer cedes epistemic authority for his belief to the speaker. In coming to believe what someone says, in contrast, no such authority is ceded; the hearer comes to believe what the speaker believes based on reasons available to him, even if these differ from those available to the speaker. The basic insight that there is a difference between believing a person and believing what they say is appealing as, among other things, it conforms to features characteristic of our moral-psychological interactions with others in (better: through) conversation. For example, as Anscombe noted, we sometimes experience “injury and insult” when, despite having made a claim, others do not come to believe us.

On the assurance view, this is a case in which the asserter is slighted as the proffered assurance is not accepted.

The difficulty facing those wishing to develop the assurance approach is to turn this insight about interpersonal relations between people into something that has epistemic, as opposed to, say, moral, significance. Suppose that the correct framework for thinking about the interpersonal relation involved in believing someone invokes the relation of
trust between interlocutors. While trust is a feature central to everyday social intercourse, and discourse surrounding this relation is deeply suffused with moral overtones, it is hard to relinquish the suspicion that the trusting agent is an epistemically irresponsible agent. This is particularly difficult for the assurance theorist who wishes to highlight not only the relationship of trust between speaker and hearer, but also for this relationship to do epistemic work, by treating the assurance as providing a distinctive kind of reason for belief. As Jonathan Adler puts the difficulty:

That the moral bond of speaker and hearer would not provide any independent epistemic weight seems right, since the bond does not affect the likelihood of truth of what the speaker asserts. Still, the moral bond imposes a constraint or bind on the hearer which is a pressure toward acceptance, and acceptance is an epistemic judgment. The result is troubling.38

There are two assumptions shared by extant versions of the assurance view that contribute to their difficulty in retaining the basic insight in face of such troubling suspicions. The first is that proponents of the view operate within a broadly Gricean framework, in which the account of the speech act in question is made in terms of the intentions of the teller. The second is that such accounts make a sharp distinction between hearer and overhearer: although others overhearing the act can use the claim as evidence for the proposition claimed, only the audience to whom the person intends to offer her assurance can accept the assurance and thereby come to believe the person. These two features account for the change in terminology used in introducing the assurance view some paragraphs back, from a focus on the speech act of asserting to a speech act of telling. Unlike assertions, telling is what we have here termed a targeted act, and extant versions of the assurance view of testimony focus only on the act of telling and not the act of asserting.

These two assumptions, and the narrowed focus on tellings, invite a parallel between the act of telling and the act of promising, wherein telling is seen as a kind of promising that the belief is true. In telling, the teller gives the tellee her word that the claim is true; in recognizing the assurance and taking it up, the tellee believes the claim on the teller’s say-so, even when the tellee has no other reason for believing that p. Promising this parallel may be in helping to capture the basic insight of the assurance approach, it also leads the assurance theorist into the kind of trouble that Adler raises. If X promises Y that she will buy lunch, then X’s act of promising gives Y a reason to act in ways that depend on A buying lunch. Promising creates a reason for Y’s subsequent actions precisely because the existence of the reason for acting depends on something under X’s control, her will. According to the parallel, if X tells Y that Arsenal’s performances in recent games have been abysmal, then X’s act of telling gives Y a reason to act in ways consonant with that claim. But here the parallel seems to break down, for it is hard to see how telling could create reasons for so acting, since whether or not there is such a reason is something outside of X’s control.39 Many opposing fans have tried to will such a fact about Arsenal into existence, but football-supporting bliss is, alas, not so easily achieved.
5.2 Brandom as non-evidentialist

There is little doubt that Brandom falls within the non-evidentialist camp regarding the epistemology of testimony. This is not to say that he denies the possibility of treating someone’s asserting as evidence for a claim. Suppose, for example, that I treat a person as an expert with regard to a particular kind of claim, based on prior experience of reliable correlations between that person making claims of this sort and the veracity of the claims made. My justification for coming to believe what they say on a particular occasion could be made explicit in the form of a reliability inference from the premises that S asserted that p and that S is an expert on such matters to the conclusion that p. In this instance, I am not deferring responsibility for justification to the other person (who may have no idea of her reliability, nor even endorse the claim); I am treating her claim as evidence for the claim made.

What makes Brandom a non-evidentialist, rather, is that he explicitly rejects the contention that the only way to fulfil the epistemic responsibility as regards a commitment undertaken is through such intercontent-intrapersonal justificatory means. Contrasted with such a content-based authority is a person-based authority that appeals to an intracontent-interpersonal communicational dimension. Others treating S’s claim as an asserting can reassert the claim, while deferring the justificatory responsibility for the claim to S herself. This is so even if the audience has no idea of S’s reliability in this regard or has no other evidence favouring the claim.40

The audience is not limited to those the speaker intends to communicate with, but to anyone coming into contact with the claim. Brandom’s non-evidentialism about testimony, therefore, applies to all assertings and is not limited to the narrower case of tellings.41 As a result, the parallel between promising and asserting embraced by proponents of the assurance view is far less tempting. Promising targets a particular audience to whom the promiser has agreed to ‘bind his will’, giving the targeted audience reasons for relying on him to perform in this way. Person-based authority in the case of asserting is very different, stemming not from assurance offered, but from the authority and responsibility structure of any up-and-running linguistic practice. Specifically, it rests on a dynamic conception of the way in which entitlement to a commitment can be acquired and lost in such a practice. A commitment may have a ‘positive justificatory status’ in a variety of ways, including having been exhibited as the conclusion of an inference, defended interpersonally by deference, or simply by default (a prima facie entitlement). Only a social practice with such a structure is properly characterized as a linguistic practice. It is, therefore, the structure of the game of giving and asking for reasons, and not the fact that an assurance has been offered, that permits, under certain circumstances, an epistemically responsible subject to assert that p simply on the say-so of another.42

Can such an account of the epistemology of testimony, one that is non-evidentialist without embracing the assurance view, capture the difference between believing a person and believing what the person claims? Brandom’s distinction between person-based and content-based authority appears to reflect just that; in deferring justificatory responsibility to another, one believes her, and not only
what is claimed. This, however, falls short of the insight proponents of the assurance view hope to provide. Person-based authority, at least as it is described in MIE, appears to be just another way of restoring default entitlement to a claim and thereby fulfilling one’s epistemic responsibilities and little is made of the relationship forged between deferrer and deferee. Why, for example, should we sometimes feel injury and insult when our assertion is not accepted, if asserting is not a kind of offering assurance?

Brandom’s discussion of the act of deferral is told from the viewpoint of the scorekeeper, so that as the result of a successful instance of deferring the scorekeeper turns to the original asserter to defend the claim. Following our discussion of the speech act of challenging, we could adopt the same strategy of supplementation here with regards the speech act of asserting to provide a positive account of the relationship between deferrer and deferee that genuinely merits it being called a person-based relation. Suppose that asserting is a second-personally addressed speech act. If so, asserting that p calls for reciprocal recognition of the address and is not simply placing a claim in a ‘public arena’ as ‘fodder’ for inferences by others. Once taken up by someone, the reciprocal recognition of the address binds asserter and assertee in a normative nexus that, among other things, precludes the possibility of ignoring the address and allows the latter to defer to the former if challenged to do so.

This interpersonal bond forged between asserter and assertee is a normatively significant I–Thou relation. Inappropriate subsequent performance is not merely a violation of the norms governing a speech act or governing rational discourse, but additionally a violation rooted in the distinctive norms governing this second-personal relation and thereby a violation addressed directly from me to you. If, for example, the asserter fails to respond adequately to challenges, there is a sense in which she has harmed each and every member of the audience separately, as a result of the reciprocal relation that binds each of them, and this is a violation directed at each of them. If, for example, a member of the audience responds inappropriately to an asserting, such as by pretending to ignore the address that she has recognized or by wilfully mis-assessing its epistemic import, it is an injustice that has its distinctive roots in the second-personal relation forged and is a rejection that is directed at the asserter. The ‘injury and insult’ experienced in such cases has this distinctive quality of being directed at the other in a way that reveals its home in the second-personal relation forged through reciprocal recognition of the address.44

In sum, a non-evidentialist view of the epistemology of testimony that does not endorse the assurance view has the potential to embrace the core insight of the assurance view, that there is a difference between believing a person and believing what they say that is reflected in our moral-psychological interactions with others, while avoiding the concerns noted, with one proviso: that it treats the speech act of asserting as second-personally addressed. It is worth stressing the tentative tenor in which this conclusion is offered, even if the argument is developed more fully. While we have motivated taking the I–Thou language seriously for both the acts of
challenging and asserting, the arguments in favour of so doing differ in strength. For challenging, it was argued that being second-personally addressed is necessary for the act achieving its function in a Brandomian linguistic practice. For asserting, it was argued that being second-personally addressed coheres with core aspects of the act as it features in our linguistic practices, although it was not claimed that this need be the case for any linguistic practice, nor was it suggested that the proposal proffered is the only way of incorporating the core feature of the non-evidentialist view. In the case of asserting, therefore, the paper is best viewed as dangling a bait to see whether Brandom bites, whereas, for the case of challenging, it contends that he is already hooked.

VI Conclusion

Pragmatic and semantic theorizing throughout MIE takes place by considering matters from the perspective of a deontic scorekeeper. The scorekeeper does not stand outside the practice upon which she is keeping score, although she may occupy the status of an overhearer, rather than an active participant, with regard to a conversation taking place in the practice. The question considered here is whether the relationship between gameplayer and scorekeeper is best thought of as a second-personal relation, in which the recognition-in-practice of addressed speech acts binds them in a normative relation that precludes the possibility of the scorekeeper ignoring those acts.

In the first part of the paper, we argued that Brandom’s account of the speech act of challenging is incomplete, and showed, in Brandomian terms, how to supplement the account so that it incorporates a second-personal relation between challenger and challengee. In the second part, we considered whether such a strategy of supplementation could be extended more widely, so that Brandom’s project could be seen as advocating an amendment of the interpretationist programme centred on a second-personal relation between interpreter and interpretee. More specifically, we considered whether the speech act of asserting is second-personally addressed. One reason for an affirmative answer was provided: treating asserting as second-personally addressed allows for the development of an attractive, non-evidentialist account of the epistemology of learning from testimony.

We earlier rejected Brandom’s description of challenging as an auxiliary sort of speech act, if it is taken to imply (as the context suggests) that there can be an up-and-running linguistic practice that does not include an act that serves the functional role characteristic of challenges. If one takes the bait just dangled, however, and treats the speech act of asserting as second-personally addressed, then it emerges that challenging is an auxiliary sort of speech act in the different sense that the functional role played by challenging can be taken over by asserting. Challenging is, as a matter of its structural role in a linguistic practice, a targeted and addressed speech act. Asserting is, if one takes the bait, an untargeted and addressed speech act. Brandom’s challenges thus emerge as a kind of targeted asserting; an auxiliary act that is not a necessary feature of linguistic practice.
Notes

1 See Brandom (2002, pp. 1–17).
3 MIE, pp. 508–9.
4 MIE, p. 659, fn. 50.
7 Both options constitute sympathetic readings of MIE. A more critical strategy would follow the second option in treating the omission of the second-personal relation in MIE as unfortunate, while following the first option in rejecting the suggestion that a second-personal relation plays any essential role in MIE. A claim to this effect was made in passing by Kukla and Lance, during a paper delivered to the Space of Reasons conference (Cape Town, July 2004).
9 These sanctioning performances are also performances within the practice, and are therefore the subject of normative attitudes themselves.
10 “Its basic building block is the relations between an audience that is attributing commitments and thereby keeping score and a speaker who is undertaking commitments, on whom a score is being kept.” (MIE, p. 508)
11 E.g. MIE, p. 172.
12 For the purposes of this essay, we have simply helped ourselves to the notion of semantic content. Brandom, of course, aspires to use an antecedent intelligible account of a linguistic practice to explain, perhaps reductively, the notion of semantic content.
13 MIE, p. 200.
14 MIE, p. 175.
15 Brandom also allows for a third, based on reliability inferences, though these introduce issues of empirical content best ignored here. (Cf. Wanderer, 2008, pp. 187–200.)
16 MIE, p. 179.
17 MIE, p. 193.
18 An alternative sense of ‘auxiliary’ is considered later on.
19 My thinking about the second-personal is indebted to the discussion in Darwall (2007), and I have appropriated some of his language in the next few paragraphs. This appropriation is partial: I have been influenced by his account of second-personal address and not by his account of second-personal reasons, even though Darwall’s presentation treats these as coming together. This is not merely reflective of different interests, but of a basic difference in the framework in which we approach the notion of second-personal address. This difference will not be explored further here, although it is worth noting, as it has ramifications for the current discussion. Specifically, Darwall rejects the role of the second-personal outside the realm of practical reasons.
20 Compare: it is to “view a pair of distinct agents as joined and opposed in a formally distinctive type of practical nexus. They are for me like the opposing poles of an electrical apparatus: in filling one of these forms with concrete content, I represent an arc of normative current as passing between the agent-poles, and as taking a certain path.” (Thompson, 2004, p. 335)
21 MIE, p. 505.
22 Habermas (2000, p. 345).
23 By the hearer–overhearer contrast, I do not just mean the distinction between addressee and ratified participant in the conversation (such as between lawyers and the judge and jury in the Habermasian discussion), but the difference between addressee and any eavesdropper whomsoever (cf. Goffman, 1981, p. 131, discussed in Clark and Carlson, 1982, p. 332).
24 The terms ‘ignoring’ and ‘rejecting’ are used here as terms-of-art, reflective of a difference suggested by their etymology that does not reflect some of their current uses in
English. It should be stressed that I am merely describing the phenomena here (viz. the recognition of the direction of a speech act functions to draw the recognizer into active engagement with the act) and not attempting to explain why this is. The explanatory task is undertaken in other work.


26 This is a stipulation, used to highlight the role of the second-personal in challenges. It does not imply that there could not be a linguistic practice in which, as a matter of its authority and responsibility structure and not merely a matter of social politesse, requests ought not to be ignored and so doing is seen as a good enough reason to remove the default entitlement associated with the act of asserting. In such a practice, requesting would be second-personal too. In everyday practice, requesting reasons normally implies a challenge, as the motivation behind the request is typically some kind of incredulity towards, or distrust of, the claims made. The act of requesting here does not have such implications. One difference is that when the request is a truncated challenge it is possible for the challenger to respond with a counter-challenge. The point in the text is that one can respond to a request for reasons by simply ignoring and thus not mount a defence or issue a counter-challenge.

27 MIE, p. 193.

28 MIE, p. xiv.

29 E.g. MIE, pp. 291–2.

30 MIE, p. 170.

31 MIE, p. 168.

32 MIE, p. 178.

33 A more usual distinction made in the literature is between reductionist and anti-reductionist approaches; I concur with Moran’s (2005) assessment that the divide between evidentialist and non-evidentialist is more basic.

34 Ross (1986); Moran (2005); Hinchman (2005).

35 In addition to the references to Brandom in Moran and Hinchman, see also Owen (2006, p. 105, fn. 1), Adler (2006), Watson (2004, p. 73, fn. 7).


38 Adler (2006).

39 I do not mean to imply any originality in raising this problem, nor that assurance theorists are unaware of this. A good discussion is Watson (2004).

40 A worry: Deferral is a way of achieving interpersonal, intracontent justification, contrasted with intercontent, intrapersonal justification achieved by an act of justifying through providing reasons. The distinction between intrapersonal and interpersonal content seems to be undermined by Brandom’s inferentialism, according to which the semantic primitive at the sentential level is the inferential role associated with a sentence, i.e. the materially correct inferences that that sentence enters into. (Brandom sometimes talks of the inferential role of a sentence as ‘curled up’ in that sentence, so that in making one claim explicitly, one is making claims involving others that, although not explicitly made, are implicitly contained in it). If so, how is one to understand the distinction between intracontent and intercontent, where the latter just is ‘curled up’ in the former? A solution: It is possible to use the notion of deferential potential itself to ground the distinction. Suppose that A asserts that p, and B, but not A, is committed to the material entailment from p to q. Under a de re specification by B of A’s commitment, A is committed to q. In putting forward the claim p as inferential fodder for B, A licenses B’s claim that q, even if A disavows such a commitment. Even though this claim is licensed by A’s assertion, B could not defer to A to justify the commitment to q, although he could to p. One could thus introduce a range of possible tokening performances that B would treat as appropriate to defer to A as a result of her original tokening of p. (See MIE, pp. 530–9.) Performings within this range may differ from A’s tokening of p in various respects, but they are all performances that B treats as authorized by A’s tokening of p, such that if B were to perform in such a manner it would
be appropriate to defer to A to justify the performance. We have thus generated a group of performance types that all share this common deferential potential, which makes sense of the idea of intracontent justification by deferral. (This idea of deferential potential could be developed into an account of the role of meaning ascriptions – see Shapiro, 2004.)

41 This is not to deny the difference between tellings and assertings but to deny that the epistemologies of learning from these differ.

42 The specific circumstances that permit C to believe that p on B’s say-so involve a case where C treats B as having asserted a claim with the same content, and C has no commitments incompatible with either the claim asserted (p) or with another claim that acts among B’s reasons for believing that p. Anyone overhearing the asserting in such circumstances can acquire positive justificatory status for commitment to the asserted claim by deferring to the asserter (MIE, p. 192).

43 E.g. MIE, p. 192.

44 I develop these sketchy claims about testimonial injustice further in Wanderer (ms.)

References


—— (ms) ‘Testimonial Injustice and Second-Personal Address’.

Pragmatism has enjoyed a major resurgence in Anglo-American philosophy over the course of the last decade or two, and Robert Brandom's work – particularly his 1994 tome *Making It Explicit* (MIE) – has been at the vanguard of this resurgence (Brandom, 1994). But pragmatism comes in several surprisingly distinct flavours. Authors such as Hubert Dreyfus find their roots in certain parts of Heidegger and in phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty, and they privilege embodied, preconceptual skills as opposed to discursive practices as the basic sites of meaning and agency (Dreyfus, 1991, 1992; Todes, 2001). With strong inheritances from Dewey and Wittgenstein, Richard Rorty has championed a pragmatism whose core emphasis is on the rejection of transcendental truth and high metaphysical theorizing (Rorty, 1982), and this anti-theoretical banner has been taken up by several prominent ethicists, among others. For his part, Brandom, who purports to offer a systematic theory of language and meaning grounded on a foundation of pragmatic normative relationships between speakers, looks back instead to Sellars and Quine for his stripe of pragmatism. Near the start of *MIE*, he writes:

The explanatory strategy pursued here is to begin with an account of social practices, identify the particular structure they must exhibit in order to qualify as specifically linguistic practices, and then consider what different sorts of semantic contents those practices can confer on states, performances, and expressions caught up in them in suitable ways. (p. xiii)

Despite his professed pragmatism, Brandom is no foe of high theory or metanarratives, and he is vastly more interested in language and theoretical reason than in the rest of human bodily activity. For Brandom, inferentially articulated discourse forms an autonomous domain of normativity, while our bodily encounters with the world in perception and in action serve as language entry and exit points respectively. *MIE* does not offer a systematic theory of how the domain of bodily interaction and the discursive domain fit together; indeed, Brandom makes the remarkable claim that it is merely a contingent matter that discourse is bounded by perception and action, and that in principle it could exist without them (*MIE*, p. 234). Hence even though he identifies as a pragmatist, the fact that it is agents with bodies and points of
view who are the necessary enactors of practices seems to play no essential role in his systematic vision. There is irony in this version of pragmatism: although Brandom wants to ground meaning in practices rather than syntax or autonomous semantics, his practices are individuated merely formally – almost syntactically – as shifts in abstract scorecards of commitments and entitlements. In this paper, we aim, from a position sympathetic to Brandom’s commitment to the foundational role of normative pragmatics in meaning and language, to plant discursive practices firmly within the embodied, material domain. We maintain that one cannot really understand meaning, content, inference, commitment or entitlement without seeing these as growing out of and being constituted within a systematic network of concrete, materially and socially incarnated actions, including transactions between agents, and between agents and the world about which they speak and inquire.

We are not the first to claim that a Brandomian story of normative transactions that commit and entitle must acknowledge that these transactions are carried out by material bodies in a concrete environment. But our goals are more specific than this. We argue that it is only concretely located agents that can have a first-person perspective or voice. Furthermore, we claim that there must be room for such first-person perspectives within a theoretical account of discursive practice, in order for it to successfully make sense of meaning, discourse, or normative statuses. Brandom’s abstract normative pragmatics, we claim, does not have the theoretical resources for identifying such perspectives, and hence it needs substantial enrichment before it can accomplish what it seeks to accomplish.

I The primacy of assertions and the problem of voice

We will work towards this claim by first arguing that Brandom’s focus on the speech act of asserting as the privileged building-block of language causes a problematic narrowing of his theoretical vision and resources. Analytic philosophers of all stripes act as though the most fundamental, important, and typical thing we do with language is use it to make propositionally structured declarative truth claims. Traditional philosophy of language begins its inquiry into meaning by way of an inquiry into semantics, and its inquiry into semantics by way of an analysis of truth conditions. Since only declarative truth claims have truth conditions, it has thus seemed ‘natural’ to philosophers to take such utterances as philosophically privileged and foundational, and to treat all other kinds of discourse as marginal and derivative, if they come up at all. In How to Do Things with Words, Austin demonstrated the panoply of pragmatic functions that language may have (Austin, 1962). Austin’s influence, however – and indeed Austin’s own rhetoric – has done little to unseat the prevailing commitment to the idea that traditional declarative assertions form the ‘core’ of language, while utterances with other pragmatic forms – interrogatives, imperatives, performatives, and so on – are derivative monkey business. (Although, for a rare but pointed exception, see Belnap, 1990.) For Brandom there is no route to meaningful content – much less to mental content – that is independent of pragmatic transactions. Semantic notions are to be
constructed on the basis of an independent account of social normative pragmatics. Given this, one might thus assume that Brandom, who aims for a systematic and comprehensive account of discursive practice, would be interested in language in all of its pragmatic forms. It would be an odd confidence, after all, that assumes that no part of the structure of pragmatic space other than the specifically assertional would be relevant to Brandom’s larger project. Within the space of inferential relations, Brandom is a holist about content. So why should he rule out the possibility that essential aspects of assertion must themselves be understood in terms of a role within a broader practical space? Nonetheless, Brandom echoes the methodological priorities of traditional philosophy of language: he is interested in only one kind of discursive practice, namely asserting, or declarative truth-claiming. On the basis of a detailed account of asserting alone he attempts to earn a semantically significant notion of inference and sub-sentential semantics. We argue that this focus on assertions to the exclusion of other pragmatic acts is problematic – it distorts our understanding of discourse as a normative phenomenon, including our understanding of assertion itself.

A crucial feature of declarative truth claims is that they are not essentially indexed to any particular speaker or audience – they are inherently “impersonal” rather than structurally bound to a first-, second-, or third-person voice. A declarative such as “Ottawa is the capital of Canada” has no personal voice. Many declaratives do have a voice: “I am sick of crappy Mexican food”; “You have schmutz on your face”; “Louise thinks that Toronto is the capital of Canada”. However, to the extent that what we are interested in when it comes to the pragmatic force of declaratives is their status as assertions or truth claims – and remember, that is the only kind of pragmatic force that interests Brandom – any declarative can be translated from one personal voice to another without changing its force in the least. Thus, qua truth-conditional assertion, “I am sick of crappy Mexican food” (spoken by Mark) is just the same as “Mark is sick of crappy Mexican food”, and “You have schmutz on your face” (directed at Rebecca) is just the same as “Rebecca has schmutz on her face”, or (uttered by Rebecca) “I have schmutz on my face”. In this sense, and relative to these concerns, the pragmatic voice (as opposed to the surface-level grammatical voice) of an assertion, qua assertion, is always impersonal – it works the same way regardless of who says it and to whom.

Now, of course, one can note all kinds of pragmatic differences between, for instance, announcing one’s own schmutz and pointing it out in someone else – these utterances are governed by different rules of etiquette, have different impacts on people’s motivational structure, and so on. But none of these differences show up if, like Brandom, the only pragmatic dimension we are interested in is the way that truth claims circulate and grant commitments and entitlements. The practice of asserting is, as we shall put it, agent-neutral with respect to both speaker and audience. An assertion makes the same claim regardless of who is speaking and who is listening.

In contrast, consider two types of utterance to which pragmatic voice is structurally essential. Imperatives are always spoken in the second person. An imperative
must be issued to someone in order for it to count as an imperative at all. The idea of ‘translating’ an imperative into the third or first person while retaining its meaning or force does not even get off the ground conceptually. “Close the door!” makes a specific demand upon someone in particular (or some particular group of people). A ‘translation’ into the third person, such as “Mark ought to close the door”, is a declarative with a totally different pragmatic structure; it does not constitute an order at all. Nor is there any clear sense in which it ‘means’ the same thing as the original imperative. Similarly, consider vocatives, such as “Hey, Eli!” or “Yo, Emma!”, which serve to recognize someone in the second person. There is no even roughly equivalent third-personal correlate of such speech acts; “I see Eli sitting there” does not have anything like the same meaning or force, on any reasonable account. Imperative and vocative speech acts are essentially second-person transactions. At the same time, these acts are not transferable at the level of their speaker. For example, only someone who actually encounters and recognizes Eli and Emma can properly use a vocative to hail them. Imperatives and vocatives are thus – as we shall put it – agent-relative with respect to both speaker and audience.

To the extent that Brandom builds his philosophical account of language entirely out of assertions, he makes no room for any discovery that such agent-relative features of discourse play an important role in constituting or enabling meaningful discursive practices within a linguistic community. Because they are just tallies of commitments and entitlements to truth-claims, all of the normative statuses – the scorecards of commitments and entitlements – in Brandom’s theoretical universe are, of necessity, impersonal statuses that can retain their identity regardless of which subject holds them.

Why should we think that this restriction is important? That Brandom’s normative statuses are inherently impersonal should bother us only if agent-relative statuses are essential to the normative functioning of language. But as Joseph Rouse (2002) has argued, we cannot engage in a Brandomian practice of imputing and assuming entitlements and commitments unless (at a bare minimum) we are able to responsively recognize other speakers, their claims, and their normative position in the game of giving and asking for reasons, and to actively take up and accord normative statuses ourselves. These are skills that are materially incarnated, and they rely on perception and action as much as do any other normatively governed skills. That is to say: to commit and to entitle is to do and to see. Now, in order for the normative force of anyone’s scores of commitments and entitlements to actually grip practice in this way, it is not enough that the commitments and entitlements be embodied in material activity. For my own commitments and entitlements to govern my practices, I have to recognize that I have them, and this means recognizing that they are mine. I must understand and recognize not only the shape of the normative web of commitments and entitlements, and not only how new speech acts change this web, but where I am located within this web: which scores are mine and which changes in scores affect me. This perspectival character is a logical condition for any of these scores making any difference to me at all.

Furthermore, the knowledge that these are my scores – that I belong on the normative map in this location – can’t itself be just another piece of third-personal
theoretical knowledge. I could recognize all the commitments and entitlements that attach to subject position x, and recognize that Rebecca is the inhabitant of subject position x, without thereby recognizing that I am bound by these commitments and entitlements. Any new theoretical reasons why they should apply to me could just be added to the score without getting that score any closer to gripping me as practically compelling. Recognizing all the commitments and entitlements that attach to subject position x, and recognizing that Rebecca is the inhabitant of subject position x, that is, gets one no closer to genuine commitment. Hence I must have a practical and perspectival grasp, not only of how to recognize and negotiate my commitments and entitlements, but also of the fact that they are mine – that they commit and entitle me.

Nor is this practical grasp of our first-person relationship to our commitments something extra that is added to them. The point is that nothing counts as a genuine commitment or entitlement solely in virtue of the way it is distributed among scorecards, either synchronically or diachronically. What makes a series of ones and zeros on abstract scorecards into genuine commitments is the way they are taken up in practice, and this taking up is an essentially first-personal activity, just as holding one to a commitment, or recognizing someone’s entitlement, is inherently second-personal. But Brandom’s focus on assertions, and hence on impersonal normative statuses, forecloses his ability to accommodate these structurally first- and second-personal dimensions of normative transactions between agents in discourse. We need to understand shifts in our commitments and entitlements as events that involve embodied agents with first-person perspectives as they act and communicate within a social context, and not merely as shifts in an abstract, Platonic space of scorecards that could be instantiated by any Universal Turing Machine. Hence we have prima facie reason to think that an account of discursive practice that recognizes only agent-neutral normative statuses will be insufficient. Whether agent-relative statuses must be built into language itself remains to be seen. We will argue that they must, by arguing (1) that perceptual episodes are structurally agent-relative, and not analogous with agent-neutral ‘inner assertions’, and (2) that a functioning language must include speech acts that give expression to such perceptual episodes and mirror their agent-relativity.

II Perception and perspective

We mentioned earlier that Brandom treats language as an autonomous domain that is independent of perception, although perception provides inputs or ‘entrance points’ for language. We will argue that he is wrong to do so, and that acts of perceiving are inextricably normatively and pragmatically bound up with acts of speaking in any meaningful discursive practice. Before we get to this argument, we will first argue that perception is an activity that (like some speech acts, as we argued above) cannot be understood except as agent-relative; acts of perception could not be cut free of a particular perceiver for whom they count as first-personal episodes. In contrast, Brandom apparently understands perceptual episodes as funny kinds of
assertions (for instance, see MIE, pp. 236 and 243). If perceptual episodes had a normative pragmatic structure analogous to acts of asserting, then they would likewise inherit the structural impersonality or agent-neutrality of asserting. Perceptual episodes could then be ‘passed on’ or transferred between agents without loss of identity.

It is true that if Rebecca perceives that there is a bunny in the bush, then not only is she entitled to claim that there is a bunny in the bush, but she is also in a position to, as Brandom would put it, pass on an entitlement to this claim to everyone in her discursive community. So she can now tell Mark that there is a bunny in the bush, and in turn, on her say-so, Mark is now entitled to believe and to assert that there is a bunny in the bush. However, Rebecca’s perceptual act is not exhausted by her acquisition of such a fungible, agent-neutral entitlement. A perceptual event is not just the transferring of a propositional belief into the head of the perceiver, but a bodily event that, as McDowell has stressed (McDowell, 1994, 1998), ineliminably involves receptivity. When we come to be entitled to a belief on the basis of perception it is because we encounter the world in a certain way. But notice that such events of receptivity are essentially individuating, in a specific sense: an event of perception cannot be shared among several agents, even though several agents may perceive the same thing as a result of similar interactions with the world. As Heidegger would put it, perceptions are in each case mine (Heidegger, 1996, I: p. 1). Perceptions, taken as concrete receptive encounters, by their nature build in first-person singular ownership of that encounter rather than adding it on as an afterthought; episodes of perception cannot even notionally be understood as floating free of being someone’s perceptual episode in particular, and this ownership is inherently first-personal. To perceive is inherently to be uniquely placed, indexically, with respect to what I see. Perceptual episodes are inherently particular and non-fungible in just the way that the inferential and assertional entitlements to which they give rise are not. The inference and assertion licenses I ‘pass on’ when I express what I perceive meaningfully maintain their identity through their different incarnations in different speakers, but the original perceptual episodes do not. Even if we insist that you see the very same thing as I do on a given occasion – you see the bunny also – we have two perceptual episodes grounding two different receptive entitlements, and not one.

Perception paradigmatically yields new entitlements. But Rebecca’s perception only yields entitlements for her insofar as she recognizes that she has perceived the bunny herself, whereas Mark earns his entitlements through learning that someone else has perceived the bunny. These are not interchangeable sources of entitlement: my perception will only yield new entitlements for anyone if they originate with me – no one else but me can be the first to pass on my perceptual entitlements. But this can only happen if I recognize my perceptual episodes, in a normatively rich sense, as mine, because this is part of what is involved in my taking myself to be directly entitled by a perception. That is, I become entitled to new claims via my perception through my recognition that I perceive something. To perceive, then – as opposed to just inheriting entitlement to a belief – is to be first-personally claimed by what I
see, to recognize my perceptual episode as mine. The receptivity of perception is one of the essential means by which my commitments and entitlements do not merely accrue to me, but make a claim on me. The perspectivally owned character of perception is not just a phenomenological fact that needs separate accommodation, but rather it is essential to the cash value of the game of giving and asking for reasons.

Brandom acknowledges a certain perspectivality of entitlement at the level of the content of our intentional states: the content of an agent’s perceptual judgment, for instance, will depend on the orientation of her body and her visual perspective, or the specific way she is embedded in the environment (MIE, p. 590). But these differences at the level of content go no distance towards getting a hold on the first-person ownership of perspective that is essential to perception and discourse: no array of different perceptual contents inflected by different orientations will mark one of them as mine. It is not enough to emphasize that our perceptual judgments are inflected and constituted by our practical bodily relationship to what we observe, although this is true too. This engaged body must furthermore be my body in order for its entitlements and commitments to have any normative bite, and no mere enrichment of bodily and social details will get this in. All these details, no matter how embodied, would not help me be gripped by my situation if they belonged to someone else. An account of perception as an assertion-like episode that is perspectivaly marked only by its content is insufficient. Rather, perceptual episodes must be understood as first-personally structured, agent-relative events.

III Recognitives

We want to argue that the inherent agent-relativity of perception gives us ground for believing that inherently agent-relative, voiced speech acts are essential elements of any functioning, meaningful discursive practices. Any community that shares a set of discursive practices, we claim, must be able to do more with their language than just make declarative assertions. To remind the reader of where we have been and where we are going: we take it as uncontentious that some speech acts, such as imperatives and vocatives, are ineliminably ‘voiced’ and agent-relative in a way that assertions are not. However, a traditional philosopher of language might argue that such agent-relative speech acts are curiosities that do not form the ‘core’ of language, and likewise that philosophy can continue to build its accounts of language on the basis of analyses of assertions. Accordingly, this traditionalist may find no fault with Brandom’s exclusive focus on assertions as the pragmatic playing pieces in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Our goal is to argue that, to the contrary, certain kinds of agent-relative speech acts must be accommodated by any systematic pragmatic account of discursive practice. However, we are still not yet at the point where we can make that argument. First, we will call attention to a kind of speech act that, as far as we know, has not been previously identified as pragmatically distinctive, and we will argue that it is inherently first-personal. In the next section we will argue that this type of speech act is essential to any language rich enough to offer the capacity to make empirical claims.
Consider the ways in which we can report on our perceptual encounters with the world in language. One thing we can do is simply utter a declarative that describes either what we saw or that we saw it: We might say “There is a rabbit in the bush” or “I see a rabbit in the bush”. These both count as assertions that state an impersonal fact. The use of the first person in the second case is merely an incidental product of the speaker and the perceiver happening to be the same person. If Rebecca asserts “I see a rabbit in the bush”, then Mark can take up and reassert that claim with no loss of meaning or pragmatic force, by saying “Rebecca sees a rabbit in the bush”.

In contrast, consider a subtly but importantly different kind of speech act, which we will call a recognitive. A recognitive is a speech act that serves to express recognition of something that makes itself present to the receptive faculties of the speaker. Consider the locution, “Lo, a rabbit!” This speech act does not merely make the declarative claim that a rabbit is present. Nor does it merely make the declarative claim that someone sees a rabbit. Rather, it serves a special recognitive function: it marks or expresses my detection of a rabbit. It is the recognizing, and not just what is recognized or who is recognizing, that is given expression in such a claim, and since what is expressed is the indexed recognition itself, this entitlement is not generalizable, even in the ideal. My utterance of “Lo, a rabbit” may commit you to the belief that there is a rabbit present, and entitle you to the assertion “There is a rabbit there”, but unless you see the bunny yourself you are not entitled to utter “Lo, a rabbit”. And if you do see it, this recognition – your recognition – is the source of your entitlement, not your acceptance of my entitlement to my own recognitive. While others may well see the same thing as I do, and hence while my entitlement to such a speech act may well not be unique, it is still the case that this entitlement is not shared.

Hence the entitlement that grounds my speech act is agent-relative – it looks quite different from the kind of in-principle universally transferable entitlement than Brandom rightly takes to be essential to declarative assertions. This distinctive agent-relativity of entitlement to recognitives is rooted in the analogous agent-relativity of the perceptual episodes they express. Hence these recognitives are individuating in the sense that one and only one agent can express them, and, likewise, they are inherently and ineliminably spoken in the first-person singular voice. The point here is not that only one agent can correctly utter them (as is true of any number of completely uninteresting declarative assertions, such as “I am the human currently sitting closest to the dog whose registered name is Innisfree Tobiko Nori”). Rather, and much more strongly, recognitive utterances – which are pragmatically defined – only are the speech act they are in virtue of giving expression to an individuating, unshareable experiential episode of the speaker.

Recognitives are not assertions – “Lo, a rabbit!” has no truth-value, for instance. And hence they of course cannot be reasserted, and likewise they do not pass on universal reassertion licenses. Brandom interprets observation reports as declarative assertions, and accordingly he claims that the distinctive normative structure of assertion depends upon observation reports passing on a completely universal “reassertion license to do just what the asserter did” (MIE, p. 210, emphasis added).
But those who pass on entitlements through giving expression to their perceptual episodes do not license others to do just what they did, no matter what the content of these episodes. When I give expression to my perceptual episode in speech, as opposed to simply asserting beliefs that I have on the basis of that perception, I cannot thereby pass on a license to others to the same speech act. If I utter “Lo, a rabbit!”, I entitle you to believe and assert that there is a rabbit present, and, in calling upon you to look and see the bunny for yourself, I help you to have your own perceptual episode with similar content, but my utterance does not entitle you to say “Lo, a rabbit!” yourself (or even, “That’s true!”). You can only say “Lo, a rabbit!” if you see the bunny yourself, in which case your speech act gives expression to your perceptual episode and not mine. Not only are recognitives not reassertable (given that they are not assertions) – they do not pass on re-performance licenses of any sort, not to mention universal ones. You can’t re-perform someone else’s recognitive, even incorrectly. For that matter, you can’t perform someone else’s recognitive for him in the first place. Thus the recognitive seems to be a kind of speech act that Brandom’s topography, which includes only assertions that are universally transferable, agent-neutral, and translatable into the third-personal or impersonal voice, cannot accommodate.

On the other hand, when I utter “Lo, a rabbit!”, my utterance involves a demand that others, for instance, accept that there is a rabbit present and that I saw it, use these beliefs appropriately in inference, and so on. In uttering it, I am making public various agent-neutral facts that can then be taken up as claims by others. As a result of my utterance, whose own entitlement was agent-relative, ‘we’ now know – one knows, it is known – that there is a rabbit present. My agent-relative recognitive utterance passes on an agent-neutral entitlement, not to reassertion, but to beliefs and assertions that are licensed directly by my speech act. In this sense it is agent-relative in a quite different sense from an imperative, for instance, which speaks in the second-person voice, and makes a normative demand upon its target audience that is neither directly transferable nor translatable into an impersonal claim.

One important feature of recognitives, then, is that even though they are not themselves assertions, they are firmly planted within the conceptually articulated space of giving and asking for reasons. When philosophers have considered non-declarative, expressive language in the past, they have focused on inarticulate ‘boo’s and ‘yay’s and similar expletives. Indeed, expressive language has been taken as almost synonymous with ‘noncognitivist’ language (Stevenson, 1963; Gibbard, 2003). However, recognitives function differently from such traditional examples of expressive language. They are inferentially fecund, they ground beliefs and public knowledge, they facilitate discursive communication, and they allow us to give voice to our encounters with the objective world. This point will be crucial in the next section, when we argue that recognitives play an essential constitutive role in any linguistic practice with the capacity to make meaningful empirical claims.

We cannot look to the surface grammar of an utterance in order to ‘read off’ whether it is a recognitive or a declarative report upon a perceptual event. I might exclaim “I see a rabbit!” as a way of giving expression to my experience of perceiving
the rabbit. In fact, very rarely does anyone other than a philosopher who read too much Quine as a child say “Lo!” — normally, when we notice a rabbit in a bush, we use ambiguous locutions (“Hey, a rabbit!” “There goes a rabbit!” “Holy smokes, check out the bunny!”) that could be read as either declaratives or recognitives. Indeed, surely in most such cases our utterance has both pragmatic forces at once; we use our utterance both to give expression to our first-person experience and to report on the contents and/or the fact of that experience. But we are not invested in identifying speech acts that function exclusively as recognitives. For the moment, we have only been arguing that some of the things we do with language are inherently agent-relative, unshareable, and first-personal in the way that we have described. Thus language as we find it cannot be understood as a system that is essentially impersonal and attached to agents and rooted in first-person perspectives only contingently at the margins, through ‘entrance’ and ‘exit’ conditions.

IV The ineliminability of voice

However, we seek a stronger result. We want to argue not only that language as we find it involves agent-relative, essentially first-personal discursive practices, but that any functioning language with the capacity to make empirical claims must involve such practices. Someone might argue, in contrast, that this feature of language is contingent. Even granting that we are right about the ineliminable agent-relativity of some of our speech, the objection would go, there could perfectly well be a coherent, functioning language that served the essential purposes that Brandom wants language to serve, but that contained the pragmatic resources only for impersonal declarative speech. So for example, we argued at the beginning that imperatives are essentially second-personal — but one might well think that a discourse without imperatives (not just without a distinctive imperative syntax, but without any pragmatic resources for making second-person demands upon others) would be inconvenient, but not impossible. Elsewhere we argue in detail that second-person speech is not eliminable in this way, and that the capacity to make second-person demands in language is as fundamental as the capacity to assert. But we will not take up that argument here. Instead, we will focus on the ineliminability of the first person, by arguing that the capacity of language-users to express recognitives (of the sort we described in the last section) is a constitutive condition for the possibility of their sharing a language that enables its users to pass around empirical truth-claims in the way Brandom describes.

For Brandom, when we make an entitled assertion, we offer an entitlement to others to reassert, and anyone who takes up this entitlement also takes up the corresponding commitment to the truth of this assertion and any other truths that are implied by it. We can thus legitimately inherit entitlements to declaratives in any of several ways: by having them passed on to us from someone else; by having them follow inferentially from our other commitments and entitlements, or, crucially, through direct experience. However, to the extent that our discourse as a whole counts as about and accountable to the concrete empirical world — rather than just
being an elaborate syntactic, non-referential game – our declarative entitlements must be traceable, through chains of entitlement, back to direct experiences, whether ours or someone else’s. As McDowell has made vivid, it is this termination of inference in receptive experience that gives our thinking and talking the external constraint that it needs to count as objective claim-making, as opposed to mere frictionless spinning in the void (McDowell, 1994, p. 67 and elsewhere). This much seems fairly uncontroversial. But, now, here’s the point: the edifice of empirical knowledge, and with it our justified ability to make empirical assertions, depends upon there being chains of commitments and entitlements that terminate in someone’s first-person experiences. The necessary termination of empirical claims in experience means that whenever we make an empirical assertion, we are committing ourselves to someone having had an experience – a receptive encounter with concrete features of the world – that grounds this assertion. And although we needn’t have any particular idea of who served as the origin of this bit of empirical knowledge, we are committed to thinking it was someone (or several people) in particular that did.

Now we have already argued at length in section II that these perceptual episodes themselves are inherently individuating and first-personal. They are not experiences that merely happen to be linked with some agent – I must experience them, if I am the original perceiver, as irreducibly mine, and they are not shareable. If there were nobody who could claim a piece of experiential knowledge from this first-person perspective, then it would not count as knowledge that we share and can make assertions about at all. From an epistemological point of view, this means that empirical assertions can only be justified to the extent that their asserters have reason to be committed to the claim that these assertions terminate in some particular speaker’s perceptual episodes. But if we could never recognize, in language, other people’s discursive expressions of their own, first-person experiences, then such expressions could not function as discursive reasons in the game of giving and asking for reasons, and we would be left without any way to attach our assertion-making game to the empirical world about which it is supposed to make claims. In turn, this means that empirical discourse only gets to count as properly open to justification to the extent that it has the capacity to recognize discursive expressions of such first-person experiences.

It is not enough that people be able to express the content of perception in language in order for our claim-making practices to be grounded in linguistically expressed reasons. We must be able to distinguish, within language, between those empirical claims that are merely inherited through the passing on of an inference or reassertion licenses, and those that function as the termination of a set of claims in someone’s receptive contact with the external world. Otherwise, we might just have an edifice of circulating claims, without any linguistic means of accessing and marking the essentially first-personal point of receptive contact between language and the world that is essential to keep language from spinning in the void. But this means that we must be able to use language to give first-person expression to perceptual episodes. In other words, our language, insofar as it is used to make
empirical claims, requires the capacity to utter recognitives, because recognitives are the speech acts that make explicit our first-person experiential encounters with the world. Of course, many claims do not directly terminate in recognitives. However, a language must have the capacity for the expression and recognition of recognitive discourse in order to tie its game of giving and asking for reasons to first-person receptive perception in the right way.

It may seem that it is enough that we be able to declaratively report upon our experiences, rather than expressing them with a recognizable. We mentioned that Brandom understands perceptual episodes as funny kinds of assertions; accordingly, we can assume that he takes such declarative reports on perceptual episodes to be the translation of these ‘assertions’ from thought into language. But if a declarative such as “I see a rabbit” truly had no recognizable, pragmatically first-person component, then in effect we would be taking a third-person stance toward ourselves, and reporting on an experience ‘from the outside’. Such an assertion is, by Brandom’s own lights, the kind of thing that can be translated into the third person and reasserted; you can now assert “Mark sees a rabbit” and this (again, to the extent that it is a pure declarative) will be the same assertion. But if this were all we could do in language – i.e. make assertions that were agent-neutral in this way – then making such assertions would precisely not give expression to the termination of empirical knowledge in a first-person, owned experience – an experience that is practically grasped as mine (see section I). To the extent that I give expression to that when I say “I see a rabbit” I am not merely making a declarative, agent-neutral report, but uttering a recognizable, at least implicitly. And it is because we can recognize this pragmatic move in discourse that we count as a discursive community that is speaking in a way that is held accountable to the world.

But why, we might wonder, must we be able to give discursive expression to our recognitive episodes at all? Could we not anchor assertional entitlement in acts of perceiving without giving the recognizable aspect of that reception recognizable linguistic expression? Not without relying upon the myth of the given that Sellars notoriously exposed (Sellars, 1997). Minimally, avoiding this classic Sellarsian demon means not treating any empirical epistemic accomplishment as in principle immune from discursive examination, challenge, and discussion. But if recognitive entitlement – the entitlement that comes from a receptive first-person encounter with the empirical world – plays a distinctive role in justification, then this distinctiveness must itself be able to be brought into the space of explicit critical examination within the game of giving and asking for reasons. But this requires that our language have the resources for making recognizable discourse explicit.

We conclude that any satisfactory account of language that takes pragmatics as fundamental, as Brandom’s does, cannot build this account out of narrow attention to assertions. Indeed, the very practices of passing around commitments and entitlements to assertions, which Brandom takes to form the core of language, cannot themselves exist except in the context of a richer set of linguistic practices. Specifically, we conclude that any philosophical account of language that attends only to agent-neutral assertions that have no essential voice will be insufficient.
Recognitive discourse is a kind of discourse that is voiced and agent-relative, and constitutive of any language with the expressive capacity to make meaningful empirical assertions. The speaking subject who participates in the Brandomian game of giving and asking for reasons is one who is ineliminably embodied in a way that allows her to have a concrete point of view and to speak in a first-person voice.

Although we take ourselves to have proposed a substantial revision and supplementation of Brandom’s account of discursive practice in *MIE*, we intend our contribution to be taken as a friendly – albeit serious – amendment. It is our core commitment to the usefulness of the Brandomian apparatus of commitments, entitlements, and inferential relations, as well as to his fundamental belief that any account of language and its meanings must begin, most fundamentally, by understanding language as an articulated, socially embedded, materially embodied practice, that has led us to take seriously the agent-relative, voiced dimensions of linguistic practice.13

Notes

1 Both authors contributed equally to this paper. We alternate the order of authorship on our collaborative projects.
2 Future references to this work will appear simply as *MIE*, followed by page numbers where appropriate.
3 See in particular Joseph Rouse’s excellent extended discussion of this (2002).
4 In the introduction to *MIE*, Brandom says “the first step in the project is accordingly the elaboration of a pragmatics (a theory of the use of language) that is couched in terms of practical scorekeeping ... The pragmatic significance of performances – eventually speech acts such as assertions – is then understood to consist in the difference those performances make to the commitments and entitlements attributed by various scorekeepers. ... The defining characteristic of discursive practice is the production and consumption of specifically propositional contents” (p. xiv). The final sentence of this passage – not to mention his semantic inferentialism – is a clue that assertions are more than an example of a speech act Brandom will analyze. Indeed, when one turns to the first two chapters of the book, in which the “elaboration of a pragmatics” is carried out and the bridge between it and semantics developed, one searches in vain for any discussion of any speech act other than assertions. A search of the index under “imperatives” yields “see commands” which takes us to historical discussions of Pufendorf and Wittgenstein and Kant on normativity. “Interrogatives”, “performatives”, and so forth do not occur at all.
5 As Brandom acknowledges they are at many points, for example *MIE*, p. 332.
6 Although this paper is co-authored, it is in the nature of our subject matter that we often need to give examples from the first-person singular point of view. We hope the reader will forgive the unavoidable awkwardness that results.
7 This is basically John Perry’s point concerning the essential indexical, transposed into a normative key. See Perry (2000).
8 See also Rouse’s discussion of this point (2002, pp. 216ff).
9 This is a Kantian commitment on our part, translated into phenomenological terms and divested of its representationalism; the essential first-personal ownership of perception that we are pointing to here is a version of the transcendental synthesis of apperception in the “I think”. Just as Kant insisted upon the attachment of the “I think” to every objective representation, likewise we insist upon the attachment of the perceptual ownership to every entitlement-yielding perceptual episode.
10 Rouse comments, “To talk about sameness of content [for Brandom] is thus to bracket the pervasive and ineliminable differences in conceptual perspective that result from
the inferential significance of differing collateral commitments and different embodied locations. It might be more natural to say that, on Brandom’s account, one could only inherit a perspectively shifted conceptual content from others’ observation reports” (2002, pp. 216–17).

11 For a fuller discussion of recognitives and their philosophical significance, see Kukla and Lance (2009).

12 See Kukla and Lance (2009).

13 For our attempt to develop a detailed pragmatic account of language that takes its voiced, agent-relative dimensions seriously, see Kukla and Lance (2009).

References


Brandom explains observational knowledge by giving an account of the speech acts that express it, observation reports. And he explains observation reports as performances that conform to two conditions.

First, they result from reliable differential responsive dispositions. But such dispositions are also possessed by things that cannot acquire observational knowledge: creatures that, though sentient, do not engage in cognition (in a demanding sense that requires responsiveness to reasons as such), and even inanimate things. Pieces of iron, for instance, reliably respond to the presence of moisture in their environment by rusting.

The second condition singles out the upshots of the dispositions operative in observation as moves in an inferentially articulated deontic practice, a game of giving and asking for reasons. Thanks to their placement in such a context, these responses are not mere responses but claims, with conceptual content.

In Brandom’s view, these conditions are sufficient for capacities to acquire observational knowledge. The second condition provides for a disposition’s outcomes to be claims; the first ensures that the claims are reliably correct.

This conception is minimalist in not regarding experience, in the sense of a shaping of sensory consciousness, as essential to observation. Brandom thinks an involvement on the part of sensory consciousness is at best a detail about the mechanism by which, in some cases, reliable differential responsive dispositions to make claims operate – not part of the very idea of an observational capacity.

There is no problem in the idea of responsive dispositions that issue in knowledge-expressing claims without relevant mediation by sensory consciousness. Consider the chicken-sexers of epistemological folklore. The chicks they pronounce to be male, getting it right with sufficient frequency for their pronouncements to count as knowledgeable, do not look, or smell, or in any other sensory modality appear any different to them from the chicks they knowledgeably pronounce to be female.\(^2\) It does not matter whether this is true of any actual capacity to sort chicks into male and female; it is enough that it could be. In Brandom’s view this possibility (or actuality, if that is what it is) reveals, in a pure form, what an observational capacity is. No doubt sensory
consciousness figures in the operation of the observational capacities we are more familiar with. But as Brandom sees things, that is no more essential to observation than, say, details about the physiology of the relevant sensory systems.

II

To a large extent Brandom recommends this conception of observational knowledge by an argument from authority. He claims to find the conception in Wilfrid Sellars’s “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”. (He calls it “Sellars’s two-ply account of observation”).

I do not object to arguments from authority. But this one limps. Brandom’s reading of Sellars’s classic work is perversive.

Brandom thinks Sellars points the way to dispensing with experience in an account of observational knowledge, and thereby in an account of empirical knowledge in general – unless it counts as invoking experience to acknowledge a role for reliable differential responsive dispositions provided by functioning sense-organs.

But that is quite wrong. In EPM Sellars offers a picture of empirical knowledge with a much more substantial involvement on the part of experience, while avoiding the pitfall he calls “the Myth of the Given”.

The chief threat is the version of the Myth he describes, in the pivotal part VIII (“Does Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?”), like this (§32):

One of the forms taken by the Myth of the Given is the idea that there is, indeed must be, a structure of particular matter of fact such that (a) each fact can not only be noninferentially known to be the case, but presupposes no other knowledge either of particular matter of fact, or of general truths; and (b) ... the noninferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims – particular and general – about the world.

How is this foundational knowledge supposed to be acquired? What Sellars describes here is what he rejects under the label “traditional empiricism” in §38. And in traditional empiricism it is experience that is supposed to yield foundations for other knowledge.

Sellars emphasizes that the foundational knowledge is conceived as presupposing no other knowledge. In §32 he goes on:

It is important to note that I characterized the knowledge of fact belonging to this stratum as not only noninferential, but as presupposing no knowledge of other matters of fact, whether particular or general. It might be thought that this is a redundancy, that knowledge (not belief or conviction, but knowledge) which logically presupposes knowledge of other facts must be inferential. This, however, as I hope to show, is itself an episode in the Myth.
When he rejects traditional empiricism, he is rejecting only that element in it. The rest of its structure can stand. That is clear from what he says in §38:

If I reject the framework of traditional empiricism, it is not because I want to say that empirical knowledge has no foundation. For to put it in this way is to suggest that it is really “empirical knowledge so-called,” and to put it in a box with rumors and hoaxes. There is clearly some point to the picture of human knowledge as resting on a level of propositions – observation reports – which do not rest on other propositions in the same way as other propositions rest on them. On the other hand, I do wish to insist that the metaphor of “foundation” is misleading in that it keeps us from seeing that if there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former.

Dependence in this second dimension is the presupposing that traditional empiricism fails to recognize. To acknowledge the second dimension is to accept that what is now – just for this reason – only misleadingly conceived as foundational knowledge presupposes knowledge of other matters of fact, knowledge that would have to belong to the structure that can now only misleadingly be seen as built on those foundations.

As I said, when Sellars makes it clear that his target is traditional empiricism, this licenses reading experience into his description of an unqualified foundationalism in §32. It also enables us to see that when he uncovers the error in traditional empiricism, he does not remove experience from its position in the epistemology of empirical knowledge. He just insists that it yields knowledge – the knowledge expressed in observation reports – only in a way that depends on other knowledge.

III

To fill out this picture, we would need more detail about the knowledge-yielding powers of experience.

And that is just what Sellars offers, starting in part III, “The Logic of ‘Looks’”. Experiences, Sellars tells us, contain propositional claims (§16). That is an initially promissory way (as Sellars insists) of crediting experiences with intentional content. He delivers on the promissory note in the first phase of the myth of Jones (part XV). Sellars aims to cast light on concepts of “inner” episodes by imagining a genius, Jones, who introduces ways of expressing such concepts into a language not yet equipped with them. In the first phase, Sellars suggests that thought about non-overt intentionality uses overt speech acts, with their semantical properties, as a model. His topic there is conceptual “inner” episodes in general, but in §60 he notes that the intentional character of experiences is an instance – thereby indicating, in effect, that he has discharged the promise he issued in §16.

In the next section, also numbered §16, Sellars says it is clear that a complete
account of (visual) experience requires “something more”, over and above intentional content, namely “what philosophers have in mind when they speak of ‘visual impressions’ or ‘immediate visual experiences’”. (It can be questioned whether this is clear, or even correct. I shall not press the question at this stage, though I shall return to it later.) Sellars says the “logical status” of this further element in experience “is a problem which will be with us for the remainder of this argument”. His final treatment of this topic comes in the second phase of the myth of Jones (part XVI). There he suggests that concepts of the phenomenal character of “impressions” should be conceived as derived by analogical extension from concepts of sensible properties of perceptible objects.

The myth of Jones, with its two phases, offers an account of the mental in general, apart from what is capturable in terms of dispositions to overt behaviour. But in EPM it clearly has a more specific purpose as well: to complete the account of experience, in particular, that Sellars begins in part III. The first phase justifies his promissory talk of experiences as possessing intentional content, and the second deals with the “something more” he thinks is needed to accommodate their sensory character.

And already in part III Sellars is ensuring that the capacity to yield knowledge he is beginning to provide for, by attributing intentional content to experiences, is not as traditional empiricism conceives it. In part III Sellars is already insisting – to put things in the terms he will use in part VIII – that an experience’s having as its intentional content that such-and-such is the case, and hence the possibility that it might yield knowledge that such-and-such is the case, presupposes knowledge other than that knowledge itself.

Experiences that, in the promissory idiom, contain the claim that something is green are experiences in which it is at least true that it looks to one as if something is green. But some such experiences are experiences in which one sees, and so is in a position to know, that something is green. One can have experiences in which it looks to one as if something is green only if one has the concept of something’s being green. And Sellars argues that having colour concepts “involves the ability to tell what colors things have by looking at them – which, in turn, involves knowing in what circumstances to place an object if one wishes to ascertain its color by looking at it” (§18). His point is that the capacity to have experiences in which it looks to one as if something is green, and hence the capacity to acquire knowledge that something is green by having such an experience, depend – in what is going to come into view as the second dimension – on knowledge about, for instance, the ways in which colour appearances can be misleading under certain lighting conditions.

IV

The “two-ply” account implies a distinctive understanding of statements about how things appear – how things look, if we restrict ourselves to visual perception. A disposition of the kind that figures in Brandom’s account of observational
knowledge can be triggered into operation in circumstances in which it would be risky to make the claim that would be its primary output. Subjects learn to inhibit inclinations to make claims in such circumstances. For instance, subjects learn, in certain lighting conditions, to withhold the claims about colours that, if allowed free rein, their responsive dispositions would induce them to make. In such conditions “looks” statements serve as substitute outlets for the dispositions. “Looks” statements evince responsive dispositions, of a visual kind, whose primary output one is inhibiting. In Brandom’s view, that is a complete account of the significance of “looks” statements.

In this doctrine, which Brandom thinks Sellars is expounding in part III, claims figure only in the guise of overt linguistic performances – the primary outlet of responsive dispositions, what subjects evince inhibited tendencies towards when they say how things look to them. But in §16 Sellars uses the notion of claims in a first shot at attributing intentional content to experiences, to be completed when Jones introduces concepts of “inner” episodes with intentional content on the model of overt linguistic performances with their semantical character. Claims figure in Brandom’s picture only in the sense in which claims are Jones’s model. What Sellars needs Jones to model on claims in the primary sense, to finish the task he begins on in part III, is not on Brandom’s scene at all.

Sellars says, in §16, that justifying his promissory talk of experiences as containing claims is “one of [his] major aims”. He is obviously looking forward to the myth of Jones. When Jones starts work, his fellows have the subjunctive conditional, hence the ability to speak of dispositions, and they can speak of overt linguistic behaviour with its semantical character. (Sellars adds that to the original “Rylean” resources in §49, before Jones begins.) To execute his “major aim”, Sellars needs to follow Jones in going beyond that conceptual apparatus. It is only after the first phase of Jones’s conceptual innovation that Sellars harks back to the intentional character of experiences, thereby in effect signalling that he has discharged his promissory note (§60). Brandom explains “looks” statements in terms of inhibited dispositions to make claims in the primary sense, overt linguistic performances of a certain sort. But that idea is available before Jones’s innovation. Brandom’s reading does not accommodate the promissory character Sellars stresses in what he does in part III.

In §15, Sellars denies that a “looks” statement reports a minimal objective fact – objective in being “logically independent of the beliefs, the conceptual framework, of the perceiver”, but minimal in being safer than a report of, say, the colour of an object in the perceiver’s environment.

That is to reject a specific conception of what “looks” statements report. But Brandom thinks “looks” statements, for Sellars, should not be reports at all – in particular not reports of experiences, since he credits Sellars with a picture of empirical knowledge that dispenses with experience. So Brandom writes, purporting to capture a point Sellars should be trying to make in §15: “it is a mistake to treat [statements of the form ‘x looks F’] as reports at all – since they evince a disposition to call something F, but may not happily be thought of as saying that one has such a disposition.”
Brandom cannot pretend that this is a good fit for Sellars’s text, and he says Sellars “wavers” on the point. But Sellars is unwaveringly clear that “looks” statements are reports—not of dispositions, the only candidate Brandom considers, but of experiences, in particular of their intentional content.

§15 ends like this:

Let me begin by noting that there certainly seems to be something in the idea that the sentence “This looks green to me now” has a reporting role. Indeed it would seem to be essentially a report. But if so, what does it report, if not a minimal objective fact, and if what it reports is not to be analyzed in terms of sense data?

And in §16 bis, after he has introduced the two elements in his picture of experiences, their intentionality and their sensory character, Sellars answers that question:

Thus, when I say “X looks green to me now” I am reporting the fact that my experience is, so to speak, intrinsically, as an experience, indistinguishable from a veridical one of seeing that x is green. Included in the report is the ascription to my experience of the claim ‘x is green’; and the fact that I make this report rather than the simple report “X is green” indicates that certain considerations have operated to raise, so to speak in a higher court, the question ‘to endorse or not to endorse’.

This states, with emphasis, something Brandom thinks Sellars should be denying, that “looks” statements are reports: not (to repeat) of dispositions, but of the intentional (claim-containing) and, implicitly, the sensory character of experiences. When Sellars discharges the promissory note of §16, the culminating move (in §59) is precisely to provide for a reporting role for self-attributions of “thoughts”, which include experiences qua characterizable as having intentional content.

The intentional character of experiences reflects conceptual capacities operative in enjoying them. So this conception of “looks” statements as reports is consistent with denying, as Sellars does in §15, that they report minimal objective facts. The facts reported by “looks” statements, on this conception, are not objective in the sense of being independent of the conceptual framework of the perceiver.

If one goes no further than reporting one’s experience as containing the claim that things are thus and so, one still has to determine whether to endorse that claim. If one endorses it, one claims to see that things are thus and so. (I continue to focus on visual experience in particular.) If not, one says no more than that it looks to one as if things are thus and so. In a “looks” statement, that is, one withholds endorsement of the claim one reports one’s experience as containing.

Brandom exploits this withholding of endorsement in an explanation, which he attributes to Sellars, for the incorrigibility of “looks” statements. He writes, on Sellars’s behalf: “Since asserting ‘X looks F’ is not undertaking a propositional
commitment - but only expressing an overrideable disposition to do so – there is no issue as to whether or not that commitment (which one?) is correct.\textsuperscript{7}

But this reflects his failure to register the Sellarsian idea I have been documenting, that a “looks” statement reports the claim-containing character of an experience. That one’s experience contains a certain claim is an assertoric commitment one is undertaking, in Sellars’s view, when one says how things look to one, even though one withholds commitment to the claim one reports one’s experience as containing. Brandom’s question “Which one?” is meant to be only rhetorical, but it has an answer: commitment to the proposition that one’s experience contains a certain claim – the claim that $X$ is $F$, in Brandom’s schematic example. Brandom’s explanation of the incorrigibility of “looks” statements is not Sellarsian at all. For a Sellarsian explanation of first-person authority in saying how things look to one, we need to apply his account of “privileged access” to conceptual episodes in one’s “inner” life, which he gives in the first phase of the myth of Jones (§59).\textsuperscript{8}

Commenting on §§19 and 20, Brandom writes: “These sections do not present Sellars’s argument in a perspicuous, or even linear, fashion.”\textsuperscript{9} This reflects his thinking Sellars’s aim in part III is to expound the “two-ply” picture.

But it is questionable exegetical practice to read something into a text at the price of having to criticize its perspicuity. In part III, Sellars is not unperspicuously presenting Brandom’s “two-ply” picture. He is starting to argue, quite perspicuously, that the knowledge-yielding capacity of experience presupposes knowledge other than what experience itself yields. The presupposed knowledge is exactly not inferentially related to the knowledge that presupposes it; that is what he is going to insist in part VIII. So this relation between bits of knowledge is not part of the inferential organization invoked in the second element of the “two-ply” picture, the structure to which outputs of responsive dispositions must belong if they are to be claims.

Brandom says “endorsement” is Sellars’s term for the second element in the “two-ply” picture. He thinks the point of Sellars’s talk of endorsement is to contribute towards providing an inferentially structured deontic context for what he is only thereby permitted to conceive as claims.\textsuperscript{10}

But Sellars introduces the idea that experiences contain claims without any hint that he feels obliged – here at least – to consider what claims are. His initial account of “looks” statements is promissory, because he needs Jones to extend the idea of claims from its primary application, which is to a certain sort of overt performance, before it can be used in attributing intentional content to “inner” episodes. For these purposes, the primary application is unproblematic. Sellars’s talk of endorsement is not code for the idea that what would otherwise be mere responses are moves in a deontic practice. By “endorsement” he just means endorsement. Even in the intuitive form in which he introduces the metaphor of experiences as containing claims, it is obvious that the subject of an experience has to consider whether to endorse...
the claim her experience contains. The idea that the outputs of some responsive
dispositions are conceptually contentful by virtue of figuring in a deontic practice is
irrelevant to any point Sellars has occasion to make in part III.

Or indeed anywhere in EPM. I mentioned earlier that before he puts Jones to
work, Sellars adds concepts of overt linguistic performances, with their conceptual
content, to the “Rylean” resources Jones is going to enrich (§49). He does that
quickly and without fanfare. In this essay Sellars is not in the business of giving an
“inferentialist” account of what it is for performances to have conceptual content.
Not that he offers some other kind of account. His purposes here generate no need
to concern himself with the question to which “inferentialism” is a response.

After his remark that Sellars’s presentation in §§19 and 20 is not perspicuous,
Brandom says “the argument is repeated in a more satisfactory form in [§§33–37]”.
He means that those sections, the central sections of part VIII, give a better formulation
of the “two- ply” picture. But this reflects the fact that he misreads them too.

Brandom thinks the point of §§33–37 is to expound the second element in the
“two- ply” account. Against that background, he argues that those sections bring out
a problem for Sellars’s epistemological internalism.

Sellars holds that for a claim to express observational knowledge, two conditions
must be met (§35, the two hurdles). First, the claim must issue from a capacity whose
outputs are reliably correct. And second, the person who makes the claim must be
aware that her pronouncements on such matters have that kind of authority. As
Sellars notes, the idea of reliability can be explicated in terms of there being a good
inference from someone’s making a claim to things being as she says they are.

Brandom thinks this puts Sellars’s second condition – which expresses his inter-
nalism – in tension with Sellars’s own conception of observational knowledge as
noninferential. He thinks the condition would imply that one arrives at a report
by persuading oneself, via the “reliability inference”, that things are as they would
be said to be in a claim one finds oneself inclined to make. But in that case the
knowledge expressed in the report would be inferential. So Brandom concludes
that to preserve the thesis that observational knowledge is noninferential, we must
reject the second condition. To be better Sellarsians than Sellars himself, we should
insist that an observational knower can invoke her reliability, in support of her title
to knowledge, at most ex post facto.11 And it is a short step from there to holding, as
Brandom does, that observational knowledge does not require a knower to be able
to invoke her reliability even ex post facto. It is enough if someone else, a scorekeeper,
can justify a belief as the conclusion of a “reliability inference”, even if the subject
herself cannot put the belief in that rational context.12

But here Brandom misses what Sellars, in §32, signals as the central point of
part VIII: to bring into view the second dimension of dependence. One bit of
knowledge can depend on another in this dimension without any threat to its being
noninferential.

I have already considered Sellars’s example from part III. (He refers back to part
III, specifically to §19, in §37.) Claims about the colours of things, made on the
basis of experience, depend in the second dimension on knowledge about how
colour appearances vary with different kinds of illumination. If challenged about one’s entitlement to say something is green, one might respond “This is a good light for telling what colour something is”. The relevance of this to one’s observational authority belongs in the second dimension, which is not to be spelled out in terms of inference. One does not offer what one says about the light as a premise in an inferential grounding for what one claims to know about the colour of the thing.

Similarly with Sellars’s second hurdle. If challenged about one’s entitlement to say something is green, one might invoke – not just \textit{ex post facto}, but at the time – one’s reliability on such matters, saying “I can tell a green thing when I see one”. And here too, the relevance of what one says to one’s observational authority is in the second dimension, which Sellars separates from the dimension in which one bit of knowledge provides inferential grounding for another.

It is true that the concept of reliability can be explicated in terms of the goodness of the “reliability inference”. But that is irrelevant to the present point. Sellars’s thesis is that an observational claim depends for its authority, in the second dimension, on the subject’s reliability. This kind of dependence is dependence on something the subject is aware of; hence Sellars’s second condition. There is no implication that the claim depends in the first dimension, the inferential dimension, on the subject’s inclination to make it, via the “reliability inference”.

When Brandom takes Sellars to be concerned to expound the “two-ply” picture of observation reports in part III, it leads him to a baseless accusation of lack of perspicuity. Here it leads him to miss, nearly completely, what Sellars signals as the central point of part VIII.

With his fixation on the “two-ply” picture, Brandom makes almost nothing of Sellars’s point about the second dimension. He almost exclusively explains Sellars’s moves in part VIII in terms of a requirement for understanding the forms of words uttered in observation reports: that one be able to use them as premises and conclusions of inferences. There surely is such a requirement, but it is not Sellars’s concern here (or, as I have urged, anywhere in \textit{EPM}). Sellars’s concern is a requirement for claims to be have the authority of observation reports. Understanding what one is claiming – in this case with that distinctive authority – is not what is in question. The point of Sellars’s second hurdle is not to cite the “reliability inference” as part of the inferentially articulated structure in which forms of words must stand if they are to have conceptual content at all. Sellars’s thesis is that observational authority depends on the subject’s reliability in the second dimension. He invokes the “reliability inference” only as a gloss on the idea of reliability. (It is obviously a good gloss. This is not a first move towards a contentious “inferentialist” account of conceptual content.) The second hurdle stands in no tension with the thesis that observational knowledge is noninferential.

At one place in his Study Guide, Brandom lets a glimpse of Sellars’s point emerge, when he says that observation reports “themselves rest (not inferentially but in the order of understanding and sometimes of justification) on other sorts of knowledge”.\textsuperscript{13} But the stress on the order of understanding – by which Brandom means the deontic structure forms of words must belong to if they are to be conceptually contentful
– is, as I have been urging, irrelevant to Sellars’s point. Sellars’s case against traditional empiricism relates entirely to the order of justification, the order of responses to the question “Quid iuris?”. His point is that observational knowledge always (not sometimes) rests in the order of justification – in the noninferential second dimension – on other sorts of knowledge. That is why it is not foundational in the sense envisaged by traditional empiricism.

I have put this in the terms Brandom uses. But we could express Sellars’s point by saying that this talk of the order of justification is misleading. One way of placing an episode or state in the space of reasons – as Sellars says we do when we classify it as a case of knowing (§36) – is to give premises from which there is a sufficiently good inference to the truth of what the putative knower claims or would claim. The point about the second dimension is that there is another kind of response to the question “Quid iuris?”, which relates differently to the claim whose status as knowledgeable is under discussion. In a response of this second kind, one does not offer premises for an inference to the truth of a claim. What one addresses, in the first instance, is not the truth of the specific thing the subject says but her authority to say anything of the relevant sort – for example her authority, in the prevailing illumination, to make a claim about something’s colour. Of course if one accepts that she speaks with authority, one equips oneself with material that could serve in an inferential grounding for whatever specific thing she says, using the fact that she says it, plus the authority one has attributed to her, as premises. But the consideration that bears on her authority speaks to the question whether the claim she makes is knowledgeable directly, not by way of this potential role as a premise in an inferential grounding for the claim. In working through this inferential grounding, one convinces oneself that the claim is true on the ground that her making it is expressive of knowledge. The inference to the truth of the claim cannot be one’s route to classifying it as knowledgeable.14

I have been insisting that Sellars’s aim in introducing the second dimension is epistemological. The second dimension concerns requirements for claims to have the authority of expressions of knowledge.

Not that the point is epistemological in a way that excludes semantical significance. The content of the concept of something’s being green, say, is partly determined by the fact that someone who has that concept knows, for instance, what sort of light to put objects in, in order to tell whether they are green by looking. But this is not an instance of the inferential dependence between claimables by virtue of which, according to the “two-ply” picture, claims have conceptual content at all. It is a noninferential dependence by virtue of which some claimings have the authority of observation reports. For Sellars’s purposes in EPM, as I have urged, an “inferentialist” account of conceptual contentfulness überhaupt is beside the point.

VI

As I noted, Sellars thinks it is clear that over and above its intentional content, experience involves items of the sort philosophers have called “impressions”. Such items do not draw on conceptual capacities of their subjects. But Sellars’s point
about “looks” statements can be put by saying that the claim-containing character of an experience reflects conceptual capacities of its subject. So in Sellars’s view an experience is composite, with a conceptual element accounting for its intentional content and a nonconceptual element accounting for its sensory character.

Brandom thinks shapings of sensory consciousness can be set aside as mere details about the mechanisms operative in some – not all – knowledge-yielding responsive dispositions. And as I have just said, Sellars credits the sensory consciousness that is part of the intuitive idea of a perceptual experience to an element in experience that he thinks we must distinguish from its intentional character. It might seem that this could be lined up with Brandom’s view. If sensory consciousness is a distinct element in the composite that Sellars conceives an experience to be, why should we not set it aside, while we focus on the intentionality-involving items without which observation could not have its cognitive significance?

But there is no prospect here of reviving the argument from authority. Sellars engages repeatedly, throughout his career, with the idea of perceptual experience. Throughout these engagements, he finds it important to insist, as in the strand of EPM I am considering here, that experience’s sensory character is to be accounted for in terms of a nonconceptual sensibility. But it is no less dear to his heart to insist that in experience sensibility and understanding – to speak in Kantian terms – are intimately bound up together. Here is a characteristic remark: “visual perception itself is not just a conceptualizing of colored objects within visual range – a ‘thinking about’ colored objects in a certain context – but, in a sense most difficult to analyze, a thinking in color about colored objects.” Sellars would not find it congenial to suppose that, say, seeing something to be red is being struck by a thought that the thing is red which might just as well have occurred to one with one’s eyes shut, but which comes into one’s mind on this occasion as the effect of some visual sensations one is undergoing. In the view Sellars is trying to express in that remark, a distinctively visual character belongs to the thought itself (it is “a thinking in color”), not just to its aetiology.

And this is phenomenologically perceptive on Sellars’s part. When one acquires knowledge through vision, it is not just that visual sensory consciousness causes thoughts, one’s acceptance of which amounts to knowledge because the mode of causation that is operative can be relied on to issue in thoughts that are true. That picture – Brandom’s picture – omits something Sellars strains to accommodate: that a state of affairs one knows to obtain through vision is sensibly – specifically, visually – present to one. Experience, in Sellars’s view, is not something that results in thoughts about one’s environment. Experiencing is having such thoughts, in a mode in which having such thoughts, in the best cases, is having directly in view the circumstances in virtue of which they are true.

Sellars would have found it easier to hold on to this phenomenal unity of the sensory and the cognitive in experience if he had seen his way to discarding the idea that the sensory character of experience must reside in an element other than one with intentional content. It is true that, in the Kantian conception that is fundamental to Sellars’s thinking, sensibility as such cannot yield items that are conceptually structured.
That requires the understanding. But it does not follow that sensory consciousness itself cannot be informed – to go on speaking in Kantian terms – by capacities that belong to the understanding. That is the basis for the possibility I mentioned, that we might question what Sellars finds clear in §16 bis of *EPM*.16

If experience is sensory consciousness informed by capacities of the understanding, it is not composite, as it is on Sellars’s conception. There is not the division that allows Brandom to excise sensory consciousness and marginalize it. Sellars’s conception provides Brandom with a division to cut along, and hence with a pretext for relegating sensory consciousness to the fringe of the picture. But as I have pointed out, that eliminates something Sellars labours to entitle himself to: the sensible presence of bits of reality to subjects of perceptual awareness.

VII

So much for Brandom’s argument from authority. Is there anything else to be said for his minimalist conception of observation reports and hence of observation?

The minimalism might itself seem a point in favour of the conception. It would be telling if Brandom’s two conditions could be made out to suffice for something recognizable as observation. In that case the idea that sensory consciousness must be involved, which I have been urging that Sellars would not dream of questioning, would be a demand for more conceptually explanatory machinery than is needed.

This issue can be encapsulated in the question whether the chicken-sexers of the story make observation reports, as Brandom thinks they do. I shall end with two points about this.

First: the idea of sensible presence, which I exploited in the previous section, provides a motivation for a negative answer.

A chicken-sexer, confronted by a chick, finds himself inclined to say “male” or inclined to say “female”. He can account for the inclination only from outside, as the result of an acquired disposition to respond to chicks with such utterances. He knows that the results of the disposition correspond to whether the chicks responded to are male or female. Perhaps he has been assured of this by those who certified him as a competent chicken-sexer. But the sensory cues that presumably prompt his differential utterances do not impinge on his consciousness. So, though he can account for his inclinations in that external way, in another way the inclinations are unaccountable to him; he simply finds himself with them.

Contrast a person who knows that something is green by seeing that it is. One way in which her inclination to say the thing is green is intelligible to her corresponds to the way a chicken-sexer’s inclinations are intelligible to him. She knows that differential dispositions to apply colour words to things have been inculcated into her, and her teachers have assured her that the claims the dispositions lead her to make are reliably true. But her inclination is intelligible to her in another way as well. She does not just find herself inclined to say the thing is green, with only that external reason to follow her inclination. On the contrary, what makes it right to say the thing is green – the thing’s being green – is sensibly present to her.
There is no counterpart to this in the case of the chicken-sexer. What makes it right to say a chick is, say, male is not sensibly present to him when he is inclined to say the chick is male. That just restates the bit of the story according to which male chicks do not appear different to him, in any sensory modality, from female chicks.

It is, to say the least, not unmotivated to think we should mark this difference by holding that the person who sees that something is green is in a position to have observational knowledge, but the chicken-sexer is not.

Second: granting that the chicken-sexers of the story know whether chicks are male or female, is it right to suppose, with Brandom, that their knowledge is noninferential? If the answer is “No”, that undermines the minimalist conception. It is not just that an alternative conception is not unmotivated, as I have argued so far. If the answer is “No”, the exemplary case of what the minimalist conception includes in observation, though a more demanding conception does not, fails a basic test for being a case of observation.

Brandom distinguishes inferential from noninferential knowledge according to whether or not a knower reaches a bit of knowledge by inference. A neophyte physicist infers claims about mu-mesons from premises about observable goings-on in cloud chambers. Later she may learn to respond to cloud-chamber phenomena with claims about mu-mesons directly, without needing to take an inferential step. As Brandom uses the idea, she has now acquired a capacity for noninferential knowledge about mu-mesons.17

But is that the right way to distinguish inferential and noninferential knowledge? Surely the distinction should be epistemologically, not just psychologically, significant. It should concern the character of a state’s credentials, not the process by which it was arrived at. That suggests this alternative to Brandom’s conception: knowledge is inferential if the only way to vindicate its status as knowledge is to invoke the goodness of an inference to what is known from something independently within the knower’s epistemic reach.

Now that may be true of a bit of knowledge even if it is not arrived at via the inference that establishes it as knowledge. Why is it knowledge about mu-mesons that the practised physicist has? There is nothing to appeal to in response but the goodness of the inferences actually engaged in by the neophyte. So on this different account of the distinction, the practised physicist’s knowledge is inferential, no less than the neophyte’s. They are psychologically different, but not epistemologically.18

An experienced chicken-sexer does not infer his claims about chicks from his inclinations to make them, in a way that would reflect confidence in the reliability of his acquired dispositions. So the claims are noninferential in Brandom’s psychological sense. Even so, there is no way to display them as knowledgeable except by invoking the inferences whose goodness reflects his reliability, the inferences he admittedly does not need to make.

Contrast, again, someone who knows that something is green by seeing that it is. That she sees that the thing is green entails that the thing is green. But it is not an
inferential basis for her claim that the thing is green. It is not independently within her epistemic reach. To say she sees that the thing is green is, rather, to classify her noninferential knowledge as knowledge she has by virtue of the visual presence to her of the state of affairs she knows to obtain.

A “reliability inference” matters for this. She can be credited with that noninferential knowledge only because there is a good inference to the thing’s being green from her saying so. But the role of the goodness of the inference, in this case, is that it is a requirement for the availability of the conceptual material we use to classify her knowledge as belonging to that noninferential kind.

With the chicken-sexer, by contrast, the “reliability inference” is all we have to appeal to in order to display his claims as knowledgeable. There is nothing analogous to what the goodness of the parallel inference enables us to cite in the case of the person who sees how things are, the visual presence to her of the state of affairs she knows to obtain. A chick’s being, say, male is not sensibly present to him. So though her knowledge is noninferential, his is inferential.

On this account of the distinction, then, the chicken-sexer’s claims are not expressive of noninferential knowledge. So they are not even candidates to be observation reports, and the case I am considering for Brandom’s minimalism collapses.

Brandom attributes his psychological way of distinguishing inferential from noninferential knowledge to Sellars. But I am doubtful about the prospects for another argument from authority here.

Brandom thinks his way of drawing the distinction is required for Sellars’s treatment of knowledge of one’s own “inner” life. In each phase of the myth of Jones, Jones proceeds in two stages. First he introduces concepts of non-overt episodes in a form in which it is only in the conclusions of theoretically mediated inferences that subjects are said to instantiate them. Then he arranges for subjects to be trained to apply the concepts, or descendants of them, to themselves straight off, without needing to advert to what would be warranted as evidence for such applications by the theory in terms of which the concepts, or their precursors, were introduced in the first stage.

Sellars’s aim is to integrate the immediacy with which concepts of the “inner” can be expressed in the first person into a picture that also provides for their role in other-ascription. But he would not succeed in that aim if all he could provide in the way of immediate self-ascription were a short-cut, equipping people with a new way to arrive at knowledge that would otherwise have been available to anyone, including themselves, only on the basis of evidence constituted by publicly accessible circumstances. That would not capture the nature of the knowledge expressed in the self-ascriptions whose distinctive features Sellars is trying to combine with the role of the same concepts in other-ascription. The immediacy of self-ascription characterizes what it is that a subject of that kind of self-knowledge knows (and thereby what it is that one knows when one knows that someone else instantiates such a concept). It is not an optional extra, like the possibility of noninferential knowledge, in Brandom’s sense, about mu-mesons. The move from Jones’s first stage to the second must make more difference to the concepts he is introducing.
than is made to the concept of a mu-meson when a physicist no longer needs to take that inferential step.

I know no reason to suppose Sellars would deny this. But if he would deny it, in the interest of defending a merely psychological differentiation of inferential from noninferential knowledge, the right response would be “So much the worse for Sellars”. On this supposition the argument from authority I am considering would fail, not through misreading of the authority, like the argument of Brandom’s that I have mainly been concerned with, but because the supposed authority does not deserve that title.

Notes

1 This paper uses material from my paper “Why is Sellars’s Essay Called ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind?’”, delivered at a conference in London in 2006 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the lectures that became “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”. It is now published in McDowell, Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

2 They might have a use for a locution on the lines of “Male chicks look different”. But it would express only the fact that, confronted with a male chick, they find themselves inclined to say it is male, together with the hypothesis that the aetiology of the inclination includes their visual equipment (this is needed to account for the fact that the locution includes the word “look”). It would not imply that their visual sensory consciousness is different when they are looking at male chicks.


5 In Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967; reissued Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1992), Sellars allows for a version of “looks” statements in the pre-Jonesian language. He says (p. 159): “This locution [‘x looks red to me’] must ... be interpreted as having, roughly, the sense of ‘x causes me to be disposed to think-out-loud: Lo! This is red, or would cause me to have this disposition if it were not for such and such considerations’.” If one said that, one would be explicitly attributing a disposition to oneself, rather than evincing one, as in Brandom’s picture. But what we have here is just a different way of exploiting the conceptual apparatus Brandom confines himself to. The passage brings out that the materials for Brandom’s account of “looks” statements are available before Jones has done his work, and hence before Sellars has in hand the materials that he makes it clear he needs for his account of “looks” statements.

6 Study Guide, p. 139.


8 In his enthusiasm for the explanatory power of the idea of withholding endorsement, Brandom is led into a clearly wrong characterization of Sellars’s treatment of generic looks in §17. Brandom says (Study Guide, p. 145): “Sellars’s account is in terms of scope of endorsement. One says that the plane figure looks ‘many-sided’ instead of ‘119-sided’ just in case one is willing only to endorse (be held responsible for justifying) the more general claim.” (For a similar statement, see Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and
Discursive Commitment [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994], p. 293.) But on Sellars’s account, if one says a plane figure looks many-sided, one exactly does not endorse the claim that it is many-sided. Sellars’s account of generic looks is not in terms of scope of endorsement, but in terms of what is up for endorsement. The claims that experiences contain, like claims in general, can be unspecific in content. Brandom tries to correct this error in “The Centrality of Sellars’s Two-Ply Account”, pp. 358–9, where he writes: “One says that the plane figure looks ‘many-sided’ instead of ‘119-sided’ just in case the disposition one is evincing and resisting is a willingness to endorse (be held responsible for justifying) the more general claim.” But this hardly warrants saying, as Brandom still does here, that “Sellars’s account [of generic looks] is in terms of scope of endorsement”. The level of specificity of a “looks” statement depends on which disposition one is evincing (to put it in Brandom’s terms). Endorsement is to the point only in that the primary output of any disposition of the kind in question is a claim. The account of generic looks is in terms of the generic character of what is up for endorsement. It is a stretch to make this fit Brandom’s continued claim that what does the explanatory work for Sellars is scope of endorsement.

9 Study Guide, p. 147.
10 Study Guide, p. 140. In “The Centrality of Sellars’s Two-Ply Account”, pp. 351–2, Brandom treats “the dimension of endorsement” as one of two strands in the second element of the “two- ply” account. This strand concerns the deontic character of the performance of making a claim, which we can consider in abstraction from the requirement of an inferential context that is the other strand.
11 For the idea of ex post facto inferential justifications of noninferential beliefs, see “Insights and Blind Spots of Reliabilism”, in Brandom’s Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), especially at pp. 103–4 and 211, n. 3.
12 See Making It Explicit, pp. 217–21. The idea is hinted at in the Study Guide; see pp. 157, 159.
14 In the context in which Sellars identifies the space of reasons as the space in which one places episodes or states when one classifies them as episodes or states of knowing, he describes it as the space “of justifying and being able to justify what one says” (§36). What I have said about the second dimension implies that this description is not completely felicitous. A second-dimension response to the question “Quid iuris?” justifies what one says only indirectly. Its direct aim is to characterize one’s right to speak with authority on the topic one speaks on. It does that independently of what, in particular, one says.
16 I discuss this further in “Sensory Consciousness in Kant and Sellars”, in McDowell, Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
18 Note that what I am proposing does not turn on the fact that the practised physicist might respond to challenges by retreating to the claims about cloud-chamber goings-on that, along with a bit of theory, serve as premises for the inferences neophytes would need to make. Brandom argues, convincingly, that that does not warrant taking the practised physicist’s knowledge to be inferential in his sense. What I am suggesting is that Brandom’s sense is not the one we ought to be concerned with for epistemological purposes.
20 Ibid.
One way to start thinking about agency is to try to distinguish the special way that reasons are involved in action from the way that reasons are involved in inanimate nature. Consider the following pair of explanations:

Explanation A  The reason the soufflé collapsed is that the oven door was opened at the wrong time.

Explanation B  The reason John collapsed onto the sofa was that he was exhausted after a hard day at work.

The approach to agency that I am considering, one that goes back through Anscombe and Davidson to Kant and perhaps Aristotle, is to say that there is something special about the explanation in case B, and that it is this special ‘reason-giving’ quality of the explanation of John’s collapsing that accounts for it being a manifestation of his agency and an intentional action.1 But, of course, this approach has to distinguish explanation B from explanation A in such a way that it is made clear why explanation A does not lead to talk of agency and intentional action too.

Each of these explanations may be expressed as an inference:

Inference A  The oven door was opened at the wrong time; so the soufflé collapsed.

Inference B  John was exhausted after a hard day at work; so he collapsed onto the sofa.

And in each case the entitlement to make the inference may be made explicit by a rule – albeit not a strict or universal rule:

Rule A  If the oven door is opened at the wrong time when a soufflé is being cooked and various other conditions are met, then, other things being equal, the soufflé should collapse.
Rule B  If one is exhausted after a hard day at work and various other conditions are met, then, other things being equal, one should collapse onto the sofa.

So the approach to agency that I am considering, which asks what is special about the way reasons are involved in action, might equally ask what is special about the way inferences or rules are involved in action. For example, the task as described by Kant (e.g. in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 36) is to distinguish the way that a rational agent’s behaviour accords with rules from the way other things in nature accord with rules.²

It may seem that the difference between John’s behaviour according with a rule and a soufflé’s activity according with a rule is a difference in the nature of the rules themselves. The rule that a person acts in accordance with is a normative one that says what the person should do in certain circumstances, while the rule that the behaviour of the soufflé conforms with is not a normative one and just says what the soufflé will do in certain circumstances. A law of nature is one kind of conditional claim and a normative rule is another.

But while it is clear that the rules that guide reasonable action are normative and the laws of nature are not, it is not clear whether this difference is intrinsic to the rules or depends on the sort of relationship the rules have with the things they apply to. Indeed it is difficult to see how to explain the idea that the normativity or factuality of a rule is an intrinsic feature of the rule rather than having something to do with what is done with the rule – with how it is used. For example it does not seem sufficient just to say that normative rules use normative vocabulary and factual ones do not. One can state normative rules without using words like “ought” and “should” and equally one can use these words in stating factual rules (as with my Rule A for soufflés above).³

So I will work on the assumption here that the difference between a normative and a factual rule is a difference in the sort of relationship each has with the things it applies to. The idea roughly is that a law of nature describes a natural process, whereas a normative rule guides a process of acting. In according with a normative rule a rational agent like John is sensitive to the rule. In according with a law of nature a soufflé is merely subject to it.

In setting up the issue in this way I am following the line of Robert Brandom (1994, pp. 30ff.) in his discussion in chapter 1, section IV of *Making It Explicit (MIE)*. Brandom endorses Kant’s way of marking the distinction between the way rational agents and inanimate objects accord with rules, which is the following: “Everything in nature works according to laws. Only a rational being has the power to act according to the idea of laws – i.e. according to principles.” (Groundwork, 36) Brandom reads this as meaning that rational agents act according to their own conception of rules. And this in turn is taken to mean that rational agents act according to some attitude they have towards rules – namely the attitude of acknowledging these rules.

The point he is making is that we act according to our grasp or understanding of rules. The rules do not immediately compel us, as natural ones do. Their compulsion is rather mediated by our attitude towards those rules. What makes us act as we do is not the rule or norm itself but our acknowledgment of it. It is the possibility of this intervening attitude that is missing in the relations between merely natural objects and the rules that govern them. (MIE, 1994, p. 31)
My task here is the same as one of Brandom’s – to make proper sense of the difference between a rational agent’s sensitivity to rules and an inanimate object’s subjection to rules (or to reasons). I will not present any more argument for the shared presumption that sensitivity to rules is essential for intentional agency, nor for Brandom’s further claim that this in turn is essential for intentionality of any sort.

In the next section I argue that Brandom’s introduction on Kant’s behalf of an intervening attitude between the rules and the agent’s behaviour in order to explain what is involved in sensitivity to rules is unhelpful and suggests an unsatisfactory picture of action. Then I present an alternative way to understand sensitivity to rules, one which makes no use of the problematic idea of intervening attitudes but which at the same time does justice to Kant’s claim that a rational agent acts according to the idea of rules. I will propose that, while the working of processes generally is described by using rules, the working of a process of acting is described by referring to rules – or more fully it is described by using one rule which refers to others. I take this to be a very natural way to understand the idea of sensitivity to rules. What distinguishes normative rules from factual rules is simply that, rather than describing any actual process, they are referred to by the rules that do describe actual processes. So, processes that involve agency are described by second-order rules – rules that refer to other rules. Where the behaviour of all natural things is subject to rules, the behaviour of agents is subject specifically to the rule to do what the rules tell you to do.

In this way agents not only act according to rules, they act according to the idea of rules. I think that what I have presented here is pretty close to Kant’s own conception of rational agency. If you act from duty you act out of respect for the law, according to Kant, and this is doing what you do because this is what the rules tell you to do.

II Brandom’s approach

Kant’s conception of the will as a sort of causality that belongs to living things in so far as they are rational is spelt out in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and in the *Critique of Practical Reason* as the power to act according to the idea of rules or laws. It is described as “das Vermögen, nach der Vorstellung der Gesetze, d.i. nach Prinzipien, zu handeln” in the *Groundwork*, 36 and very similarly in *Groundwork*, 63. And in the *Critique*, 32 he uses a similar formulation but talks about rules instead of laws, when he describes the will as “ein Vermögen ... ihre Kausalität durch die Vorstellung von Regeln zu bestimmen.”

In this paper I will, like Brandom, make nothing of the distinction between rules and laws and indeed talk of them interchangeably. What I want to focus on instead is how to treat the word ‘idea’ or ‘Vorstellung’ here. Should we understand the idea of laws or rules to be the agent’s own representation of them – an aspect of their mental life? Or should we understand the idea of laws or rules to be an abstract representation of them – like “the representation of chivalry in fourteenth century poetry”? The issue is rather prejudiced by Paton’s 1948 translation of the *Groundwork* where “der Vorstellung der Gesetze” is translated as “his idea of laws” (my italics).

Brandom treats the idea of rules as the agent’s own attitude towards the rules – their attitude of acknowledging the rules. So Brandom’s reply to Kant’s problem is to
say that in the case of rational agents, norms or rules are first brought into the agent’s motivational system in virtue of the agent acknowledging them. Rational action is the causal response to these acknowledgements. Brandom is not here claiming that rules and reasons are themselves attitudes or are about attitudes. His claim is that there must be attitudes causally intervening between the rules and the actions.

There is often a temptation in philosophy when faced with the challenge of explaining what is special about the relation between A and B to introduce a third element C and say that what is special is the existence of this intervening element. This is usually an unhelpful move since it takes the initial problem of characterizing one relation and exchanges it for the two problems of characterizing the relation between A and C and characterizing that between C and B.

A classic example of this is the attempt to explain what it is for a person to be consciously aware of something. No progress has been made by saying that the person is in a certain relation of awareness with some internal object and that the internal object is in the relation of representation with the external thing. Indeed it looks to many as if the problem is now quite insoluble once this first move is made.

Brandom acknowledges that Kant’s strategy as he interprets it does have something in common with Descartes’ invocation of intervening representations in explaining the possibility of error about external things (MIE, pp. 31–2). But Brandom’s own version of this strategy is distinctive, since he takes the relevant intervening attitude to belong to a specifically linguistic social practice, thus according explanatory priority to linguistic practice over rational agency. The social nature of the attitudes intervening between rules and behaviour means that Brandom is not endorsing Descartes’s extraordinary strategy of going inwards to explain our special relationship with the outer world.

Nevertheless I think that Brandom’s attempt to explain the process of acting according to reason as a two-stage process of acknowledging a rule and then responding to that acknowledgement can give us a distorted conception of the causal process that constitutes action. The distortion arises if in the two-stage model the rationality characteristic of agency is confined to the first stage – the production of attitudes. It looks like this must be the case because it is only in this first stage that the rules themselves are involved. In the second stage it is the agent’s attitudes to the rules not the rules themselves that are involved in the process. Since the agent’s attitudes to rules (or reasons) are not themselves rules (or reasons) it looks as if the transition from these attitudes to things actually being made to happen in the world around does not itself involve the rationality characteristic of agency.

In this problematic version of the two-stage model of action, the first stage involves sensitivity to rules (or reasons), but does not involve anything actually happening, and the second stage involves things actually being made to happen but involves no sensitivity to rules (or reasons). This fails to take seriously the idea of action as a process of rationally transforming the world – i.e. a process in which the changes characteristic of the action involve the rationality characteristic of agency. Instead the rationality characteristic of agency is manifested in the production of attitudes; the transformation of the world characteristic of the action is not taken to be a manifestation of rationality in action, but rather a response to such a manifestation. Intervening attitudes
between the rules and the action which are supposed to explain the special relationship between rules and action serve merely to separate the rules from the action.

Now Brandom might deny that the rationality characteristic of agency is confined to the first stage of his two-stage model and accordingly deny that the second stage in his two-stage model is just a causal response to the acknowledgement of rules. He might say that the first stage involves forming attitudes and the second stage involves acting according to those attitudes. This seems quite reasonable, albeit not a move he actually makes. He might then deny that acting according to attitudes should be understood simply as a causal process that takes those attitudes as inputs. Instead the process of acting according to attitudes – the second stage – itself involves something characteristic of agency; this would be something over and above the special nature of the inputs to that process.

The trouble with this from Brandom’s point of view is that he would lose the supposed explanatory gain from introducing intervening attitudes between rules and the world in his attempt to answer Kant’s problem. What distinguishes a rational agent’s acting being guided by rules from an inanimate object’s behaviour being subject to rules would not then be just the existence of an intervening attitude in the rational agent’s process of acting. There is something about the process of acting in addition to the mere existence of an intervening attitude that explains why this process manifests rational agency, and Brandom has not told us what it is. In this case Brandom has not answered Kant’s problem.

### III Subjection to second-order rules

The key stage in Brandom’s derivation of the two-stage model of action is his interpretation of Kant’s phrase: “acting according to the idea of rules.” Brandom takes it to mean: “acting according to the agent’s own idea of the rules.” But there is another way to read it.

Consider again the distinction between being subject to something and being sensitive to something. I am working here with a picture of causation according to which causal processes result in other things happening, and rules of nature describe how these causal processes work. When something happens that results from some process, it is subject to the rules that describe how that process works. If a rule says that in such-and-such a circumstance such-and-such should happen, and this describes a causal process that does result in such things happening, then what happens is subject to that rule. At the same time it is sensitive to the circumstances that figure in the rule.

In being disposed to rust in the presence of moisture in the air the behaviour of a bit of iron is sensitive to the presence of moisture. At the same time it is subject to the rule that if there is moisture in the air, rust should happen. But although the bit of iron responds to the presence of moisture in the air it does not respond to the presence of this rule. Its behaviour is not sensitive to the rule that if there is moisture in the air then rust should happen. If physical science included a different specification of the rust rule – say that iron should not rust in the presence of moisture but should rust otherwise – it would have no effect on the piece of iron’s behaviour.

A rational agent on the other hand – one who is guided by rules – has the capacity not only to be sensitive in their behaviour to the features of the world that rules describe,
but also sensitive to the rules themselves. A rational agent can respond not only to the presence of moisture in the environment, but also to what the rules tell it should be done in such a situation. If the rules change, the behaviour of a rational agent changes. This is something that Brandom’s two-stage model was supposed to capture.

For this idea of sensitivity to rules to make sense we must think of the rules as existing somehow. The sensitivity at issue is not in the first instance sensitivity to the truth of rules, but is sensitivity to the presence of rules. Rules may be present explicitly in some rule-book or in some scientific theory. But they may also be present implicitly in some normatively structured set of conventions. We may also think of rules as being present even more implicitly in that set of rules that should structure a set of conventions.

On the view I am recommending here, the behaviour of rational agents is still subject to a rule – a second-order one that makes reference to other rules. The behaviour of a rational agent is subject to the rule, “Whatever those first-order rules say should happen should happen.” But subjection to this rule is not a separate process coming after the real work of rational agency. Subjection to this second-order rule just is sensitivity to reason.⁵ For the piece of iron, subjection to the rust rule just is sensitivity to the presence of moisture. In the same way, for a rational agent, subjection to a second-order rule just is sensitivity to the presence of first-order rules.

This makes sense of Kant’s distinction between acting according to rules and acting according to the idea of rules. As with the two-stage model, acting according to the idea of rules is having one’s behaviour causally determined at one stage removed from the normative rules. But this is not to be understood as having one’s behaviour causally determined by something else that is the true rational response to the normative rules – for example the attitude of acknowledging the normative rules. Instead it is to be understood as being causally determined by a second-order rule that requires sensitivity to what the first-order rules say. The first-order rules determine behaviour through the idea of them in the second-order rules. The idea of rules is taken here not to be the presentation of the rules in the mind of the agent but rather the presentation of the rules that figures in the second-order rule that the agent’s behaviour is subject to.

There is a place here for something like Brandom’s attitude of acknowledging the rules with Kant’s conception of reverence or respect for the moral law (introduced in the Groundwork and developed in chapter 3 of Book 1 of the Critique of Practical Reason). Kant regards this attitude of acknowledging the subordination of one’s will to the law as essential to truly rational activity. But he explicitly denies that reverence for the moral law mediates our moral agency.

Immediate determination of the will by the law and consciousness of this determination is called ‘reverence’, so that reverence is regarded as the effect of the law on the subject and not as the cause of the law. (Groundwork, I6)

Being determined to do what the law says because it is the law counts as reverence for the law or respect for the law. Doing what the law says because it is the law is simply being subject in one’s behaviour to the second-order rule: what the law says should be done should be done. The attitude of respect for the law does not have to be conceived
as an independent input in law-guided activity. Instead, to have that attitude just is to behave in a way that is sensitive to the law and subject to the second-order rule.

So, you would not have the rational sensitivity I am describing unless you had the attitude of respect for these rules. But my suggestion is the behaviourist one that such an attitude is not a mediating component in rule-guided behaviour, but can be attributed to the rational agent in virtue of such rational sensitivity. The attitude of respect for a rule or acknowledgement of a reason turns out to be necessary when a rational agent acts according to that rule or reason, but it does not figure in an account of what it is for a rational agent to act according to that rule or reason.

It might be objected against this simple strategy for solving Kant’s problem that the distinction between second-order rules and first-order rules must collapse. Whenever something is subject to a rule is it not automatically subject to a second-order rule recommending that it do what the first rule says? Consider again the piece of iron whose behaviour is subject to the rule that says that if there is moisture in its environment, rust should happen. It is equally subject to the second-order rule that says whatever that first-order rule says should happen should happen. If the recommendations of the first-order rule are fully specified in the second-order rule, then the two rules are equivalent.

It is clear that reference to a rule within a rule is quite redundant in this case. So we should identify sensitivity to rules with subjection to properly second-order rules. A rule is properly second-order only if it describes some sensitivity that cannot be described by any first-order rule. You get this sensitivity if the recommendations of the rule that is specified in the second-order rule are not completely fixed by that specification.

Consider a law-abider. This person’s behaviour is subject to a second-order rule that says that whatever the law says should be done should be done. If we could construct a first-order rule that was in fact the complete and final specification of the law, then subjection to this first-order rule would give exactly the same sensitivity as subjection to the second-order rule. But there can be no complete specification of the law. For every finite specification of the law it is always possible to think of circumstances not included in that specification. The recommendations for those circumstances are not determined in advance. So there are always alternative possibilities available to the law – it is open-ended. Also the law changes, and as it changes so does the behaviour of the law-abider. So whatever first-order rule we come up with will not quite capture the flexibility of the second-order rule that requires no complete first-order specification.

My requirement that the rules that a rational agent’s behaviour is subject to be properly second-order corresponds to a rejection of what Brandom calls ‘regularism’. Regularism is the claim that the normative rules that an agent’s behaviour is sensitive to can be read off from regularities in the way that agent (or others) behaves – “a norm implicit in practice is just a pattern exhibited by behaviour.” (MIE, p. 28) In my terms this is the claim that the normative rules that an agent’s behaviour is sensitive to can be read off from the rules that their behaviour is subject to. If this were the case then the rules that their behaviour was subject to would not be properly second-order.

But my suggestion also counts as an example of regularism in a different weaker sense which also seems to be objected to by Brandom. It does so in as much as it
treats the rule-guidedness of behaviour as a feature of what is done – that what is done conforms with some specific regularity (*MIE*, 63). The specific regularity in what is done that I am identifying is conformity to a second-order rule. Brandom argues that instead of explaining what it is for behaviour to be rule-guided in terms of what is done, one should explain it in terms of attitudes towards what is done – attitudes that are themselves implicit in practice.

But the regularity that my account appeals to – namely the regularity of conforming with a second-order rule – is not a regularity that can just be read off from the behaviour of agents. This is because the first-order rule that is referred to is not explicitly specified in the second-order rule. So the distinction between treating a performance as subject to normative assessment and treating it as subject to physical laws is not obliterated on this account.

### IV Brandom’s pragmatism

Brandom’s aim in the philosophy of language is to account for representational concepts like truth, reference and existence in terms of structural features of the proprieties of linguistic inferences. True to his aim of constructing an ‘inferentialist’ as opposed to a ‘representationalist’ account of intentionality, Brandom treats the idea of the idea of rules in inferential rather than representational terms. He starts with the idea that I have been questioning, namely that a rational rule-guided agent must have a certain attitude of acknowledging the rules mediating the rules and their behaviour. Then he explains this sort of attitude in terms of having a disposition to sanction, positively and negatively, correct and incorrect applications of the rule (*MIE*, p. 35). This sanctioning behaviour can only be understood as a social practice. So, rational rule-guided behaviour (and hence intentionality itself) can only be understood in terms of social practices. Brandom presents the example of beating someone with sticks when they go wrong as a primitive example of this sort of social practice. But in the end his account of linguistic scorekeeping practices is going to be required to explain fully conceptual intentional states and behaviour (*MIE*, chapter 3).

My alternative suggestion is that what it is for an agent to act according to the idea of rules is for those rules to be referred to in the second-order rule that the agent’s behaviour is subject to. Introducing such talk of reference at this stage of the story spoils the purity of the inferentialism, and Brandom certainly seems to be trying to avoid doing so. But it does not do this by saying that we have to understand the notion of representations in the mind to understand intentionality. It does this instead by saying that we have to understand the notion of one rule representing another in order to understand intentionality. Only a very reductive sort of inferentialism would be threatened by this.

So I am not sure to what extent my suggestion counts as a fundamental difference with Brandom. Brandom’s goal in the section of *Making It Explicit* that I am looking at is to show that rational rule-guided behaviour (and hence intentionality itself) only makes sense in the context of social institutions of treating performances as correct or incorrect. My argument that rational rule-guided behaviour requires behaviour to be subject to second-order rules in no way obviates the need
for some sort of account of how the rules that are referred to in these second-order rules are supposed to exist. Brandom’s Wittgensteinian argument against what he calls ‘regulism’ – not to be confused with ‘regularism’ – is supposed to show that no account of the existence of rules that relies entirely on their existing in a fully explicit way can work. Given this it is natural to try to make sense of the idea of sensitivity to rules by thinking of these rules (the ones that are embedded in second-order rules) as existing implicitly in social practice.

So I think there are two arguments we can extract from this chapter for the conclusion that rule-guided behaviour depends on the existence of a social practice, one starting with Brandom’s interpretation of Kant’s “acting according to the idea of rules” and one starting from mine. Although Brandom does not endorse the starting point of this second argument, he endorses the rest of it.

Here is Brandom’s argument:

1. Rational rule-guided behaviour depends on the agent having normative attitudes to performances; this is Brandom’s interpretation of “acting according to the idea of rules”.
2. The agent’s normative attitudes to performances are dispositions to sanction, positively or negatively, correct or incorrect performances.
3. Such sanctioning behaviour only makes sense in the context of social practice.
4. So rational rule-guided behaviour (and hence intentionality) only makes sense in the context of social practice.

Here is the alternative argument that uses my first premise instead:

1. Rational rule-guided behaviour depends on the agent being subject to a rule that refers to rules; this is my interpretation of “acting according to the idea of rules”.
2. A rule cannot be referred to by another rule unless it exists; it follows from this and 1 above that rule-guided behaviour depends on the existence of rules to be guided by.
3. Such rules cannot exist only in a fully explicit way but must be taken partly to exist implicitly in practice; this corresponds to Brandom’s rejection of regulism.
4. But such rules must exist independently of the agent’s own behaviour; this corresponds to Brandom’s rejection of regularism and follows in my account from the requirement that the rules that the agent’s behaviour is subject to are properly second-order.
5. A rule which partly exists implicitly in behaviour but is at the same time independent of an agent’s actual behaviour must depend on some other behaviour; in particular, it depends on the existence of a social practice of treating performances as correct or incorrect.
6. So rational rule-guided behaviour (and hence intentionality) only makes sense in the context of social practice.

The premise in stage 3 coincides with Brandom’s rejection of regulism. Regulism is taken to be the claim that norms can be fully understood in terms of explicit
rules. Brandom approves of Wittgenstein’s regress of rules argument against this in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Rules do not apply themselves; they determine correctnesses of performance only in the context of practices of distinguishing correct from incorrect applications of the rules. To conceive these practical proprieties of application as themselves rule-governed is to embark on a regress. Sooner or later the theorist will have to acknowledge the existence of practical distinctions between what is appropriate and what is not, admitting appropriatenesses according to practice as well as according to rules or explicit principles. (MIE, pp. 20–1)

The rejection of regulism combines powerfully with the rejection of regularism. According to the rejection of regulism, the rule whose existence an agent’s behaviour is sensitive to cannot exist in a completely explicit way, but must be partly implicit in behaviour. And according to stage 4 – the rejection of regularism – the behaviour in which the rule exists implicitly is not the agent’s own behaviour. This gives the conclusion that for some behaviour to count as rule-guided, there must be some other behaviour. Stage 5 in this argument is just the assumption that this other behaviour can only be a social practice. There is really nothing else for it to be, and since Brandom is keen to argue that norms are instituted by attitudes within a social practice of treating performances as correct or incorrect, he should have no problem with this.

V Imitation

I want to end by illustrating this conception of rational agency as subjection to second-order rules using what must be one of the most basic skills in the progression to fully-blown rational agency – namely imitation. I present this as an alternative to Brandom’s story of primitive sanctioning behaviour – beating wrongdoers with sticks. Brandom takes it to be a condition of adequacy of his enterprise that it make “the advent of the favored sort of linguistic intentionality less mysterious. ... The hope is that doing so will offer guidance concerning what would be involved in diagnosing aliens as exhibiting such states, and programming computers or teaching merely sentient animals to exhibit them.” (MIE, p. 7) Brandom’s suggestion seems to be that teaching merely sentient animals to punish and reward each other would get them going on the right path. I suggest that teaching them to *imitate* sapient creatures is what is required instead.

Roughly speaking, the imitator’s behaviour is subject to the rule: “Whatever she does you should do too.” Whether or not this is a second-order rule depends on how we take the notion of doing something. At its most basic the rule is to be understood as something like the following: “Within some repertoire of possible movements, whatever movements of her body are happening should happen in your body.” To be subject to this rule is to be sensitive to her movements and to mirror them. It may be that the behaviour of dolphins in play or human babies in mirroring an adult’s facial expression is subject to this rule. By itself, it involves no sensitivity to rules.
But, if the imitator goes beyond repetition of mere bodily movement patterns to repetition of *ways of behaving*, it becomes genuinely subject to a second-order rule. Then the rule is to be understood as: “If her behaviour is subject to a certain rule then you should do what that rule recommends.” Babies develop from mirroring movements to mirroring ways of behaving. If I am looking at or grasping an object, the baby may look at or grasp the same object. This involves producing quite different movements to mine, but movements which are subject to the same rules that my behaviour is subject to. This gets clearer still when the young child is engaged in play-acting.

But the beginning of real social practice comes when the rule you are imitating is itself a second-order rule. At this point you are not just simulating someone’s sensitivity to certain conditions, you are simulating her sensitivity to rules. You have become a social conformer. A social conformer starts off being subject to the rule that can be expressed as follows: “Follow the rules that she is following.” But since the she in question is also following the rules that someone else is following, and so on, they are all also subject to the rule: “Follow the rules that they are following.”

“They” in this rule ranges over some group of people. There are indefinitely many special cases of this rule depending on the social group that figures in it. For example, proper members of this family or community are subject to the rule: “Follow the rules that members of this family/community follow.” Good soldiers are subject to the rule: “Follow the rules that soldiers follow.” Polite people are subject to the rule: “Follow the rules of polite society,” and so on.

Real agents are not usually merely subject to such rules. Being subject to such rules usually involves sensitivity at a higher level. You follow such rules for a reason, and in doing so you are subject to a higher-order rule that demands sensitivity to that reason. But at an early stage of the progression towards full rationality, I think it is possible to be subject to such rules for no reason. You have been brought up in a certain way, and this is how you behave. Your initiation in the practice may not have been a matter of rational choice. What Gibbard (1990, ch. 4) calls “being in the grip of norms” should be understood in the philosophy of action in advance of understanding the conscious acceptance of norms.

This makes clear how far away from Kantian autonomy we are at this stage of the progression. Something a bit like autonomy is present in all second-order rule-guided behaviour. Being subject to properly second-order rules involves not just responding to the recommendation of rules, but also working out what these recommendations are. But working out what the recommendations are is not the same as determining what they should be. This is clear from considering the law abider. They have to work out what the law is; but of course they do not determine it in the sense required for autonomy.

Subjection to the rule: “Follow the rules that they are following,” can move to something a bit closer to autonomy if membership of the group that “they” ranges over is determined by the fact that this is the very rule that they are following. We then get subjection to the rule: “Follow the rules that this sort of rule-follower follows.” In subjection to that rule you automatically become one of them, and are subject to the satisfyingly holistic second-order rule: “Follow the rules that we are following.” Being a legislating member of the kingdom of ends does not seem so far away after all.
Whether fully autonomous rational agency can be made intelligible as part of this progression from mere imitation remains to be seen. But these examples in the second half of the progression from imitation are certainly cases of acting for reasons. That they are such can be made intelligible without appeal to any motivating role for the attitudes the agent has to the rules they are following.

Notes
1 See Anscombe (1957) and Davidson (1980, essay 1).
2 The page numbers for the Groundwork are from the second edition and for the Critique of Practical Reason are from the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences 1929 edition edited by Natorp.
3 It is often claimed that the normative rules that guide action do not say what should be done but only what may be done. This looks like an intrinsic difference between normative rules and factual rules after all. But whatever we say about the possible role for rules of entitlement in reason-giving explanation, all that I require here is that sometimes there is a role for rules of obligation.
4 Some philosophers have accepted that the work of agency is over before the body even starts to move. For example, Pietroski (2000), developing Hornsby’s (1980) identification of acting with trying, argues that actions are inner causes of bodily movement. But I take it that this is a position only to be adopted if one has painted oneself into a corner, and my task here is to see if we can step out of that corner.
5 This is reminiscent of Sellars’s (1963, p. 325) suggestion.
6 For a development of the behaviourist suggestion, see Stout (2006).
7 It is reasonable to suppose that the laws of nature are not fully specifiable either. But this does not mean that the rule that says that whatever the laws of nature say should be done should be done is properly second-order. I take it that the laws of nature are simply the descriptions of the natural processes that result in things happening. These laws would be unspecifiable in full because no complete description of every process is possible. But in that case, to claim that the laws of nature say that something should happen is precisely to claim that there is a natural process that results in it. So the second-order rule that says that whatever the laws of nature say should happen should happen is equivalent to the rule that says that whatever results from natural processes should happen. This rule is both empty and first-order.

References
Part II

THE CHALLENGE OF INFERENTIALISM
INFERENTIALISM AND SOME OF ITS CHALLENGES

Robert Brandom

I Some methodological preliminaries

Our ordinary ways of talking and thinking about the contentfulness of linguistic utterances and mental states distinguish between what is said or thought and what we are thereby talking or thinking about. Intentionality, we may say, comes in two flavors: ‘that’ intentionality and ‘of’ intentionality. A central semantic task in the area where the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind overlap is accordingly to offer an account of how these two dimensions of sapience are related to one another.

One prominent explanatory strategy begins by explaining what it is for something to represent something else: paradigmatically what it is for a singular term to pick out an object, and a predicate to pick out a property of (in a different sense of ‘of’) or relation among objects. One then explains what it is for sentential constellations of those representing elements to be true in terms of set-theoretic inclusion relations among the various represented items. Finally, one explains the propositional content expressed by sententially shaped or labeled representings by modalizing the truth assignments of the previous step: taking those conditions to be the ones under which those representings would be true. This familiar sort of approach results from combining two prioritizing commitments. On the one hand, with respect to the two semantic dimensions just pointed out, it moves from a story about what is represented to one about what is expressed – roughly, from a theory of reference to a theory of sense. On the other hand, it proceeds categorically in a bottom-up direction: from the contents of subsentential expressions to those of sentential ones.

Of course, one might go about things differently. A semantically and categorially converse strategy, to pick one, starts with a notion of the propositions expressed by whole sentences. It might, for instance, identify those contents – what can be said or thought – with sets of possible worlds. At the next stage, it seeks to understand the contributions made to the specification of such contents by the subsentential expressions deployed in the sentences that express them. For example, singular terms might be associated with functions whose arguments are possible worlds and whose values are objects in those worlds. Then, if an additional step is needed to get there, an account would be offered of what is picked out, referred to, or represented by those subsentential contents. Thus, in each world, one might identify what is represented as the object assigned to that world by the function associated with the representing singular term. Other sorts of approach are also possible.
It is possible to assemble considerations that speak, ceteris paribus, for or against the various methodological approaches botanized by this two-by-two semantic/categorial characterization. Thus the pragmatic priority of sentences – the thought that leads Kant to treat the judgment as the smallest unit of awareness, Frege to prioritize what can be true since it is the smallest unit to which pragmatic force can be attached, and Wittgenstein to pick out sentences as the smallest unit whose use counts as making a move in a language game – offers some reasons in favor of categorically top-down orders of explanation. The need to explain our capacity to produce and understand indefinitely many novel thoughts and the sentences that express them offers a countervailing reason to prefer a compositional, categorically bottom-up strategy. Broadly cognitive issues of what it is to grasp a content or understand a meaning, as well as functional ones concerning what it is to use an expression as a representation, or for it to function in some system as such a representation, speak for an approach that focuses on the first, sense-like sort of semantic content. But the need to explain why the liability of some sayables or thinkables to assessment of their truth is essential to their having the contents they do – or indeed, any contents at all – offers grounds for treating the representational or referential semantic dimension as central.

I doubt that decisive arguments for or against any of these orders of semantic explanation are available at this level of methodological abstraction. The considerations on offer, while genuine and important, offer at best probative reasons, not dispositive ones. I suppose that understanding will best be served by patient working out of more specific semantic theories pursuing the various kinds of explanatory strategy, and their rigorous assessment according to the criteria of adequacy that provide the motivations that have been forwarded for preferring one sort of approach over another in advance of looking at such detailed proposals. It is in that spirit that I want to consider, in this paper, a number of objections that suggest themselves to the kind of semantic theory I have called ‘inferentialist’.

II What is inferentialism?

Logical empiricism revived classical empiricism by appealing to the new quantificational predicate logic Russell had developed out of Frege. Its motivating thought was that this way of understanding the inferential articulation of the immediate deliverances of sense provided powerful new expressive tools to put in the place of traditional appeals to processes such as association and abstraction, which had proven themselves woefully inadequate to rendering the contents of interesting empirical concepts – never mind mathematical ones. It is a striking fact about the contemporary scene that two broad classes of theories of concepts (I’ll discuss a third in a moment) correspond to these two dimensions – sensuous and logical – into which the logical empiricists sought to factor conceptual content.

One popular strategy looks to the observational use of concepts as the key to conceptual content. Here one thinks of the use of ‘red’ or ‘square’ as noninferentially
elicited as a response, typically, to red or square things. The focus is accordingly on the reliable differential responsive dispositions linking, say, tokenings of ‘horse’ to horses. Fodor’s and Dretske’s semantic theories are principal examples of this class of approach. These deserve to be seen as contemporary descendants of classical empiricist theories of content. Another strategy is to look to the contents of logical concepts as providing the key to understanding conceptual content generally. Here the idea is to generalize Gentzen-style specifications of the meanings of logical connectives by pairs of introduction and elimination rules to notions of the circumstances and consequences of application of an expression. Dummett is the principal figure in this tradition, in which he is followed by others such as Peacocke, and myself in *Making It Explicit*. These deserve to be seen as offering specifically logical versions of traditional rationalist theories of content. Each is a self-consciously one-sided approach, in contrast to the even-handed appeal to both observation and logical inference in virtue of which Carnap’s neo-Kantian roots become evident.

The genus of which semantic inferentialism is a species then has these features. It is

(a) categorically sententialist or top-down,
(b) expressive, or sense-based, and
(c) rationalist in its choice of conceptual paradigm,

in contrast to theories that are either categorially bottom-up, representational or reference-based, and empiricist in their choice of conceptual paradigm. Any theory of this genus faces three structural demands. Along the categorial dimension, it must show how to assign contents to subsentential elements. Along the semantic dimension, it must show how to underwrite a notion of reference or representation. And it must show how to model conceptual content generally, including especially the content of observational concepts, on that of the logical concepts it treats as paradigmatic.

What distinguishes inferentialist semantics within this genus is the concept it proposes to explore as a candidate for the notion of sentential sense treated as central by accounts of that genus and motivated by the case of logical concepts: inferential role. The idea is to understand propositional contents as what can both serve as and stand in need of reasons, where the notion of a reason is understood in terms of inference. So propositional contentfulness is taken to be a matter of being able to play the role both of premise and of conclusion in inferences. Once the notion of introduction and elimination rules as exhaustively constitutive of the content of logical concepts has been generalized to take in the circumstances and consequences of application of nonlogical concepts, the step to inferentialism is taken when one understands their content as exhaustively constituted by the material, nonlogical inferential connection between those circumstances and consequences. The content of a concept such as *temperature* is, on this view, captured by the constellation of inferential commitments one undertakes in applying it: commitment, namely, to
the propriety of all the inferences from any of its circumstances of appropriate application to any of its appropriate consequences of application.

Inferentialism is not the only way to try to develop an account that takes the contents of logical concepts as paradigmatic. (Peacocke, for instance, takes a somewhat different tack.) But one might well ask what motivation there is for adopting this paradigm at all. Granted (though there is, to be sure, no unanimity even on this point) that Gentzen-style definitions offer us impressively clear and demonstrably useful specifications of the meanings of logical connectives, why should we think that that model can helpfully be generalized from logical to nonlogical, paradigmatically empirical concepts? The drunk’s reason for looking for his lost keys under the streetlamp – that the light is better there – notoriously does not provide a reason for thinking the keys are likely to be found there. Why doesn’t a corresponding criticism apply to contemporary logical-rationalist approaches in semantics?

One reason is provided by looking at the motivations for a third contemporary candidate for a privileged subclass of conceptual contents on which to model the rest: modal concepts. For logical empiricism, like its classical Early Modern ancestors, also signalantly failed to render the contents of ordinary concepts. One retrospectively obvious reason is its lack of expressive resources sufficient to render the distinction between accidental generalizations and lawlike regularities – the very incapacity Kant had diagnosed already as fatal to the classical version of empiricism. The advent of a technically adequate semantics for modal concepts put philosophers in a position to create a third wave of empiricism. It had many of the same basic motivations and aspirations as the logical empiricism of the middle third of the twentieth century, but could use more powerful modal logical apparatus in place of the extensional logic previously appealed to as providing the logical cement binding together and articulating the sensuous content provided by perception. David Lewis may be taken as an index figure of this movement.

What I want to focus on for the moment is the appreciation of the significance of what might be called ‘non-Tractarian’ concepts – paradigmatically modal, probabilistic, and normative ones – for our understanding of conceptual content generally. In an autobiographical sketch, Sellars says the central idea motivating his work was one that occurred to him already in the 1930s: that the centrality of modal concepts in formulating empirical ones – the insight he put into the lucid title of one of his most impenetrable essays, “Concepts as Involving Laws, and Inconceivable Without Them” – meant that

What was needed was a functional theory of concepts which would make their role in reasoning, rather than their supposed origin in experience, their primary feature.

The expressive role distinctive of modal vocabulary is to make explicit the distinction between counterfactually robust inferences and those that are not – a distinction without which, Sellars reminds us, following Kant, we must fail to understand not only the content of such theoretical empirical concepts as rigidity or mass, but
also such observational ones as red or horse. It is not at all clear how these modal features of empirical concept use might be understood in terms of chains of reliably co-varying events linking horse-stimuli to 'horse'-responses. In this connection it might be noticed that although the liberal use of modal vocabulary in the metalanguage in which they conduct their explanatory enterprise is of the very essence of Dretske's and Fodor's semantics for the observational concepts they treat as paradigmatic of concepts in general, neither one so much as attempts to reconstruct within their theory the contents of those modal concepts. And the recalcitrance to empiricist reduction of what is expressed by modal vocabulary applies, ceteris paribus, equally to probabilistic and normative vocabulary. It provides the motivation for Sellars's inferentialism.

III Varieties of inferentialism

Inferential approaches to what is expressed by sentences can take various forms. What may be called 'weak' inferentialism claims only that the inferential connections among sentences are necessary for them to have the content that they do, in the sense that unless at least some of those inferential involvements were as they are, the sentence would mean something different. By 'inference' in such a formulation is meant correct inference: the ones people ought to make, rather than the ones they are actually disposed to make, if those two notions fall apart. The claim of weak inferentialism, so understood, ought not, I think, to be controversial. For even those who understand what is said by sentences in terms ultimately of what is represented by their subsentential components take it that their representational content determines the proprieties of inferences they are involved in. So at least some of the inferences are such that if they were not correct, the sentence would mean something else. For only if they had different truth conditions – for instance – could the sentences be understood as playing different roles as premises and conclusions of good inferences.

At the other end of the spectrum is what might be called 'hyperinferentialism'. It is the claim that the inferential connections among sentences, narrowly construed, are sufficient to determine the contents they express. By 'narrowly construed' in this formulation is meant that only correct inferences in which the sentence plays the role of premise or conclusion are to be considered. Hyperinferentialism is – Gentzen claims, and I think we ought to agree – true for logical vocabulary. The introduction rules for logical connectives appeal only to inferential grounds for applying them (as principal connectives) that are sentences in which the connective being defined or introduced does not occur (as principal connectives). And their elimination rules appeal only to inferential consequences of applying them (as principal connective) in which the connective in question does not occur (as principal connective). But hyperinferentialism is extremely implausible as applied to other sorts of vocabulary, especially to vocabulary that has observational uses that are essential to its meaning. The meaning of 'red' is not just a matter of what other concepts its applicability is properly inferrable from (e.g. scarlet), and the applicability of what other concepts
are properly inferrable from its applicability (e.g. colored), nor of the applicability of what other concepts preclude its applicability (e.g. green or multiple of 3). Its noninferential applicability to red things is also an essential propriety of the use of the concept red: one that must accordingly be underwritten by any adequate account of the meaning or content expressed by the use of the word ‘red’. If taking the meanings expressed by logical vocabulary as a model for the semantics of other sorts of expressions could take the form only of commitment to hyperinferentialism, then there would be little reason to take this explanatory strategy seriously.

But there is a via media between the uncontroversial but unhelpful truism of weak semantic inferentialism and the powerful and interesting but unsustainable (outside the realm of logical and perhaps some mathematical discourse) thesis of semantic hyperinferentialism. What may be called ‘strong’ inferentialism claims that the inferential articulation of concepts, broadly construed, is sufficient to determine their contents. By ‘broadly construed’ in this formulation is meant three things. First, the inferences in question must be understood to extend beyond logically or formally good ones – those whose correctness is settled just by the logical form of the sentences involved. They must include also those that are materially correct – that is, those that intuitively articulate the contents of the nonlogical concepts involved. Sellars offers as examples the inference from “A is to the East of B,” to “B is to the West of A,” and from “Lightning is seen now,” to “Thunder will be heard soon.” Second, besides material inferential relations among sentences in the sense of their proper role as premises and conclusions, material incompatibilities among sentences, which underwrite inferential relations in a narrower sense, are included. Thus the fact that the correct applicability of square precludes the correct applicability of triangular, so that the inference from square to not-triangular is a good one, is also to be considered.

Third, and most important for understanding the difference between the hyperinferentialist and strong inferentialist theses in semantics, is that inferential relations between noninferential circumstances of appropriate application and noninferential appropriate consequences of application are also taken into account. The way the Gentzen hyperinferentialist model for the semantics of logical concepts is to be extended is by taking seriously the thought that in using any expression, applying any concept, one is undertaking a commitment to the correctness of the (in general, material) inference from the circumstances in which it is correctly applied to the correct consequences of such application. And this is so even where some of those circumstances or consequences of application are noninferential. Thus the visible presence of red things warrants the applicability of the concept red – not as the conclusion of an inference, but observationally. And the point is that the connection between those circumstances of application and whatever consequences of application the concept may have can be understood to be inferential in a broad sense, even when the items connected are not themselves sentential. In a culture in which white is the color of death, and things associated with death are to be shunned or avoided – a culture, to be sure, that would mean something somewhat different than we do by their word corresponding to our ‘white’ – the connection
between the visible presence of white things and the practical response of shunning or avoiding, which their practitioners endorse by using the concept in question, is an inferential one in the broad sense in question here.

It is strong semantic inferentialism that is articulated and endorsed in *Making It Explicit*. The two key moves in extending the inferential approach beyond its paradigmatic application to logical concepts are first, looking to material inferential and incompatibility relations, and second, taking into account the inferential relations linking circumstances and consequences of application, even where these are noninferential circumstances or consequences. The generic location of this approach in the botanization presented in the first two sections of this paper – as categorically top-down, and semantically expressive rather than representational – then dictate the principal constructive obligations of inferentialist approaches in semantics. It must be extendable somehow to subsentential expressions, such as singular terms and predicates, quantifiers and so on, which cannot play the directly inferential roles of premise or conclusion in inferences. And it must somehow underwrite assessments of the representational content of expressions of all categories: the truth of sentences and the reference or denotation of terms, predicates, and so on. In *Making It Explicit*, the first of these tasks is addressed by using Frege’s methodology of marking inferential invariances under substitution of one expression for another. Roughly, two subsentential expressions play the same indirectly inferential role just in case substituting one for the other never turns a good inference (in the broad sense) into a bad one. The second task, offering an account in inferential terms of the representational dimension of content, is addressed (in chapter 8 of *Making It Explicit* and chapter 5 of *Articulating Reasons*) by appealing to the different social perspectives corresponding to the difference between the practical deontic attitudes of undertaking a commitment (oneself), and attributing it (to another), which are made explicit in the difference between *de re* and *de dicto* ascriptions of propositional attitude.

This constructive task of semantic theories of inferentialist shape – roughly, underwriting representational semantic characterizations in terms of inferential ones, or understanding reference in terms of inference – points to a further division. For another important way in which it is useful to characterize varieties of semantic inferentialist programs concerns the nature of their methodological aspirations. The big distinction in this vicinity is that between reductive versions of inferentialism and expressive ones. As I would understand it, reductive inferentialism would claim first that there can be expressions or intentional states standing in inferential relations and playing inferential roles, hence having conceptual content, without yet standing in representational ones, and second, that one can then build representational relations and roles, and so content, out of those inferential ones. Compare, for the case of the converse order of explanation, a story where representational relations are defined in terms of nomological relations between representings and representeds, and a story is told only much later about how they must interact to yield representations of states of affairs that are truth-evaluable (hence believable), and so inferentially related.
Expressive inferentialism, by contrast, is a claim about understanding inferential and representational relations. It is at the level of the senses of the concepts inference and representation, rather than at the level of their referents. The expressive inferentialist acknowledges that nothing can stand in genuinely inferential relations unless it also has representational content. There is no inference without reference. But it is claimed nonetheless that one can specify sufficient conditions for expressions to be used so as to possess conceptual content (of both sorts) in a purely inferential metalanguage. Seeing what it is about this inferential articulation that amounts to the possession of representational content is then explaining what is expressed by the representational semantic metalanguage (which turns out always already to have been in principle applicable) in the terms of the inferential semantic metalanguage. So one of the most important concluding moves developing the expressive inferentialism in Making It Explicit (reprised in chapter 5 of Articulating Reasons) is an account of the broadly inferential role locutions must play in order for them to mean what ‘of’ and ‘about’ do when expressing the representational dimension of intentionality – the uses of ‘of’ and ‘about’ epitomized by “thinking of a horse” and “talking about colors,” rather than “the pen of my aunt,” and “weighing about five pounds.”

IV Which inferences?

It is obvious that a key question for strong expressive inferentialism – as for any species of this genus of semantic explanatory strategy – is (as Fodor and Lepore put it in a recent article)7 “Which inferences are meaning-constitutive?” I want to discuss briefly two kinds of response to this question (without meaning to deny that other avenues are also open). A natural way into the issue is provided by one of Quine’s central challenges in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism.” Transposed from the idiom of analytic truths – sentences whose truth is underwritten by the meanings of the nonlogical expressions occurring in them – to one of, as it were, analytic inferences, i.e. those whose correctness is underwritten by the meanings of the nonlogical expressions occurring in them, the challenge is this. Semantic theories associate contents (or other semantic interpretants) with expressions, performances, or states in order to explain or at least codify proprieties of the use of those expressions, the practical significance of those performances, or the proper functioning of those states. Specifications of the distinction between correct and incorrect uses accordingly stand to attributions of content very much as statements in an observation language stand to statements in a theoretical language in ordinary empirical science: the point of the theory is to explain what is observable, and the point of semantics is to explain practice. So if one of the principal moves proposed by a semantic theory is to distinguish two flavors of inference (or truth), namely those that are constitutive or expressive of meaning, and those that are good rather in virtue of something else, we are entitled to ask what feature of the use of expressions with those meanings or contents reflects this semantic difference. (One need not be committed to semantic instrumentalism to ask this question, any more than

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one need be committed to instrumentalism more generally in order to ask what observable phenomena are explained by or manifest a hypothesized, unobservable, theoretical state of affairs.)

Quine, of course, surveys a number of candidates such as unrevisability, and finds all of them wanting. He famously concludes that postulating meanings, and thereby committing oneself to some inferences (truths) having a semantic privilege that not all do, can do no explanatory work. Sellars offers a direct response to this challenge. The practical difference that Quine rightly demands is, according to Sellars, just the difference between counterfactually robust inferences and those that are not. The inference from something’s being copper to its melting at 1083.4°C is partly constitutive of the concept copper because if the coin in my pocket were copper, it would melt at that temperature. The inference from the coin’s being in my pocket to its being copper is not partly constitutive of the concept copper because if this nickel were in my pocket, it would not follow that it was copper. This is a directly responsive answer to Quine’s challenge, because we do in our ordinary linguistic practice distinguish between inferences based on their modal status as counterfactual-supporting or not – between those that would explicitly be licensed by lawlike regularities such as connect atomic structure and melting point, and those that would be licensed only by accidental regularities, such as those connecting atomic structure and location in space. For Sellars, conceptual connections are just the lawful ones. (That is why “concepts involve laws and are inconceivable without them.”) His was the first explicitly modal theory of meaning.

To be sure, this approach has some radical consequences. If we are wrong about the laws of nature, then not only have we gotten the facts wrong, we are using incorrect concepts. Investigating the world is an attempt at once to rectify our claims and our concepts. Conceptual change is part and parcel of scientific change, because every new law we discover and every old one we are forced to give up brings with it a change in our concepts. Semantics is not a discipline that can be pursued independently of our empirical inquiries into the rest of the world. These consequences may not sit well with our pre-theoretic talk about meaning, but so what? Our ordinary talk of hot and cold runs together differences in temperature and differences in specific heat (“Stone floors are colder than wood floors”) but we wouldn’t want to hold our theoretical physics hostage to our casual, unreflective practice. Why do so in semantics?

Another approach is Quine’s own: put all the inferences in the same basket, by rejecting the distinction between those good in virtue of meaning and those good in virtue of fact. Such an approach can still accommodate a notion of sentences as content-ful – as, we can say if we like, expressing contents. For sentences can still be understood as playing roles as premises and conclusions of inferences. But since for the most part the inferences in question are multipremise inferences, there is a sense in which no sentence plays its inferential role all on its own. For what a claim is evidence for or against and what is evidence for or against it depends on what collateral commitments are available to serve as auxiliary hypotheses in extracting inferential consequences. The inferential significance of endorsing any
one sentence depends on what else one is committed to. This is the line of thought that leads Quine to think that “the unit of meaning is the whole theory,” rather than individual sentences. This holist consequence goes against the grain of the semantic atomism that has been at the center of the empiricist tradition – in both its traditional and its distinctive twentieth century logical and modal forms. But that incompatibility doesn’t by itself show that the holist response is incoherent.

I think that both these strategies are open to contemporary semantic inferentialists. Sellars’s approach seems to be wholly viable, though it has not, as far as I know, yet been pursued by other theorists. In *Making It Explicit*, I adopt a version of the Quinean strategy. This does in a certain sense involve giving up the notion of content – at least, it means giving it up in any sense that would be recognizable to a semantic atomist. But the suggestion is that we can do without talk of contents and meanings as things associated with sentences one by one in favor of talk of inferential connections among sentences that are contentful precisely in virtue of standing in those relations. The question of whether “all of them” is, like Sellars’s different one, a responsive and viable answer to the question “Which inferences matter for content?” then becomes the question of whether one can make sense of semantic holism. So let us look at that issue.

V Holism

The biggest challenge for holistic semantic theories has always been accounting for the possibility of communication or of interpersonal understanding. If the inferential significance of a claim depends on what else one is committed to, then any difference between the collateral commitments of speaker and audience can mean that a remark has a different significance in the one’s mouth than it does in the other’s ear. How is it then possible to make sense of the idea that they understand one another, so as to be able to agree or disagree? If the contents expressed by sentences must be individuated as finely as the theories they are embedded in, the intelligibility of communication across theories – the very notion of conveying information – is threatened. And the issue arises as urgently for diachronic communication as for synchronic, face-to-face cases. If, because of his very different collateral commitments, Rutherford meant something quite different by ‘electron’ than I do, it seems I can’t disagree with him about whether electrons have fixed positions and orbits, since I can’t either say or think anything with the content he would have expressed by saying “electrons orbit the nucleus.” How, then, are we to understand so much as the possibility of cognitive progress in science?

Quine, of course, fully appreciated the force of these challenges. It is precisely such considerations of semantic incommensurability of meanings that led him to insist that concepts such as communication, information, and cognitive progress – most importantly as they matter for the serious business of the conduct of science, but also in our more informal transactions with each other – must be understood as arising at a different semantic level: that of reference, rather than meaning. Our starting-point in this essay was the commonsensical observation that besides what
is said or thought there is also what is talked or thought about. Though Rutherford and I may be saying different things – expressing different contents – when we use the phrase “the location of the electron,” we can both be talking about or referring to the same things: electrons. And we may be classifying them as falling within the same extension when we characterize them as “fast-moving.” Given his collateral beliefs concerning its divinity, the Zoroastrian sun-worshipper surely means something different by the term ‘the Sun’ than I do, but we may still both believe of the Sun and of visible things that the first is to be counted among the second. Or, if we don’t already share it, he can convey that information to me, in spite of our other semantic differences.

Quine’s way out, then, is to neutralize the otherwise corrosive effects of holism at the level of what is said or thought about by appeal to the representational dimension of what is talked or thought about. Coreference or coextensionality is an equivalence relation that maps the disparate meanings expressed by sentences animated by distinct theories onto one another in just the way needed to underwrite the possibility of communication or information, reciprocal understanding, and so on. Again as noted at the outset of this essay, any semantic theory that begins with ‘that’ intentionality must eventually explain its relation to ‘of’ intentionality in any case – must proceed from an account of senses expressed to one of objects (and sets of objects) denoted. So it is open to any theory that adopts this order of semantic explanation to adopt Quine’s strategy of appealing to what is talked or thought about to secure an account of the nature of communication.

One might, it is true, at this point ask what work the holist theory of meaning (the expressive dimension of intentionality) would be doing, if it is immediately abandoned in favor of the representational dimension of intentionality when hard questions are asked about communication and shared understanding. But the answer on which the adoption of the order of explanation being considered is premised is clear: it is at that level that we are to understand the use of expressions (the functioning of states or performances) in virtue of which we can understand them as having representational properties and relations. The account in Making It Explicit is of this sort. The explanation of what is expressed by declarative sentences, and so by the ‘that’ clauses of de dicto ascriptions of propositional attitudes, is offered in inferentialist terms. Then substitution-inferential commitments and their anaphoric inheritance are shown to be sufficient to explain what is made explicit in the de re portions of such ascriptions: the part where it is specified what one is speaking of or thinking about. Thus the implicit representational dimension that is expressed explicitly by the use of terms such as ‘of’ and ‘about’, which is invoked when we say that both Rutherford and I were thinking of electrons, and that the Zoroastrian was talking about the Sun, is explained in ultimately inferential terms. Inferentialists do not, and should not want to, deny the existence or the importance of the representational dimension of intentionality. Rather, they are committed to an order of explanation that seeks to understand ‘of’ intentionality in terms of ‘that’ intentionality. Coreference – a kind of intersubstitutability of expressions –
then provides a respect of similarity across inferential roles, grouping them into extensional equivalence classes, which interlocutors can share.

In his writings on holism, Fodor has argued that where meanings-as-inferential-roles are individuated so finely that there is little hope of different interlocutors (or even one interlocutor at different times) having identical ones, it is of no use for the holist semantic theorist to attempt to retreat to the idea of mutual understanding consisting in the grasp of at least similar meanings, or meanings that in some sense “overlap.” One might initially think that, for example, Rutherford and I at least share some of the inferential consequences of application of our uses of ‘electron’. We both agree, for instance, that it follows from something’s being an electron that it is negatively charged, has a mass that is orders of magnitude smaller than that of the proton, that its movement creates a magnetic field in the direction specified by the right-hand rule, and so on. But that overlooks the fact that ‘charge’, ‘proton’, and ‘magnetic field’ all by hypothesis also mean something different in his mouth than in mine. Once we realize that these are all in exactly the same boat as ‘electron’, we see that we’ve just put the issue off, rather than solving it by defining a sense of ‘similarity’ that consists in having some, but not all, inferential antecedents and consequences in common. We actually have nothing in common.

But this conclusion is too strong. For we do share the words, at least in the sense of noise- or sign-design types. When Rutherford sees lightning, he, like me, is committed to the correctness of applying ‘electron’; and when he does apply it, he, like me, is committed to the correctness of the application of ‘charge’, ‘magnetic field’ and so on. One might respond at this point on Fodor’s behalf that although some kind of similarity metric is induced by counting the noises that express the conclusions two interlocutors would draw from, or the promissory claims they would count as evidence for, claims expressed using ‘electron’, still that is only because we have restricted ourselves exclusively to nonsemantic properties of their utterances. So nothing like shared meaning is thereby underwritten. But once again, this is too hasty a conclusion. Here one might think of Davidson’s account of communication as interpretation. Davidsonian interpretation is explicitly understood as consisting in mapping the noises made by the interpretive target onto the noises made by the interpreter. In understanding another, I am to use sentences in my mouth to attach as labels to his sentences, and thereby serving to ‘measure’ them. My interpretation is a useful one – I have understood what the other says – just insofar as the inferential moves I am committed to endorse with the noises I produce mirror (perhaps with a qualifying commentary couch in my own idiom) his. The ideal interpretation is a homomorphism, a structure-preserving mapping, from his noises onto mine, preserving the consequential structures. Where not all the moves between his noises that he is committed to the correctness of are matched by similar commitments on my part regarding my counterpart (according to the interpretation mapping) noises, only similarity, and not identity of consequential role – and so only partial understanding – is achieved. And recall that inferential role in the broad sense includes the inferential connections between circumstances of appropriate application and appropriate consequences of application quite
generally - even when the circumstances or consequences of application themselves are noninferential. Thus Rutherford and I are both disposed to respond to a bolt of lightning by applying the term ‘electron’, and to respond to applying the expression ‘high voltage, high amperage electron flow’ to a bare piece of metal by avoiding contact with it. These language entry and language exit moves, no less than the language-language ones, also give us something important in common, even when described at a so-far-subsemantic level, that is, in a nonsemantic vocabulary. I do not see why the structures so-described do not underwrite a perfectly intelligible notion of partially shared, or merely similar inferential roles.11

A more radical response than Quine’s, one that obviates the necessity of considering similarities rather than identities of meaning as what is shared, is one that rejects the model of sharing on which the worry about the intelligibility of communication in the face of the holistic character of meaning is based. The motivating picture is at root a Lockean one: the speaker has an idea in his head, and his uttering the words he does succeeds in communicating that idea to me if the idea hearing them uttered arouses in me is the same (repeatable) as the one he has. The meaning or content is, as it were, to be transported from his head to mind, or reproduced in mine. But one could think of understanding rather on the model of a cooperative practice or activity. In particular, I can be said to understand your remark insofar as I can compute its inferential significance both for you and for me, and navigate successfully back and forth across the two perspectives on its content constituted by the background of auxiliary hypotheses drawn from your collateral commitments and the ones drawn from mine.

To do that, I need to be able to determine what you would take to be the consequences of your claim, and what would be evidence for it and against it, given your theory of things. This will matter if I want to predict what else you’ll go on to say or believe, or what you will try to do in a particular situation. (If you believe that animal over there is a deer and desire to shoot a deer, then you may try to shoot the animal.) I also need to be able to determine how I should draw inferences, using your utterance as a premise. That includes mapping your noises onto mine, and then extracting the inferential consequences from the claim that would be expressed by my corresponding sentence utterance, with the help of auxiliary hypotheses drawn from other claims I endorse. This will matter if I want to extract information from your remark, that is, to draw conclusions from it about what is true, and if I want to predict what you are likely to succeed in doing. (If you do try to shoot the animal, I know, though you do not, that what you are likely to succeed in shooting is in fact a horse.)

The capacity to understand each other is the practical ability to navigate across the gulf between doxastic perspectives created by the effect of differing collateral commitments on the inferential significance of one noise in the mouth that utters it and the ear that hears it. When that implicit skill is made explicit in the form of claims (thinkables, believables, sayables), it takes the form of de dicto and de re ascriptions of propositional attitudes: “The speaker believes that that animal is a deer,” “The speaker believes of or about a horse that it is a deer.” The expressive role of
explicitly representational terms such as ‘of’ or ‘about’ in this usage is to mark that the identity claim (intersubstitutional commitment) connecting ‘that animal’ and ‘a horse’ is one that the ascriber undertakes, and is using to express the content of the propositional commitment attributed to the speaker. When what is at issue is what I, the ascriber, should conclude from your remarks, I am going to map your ‘deer’ talk onto my ‘horse’ talk. I say that (rather than just doing it), precisely by using de re forms of ascription: talking about what you are talking about, what you are speaking of, what you represent as what. Those de re ascriptions are the home language games of such explicitly representational locutions – the ones that make explicit the representational dimension of intentionality, the ‘of’ flavor, rather than the de dicto ‘that’ flavor. That is, it is their use in such contexts that makes them explicitly representational locutions. And that expressive role can be understood in terms of the inferentially articulated and specified distinction of perspective between premises attributed and those endorsed. In that way adopting the navigation-across-perspectives model of communication can also be seen as a way of developing the Quinean retreat-to-reference response to the challenge to make communication intelligible within a holistic semantics of what sentences express.

Practitioners who understand each other in this practical sense – who can successfully make use of each other’s remarks in their own reasoning, both about what the other has reason to do (given his or her beliefs) and about what one has oneself reason to do (given one’s own beliefs) – do indeed ‘share’ something. But what they share is like the dance that Fred and Ginger are doing together – one and the same dance, even though individually they are doing different things (him going forward, her backward; she dipping, he holding; she twirling, he leaping ...). It is not like the cadence that the soldiers marching in step share: something visible already in what each is doing individually, simply repeated across them all. We can think of conceptual (that is, inferentially articulated) content as like Fred and Ginger’s dance: something that is essentially perspectival, in that grasping it (like engaging in the dance) requires doing different things from each individual participating (in the conceptual case, depending on the background constituted by their other commitments). This is a different model of understanding and communication from the Lockean repetition or reproduction model – the soldiers marching model. An account of this shape will count as leaving communication unintelligible only to those who insist upon the Lockean model as the only way to understand understanding each other.

Besides the Quinean retreat-to-reference response and the practical-navigation-across-perspectives response, there is a third way in which inferentialism can (and the theory expounded in Making It Explicit does) respond to worries about the effects on the intelligibility of communication of the relativity of inferential significance to collateral commitments. For another great division among theories of concepts and their contents is that between broadly cartesian and broadly kantian approaches. cartesians think of concepts as something like mental particulars. The principal question about them concerns the thinker’s grasp of them: how well do we really understand them. Kantians think of concepts rather as norms or rules that bind
those who apply them, determining what would count as a correct judgment in which they are applied, or a successful intention in which they were applied. For them the principal question does not concern our grip on the concepts, but rather their grip on us. So for Kant, issues of the bindingness of concepts, the way in which they become valid (gültig) for a thinker and agent, is the central philosophical issue. Transposed into a linguistic key, the question becomes what I must do in order to count as having applied, say, the concept copper, in thought or assertion – to have subjected myself to assessments of the truth of my claim or the success of my action accordingly as what I am talking about or acting on is or is not copper (rather than, say, just some reddish metal).

A good model of the second kind is playing a counter in a game. Once I count as a player in the game, I can play a counter that has a certain significance – obliges me to make some further moves under various circumstances, precludes me from making others, entitles but does not oblige me to make others, and so on. And the facts about the normative significance of that move may significantly outrun what I understand that significance to be. I may not realize all, or even very many, of the aspects of the normative significance of my performance, for it nonetheless to have that significance. I do not, for instance, need to know that the melting point of copper is 1083.4°C in order to call something copper, and thereby to have committed myself to its not melting at 1083°, but melting at 1084°C – in the sense of having said something that is true if and only if that condition obtains. Thus my remark or thought is subject to assessment according to that norm, even though I may not be aware of that fact.

On a kantian picture, then, you and I can share a concept even though our dispositions to call something ‘copper’ are quite different – perhaps because of our different collateral commitments. In spite of such differences, we may be understood as binding ourselves by the very same complex norm for assessments of truth and success by our use of the word ‘copper’. For what matters for such assessments is what auxiliary hypotheses (e.g. about the melting point of copper) are true. The fact that you and I have different views about which these are, and so are disposed to draw different conclusions from something’s being copper, does not alter what really follows from it. \textit{De dicto} specifications of the content of another’s thought depend on the inferences she is disposed to draw from it: what she thinks she is committing and entitling herself to thereby. They articulate her conception. \textit{De re} specifications of the content of another’s thought, by contrast, depend on what inferences to and from it are in fact (including counterfactually correct). They articulate the concept she has applied, even insofar as she is ignorant of or mistaken about its content. The practical navigational capacities that are made explicit in \textit{de re} specifications of the contents of ascribed propositional commitments express the standing commitment each of us has to their being one set of inferential roles that bind all interlocutors: those, namely, determined by multipremise inferences in which the collateral commitments supplying auxiliary hypotheses are true.

I conclude that the sensitivity and relativity of the inferential significance of a sentence to collateral commitments poses a threat to the intelligibility of
communication only for a theorist whose own collateral commitments at the meta-
level include all of these:

(a) commitment to communication’s having to take place at the level of meaning,
rather than of reference;
(b) commitment to a Lockean reproductive model of the sort of sharing that
communication consists in; and
(c) commitment to a cartesian, rather than a kantian model of our relation to
concepts.

The inferentialism of *Making It Explicit* explicitly rejects all of these assumptions. (If
you think the couch cannot possibly go on the wall next to the fireplace, that may
be because you are not thinking about moving enough of the rest of the furniture.
Almost certainly you are not thinking about knocking out one of the interior walls.)

**VI Compositionality**

A related worry about inferentialism concerns the productivity of language and
thought: the fact that competent speakers and thinkers are able to produce and
understand an indefinite number of sentences that express novel contents – not
just novel in the sense that that speaker, hearer, or thinker has never entertained
them before, but in the much stronger sense that no one has ever done so. This
striking observation was first made by Chomsky almost fifty years ago, and it has
been adequately confirmed since in many ways – ranging from statistical analyses of
empirical corpora of actual utterances to theoretical analyses based on the sentences
of given lengths generated by particular partial grammars given fixed lexicons. About
the only idea anyone has as to how to explain this striking fact is to treat language as
compositional, at least in the weak sense that semantic interpretations of unfamiliar
sentences are understood as generated by operations on semantic interpretations of
their familiar parts.

The compositionality challenge to inferentialism arises because it is essentially
a categorically top-down order of semantic explanation. It begins, not with the
contents of subsentential components, but with what is expressed by whole declarative
sentences. The thought is that (as a recent paper puts it): “productivity demands
compositionality, and compositionality implies the priority of subsentential semantics
to sentential semantics.”

The first of these claims ought to be granted (at least for a suitably broad understanding of ‘compositionality’). But the second is surely
too strong. Compositionality does not imply semantic atomism, but at most what
Dummett calls ‘molecularism’. A molecularist order of semantic explanation starts
with sentences, and so contrasts both with fully holist theories, which start with
whole idioms or theories, from above, on the one hand, and atomist theories,
which start with subsentential expressions such as singular terms and predicates,
from below. That is, it takes seriously the idea that the sentence is the minimal
unit for which one can take responsibility, or which can express the undertaking
of a commitment (Kant), the minimal unit to which pragmatic force can attach (Frege), and the minimal unit with which one can make a move in a language game (Wittgenstein). The notion of semantic content is accordingly introduced to begin with as a way of codifying or explaining proprieties of the use of expressions of this category: sentences. (One might or might not look to inferential properties of the sentences at this point in the story, as inferentialists do.) One might do this for a relatively small finite corpus of sentences – say, those which a given interlocutor has used either as speaker or hearer, during his initiation into the language. One then looks to codify or explain features of the use of those sentences by noting similarities among them, paradigmatically that they contain occurrences of the same subsentential expression. Looking at the contribution the occurrence of that subsentential expression makes to the features of the use of the whole sentences in virtue of which they are intelligible as semantically contentful then allows one to attribute semantic content, in a derivative, indirect sense, also to those subsentential expressions. That in turn can allow one to generate semantic interpretants for a much larger class of sentences, compounded in familiar ways out of the familiar parts. Compare: offering a structural analysis of the behavior of ordinary solids, liquids, and gases in terms of their molecular composition, and only later seeking to explain the behavior of those molecules, and many others one has not observed, on the basis of their atomic structure.

Like Dummett, I think that Frege pursued such an explanatory strategy of decomposition and recomposition. He starts with sentences, as the bearers of truth values, and assigns Bedeutung to singular terms only so as to be able to analyze the sentences as applications of functions to arguments. His strategy for specifying the truth conditions (and inferential roles) of arbitrarily iterated quantifications depends on one being able to form complex predicates by substitutional variation of whatever sentences are already on board, and then forming new sentences from those predicates by clamping quantifiers onto them. This way of proceeding does not even depend on the original sentences having literal lexical-syntactic parts; it is enough if they can be sorted as similar to one another in respects that act enough like the equivalence classes generated by orthodox substitutional variants. There may be various reasons not to want to adopt the method of decomposition and recomposition. But it is surely a coherent strategy for achieving compositionality. So achieving the effect of compositionality does not imply the explanatory priority of sentences to subsentential structures.

The sort of inferentialism pursued in Making It Explicit explains our capacity to understand novel sentences in two different ways. First, it includes an account of the introduction of logical vocabulary in a way that is straightforwardly and traditionally compositional. Logical vocabulary is demarcated by its playing a distinctive expressive role: making explicit in propositional (claimable, believable, thinkable) form broadly inferential commitments that otherwise remain implicit in practical assessments of practice. The paradigm of logical vocabulary in this sense is the conditional, which lets one assert an inferential connection between (what is expressed by) the sentences that appear as its antecedent and consequent. In the same way,
negation can be understood as codifying commitment to the incompatibility of claims. But on this account normative vocabulary also qualifies as logical, in that it serves to codify commitment to the correctness of various patterns of practical reasoning. And other bits of vocabulary, from identity and quantificational locutions to the ‘of’ and ‘about’ that express representational intentional directedness (like normative locutions in that they are not usually thought of as distinctively logical vocabulary) show up as playing expressive roles of these kinds. For each, it is shown how they can be introduced into languages that do not already contain them, in such a way that the inferential roles of sentences in which they appear are settled by the inferential roles of nonlogical sentences formulated in the prior vocabulary. It is in these terms, for instance, that the inferential roles of arbitrarily iterated mixtures of \textit{de dicto} and \textit{de re} ascriptions (sentences such as “Tom believes of Benjamin Franklin that Henry Adams believed that he was not the inventor of the lightning rod”) are computed. For the special class of logically compound sentences (including those formed by using subsentential logical locutions), this account is compositional in the classical bottom-up sense, albeit conducted within an inferentialist framework.

The inferences (and so inferential roles) generated for compounds formed by applying vocabulary that is logical in this special, semantically expressive sense are not restricted to those that are good in virtue of logical form (even for classical logical particles like conditionals and negation), because of the special expressive role discerned between the use of nonlogical sentences and the logical compounds that make explicit aspects of that use. They are, however, all inferences that are good in virtue of the (broadly inferential) meaning or content expressed by the use of the logical vocabulary in question. But not all vocabulary is logical vocabulary even in this extended semantically expressive sense, and (so) not all material inferences manifest the contents of logical concepts. What about the rest?

Here the account in \textit{Making It Explicit} adopts a version of the decomposition-recomposition strategy. The material inferential behavior of nonlogical sentences is dissected with a substitutional scalpel by using Frege’s basic methodological idea that what it is for two subsentential expressions to play the same indirectly inferential role (‘indirect’ since they don’t express reasons in the sense that they cannot play the directly inferential roles of premise and conclusion of inferences) is for substitution of one for the other to preserve (important features of) the inferential roles of the sentences they occur in. Equivalence classes of subsentential expressions generated by these relations can then be associated with what are called (in chapter 6 of \textit{Making It Explicit} and chapter 4 of \textit{Articulating Reasons}) “simple material substitution inferential commitments.” Those subsentential, indirectly inferential contents then determine the correctness of all the substitution inferences involving compound expressions in which they occur.\textsuperscript{14} This is how compositionality works for material inferences: via substitutions. It can be shown that the formal power of this substitutional decomposition and recomposition is equivalent to that of the standard functional-categorial grammars that David Lewis considers in “General Semantics.”\textsuperscript{15} That is, the result is as compositional as the most powerful approaches

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that assign semantic interpretants to, say, singular terms and sentences (let us say, objects and sets of possible worlds), and then generate semantic interpretants for derived categories functionally: predicates as functions from (tuples of) objects to sets of possible worlds, adverbs (such as ‘slowly’) as functions from functions from objects to sets of possible worlds to functions from objects to sets of possible worlds, and so on.

That is not the end of the story, however. For once again, not all the material inferences sentences are involved in can be computed on the basis of substitutions or the functions they generate. There will be a significant residue of multipremise material inferences whose correctness is not settled in this way by the contribution made to the inference potential of the various individual components that occur in the premises and conclusion, even when they are all summed. New things happen. That the apple is red does not follow either from its being ripe or from its being a Macintosh, but does follow from both premises together. The inference that would be explicitly licensed by the conditional “If an apple is both ripe and a Macintosh, then it is red,” is not a substitution inference. If that claim is true, then it does articulate part of the commitment that is implicit in applying the terms ‘Macintosh’, ‘ripe’, and ‘red’ and in that sense is a feature of the contents they express. But it is not a consequence of features of their use that are manifested one by one. In this sense (though, given the rejection of a distinction between inferences made good by meaning and inferences made good by how the world is in favor of seeing them all as having both sources – for very different reasons), I agree with Fodor and Lepore that “in general, the inferential role of a sentence/thought is not determined by the inferential roles of its constituents.”\(^{16}\) But I think this fact evidences not a particular defect of inferentialism, but simply a fact about languages and (so) concepts. It is important not to treat languages as more compositional than they are. They are compositional with respect to their substitution inferences, but not with respect to the rest.

Some material proprieties of multipremise inferences cannot be discovered simply by inspecting the use of their component expressions. The substitution inferences give us a good handle on the proprieties of use governing novel compound sentences. They ensure that we always have a place to start in sorting the inferences involving the novel sentences into good ones and bad ones. But since what inferences are good – and so, on this line, what our words mean and what content our thoughts have – depends on how the world actually is (for instance, on what color ripe Macintosh apples are), we may have to go out into the world to find out what follows from or is evidence for or against novel claims. The idea that this sort of failure of compositionality is a problem for semantic theories is a product of commitment both to semantic theories having to be categorially bottom-up, and to a Cartesian transparency thesis about the epistemological availability of the contents we grasp in the sense of being able to deploy them in thought. But these commitments are optional, and are rejected by inferentialists.
VII Conclusion

In the first three sections of this paper, I sought to place inferentialism in a more general botanization of semantic theories, and to distinguish various more specific shapes versions of that approach can take. In the second half of the paper, I considered inferentialist responses to worries about its capacity to distinguish the inferences constitutive of conceptual content, about the intelligibility of communication and reciprocal understanding given its attendant holism, and about its ability to deal with the phenomena of productivity and (so) compositionality. Those interested in more detailed workings-out of those responses will find some in Making It Explicit. But I don’t take it that the arguments on offer there settle the ultimate viability of the specific version of inferentialism they articulate. I’ve told the story in the way I have here in part as a reminder of how misleading it can be to assess the claims of a systematic theory piecemeal. Very often one move makes sense only in the context of others – as for instance the sort of holism inferentialism involves has many more resources available for explaining what it is for two interlocutors to be applying the same concept when concepts are understood in the kantian way, in terms of their normative grip on us, rather than in the cartesian way, in terms of our epistemic grip on them. One thread that runs through much of the tapestry I’ve been displaying is the way in which an inferentialist semantic metalanguage gives us the resources to explain what is expressed by the locutions that make explicit specifically representational relations. How one understands the relation between the expressive and the representational dimensions of intentionality – between ‘that’ intentionality and ‘of’ intentionality – must be at the core of any theory of content or intentionality.

Notes

2 Stalnaker, for instance, in Inquiry (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984) offers a categorically top-down story of roughly this shape in which the top-level semantic notion is of the representation of a set of possible worlds.
4 At the level of generality in play in this telling of the story. Of course there is lots more going on in Lewis than this – but Fodor is not just an empiricist either.
6 In fact, it is also an essential move to replace the undifferentiated notion of propriety with the more articulated distinction of two flavors of deontic status: commitment and entitlement. Doing that permits one to define incompatibility (two claims are incompatible if commitment to one precludes entitlement to the other), and three sorts of inferential relations: commitment-preserving inferences (a generalization to the case of material inferences of deductively good inferences), entitlement-preserving inferences (a generalization to the case of material inferences of inductively good inferences), and incompatibility entailments (a generalization to the case of material inferences of modally robust, i.e., counterfactual-supporting, inferences). See chapter 6 of Articulating Reasons (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) for a rationale.
9 I take it that this is how Fodor and Lepore see things, though their discussion is not as clear on this point as one would like. They say, “Like everybody else who thinks that content comes from inferential role, Brandom needs, but doesn’t have, a story about which inferences are the ones that content comes from.” (“Brandom’s Burdens,” p. 471) As I point out in the text, Sellars does have such a story. But everyone needs to make the distinction only if it is incoherent to appeal to all the inferences, and so to refuse to make the supposedly required distinction between “what the world contributes to the reliability of inferences and what the (putative) rules of language contribute.” Acknowledging in a footnote that I am “explicitly suspicious” of the distinction, the authors say: “So be it; but then he needs some argument that he can make sense of the notion of content without employing it. To say that he has no such argument on offer would be to put the case very mildly.” Working out a theory of that shape, as I do in Part Two of *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), ought to be the very best such argument. But in fact Fodor and Lepore seem to have in mind their worries about holism, which I address in the next section. Insofar as the holism is the source of the problem with not privileging some inferences, there is no separate issue about “which inferences.” I address the holism question in the next section, where I sketch some of the arguments that are given in more detail in *Making It Explicit*.
10 As Israel Scheffler and Paul Feyerabend had pointed out already in the middle 1960s.
11 I do think there are some deep issues about holism in the vicinity. I discuss some of them in chapter 6 of *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
14 Of course, not everyone agrees that this construction is successful. See Alex Oliver’s TLS review of *Articulating Reasons*, and Fodor and Lepore, op. cit. They are quite right to point out that the characterizations of singular term and predicate will work for natural languages only if they are first somewhat regimented or syntactically pre-processed. It is not hard to show how to do that so as to deal with the cases they forward as counterexamples. (So, for instance, Oliver’s case of the nonsubstitutability of ‘the first Postmaster General’ for ‘Ben Franklin’ in the phrase ‘good old Ben Franklin’ requires that appositive be made explicit, in a form such as ‘Ben Franklin, who is good and old’, in which case the substitution is syntactically allowed and semantically correct. Cf. *Making It Explicit*, p. 388, where this construction is discussed.) Transformations need to be applied before categorial analysis, and after categorial synthesis. This is a point, again, that is explicitly acknowledged in *Making It Explicit*, even though it is not addressing that phase of the process. Another sort of criticism both sets of critics make, however, is based on a simple misunderstanding of the view they are criticizing. Thus, to pick a representative example from Fodor and Lepore (p. 476), they object to the denial that there can be systematically asymmetric substitution relations among singular terms, as there can be among predicates, that “Father was at Magdalen,” entails “Father was at Oxford,” but not vice versa. But this looks like a counterexample only if one drops the crucial initial quantifier from the claim. For there to be an asymmetric relation of the kind asserted, it must be the case that the inference from P(Magdalen) to P(Oxford), but not the converse, holds for every predicate P, not just for some specific one. And this is obviously not the case: consider P=Peter has never set foot in .... (Of course one’s next thought would be that, so understood, the corresponding asymmetry does not hold for the predicates ...walks
and moves. But that is not right. That thought overlooks the fact that the predicates in question are not simple predicates, but complex ones – in Dummett’s vocabulary. That is, they are sentence frames identifiable with equivalence classes of sentences that are substitutional variants of one another.) All this is explicitly discussed, along with other putative counterexamples, in the extended section VI of chapter 6 of Making It Explicit, “Objections and Replies,” to which the reader of Articulating Reasons was referred for the details of the argument.

15 And is, in the Appendix I to chapter 6 of Making It Explicit. The Lewis article is in G. Harman and D. Davidson, Semantics for Natural Languages (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1972).

16 Fodor and Lepore, op. cit., p. 472.
1 Preliminaries

Brandom begins by distinguishing between two “explanatory strategies” one might pursue in attempting to understand the metaphysics of Intentionality:

1. **Either** one proceeds “bottom-up”, beginning with an account of “what it is for something to represent something else: paradigmatically what it is for a singular term to pick out an object” – in effect, with a theory of word reference – and then proceeds to an account of “the propositional content expressed by sententially shaped or labeled representations” – in effect, a compositional theory of the content of sentences (MIE, p. 651);

2. **Or** one proceeds “top-down”, adopting “a semantically and categorically converse strategy [which] … starts with a notion of the propositions expressed by whole sentences … [and then] seeks to understand the contributions made to the specification of such [sentential] contents by the subsentential expressions deployed in the sentences that express them” (MIE, p. 652).

We take it that Brandom’s sense of the geography is that our way of proceeding is more or less the first and his is more or less the second. But we think this way of describing the situation is both unclear and misleading, and we want to have this out right at the start. Our problem is that we don’t know what “you start with” means either in formulations like “you start with the content of words and proceed to the content of sentences” or in formulations like “you start with the content of sentences and you proceed to the content of words.” Brandom’s official view seems to be that he’s talking about explanatory priorities (see the preceding quote); but we think that can’t really be what he has in mind, and we can’t find any alternative interpretation that seems plausible.

Speaking just for ourselves, we’re inclined towards a relatively pragmatic view of explanation; what explanation we should “start with” depends, inter alia, on what it’s an explanation of and whom it’s an explanation for. But, in any case, we would have thought that explanatory priority is of more than heuristic interest only if it reflects a priority of some other kind: ontological, semantical, psychological, or whatever. In talking about what one “starts with”, Brandom must be claiming more than
that exposition is facilitated by prioritizing word meaning over sentence meaning, or vice versa. The question is: what does the more amount to?

Qua “bottom-up” theorists, we think something like this: for non-idiomatic expressions in productive languages, the meaning of a sentence is ontologically dependent on the meaning of its subsentential constituents. This is to say, at the very least, that in such languages the sentences have the contents that they do because their constituent expressions have the contents they do, and not vice versa. In fact, we hold this principle in a very strong form; on the one hand, the meaning of a sentence S in a language L must be computable by algorithm from the meanings of its constituents on pain of L being unproductive or S being idiomatic. On the other hand, we know of no reason why it should be possible (algorithmically or otherwise) to recover the meanings of the constituents of S from the meaning of S. (Mutatis mutandis, we think that there could be minds that are able to “think of” but aren’t able to “think that”; concepts are prior to judgments in much the same way as word content is prior to sentence content.)

There actually is a reason why we’re fussing about this. Namely, that sentence meaning might be ontologically dependent on word meaning even if the order of explanatory priority is the other way around when what is to be explained is (for example) language learning, or translation, or comprehension. In fact, we think that the (radical) interpretation/translation of languages (assuming that there is any sense to such notions; see Fodor and Lepore, 1994) probably is sentence-first; that language learning may be; and that understanding sentences is probably a complex mixture of both. But, in our view, none of this bears at all on the direction of the ontological dependency between sentence meanings and constituent meanings. It is a bad idea to confuse semantics with the epistemology of interpretation/translation; and it is a bad idea to confuse semantics with the psychology of learning; and it is a bad idea to confuse semantics with the psychology of language production/comprehension. All that being so, it’s important to get clear on which of these it is that is being explained before one decides whether the explanation should start from the top or from the bottom.

Here’s what we take to be the ground-rule: Brandom has to show that (and how) word meanings might be ontologically dependent on sentence meanings (rather than vice versa) in a language that’s productive and systematic. We don’t think he can show that because we don’t think it’s true. In any case, we will argue that nothing in his paper here makes the contrary opinion plausible.

It goes without saying that nobody has a worked out semantics for any natural language or for any substantial fragment thereof. But, like many other philosophers for whom Sellars is a major influence, Brandom holds that a Gentzen-style semantics of the canonical “logical terms” is in some sense a model for lexical/conceptual analysis at large. The basic idea is that the logical terms are clear cases of expressions whose content can be specified by the rules of introduction and elimination that control their behavior in inferences. For example, the “introduction rule” for “&” is perhaps \( P, Q \to P \& Q \); its “elimination rule” is maybe \( P \& Q \to P, Q \). The following passage is characteristic:

A [top-down strategy] is to look to the contents of logical concepts as providing the key to understanding conceptual content generally. Here the idea is to
generalize Gentzen-style specifications of the meanings of logical connectives by pairs of introduction and elimination rules to notions of the circumstances and consequences of application of an expression. (MIE, p. 653)

There are, of course, well-known problems for this project. One is that it’s thoroughly unclear how it is to be generalized to apply to non-logical terms (or, for that matter, even to quasi-logical terms like “most”). What, for example, is the “introduction rule” for “tree”? (We do hope it’s not some procedure for identifying trees as such since we’re a bit tired of verificationism.) Correspondingly, what is the “elimination rule” for “tree”? (We do hope it’s not something like a conceptually sufficient condition for being a tree since we doubt that there are any conceptually sufficient conditions for being a tree (except, of course, question-begging ones like “x is a tree if, and only if, x is a tree”).)

We’re also not clear what Brandom thinks about the status of utterly contingent inferences like “If it’s a plant in my backyard and it’s taller than 6 feet, then it’s a tree”. He does apparently endorse the idea that “[the concept-constitutive inferences] must include ... those that are materially [sic] correct” (MIE, p. 657). But what he gives as examples are two he borrows from Sellars: “A is to the East of B” → “B is to the West of A” and “Lightning is seen” → “Thunder will be heard soon”. We find this puzzling since the first of these strikes us as arguably conceptually necessary (whatever that means) and the second strikes as arguably nomologically necessary (whatever that means). So even if we granted that both are concept-constitutive, we would still want to know whether clear cases of purely contingent hypotheticals are too; and, if they aren’t, how Brandom proposes to do without an analytic/synthetic distinction.

At one point, Brandom (still following Sellars) suggests that the concept-constitutive inferences are the ones that support counterfactuals. But this can’t be right unless, at a minimum, the counterfactuals in question are themselves supported by nomological necessities; and the notion of nomological necessity is, of course, not available for use in reconstructing the notion of modality. (Cf. “The train is scheduled to arrive at 6:00” supports “If the train had been on time, it would have arrived by now.” But, surely, it’s not concept-constitutive for any of the concepts it deploys.) Also, and more importantly, it follows from this proposal that “if we are wrong about the laws of nature, then not only have we got the facts wrong, we are using incorrect concepts ... every new law ... brings with it a change in our concepts” (MIE, pp. 661–2).

We don’t know why Brandom says that; if it were true, it looks like discovering that law L holds for Xs changes the objects of investigation from Xs, which are not constituted by their falling under L, to Ys which are. Now, maybe there are some such cases (we don’t believe a word of that, but still ...), maybe very theoretical concepts are sometimes defined by the laws that contain them. But surely that can’t be true in the general case? Surely discovering the specific gravity of water was discovering the specific gravity of water and not of some other thing! Anyhow, what use would such a radically relativized notion of content be in theorizing about languages or minds? And, if a notion of content isn’t useful for theorizing about languages or minds, what makes it a notion of content at all?
The basic problem in this area isn’t, however, the holism that Brandom’s suggestions invite; it’s rather that he seems to want to be on both sides of the analytic/synthetic distinction at the same time. On the one hand, he would like to agree with Quine that there’s no principled difference between empirical and conceptual truth; but, on the other hand, he wants to endorse the idea that nomological necessities are concept-constitutive. His problem is that the kind of necessities that a notion of conceptual content underwrites are, ipso facto, conceptual necessities; and nomological necessities aren’t conceptual.

We’ve been wondering, so far, how the treatment of “and” and the like in “Gentzen-style” inferential role theories of meaning might generalize from the logical vocabulary to the rest of the lexicon; for example, to “tree”. As far as we can see, it simply doesn’t; not, anyhow, lacking a viable analytic/synthetic distinction. (To be sure, having a viable analytic/synthetic distinction really would make everything different; so would having the philosopher’s stone – but we aren’t holding our breath.)

But there is a stronger point to make; namely that if, as we suppose, Brandom understands his Gentzen-style analysis of content as providing a possession condition for “and” (more generally, for the concept of conjunction), then the treatment would seem to be circular on the face of it. So, for example, we’re told that “to define the inferential role of an expression ‘&’ ... one specifies that anyone who is committed to P and committed to Q, is thereby to count also as committed as to P&Q, and that anyone who is committed to P&Q is thereby committed both to P and to Q” (Brandom, 2000, p. 62). But since expressions for conjunction (viz. “&” and “and”) appear on both sides of each equation, it couldn’t be that Brandom’s definition of “and” is what is known by someone who has the word (/concept) and in virtue of which he understands the word (/grasps the concept). Nor, for the same reason, could it be what is learned when someone learns the word (/concept).

Notice that the looming circularity can’t be cured by switching from a “knowing that” view of concept possession to a “knowing how” view of concept possession, though precisely this tactic is very widely endorsed by philosophers who think of “definitions in use” as paradigms of inferential role accounts of content. Here, for example, is a quotation from a recent paper by Boghossian that gives the spirit of the thing:

Surely, it isn’t compulsory to think of someone’s following a rule R with respect to an expression as consisting in his explicitly stating that rule in so many words ... On the contrary, it seems far more plausible to construe x’s following rule R with respect to e as consisting in some sort of fact about x’s behavior with e. (Boghossian, 1996)

So it isn’t, after all, that knowing “and” is knowing its entrance and exit rules; it will do for there to be “some sort of fact” in virtue of which one’s behavior (say, in drawing conjunction-involving inferences) accords with a Gentzen-style definition of “and”.

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The virtue of this suggestion is that it avoids the circularity that such definitions in use court when they are co-opted for use as theories of concept possession; “and” doesn’t come into the formulation of the rules for conjunction because having conjunction doesn’t involve explicitly formulating any rules. We suspect that Brandom feels considerable sympathy with this sort of proposal; we’ll see presently that he says much the same sort of thing in his discussion of linguistic communication. And his relentless emphasis on the importance of practice in establishing content would certainly make it natural for him to do so. Nor does Brandom appear to have any other alternative on offer with which to reply to the kind of worries about circularity that we’ve been raising.

In any case, theories of content elaborated in terms of definitions in use actually comport very badly with the sort of pragmatism that wants to identify concept possession with some species of know-how. The point is straightforward. “Acts in accord with R” is transparent at the “R” position; if your behavior accords with rule R, it thereby accords with any rule equivalent to R. Indeed, your behavior can perfectly well accord with (conform to, etc.) rule R even though you aren’t following any rule at all. By contrast, the definition in use treatment wants to privilege certain rules as the ones the grasp of which constitutes the possession of the connective. Well, one can’t have it both ways: “grasps R” is opaque to substitution of equivalents at the R position; “x grasps R’ and ‘R iff Q’” does not imply that grasping Q is sufficient for grasping R. To put the point less in the formal mode, “knowing how” theories have an awful time trying to cope with the Intentionality of the attitudes. That’s not exactly news either.

Like other kinds of definition-based semantics, the definition in use theory is intrinsically intellectualistic; its natural interpretation is that to have the concept is to know its definition. But, alas, the exit and entrance rules for “and” make use of the concept of conjunction and so circularity transpires when they are considered as a semantic analysis of that concept. By contrast, the “knowing how” account of concept possession avoids the circularity but fails to distinguish any particular formulation of the rules as constituting the content of the concept. This is a dilemma, and we don’t know of any way out of it. Nor, we suspect, does Brandom.

II Which comes first, thought or language?

As far as we can tell, Brandom simply takes for granted that (what Searle calls) “original Intentionality” inheres in public languages, the intentionality of mental states being, in some sense, derived. This is an issue over which floods of tears have already been shed; we don’t propose to revive it here except to stress one brief point: if original Intentionality inheres in public languages, it must be possible fully to describe the procedures by which a child obtains mastery of its first language without invoking the child’s intentional states (including what he knows, believes, hypothesizes, observes, etc.). Brandom doesn’t anywhere rise to this challenge, as far as we know. Nor, for that matter, does any other philosopher we’ve come across. (Wittgenstein suggests that first language learning is somehow
a matter of “training”; but he says nothing intelligible about how training could lead to learning in a creature that doesn’t already have a mind.) In fact, this sort of problem arises quite generally for Brandom. He is forever attributing to speaker/hearers commitment to norms, communicative intentions, interpretations, and the like, all of which are supposed to be constitutive of linguistic competence. But, according to his own view, these could only be properties of creatures that have already acquired a linguistic competence. So, a child can’t undertake to learn the ambient language by inquiring into the norms to which the speech community is “committed” to: “undertaking”, “inquiring”, and the like are intentional states; hence, not ones that can mediate the acquisition of a child’s first public language. This is, to be sure, a very old hat; but it’s one thing to have grown bored with a problem, quite another to have solved it.

III Communication and psychology

As Brandom rightly remarks, a standard objection to inferentialist theories of content is that (lacking a motivated analytic/synthetic distinction; how that does keep coming up!) they lead to a kind of meaning holism that would presumably undermine the possibility of linguistic communication. How can we use the form of words “It’s raining” to communicate to you our belief that it’s raining unless the word “raining” means the same to all of us? And, how can it mean the same to all of us if, on the one hand, its meaning is determined by its inferential role and, on the other hand, no two people could conceivably agree on all the inferences in which “raining” occurs (to say nothing of all the “correct inferences” in which it occurs)? We do think that anyone who runs an “inferential role” semantics is in need of a serious answer to this question. Brandom floats two or three well-known possibilities, none of which strikes us as remotely tenable.

3.1 Maybe similarity of inferential role is sufficient for communication

Consider (Brandom’s example) the question: what do Brandom and the physicist Rutherford share when they share the words (/concepts) “lightning” and “electron”? Well, it’s certainly not the precise inferential role of the concepts (see preceding); but also, arguably, it’s not any part of their inferential roles. That’s because, although Brandom and Rutherford may both go around saying things like “Lightning is made of electrons and electrons are subatomic particles”, it would beg the question to take for granted that when they do so, they mean the same thing by “electron”, “subatomic”, or “particle”: presumably they don’t entirely share the entire inferential roles of these words either.

Brandom is quite aware that this sort of argument iterates; so what has he got left? What does the putative similarity between the meanings of Brandom’s and Rutherford’s terms “lightning” and “electron” consist in?
3.2 Maybe just sharing the sounds helps

... we do share the words, at least in the sense of noise- or sign-design types. When Rutherford sees lightning, he, like me, is committed to the correctness of applying ‘electron’ ... (MIE, p. 665)

True enough, but does it really help? First, it’s no use if Rutherford happens to be talking Latin. Second, it implies (quite incorrectly) that the notion of same word can be cashed without taking out loans on semantics (what if it happens that “lightning” or “electron” is ambiguous in English)? Third, it seems to beg the question of what counts as applying a word. Just saying “lightning” when there’s a flash in the sky doesn’t constitute an application of the word to the flash. In fact, Brandom sums up such points correctly:

although some kind of similarity metric is induced by counting the noises that express the conclusions two interlocutors would draw from, or the promissory claims they would count as evidence for, claims expressed using ‘electron’, still that is only because we have restricted ourselves exclusively to nonsemantic properties of their utterances. So nothing like shared meaning is thereby underwritten. (MIE, pp. 665–6)

Quite so, and one might have thought that observation would end the discussion; but no:

Here one might think of Davidson’s account of communication as interpretation. Davidsonian interpretation is explicitly understood as consisting in mapping the noises made by the interpretive target onto the noises made by the interpreter. (MIE, p. 666)

But, first, this strikes us as an extraordinary misreading of Davidson who, by our lights, takes himself to be answering some such question as: “How could you get from observations of speakers’ behaviors to a semantics for their language?” An answer to that question is not, in any interesting respect, an account of communication between speakers. An account of communication takes for granted a speaker and hearer who share a language; the issue is how they can use the shared language to exchange information between them. Since the notion of communication (in a language) presupposes a notion of same/similar language, you can’t equate theories of interpretation with theories of communication. Any attempt to do so is doomed to circularity.

Also, by the way: does anybody still think that there is any such thing as a theory of (radical) translation/interpretation? Or that if there were, it would illuminate questions in semantics or in the metaphysics of meaning? Interpretation and translation, as Davidson and Quine understood them, are to be construed in epistemological terms. (Davidson is explicitly trying to answer questions like what evidence about
the sayings of L-speakers is available to a radical interpreter/translator of L.) What has the epistemology of interpretation got to do with the metaphysic of content?13

3.3 Maybe similarity of application helps

Here’s a third way that Brandom hopes to flesh out the notion of content similarity. It’s how Brandom sums up his “similar but not identical” reply to the stand off between the theory of communication and holism about meaning:

Rutherford and I are both disposed to respond to a bolt of lightning by applying the term ‘electron’, and to respond to applying the expression ‘high voltage, high amperage electron flow’ to a bare piece of metal by avoiding contact with it. These language entry and language exit moves, no less than the language-language ones, also give us something important in common, even when described at a so-far-subsemantic level, that is, in a nonsemantic vocabulary. I do not see why the structures so-described do not underwrite a perfectly intelligible notion of partially shared, or merely similar inferential roles (MIE, p. 666).

That is: what Brandom and Rutherford have in common is: (1) the sounds they make when they say “electron”; (2) overlapping conditions of application; and (3) shared behavioral responses.

Maybe, if one were to grant all of these, one might manage to convince oneself that some useful semantic concept can be reconstructed in terms of them. But the issue is moot since, notice, concepts like “apply”, “avoid”, and, of course, “respond” and “behavior”, are themselves all dripping with intentionality; as far as anybody knows, they simply can’t be reconstructed in a “sub-semantic” vocabulary. You do not apply a word to a thing by making a sound in the presence of the thing (see above); and not to touch a hot stove is not thereby to avoid touching it. These anti-behaviorist chestnuts were, we thought, kinds of points that became common ground in consequence of Chomsky’s remarks about Skinner. Why does Brandom feel free to ignore them?14

It seems to us that lurking behaviorism is pervasive in Brandom’s text; frankly, we are appalled. At one point, Brandom says (speaking of linguistic communication rather than concept possession) “the capacity to understand each other is the practical ability to navigate across the gulf between doxastic perspectives created by the effect of differing collateral commitments on the inferential significance of one noise in the mouth that utters it and the ear that hears it” (MIE, p. 667). No, it’s not. The capacity for (linguistic) understanding consists in your being able to tell me (e.g. in English) what you have in mind, and my being able to understand what you tell me. We take this to be simply a truism. Does Brandom really propose to flout it?

The long and short of all this is: Brandom, like so many others, thinks that maybe he can do without a notion of analytic equivalence – in fact, without any notion of
identity of meaning – because some notion of similarity of meaning will do instead. But the notion of similarity of meaning is utterly without explication; and it is no less in need of explication than the notion of identity of meaning that it is supposed to replace. Nobody has such a notion, and nobody has any idea where to get one. The prevailing proposals (including Brandom’s) suffer from vacuity, or circularity, or begging of the question, or all of these at once. It is very naughty to pay your debts by writing checks that you know perfectly well that you can’t cash.

IV Compositionality

It’s important – we think it’s centrally important – whether an Inferentialist can tell a convincing story about the compositionality of natural languages. One reason it matters so much is that the idea of combining some variety of an inferential role theory of meaning with a use theory of concept possession is by no means proprietary to semantics in the Gentzen tradition. In fact, it’s a large part of the mainstream of twentieth-century philosophy of language/mind. Try to imagine Ryle, or Wittgenstein, or Sellars without it. But it turns out that, prima facie at least, “knowing how” doesn’t compose.

You can know how to recognize good examples of pets (in favorable circumstances) and how to recognize good examples of fish (in favorable circumstances) without having a clue how to recognize good examples of pet fish in any circumstances (for example, because the conditions that are favorable for recognizing fish may screen the conditions that are favorable for recognizing pets; or vice versa). We think, and we have said loudly, frequently, but to little avail, that this line of argument generalizes to the conclusion that there can be no epistemic conditions on concept possession. If that’s right, the question how an Inferentialist can account for compositionality is seen to be the crux that he must resolve. But nothing Brandom says inclines us to think that he is able to do so.

Brandom’s discussion of compositionality starts by quoting a remark of ours: we say that “productivity demands compositionality, and compositionality implies the priority of subsentential semantics to sentential semantics” (“Brandom’s Burdens”, p. 80). To which Brandom offers the following reply

The first of these claims ought to be granted (at least for a suitably broad understanding of ‘compositionality’). But the second is surely too strong. Compositionality does not imply semantic atomism, but at most what Dummett calls ‘molecularism’. A molecularist order of semantic explanation starts with sentences, and so contrasts both with fully holist theories, which start with whole idioms or theories, from above, on the one hand, and atomist theories, which start with subsentential expressions such as singular terms and predicates, from below. (MIE, p. 671)

We continue to reserve the right not to understand the talk about where one “starts”. But we quite agree that a tenable molecularism would solve all sorts of problems
to which Inferentialism is otherwise prone. So, in particular, if molecularism is true, then the content of a concept would not be sensitive to all the inferences it’s involved in, (or even to all the “correct” inferences it’s involved in) but only to the ones that belong to the same “molecule” that the concept does. However, we know of no proposal for a molecularist inferentialism that doesn’t presuppose a robust analytic/synthetic distinction (that again!); invariably the inferences that constitute a molecule are distinguished from the others by their analyticity. Even Dummett, with whom the talk of semantic molecules seems to have originated, acknowledges its dependence on the analytic/synthetic distinction. So then, we are prepared to grant Brandom his holist/molecularist distinction, but only if he acknowledges that he’s in debt for an analytic/synthetic distinction. We take this part of the dialectic too to have been old hat for decades now.

There’s a lot more, but we give up. In fact, we sometimes rather doubt that Brandom means by “compositionality” anything like what we have in mind. For example: “since what inferences are good – and so, on this line, what our words mean and what content our thoughts have – depends on how the world actually is (for instance, on what color ripe Macintosh apples are), we may have to go out into the world to find out what follows from or is evidence for or against novel claims” (MIE, p. 675). Now we think it’s right that it’s not semantics but how the world is that determines what is evidence for what. (Indeed, we’re surprised to find that Brandom agrees. He must find it tricky to square this sort of view with his idea that justification relations among sentences are constitutive of the content of their constituents. How do you find out that “apples are red” is justified unless you already know what “apples are red” means?) But, in any case, the whole point about compositionality – the very phenomenon that it was supposed to explain – is that (demonstratives and the like aside) fluent speaker/hearers don’t have to go out into the world to find out what the sentences of their language mean; what they go out into the world for is to find out which of the sentences are true. That apples are red is something you determine by looking at apples; or by sending a friend out to look at them for you. But that “apples are red” says that apples are red is the common knowledge of every speaker of English. Meaning is about not truth but truth conditions.

We’re tempted beyond bearing to an ad hominem remark. We think that Brandom, like most of the philosophical community, simply takes it for granted that somebody (Sellars? Wittgenstein? Davidson? Quine? Putnam? Frege? Dummett? Rorty? Block? Harman? Heidegger(!)?) has shown beyond reasonable cavil that there is no serious prospect for a theory of concepts that embraces an atomistic referentialism; and that the only serious alternative is some sort of Inferential Role Semantics. That being so, Brandom is (perfectly reasonably) prepared to go ahead with the project of constructing an Inferential Role Semantics without, at this stage, worrying a lot about the details; and to do so even if it means flirting with the analytic/synthetic distinction. Well, it’s hard not to be impressed by the extent to which Inferential Role Semantics is the consensus view, not just in philosophy but also in cognitive science. But we’d be a lot more impressed if all the attempts to construct an Inferential Role Semantics (over going on at least a hundred years now)
hadn’t been such abject and total failures. There isn’t, so far, any known candidate for an inferential role analysis of any concept; not, anyhow, one that meets reasonable constraints on accounts of concept possession and individuation. It must be nice to have so many people on your side, but you don’t win a war just by assembling an army; you also have to win a battle or two.

**Notes**

1. NB: an algorithm that constructs sentence meaning from constituent meaning, not from constituent reference. Brandom’s characterization of the “bottom-up” strategy is very misleading in this respect. Brandom’s characterization of the “bottom-up” strategy is very misleading in this respect. Brandom says that this strategy “starts with” an account of “what it is for something to represent something else; paradigmatically what it is for a singular term to pick out an object”, i.e. with a metaphysics of reference; “one then explains what it is for sentential constellations of the representing elements to be true …”. In effect, one constructs a Tarski bi-conditional for the sentence, and then one assigns it a propositional content by “modalizing the truth assignments at the previous step”. Brandom says that this is to “proceed ... from the contents [our emphasis] of subsentential expressions to the contents of sentential ones”. But, on the face of it, it isn’t. What Brandom ascribes to bottom-up theory is a process that starts with the reference of lexical constituents and proceeds first to their sense and then to the senses of sentences. Of course there can be no such procedure since, of course, reference doesn’t determine sense. Rather, a standard bottom-up, compositional meaning theory assumes constituent content and predicts sentence content on that basis. Likewise, however, in the other direction: a top-down theory might predict the senses of constituents from the senses of sentences; but surely it doesn’t undertake to predict the extensions (referents) of constituents from the senses of sentences; if it did, then to understand “birds fly” would ipso facto be to know whether it’s true that birds fly.

2. Requiring that there be an algorithmic procedure that computes sentence meanings from word meanings (plus syntax) is requiring quite a lot. But we see no other way of ensuring that (under appropriate idealization) a speaker/hearer of L is ipso facto able to understand any sentence of L.

3. If, for example, you agree with paradigm top-down theorists like Quine and/or Davidson that there is some sense in which sentences are the smallest semantically evaluable linguistic expressions, then it follows that there is no function from the meaning of sentences to the meanings of their constituents. And, even if (like us) you don’t agree with Quine and Davidson, it’s very plausible that there are always lots of ways in which the meaning of a sentence could be, as it were, distributed over the meaning of its constituents. Consider “John loves Mary” under the interpretation where “John” refers to Mary, “Mary” refers to John, and “loves” expresses the relation $x \text{ is loved by } y$. The moral is that (assuming the usual arguments that connect productivity with compositionality) the semantics of a sentence must be determined by the semantics of its constituents, but the converse doesn’t follow.

4. On this view, a word like “tree” could mean what it does even if there were no sentences (a fortiori, no sentence meanings). But the sentence “Trees pollute the atmosphere” couldn’t mean what it does but that “tree” means tree. (There are caveats: it’s assumed that English is productive and systematic and that “Trees pollute the atmosphere” is not idiomatic.)

5. The caveat is because there are, obviously, indefinitely many equivalent principles of inference that could be used to introduce/eliminate “&”, and it’s unclear how one is supposed to choose among them; or what is supposed to be the consequence of one’s doing so.

6. Sometimes Brandom writes as though anything you believe about trees can appear as a
clause in an entrance/exit rule for “tree”. But we think he can’t mean that since, if he does, the distinction between the constitutive inferences and the others simply disappears. (And, of course, the holism problems come back with a rush.) In fact, there’s a special embarrassment for anyone who adheres to the Gentzen story about “and”; namely, if every “and”-involving inference is meaning-constitutive, then what becomes of the privileged status of the Gentzen rules? Why doesn’t (e.g.) “If there are trees and chairs, then there are chairs” also count as constitutive of “and”? (Brandom might say: “logical concepts are different” except that it’s precisely the logical concepts that he proposes to use as models for the others.)

In a footnote, Brandom suggests that we think that the basic objection to abandoning the analytic/synthetic distinction is that doing so invites holism. But it’s not. The basic objection is that there isn’t any serious account of how there could be such a thing as purely conceptual or purely linguistic truth. Consider, to take one example among a multitude, the idea that linguistic truths are the ones that follow from the “criteria” for applying a term. One then wants to know what makes some principle of use “criterial”, and the only thing we’ve heard is the circular suggestion that the truths criteria warrant are ipso facto linguistic. This is, of course, a classically Quinean style of argument; and, to our knowledge, nobody knows how to refute it.

This is hardly news; see Quine’s “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”.

For more of much the same, see Dummett (2004), Peacocke (1992), et alia.

One way to think about this would be that the definition in use for term T constitutes a special subset of the necessary inferences in which T is implicated; namely, the ones that are both necessary and analytic.

In the sense of that term that Gilbert Ryle appeals to in The Concept of Mind (1949).

In fact Brandom owes an account of “applying a concept” that doesn’t itself rest on a prior notion of reference. Sometimes he comes perilously close to circularity in this respect too: “a [...] semantic theory that begins with ‘that’ intentionality must eventually explain its relation to ‘of’ intentionality in any case – must proceed from an account of senses expressed to one of objects (and sets of objects) denoted. So it is open to any theory that adopts this order of semantic explanation to adopt Quine’s strategy of appealing to what is talked about to secure an account of the nature of communication” (MIE, p. 664). But this really is question-begging. Any theory that has an account of communication that doesn’t rely on notions like applying a concept, reference, coreference, and the like is of course free to use the notion of reference in its account of communication. But part of the present issue is whether Brandom does have such an independent account. For example, it’s not clear that the cash value of the idea that Rutherford and I both “apply” “lightning” to lightning isn’t just that we both use the one to refer to the other. If so, then a “top-down theory” mustn’t appeal to our consensus about what we apply the word to in explaining what it is that makes my use of “lightning” relevantly similar to his.

There is, in any case, considerable irony in the spectacle of Brandom, the arch-inferentialist, appealing to Davidson, the arch-Tarskian, in hopes of saving his bacon. Brandom’s appeal to Davidson here sounds to us a lot like panic.

Likewise, whether one avoids charged wires depends (not just on your linguistic competences but) on your intentions with respect to the wires (perhaps one has it in mind to turn off the current.) Must we really go through all that again? Why does philosophy perseverate so?

In particular, we don’t propose to work through the details of how substitution considerations are supposed to isolate singular terms. Brandom says that he’s been misinterpreted by his critics, and we’re prepared to believe him. One point in passing, however. Brandom says: “Fodor and Lepore [p. 476] ... object to the denial that there can be systematically asymmetric substitution relations among singular terms, as there can be among predicates, that ‘Father was at Magdalen’ entails ‘Father was at Oxford’, but not
vice versa. But this looks like a counterexample only if one drops the crucial initial quan-
tifier from the claim. For there to be an asymmetric relation of the kind asserted, it must
be the case that the inference from P(Magdalen) to P(Oxford), but not the converse, hold
for every predicate P, not just for some specific one” (MIE, p. 674). But that can’t be right:
“every predicate [of English]” subtends an infinite set and, we suppose, Brandom intends
that his procedure for isolating singular terms is to be finitely executable.

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In *Making It Explicit* Brandom develops and defends an inferentialist semantics according to which conceptual contents are to be understood in terms of the formally and materially valid inferences they underwrite. Because, Brandom thinks, inferentialism entails that “it makes sense to specify the content of a state only from some point of view, relative to some set of collateral concomitant commitments, which can serve as auxiliary hypotheses in inferences involving it” (p. 608), the only way he can understand knowing is perspectivally, in terms of I–Thou sociality. Objective truth, on his account, is to be understood “as consisting in a kind of perspectival form”: “what is shared by all discursive perspectives is that there is a difference between what is objectively correct in the way of concept application and what is merely taken to be so, not what it is – the structure, not the content” (p. 600). If Brandom is right, an inferentialist semantics entails perspectivalism, which in turn can fund only a formal distinction between believing that *p* and *p*. Significantly, neither Sellars nor Frege, both of whom are enlisted as fellow inferentialists in *Making It Explicit*, draw these conclusions. According to both, though in different ways, an inferentialist conception of meaning is compatible with, indeed constitutive of, a substantial notion of objective truth. My aim is to clarify the differences between these three varieties of inferentialism, and also to indicate the prospects of each regarding the notion of truth.

I Brandom’s variety of inferentialism

Brandom’s inferentialist semantics begins with the Sellarsian idea that meaning is to be understood by appeal to formal and material rules of inference. The essential idea is easily illustrated: it follows logically, or formally, from something’s being, say, red that it is colored because red just is a color of a certain sort; and it follows materially from something’s being red (all over) that it is not blue because although the concept red contains nothing involving being blue, nonetheless the two are materially, that is, necessarily though not logically, incompatible. Brandom’s inferentialism is based on a variant of this idea: whereas Sellars focuses on inferences involving necessary relations among concepts as they contrast with inferences whose correctness essentially depends on accidental relations between concepts (e.g. that fire
engines are generally, or even invariably, red), for Brandom both sorts of inferences are properly material inferences constitutive of the concepts they involve. Because, he thinks, “inferential approaches to conceptual content apply directly only to what is expressed by declarative sentences, which can play the role of premises and conclusions of inferences” (MIE, p. 136), inferentialism requires – on pain of circularity (p. 134) – that one begin with relations among atomic sentences rather than with relations among concepts. Sellars’s distinction between necessary and merely accidental relations among concepts cannot, then, be invoked at the outset. 4

For Brandom, any move from one claim to another as entitled by it is constitutive of the contents of the concepts involved; all such moves are material inferences in Brandom’s sense. Indeed, even relations among claims and non-inferential circumstances and consequences of application are taken to be constitutive of contents, and so as inferential (p. 131). Brandom gives the name “hyperinferentialism” to the view that inferential articulation narrowly conceived to include only inferential circumstances and consequences of application (i.e. what Brandom, following Sellars, calls language-language moves as they contrast with language entries and exits) is sufficient for conceptual contentfulness. Brandom rejects hyperinferentialism because, he thinks, “under such a restriction, it is impossible to reconstruct the contents of actual concepts, except perhaps in some regions of mathematics” (pp. 131–2).

But why be an inferentialist at all? Brandom’s answer derives from limitations in the explanatory power of a representationalist semantics according to which words, at least some of them, function as representatives of objects (and perhaps also properties and relations) in a way enabling one to use sentences of the language to picture states of affairs. On the representational conception, which is codified in standard model theoretic semantics, one begins with a collection of signs, marks or sounds, together with some rules governing their syntactically correct combination and some rules governing permissible transformations. These signs together with the two sorts of rules determine a kind of game. What makes the language more than a mere game is the semantics that is provided by an interpretation or model, which assigns a semantic value to all the non-logical constants of the language. Given such an interpretation, it is possible to talk not only of well-formedness or of legitimate transitions from one string of signs to another, but also of truth: a sentence of the language is true iff the state of affairs it pictures actually obtains. Brandom rejects this conception of language and he does so because language so conceived can serve only to record something antecedently recognized, grasped or understood; it presupposes rather than explains one’s awareness of the states of affairs that are pictured.5 Indeed, it leaves our understanding of states of affairs utterly inexplicable: given this conception of language, one’s conception of mind will inevitably involve appeal to a mythic Given.6

The Myth of the Given, at a first approximation, is the mistaken idea that something merely causal, not in conceptual shape, might rationally constrain our judgments. Because the world is a merely causal structure, Brandom reasons, it follows directly that things as they are cannot rationally constrain our judgments. The relationship of mind to world, as he understands it, is instead this:7
Physical objects → Sensings of sense contents → Noninferential beliefs → Inferential beliefs.

The left-most arrow is causal: “it relates particulars describable in a nonnormative vocabulary”. The right-most arrow is normative and justificatory: “it is an inferential notion, relating sententially structured beliefs”. What is at issue is the middle arrow. Because to take it to be normative and justificatory would be to embrace a mythic Given, the relationship between sensing a sense content and having a noninferential belief must be merely causal.

Mere things have merely causal powers. Because they do, Brandom thinks, their impacts on us are no different from their impacts on any object, animate or inanimate. It is, then, a good question for him what distinguishes our responses to environing circumstances from those of, say, a chunk of iron or a parrot. A chunk of iron “responds” to rain by rusting, and a parrot can be trained to squawk “that’s red” in the presence of red things. Nevertheless, neither the iron nor the parrot is judging. So, Brandom asks, “what, besides exercise regular differential responsive dispositions, must one be able to do, in order to count as having or grasping concepts, and so as able to perform not only classification but specifically conceptual classification?” (p. 88). Because, on Brandom’s account, a response or classification is conceptual just if it plays a role in what Brandom calls the game of giving and asking for reasons, what one must be able to do to count as giving such a response is to play that game: “it is practical mastery of the inferential involvements of a response, the responder’s understanding of it in this sense, that makes the response an intentional state or performance – one having a content for the one whose state or performance it is, and not merely for those using it as an indicator” (p. 89).

Brandom’s problem is to understand the interface between a merely causal world and what, following Sellars, he thinks of as the space of reasons, and that problem arises because the causal realm is not normatively characterizable and the space of reasons is inherently normative. His solution is to say that although our responses to environing circumstances are merely causally elicited, they are nonetheless describable in normative terms – as the expression of our commitments, as game moves – in virtue of the context of social practices within which they are embedded. Those responses are treated as moves in the game both by the responder and by others, and in being so treated are correctly described as being game moves because games (in general, not merely in the case of concern to Brandom) are socially instituted through mutual recognition: to be a player in a game just is to be recognized as such by those one recognizes as players. So, although the environment of the players, and in particular the various stimuli it provides, are to be described in merely causal terms, the responses of players to those stimuli are properly described in normative terms, as moves in the game that are correct or incorrect, legitimate or illegitimate, according to the rules of the game.

The overall picture, then, is this. Judgment (at least in the most basic and paradigmatic case) is to be taken to be a form of classification, the application of a concept, where a concept is inferentially articulated in the ways described above and its
application counts as a move in a socially instituted game. What we are to envisage is a community of individuals responding to things with utterances of the form “that is red”, “this is Jones’s pet”, and so on, and responding to such utterances with further utterances, “it is colored”, say, or “it is a dog”. Such utterances change players’ scores by changing what they are held and hold themselves to be committed and entitled to according to the rules that are implicit in the scorekeeping practices of the various players. But because “what a given endorsement of [a] claim commits one to, is entitled by, and is incompatible with depends on what else one is committed to, on what collateral information is available as auxiliary hypothesis for the inferences in question” (p. 477), the rules implicit in the scorekeeping practices of players will not in general be shared; different players will exhibit different, even incompatible, scorekeeping behavior; they will play by different rules. It follows “that inferential significance is not preserved in communication” (p. 480), that the content of a claim can be specified only from the perspective of this or that player. But, Brandom thinks, it can be specified, and relative to such a specification, he claims, we can understand objectivity as a matter of perspectival form. Given that, he is, he thinks, entitled to claim that players of such a game are properly described as making judgments, as drawing inferences, and as giving and asking for reasons.

Brandom claims that his account in part I of Making It Explicit, which sets out what he calls the game of giving and asking for reasons, entitles him to a reasonably robust notion of objective truth, one according to which inquiry is rational, and rationally constrained by how things are. This is surprising given the limited resources with which he begins. To help us to see that it is nonetheless true, Brandom, in part II, enriches the game with semantic and logical locutions that are to make its rationality manifest. The conditional is paradigmatic. Although not necessary to the language game of rational agents, the conditional enables one to say that one claim follows from another where without it one can only show that this is so by doing something, that is, by inferring the claim from the relevant premise. Negation similarly enables one to say that one denies a claim rather than merely showing one’s denial by asserting something incompatible with it. Identity and quantificational locutions likewise serve to make explicit in claims symmetric and asymmetric substitution-inferential commitments otherwise only implicit in one’s scorekeeping practice. In this way standard logical locutions are to enable the scorekeeping rules themselves to be ascribed and undertaken as commitments for which reasons can be demanded and which can serve as reasons. But again, such locutions are not required for rationality itself on Brandom’s view. They are critical only to the ambition of the author of Making It Explicit, the ambition to “[present] an explanation of what it is to say something that is powerful enough to explain what it itself is saying” (MIE, p. xx). By making explicit things that are otherwise only implicit in the practice of the players, these locutions are to enable us, the readers of Making It Explicit, to understand why it is correct to think of Brandom’s players as judging and inferring, as giving and asking for reasons. It is not at all obvious how this is to work, however. Although Brandom describes the game he outlines in Part I of Making It Explicit as that of giving and asking for reasons, its moves as judgments aimed at truth, and so on, these notions, as entitled by the game he describes, seem actually to be quite insubstantial – as both defenders
and critics of Brandom have noted. Indeed, I think there is a real question whether the I–Thou sociality Brandom describes in *Making It Explicit* is sufficient to fund even the sort of normativity that is characteristic of a game – let alone that characteristic of the pursuit of truth.

Brandom takes from his reading of Wittgenstein the idea that norms explicit in principles are intelligible only against a background of norms implicit in practices. He rejects, however, the standard communitarian interpretation of the idea according to which those latter norms are set by what “we” do. Because, he argues, such an I–We sociality cannot fund a notion of objectivity, that is, a distinction between what we do and what it is correct to do, which is essential to a norm’s being properly conceptual, Brandom rejects I–We sociality in favor of an I–Thou form of sociality, the “basic building block” of which “is the relation between an audience that is attributing commitments and thereby keeping score and a speaker who is undertaking commitments, on whom score is being kept” (*MIE*, p. 508). On Brandom’s account, as we have seen, there need be no essentially shared public language, no shared set of norms, even implicit in practice, governing the correctness and incorrectness of responses. Each player keeps his or her own set of books, according to his or her own rules, in what is in effect a private language. Nor could Brandom reply that, on his account, although what I do may be perhaps vacuously correct by my own lights, it may nonetheless be incorrect by your lights, and that this is what is essential to his account; for what is at issue is whether any content can be given to the idea that I in acting, or indeed you in assessing, do something normatively significant at all.

Consider a different case, that of an animal. Relative to the species to which the animal belongs, that animal can be assessed as, for example, normally sighted or blind. If, however, one considers the animal independent of the context provided by the species, there is no content at all to the idea that it might be normal or abnormal in any respect. It merely is the way it is. (And it would not seem to help to have two such animals so that each could be assessed as abnormal, relative to the other, in any respect it did not share with the other.) Similarly, *pace* Brandom, it would seem that the moves of the players of a game can be assessed as correct or incorrect only relative to the (socially instituted) norms of the game, norms relative to which the behavior of all players can be assessed. The point is not that what we do is the criterion of correctness (it need not be), but rather that it is only within the context of an essentially social practice, as it contrasts with one that is essentially individualized or private, that it makes sense to talk of correctness, and incorrectness, at all. The worry is that the practices Brandom describes are, in the relevant sense, individualized, private, and therefore cannot fund any notion of correctness, hence of content (whether objective or not), at all.

II Sellars’s variety of inferentialism

We have seen that Brandom’s notion of material inference is broader than Sellars’s along two dimensions: it includes proprieties of inference grounded in contingent as well as necessary relations among concepts, and also language entries and
language exits. For Sellars, following Carnap, only what he calls P- or physical-rules are rules of materially valid inference, where these rules are to be thought of as inference licenses and as such are essentially general, of the form: ‘x is y’ may be inferred from ‘x is φ’, or, as Sellars sometimes puts it, being φ P-entails being y.11 As Sellars recognizes, such inference licenses are not expressible using the universal quantifier, although if the license – say, being φ P-entails being y – is a good one then it will follow that as a matter of empirical fact anything that is φ is also y, that is, that the sentence “(∀x)(φx⇒ψx)” is true.12

Is this strategy circular as Brandom claims? Certainly it would be circular to imagine a set of practices that came into being with such resources. But the real question is whether practices that have not evolved to the point of including the expression of inference licenses ought to be counted as properly linguistic (as contrasted with merely verbal) practices at all. Sellars’s view is that they should not. According to him, to have the resources needed for the expression of inference licenses fundamentally alters the game by enabling one rationally to reflect on the rules by which the game is played and to alter the rules as reason sees fit. He writes in “Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and the Causal Modalities”:

although describing and explaining (predicting, retrodicting, understanding) are distinguishable, they are also, in an important sense, inseparable. It is only because the expressions in terms of which we describe objects ... locate these objects in a space of implications, that they describe at all, rather than merely label. The descriptive and explanatory resources of the language advance hand in hand.13

On Sellars’s view, only a creature capable of reasoning about what is a reason for what is properly described as reasoning, and so also as judging or inferring, at all.

On Sellars’s view, as contrasted with Brandom’s, the contents of concepts do not include merely accidental relations among concepts. Nor do they include “inferential relations” between linguistic items and anything non-linguistic – although as Sellars remarks, “that at least some of the descriptive predicates of a language must be learned responses to extra-linguistic objects in order for the language to be applied, is obvious”.14 Because no concepts, including observational ones, no matter how basic, have any “ostensive tie” to items in the world on his view, there is in principle no reason to understand scientific theories instrumentally; it is perfectly coherent that “the scientific account of ‘what there is’ supersedes the descriptive ontology of everyday life”15 – provided, that is, that the theoretical language comes to be itself an observation language, that is, usable in direct perceptual reports rather than only in fact-stating judgments that are the conclusions of inferences.16 For Sellars, the fact that the Given is a myth, the fact that (as Sellars understands it) nothing is Given as the unquestioned and unquestionable ground of judgment, is the essential insight required to understand the objective purport, and potential success, of our empirical judgments.17 According to Sellars, the rationality of inquiry is to be found not in the notion of truth itself but in the striving for truth, not in what there is, at least not directly, but in our investigative practices aimed at knowing what there is.18
For Sellars the fact that nothing is Given (i.e. unquestioned and unquestionable) means that we can, and do in the course of our scientific investigations, radically revise our conceptions of what there is, and can, in principle, come to conceptions that are true to what there is. To explain how this is to work, he introduces the idea of concepts that are not merely theoretical but also analogical where analogical concepts are theoretical concepts that share certain second-order attributes with the observational concepts on which they are modeled and the use of which they are to explain.19 For example, because the theory of sense impressions is developed analogically on the model of sensible objects, according to Sellars,20 it is intelligible to say that the same sensible form (as we might put it) can characterize both red objects and sensings of red objects. According to Sellars, an account of analogical thinking, combined with his Tractarian notion of picturing, provides an adequate account of objective truth, empirical knowledge of things as they are in themselves.21

On Sellars’s view, both sensibility (which we share with mere animals) and understanding are faculties of representation, though only the latter is a cognitive faculty. It follows that not all representational aboutness is intentional aboutness, “where the intentional is that which belongs to the conceptual order”.22 Furthermore, both sorts of representations, both those that are cognitively significant and those that are not, can be representations of things as thus and so; both can be conceived as picturing things as thus and so, where picturing is a non-intentional correlation of items in the real order. In the case of a mere animal, there is only sensing and the sort of picturing it enables. But we rational animals also have understanding. In our case, this correlation of items in the real order is combined with “the complex machinery of language entry transitions (noticings), intralinguistic moves (inference, identification by means of criteria) and language departure transitions (volitions pertaining to epistemic activity)”.23 It involves, in other words, semantical uniformities in Sellars’s sense, uniformities in behavior that mirror semantic rules (where these rules are, for Sellars, inherently public, that is, rules to which all speakers of the language are answerable). For Sellars, this pair of notions, semantical uniformity and semantical rule, are to replace the (according to him, fundamentally mistaken) notion of a semantic statement as expressing an intentional relation of meaning or aboutness between a linguistic item and a nonlinguistic one.

According to Sellars’s analysis, sentences such as “‘rot’ in German means red” – sentences that one might have taken to express relations between words and properties of objects – in fact ascribe to words certain linguistic roles, in this case, to the German word “rot” the role that the word “red” plays in English.24 Such sentences do not formulate ideal semantical uniformities, rules of use on the order of “‘rot’ is correctly applied to all and only red things”, but instead classify words according to their function relative to a language already in use. In the case of words that have extensions as well as intensions – e.g., “red” but not “not” – such classifications also convey “that these expressions are involved in semantic uniformities (actual or potential) with appropriate extra-linguistic items”.25 On this account, there are word-word relations expressible as semantic rules, which belong to the conceptual order, and world-world relations, semantic uniformities, in the real order; but there
are no relations of meaning or aboutness between items in the conceptual order and items in the real order. For that, Sellars thinks, would require the Myth of the Given.

Sellars offers an analogous two-part account of truth: on the one hand, an intra-linguistic notion of truth as semantic (or S-) assertibility, and on the other, a matter-of-factual notion of truth in terms of picturing. The “bringing about of linguistic pictures could be ‘mechanical’; but because in our case the uniformities “which link natural linguistic objects with one another and with the objects of which they are linguistic projections” reflect semantic rules, they are subject to what Sellars calls rules of criticism. We can and do refine our habits of response in light of what we take to be the correct semantic rules of the language. Because, furthermore, the notion of truth as correct picturing (by contrast with the notion of truth as S-assertibility) admits of degrees – pictures can be more or less adequate maps of reality – we can make intelligible the idea that there are more adequate pictures of reality than those we now are in a position to produce. We can make good the Peircean concept of “ideal truth”.

On Sellars’s view, “to take a realistic stance towards scientific theories is to take seriously this role of theoretical languages as providing a method of picturing the world”. A theoretical language, if it is to picture how things are, must acquire a reporting role. Furthermore, if we assume (as Sellars thinks we must for reasons that will soon become clear) that there is in the real order some analogical counterpart of color predicates – a counterpart that we, as the sentient beings we naturally are, picture in sensing – then to acquire conceptual resources adequate to these counterparts (through the development of analogical concepts which subsequently acquire a reporting role) just is to picture them correctly, that is truly, and to do so because the world is that way. On Sellars’s view, noncognitive impressions of sense do not “guide minds” in the sense of merely causing us to have certain thoughts (which seems to be Brandom’s view). Nor do they “guide minds” by providing us reasons, justifications, for our thinking as we do (which Sellars thinks would constitute an instance of the Myth of the Given). Instead the noncognitive impressions of sense are to guide minds dynamically, as it were, by being, retrospectively, the (ineffable) causes of our finding things to be thus and so within whatever conceptual scheme we actually employ, and prospectively, through the development of ever more adequate theories of what there is, the (effable) causes of linguistic pictures that in the limit correctly depict those causes. At the level of sense impressions we just do – mechanically, as it were – correctly picture how things really are. But such pictures are not true because sensing is not knowing, not an episode in the space of reasons. What is required for knowing is that we have concepts of such impressions (or concepts of whatever is the counterpart of such impressions in the final theory), and we can come to have such concepts, Sellars thinks, in virtue of our capacity to develop theories involving analogical concepts that will not only explain why ordinary perceptible objects obey the lawful generalities they do as far as they do, but also (because they are analogical) ground the idea that it is those very sense impressions that our talk is about.
By contrast with Brandom’s, Sellars's variety of inferentialism involves a fundamental distinction between, on the one hand, a public language as constituted by rules of formal and material inference, and on the other, the use of that language in judgment and inference. Such a distinction is required, he thinks, because what explains the rationality of our practice is our capacity to theorize, to develop new languages through the articulation of new inferential relations among concepts and thereby new conceptions of what there is. In the limit those conceptions are to be adequate to the task of picturing things as they are. But, I would argue, even this variety of inferentialism gives us a less than fully robust notion of truth. Sellars’s inferentialism, we have seen, funds a two-perspective view according to which our judgments can be treated either as episodes in the space of reasons, the conceptual order, which, as justified or not according to the semantic rules of the game, are S-assertible or not, or as episodes in the realm of nature, in the real order, which either do or do not correctly picture other states of affairs in the real order according to the method of projection grounded in the relevant semantic uniformities. On his account, there is, in this way, to be rational constraint on judgment and constraint by what is. What is missing is rational constraint by what is. Of course, Sellars would argue that there cannot be any such constraint, that the very idea of rational constraint by what is involves a mythic Given. Without it, however, there is a very real question whether Sellars has provided us with any notion of empirical content at all.32

III Frege’s variety of inferentialism

According to both Sellars and Brandom following him, an adequate conception of intentionality demands that formal rules of inference be supplemented by material rules conceived as relations among concepts or claims, that is, as governing language-language moves, as well as, in Brandom’s case, language entries and exits. Frege provides a very different picture, and he does so in part because his concern is not with natural language understanding but instead with reasoning in mathematics. To understand the difference this difference makes, we need first to recognize that natural language is, as a language, essentially different from a symbolic language such as the formula language of arithmetic or Frege’s formula language of pure thought.33

The received view, which both Brandom and Sellars seem implicitly to endorse, is that symbolic and natural languages are not essentially different, that they differ only in, say, their relative perspicuity. It does not require much reflection, however, to see that they are actually very different. To begin with, a natural language such as, say, English or German is first and foremost a spoken language and a vehicle of communication; symbolic languages such as the formula language of arithmetic or Frege’s two-dimensional formula language of pure thought, *Begriffsschrift*, are essentially written and serve primarily as vehicles of reasoning. Natural languages are also enormously versatile; as Wittgenstein reminds us, one can do all sorts of things with natural language.34 Symbolic languages, as Frege reminds us, are special purpose
instruments designed for particular purposes and useless for others. Natural languages evolve through their use; they are essentially social and inherently historical. Symbolic languages are instead self-consciously created, often by a single individual, and they have no intrinsic tendency to evolve through their use. Symbolic languages, finally, are fully formalizable, at least in principle; the rules governing the use of signs in such languages can be make explicit – if only to someone who already has natural language and the capacity to read. There is little reason to think that this is true of the signs, words, of natural languages. Although it is relatively easy to build a machine that correctly manipulates the signs of the Arabic numeration system or those of logic, there is good reason to believe that it is impossible to build a machine that correctly manipulates the signs of a natural language such as English. Indeed, the essentially social and historical nature of natural language already suggests as much.

These differences between a natural language and a symbolic language are furthermore connected to fundamental differences between the concepts they typically involve. Whereas natural language concepts are, paradigmatically, sensory and object involving, properly mathematical (and logical) concepts are neither. Consider, for example, Aristotle’s concept of a sphere. According to him a sphere is what he calls a common sensible: much as the color red is something with a characteristic look so a sphere is something with a characteristic look and feel. Aristotle’s concept of a sphere is at once sensory and object involving; no one who had never seen or felt the shape of an actual (three-dimensional) sphere could possibly have this concept. Our modern mathematical concept of a sphere is very different: a sphere is a two-dimensional surface all points of which are equidistant from a center. This concept is neither sensory nor object involving. Although no one who had not already been acculturated into natural language could acquire such a concept, the concept itself is not dependent on any natural language concepts. What is needed to understand it is an understanding of the formula language of algebra, in particular the equation \(x^2 + y^2 + z^2 = r^2\) .

Frege’s Begriffsschrift is a symbolic language modeled on the formula language of arithmetic. As Frege comes to understand it, this language differs from language as we tend to conceive it in two fundamental respects. First, instead of understanding language by appeal to a fundamental logical distinction between referring expressions, which give an object about which to judge, and predicative expressions enabling one to characterize an object (otherwise given), Frege splits that logical distinction into two other distinctions, that between object and concept, on the one hand, and that between Bedeutung (meaning, signification, or designation) and Sinn (sense), on the other. Objectivity, for him, does not lie in relation to an object, and cognitive content is not due to the involvement of concepts. Both object names and concept words express senses and designate something objective, namely, objects and concepts, respectively. Because concepts – which are, on Frege’s view, functions, laws of correlation – are something objective (albeit unsaturated), they can serve just as objects do, as arguments for functions. There can be truths about concepts just as there are truths about objects.
The second respect in which Frege’s *Begriffsschrift* is different from language as we tend to think of it, is indicated already in *Grundlagen* by Frege’s context principle, never to ask for the meaning of a word except in the context of a proposition. The primitive signs of *Begriffsschrift* only express a sense independent of their involvement in a sentence. To put them together in a sentence is, then, to have something that expresses a thought, which can then be variously analyzed into function and argument. Only relative to an analysis can one speak of object names and concept words as designating objects and concepts (respectively). Sentences of *Begriffsschrift* do not function by picturing states of affairs through the use of independently meaningful signs for objects and properties as on the model theoretic conception of language. They instead express thoughts that can be variously analyzed into function and argument. An example from arithmetic will illustrate how this is to work.

On the standard model-theoretic conception of language, written sentences (whether of natural language or of symbolic language) are taken to be composed of antecedently meaningful parts: simple signs are representatives of their contents, of the objects and properties they stand for, and sentences present represented objects as thus and so. Already in his 1884 *Grundlagen* Frege rejects this conception, at least for the case of the formula language of arithmetic, arguing that we must not look for the meaning of a word in isolation but only in the context of a sentence – and relative to an analysis. Frege motivates the view by reflection on the simple arithmetical identity “1 + 1 + 1 = 3”. This sentence obviously expresses a truth of arithmetic. But how, exactly, are we to read it? The idea that each tokening of the numeral “1” designates the number one, and the sentence itself the fact that the number one and the number one and the number one together equal three, cannot be right because, as Frege argues, there is only one one and no amount of putting one together with itself will produce anything other than one. There is only one one and yet the sentence “1 + 1 + 1 = 3” expresses a truth of arithmetic. The task is to understand how this can be.

On the standard view, the primitive signs of the Arabic numeration system designate numbers independent of any use, the numeral “1”, for example, designates the number one whatever the context. Frege suggests that we should instead understand such signs as only expressing a sense prior to their use. The signs are then put together to form a sentence that expresses a thought, and that thought can then be analyzed into function and argument in various ways, none of which are privileged. The sentence “1 + 1 + 1 = 3” can be taken to involve, for instance, the function \( \xi + 1 + 1 = 3 \) with the number one as argument. Alternatively, we can take the object names “1 + 1 + 1” and “3”, both of which designate the number three (though they do so under different modes of presentation), to designate the arguments for the two-place relation \( \xi = \zeta \); or alternatively, we can take the object name “1 + 1” to designate the argument for the function \( \xi + 1 = 3 \). Clearly other analyses are possible as well. So read the sentence does not present objects as thus and so. Instead it expresses a sense. Only relative to an analysis into function and argument are objects and concepts designated by the subsentential expressions of the language so conceived.
Just the same is true of sentences of Frege’s *Begriffsschrift*, for instance, this:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\vdash \phi(a) \\
\phi(a) \\
\end{array}
\]

Like any sentence of *Begriffsschrift*, this sentence is to be read as expressing a thought that can be variously analyzed. It can, for instance, be read as expressing the thought that the concepts (say) red and colored are related by subordination, that is, as involving the second-level relation of subordination, designated by the expression

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\vdash \psi(a) \\
\phi(a) \\
\end{array}
\]

for arguments Cξ and Rξ. But we can equally well take it to involve the second-level concept

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\vdash \psi(a) \\
\end{array}
\]

for argument

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\vdash \psi(a) \\
\end{array}
\]

Or we can take it to involve the second-level concept

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\vdash \psi(a) \\
\end{array}
\]

for argument Cξ, and so on.

According to the conception of language just outlined, the primitive signs of the language only express senses independent of their appearance in a sentence. One grasps the sentence, the thought it expresses, through one’s grasp of the senses of the primitive signs it involves in the particular arrangement in which they occur. The sentence itself can then be variously analyzed to yield subsentential expressions, whether simple or complex, that express senses and also designate objective entities, that is, objects and concepts. We have already seen this for the second-level relation of subordination. Another, more interesting, example is given by the concept of continuity, which is conceived quantificationally thus:

\[
(\forall \varepsilon > 0)(\exists \delta > 0)(\forall x)(|x| < \delta \supset |f(x + a) - f(a)| < \varepsilon).
\]

This sentence as it is usually read is composed of antecedently meaningful parts as specified in a standard semantics for the language, parts that are combined into a whole according to the syntactic rules of the language. The content of the concept of continuity, on this account, is not exhibited but reduced to relations among other concepts. It is nothing over and above its parts in a given logical array. That same concept, as Frege conceives it, is designated by the following complex sign:
Here an analysis is already indicated: we are to take the Greek letters ‘Φ’ and ‘Α’ to mark the argument places for a higher-level concept word. But in any actual use of this concept word in a sentence, the sense it expresses would be variously analyzable. What we have, then, is an expression in *Begriffsschrift* that designates (relative to the given analysis) the concept of continuity; we have a sign, a name, for this concept, and it is one that exhibits, makes fully manifest, the content of that concept as it matters to judgment and inference. ⁴² And the same is true of concepts generally in *Begriffsschrift*. ⁴³

According to Sellars, and Brandom following him, inferentialism is the view that the contents of concepts are at least partially constituted by material implication relations between those concepts, relations that might be set out in axioms as conditional judgments. For Frege, I have indicated, inferential articulation is *internal* to concepts; it belongs to the senses through which concepts are designated by concept words. On Frege’s view, the whole content of a concept is given by an adequate analysis of it; no material rules are needed. In Frege’s logic, the role of axioms is not implicitly to define concepts but instead to set out the basic truths of a system, thoughts that can be seen to be true (assuming we have gotten things right) on the basis of our grasp of the senses expressed by the primitive signs of the language.

Frege, like Sellars, is a realist. He is also like Sellars, I would argue, in understanding the objectivity of judgment dynamically, through an understanding of our striving for truth. ⁴⁴ For both, finally, the crucial first step in the striving for truth is coming to have adequate conceptions of things. But, as I have indicated, Frege is not an inferentialist in Sellars’s (or Brandom’s) sense. For Frege inferential articulation is internal to concepts rather than a relation between concepts. Is such an understanding of inferential articulation sufficient to provide what is wanted, a fully robust notion of truth according to which things as they are rationally constrain our judgments? I cannot even begin to defend the claim here, but I would say that the answer to that question is, perhaps surprisingly, yes. ⁴⁵

**IV Conclusion**

In *Making It Explicit* Brandom develops an account of the nature of language – that is, as he thinks of it, “of the social practices that distinguish us as rational, indeed logical, concept-mongering creatures – knowers and agents” (p. xi) – by appeal to a social pragmatist understanding of norms as instituted statuses and an inferentialist understanding of semantic content. My focus here has been on the latter, on Brandom’s inferentialism about meaning, although a question was raised in passing also about Brandom’s I-Thou social pragmatism. What I have tried to show is that Brandom’s variety of inferentialism is not the only one available to us. Nor,
I have indicated, is it even the most plausible. That language constitutively involves inferential articulation is a fundamental insight; the task is to develop a variety of inferentialism that is adequate to our needs.

Notes

1 Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), henceforth MIE. References will be given parenthetically by page number.


4 Brandom does distinguish among material inferences. In the game he outlines, assertions change the score by changing what speakers and audiences are thereby committed and entitled to according to three different sorts of rules implicit in practice: commissive inferential properties according to which commitment to one claim entails commitment to another; permissive inferential properties according to which entitlement to one claim entails entitlement to another; and incompatibility relations according to which commitment to one claim is incompatible with entitlement to another. We can, Brandom says, understand both logically good inferences and those that are materially good in something like Sellars’s sense on the basis of commissive inferential relations among sentences as they are exhibited in scorekeeping practice. Inductive inferences (like that from “This is a John Deere tractor” to “It is green”) are to be explained in terms of permissive inferential relations among sentences as exhibited in practice. And an account of counterfactual reasoning can, he says, be developed on the basis of incompatibility relations. (See MIE, pp. 168–9, 634–5.) Nevertheless, what is most fundamental to his account is the fact that the three sorts of inference – permissive, commissive, and incompatibility – are equally constitutive of content.

5 “This [representationalist] approach is objectionable if it is pretended that an account in these terms gives one an independent grip on what is expressed by the declarative use of sentences – as though one could understand the notions of states of affairs or truth conditions in advance of understanding claiming or judging” (MIE, p. 496).

6 Brandom does not explicitly invoke the Myth of the Given in *Making It Explicit*, but, as should become clear, it is nonetheless central for him.

7 Brandom provides this picture in his study guide to Wilfrid Sellars’s *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 126, and for the quotations to follow, p. 127.

8 See chapter 6 for Brandom’s discussion of such commitments.


13 “Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and the Causal Modalities”, pp. 306–7. Sellars returns to this theme thirty years later in “Mental Events”, Philosophical Studies 39 (1981): 325–45, arguing that although mere animals can have “innate abilities to be aware of something as something” (p. 336), only animals with logical locutions in their vocabularies have the sort of awareness we enjoy, the sort of awareness that is relevant to scientific inquiry, the pursuit of truth.


15 Sellars, Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind, §41, p 82.

16 This idea is critical to the course of intellectual evolution Sellars traces in Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.

17 As the point is put in Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind, §38, the “metaphor of ‘foundations’ is misleading”, and it is misleading “above all ... because of its static character. One seems forced to choose between the picture of an elephant which rests on a tortoise (What supports the tortoise?) and the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where does it begin?). Neither will do. For empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a foundation but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not all at once.”

18 From this perspective, the mistake of communitarian readings of Wittgenstein is to suppose that because the language is essentially shared, the norm of truth must be understood in terms of what “we” say. Language is essentially public; nevertheless, Sellars urges, the norms it embodies should be understood in light of the striving for truth; concepts are essentially public but the criterion of the correctness of their application lies in things as they are.

19 This is not to say that our understanding of the meanings of these concepts essentially depends on the fact that they have such a higher-order isomorphism with observational concepts. In principle it must be possible directly to formulate the rules governing the use of such concepts. For, as Sellars argues in “Scientific Realism or Irenic Instrumentalism”, Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. II, eds. R. S. Cohen and M. W. Wartofsky (New York: Humanities Press, 1965), “to suppose otherwise is to return to some form of abstractionism or givenness” (p 179).

20 See Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind, part XVI, “The Logic of Private Episodes: Impressions”.


24 In Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind Sellars puts the point this way: ‘the rubric ‘...’ means ‘...’’ is a linguistic device for conveying the information that a mentioned word, in this case ‘rot’, plays the same role in a certain linguistic economy, in this case the linguistic economy of German-speaking peoples, as does the word ‘red’, which is not mentioned but used – used in a unique way; exhibited, so to speak – and which occurs ‘on the right-hand side’ of the semantic statement” (§31, p. 67).
To say that a sentence is true in this sense is to say that it (or any other sentence with the same role) is "correctly assertible; assertible, that is, in accordance with the relevant semantical rules, and on the basis of such additional, though unspecified, information as these rules may require" (Science and Metaphysics, IV, §26, p. 101).

A statement to the effect that a linguistic item pictures a nonlinguistic item by virtue of the semantic uniformities characteristic of a certain conceptual structure is, in an important sense, an object language statement, for though it mentions linguistic objects, it treats them as items in the order of causes and effects, i.e. in rerum natura, and speaks directly of their functioning in this order in a way which is to be sharply contrasted with the metalinguistic statements of logical semantics, in which the key role is played by abstract singular terms" (Science and Metaphysics, V, §59, p. 137).


See my "Empirical Knowledge: Kantian Themes and Sellarsian Variations" for a more detailed argument.


See my “Viète, Descartes, and the Emergence of Modern Mathematics”, Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal 25 (2004): 87–117, which discusses in further detail the differences between ancient and early modern mathematics.

The question how exactly we should understand Frege’s conception of sense, both for the case of the formula language of arithmetic and for that of the formula language of pure thought, is addressed in Chapter 4 of my Frege’s Logic.

Again, see chapter 4 of Frege’s Logic for an account of how exactly this is to work.

I explore the role such definitions play in proofs in Frege’s logic, and their significance for understanding the pursuit of truth in mathematics, in “Striving for Truth in the Practice of Mathematics: Kant and Frege”, Grazer Philosophische Studien 75 (2007), pp. 65–92.

Frege provides many examples. See, for example, “Boole’s Logical Calculus and the Concept-script” and other essays from the early 1880s.

See chapter 4 of Frege’s Logic for a preliminary discussion.

SHOULD SEMANTICS BE DEFLATED?

Michael Dummett

[Typographical note: in the following, double quotation marks function either as Quinean quasi-quotes or as quotation marks within quotation marks.]

P: Should semantic theories be deflated, as Robert Brandom believes?
Q: What is a semantic theory, and what is it for?
P: The notion of a semantic theory was invented by logicians. The first systematic semantic theory was given by Gottlob Frege, the founder of modern mathematical logic. A semantic theory holds for a particular language, and Frege’s semantic theory applied to the formal language of his magnum opus, *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*. Frege had some quite special ideas about the nature of a semantic theory (in his terminology, a specification of the Bedeutungen of the expressions of the language); but we need not follow these, or even explain them, at this point. To formalise logic, you have in the first place to have a syntax, which consists of a specification of the different categories of primitive expression and an account of how these may be put together to form sentences. Of these, a few may be designated logical constants relative to the formalisation. Typically, these consist of the sign of identity, together with expressions that serve to form complex sentences out of simpler ones. The latter typically consist of the sentential operators and first- and perhaps higher-order quantifiers, but may include other operators such as modal and temporal ones. Since generality is always expressed by logicians by means of the quantifiers introduced by Frege, the notation will need bound variables to be governed by them; when only first-order quantifiers are considered, the notation for the formalisation will also need schematic letters, representing indeterminate expressions of the different categories. The formalisation will lay down basic rules of deduction and provide effective means of deriving further rules. It will apply to formal languages constructed in accordance with the given syntax, but of course having specific non-logical primitives in place of schematic letters, and to such fragments of natural language as can be represented by means of that syntax.
Q: Come on, we know all that; I asked you what a semantic theory is, and is for.
P: I’m coming to that. When we have constructed our formalisation of logic, two questions arise about it. First, is it sound? That is, are the deductive rules derivable
in it really valid? They usually obviously are; but to show that they are, we need to spell out what it is for such a rule to be valid. This is what a semantic theory does. But when it has done so, the second, much harder, question arises. Is our formalisation complete? That is, can we derive in it every valid rule (that is, every valid rule statable using only the logical constants recognised by the formalisation)?

Q: How does the semantic theory do that?

P: It does so by specifying the types, not of meanings, but of functions of expressions of the different categories (and the specific such functions of the logical constants). This is usually expressed by assigning to an expression of each category an entity of a particular kind as its semantic value, for instance to a one-place predicate a property, to a two-place predicate a relation, to a functor (functional expression) a function, and so on. It is then explained, in terms of such an assignment, how expressions of the different categories interact, when combined, to yield more complex expressions with resultant semantic values, and, eventually, sentences with their semantic values.

The idea is that the semantic value of an expression is that feature of it which is needed – and which is sufficient – to determine whether a sentence containing it is or is not true. If the logic is classical, the semantic value of a sentence will be a truth-value, that is, either the value true or the value false. This amounts to taking a subsentence of a more complex sentence as contributing to determining whether the complex sentence is or is not true solely by its own truth-value. If the logic is not classical, the semantic value of a sentence will be something else, for example a set of possible worlds, but always something in terms of which truth simpliciter can be defined, in this case as the actual world’s belonging to the set.

Now when the semantic theory is expressed in terms of semantic values, questions may be raised about what properties, relations and functions are. But there is no need to express it in this way: it can be expressed in a manner more closely related to the explanation of how, semantically, expressions of different categories combine together, namely by attributing to the expressions of different categories their semantic roles. Thus, in a classical theory, the role of an individual constant or other singular term is to pick out a particular object (element of the domain); that of a one-place predicate is either to apply to (or be true of) or not to apply to (or not be true of) each given object; that of a two-place predicate either to hold between or not to hold between any given pair of objects, taken in order; that of a one-place functor to map each given object onto another object; and so on.

Q: You said that, in a classical theory, the semantic value of a sentence is one of the two truth-values. What is its semantic role?

P: We should, of course, be careful. When speaking of a formal language, it is all right to talk about sentences as being true or false; but, when speaking of a natural language, we ought to talk about statements, since many sentences of natural language contain indexicals and demonstratives.

Q: All right, what is the semantic role of a statement in a natural language, or of a sentence of a formal language?

P: The semantic role of a statement, or sentence of a formal language, is to say something that is or is not true.
Q: And what, in these terms, is the criterion for a valid deductive rule?
P: That, under every interpretation of the schematic letters (that is, for every assignment to each schematic letter of a specific semantic role of the type appropriate to its category), it should carry sentences that say something true (the premisses) into a sentence that also says something true (the conclusion).

Q: What is it for a sentence or statement to say something true?
P: It is for an assertion made by uttering it to be correct.

Q: And when is such an assertion correct?
P: Now you are asking a deep question, which I do not think it is necessary to go into in order to consider whether semantics ought to be deflated.

Q: I was not aiming to ask anything deep: I simply wanted to find out what you mean by an assertion’s being correct.
P: Surely you see that the whole practice of making assertions depends upon our being able to judge them as correct or incorrect.

Q: Yes, I do. But there are different kinds of judgement that we can make. Suppose that Adrian Abbott says, ‘It will be sunny all day tomorrow’, and Bernard Bishop replies, ‘No, it won’t.’ Abbott, thus challenged, replies that he has studied all the weather forecasts, and they agree that it will be sunny. Moreover, he himself knows something of meteorology, and can give his own persuasive reasons for thinking that it will be sunny. Bishop replies, ‘I don’t care. I know it will rain. I’ve arranged with some friends to go on a picnic, and I know from past experience that it is bound to rain.’ Abbott replies, ‘That’s not a reason: it’s just superstition.’ Now was Abbott’s assertion correct?
P: Well, he had good reasons for making it, and was perfectly entitled to make it: but whether his assertion was correct or not depends on what happened the following day.

Q: That helps to answer my question. Suppose that the next day, despite the weather forecasts, it rained heavily in the afternoon, at just the time for which Bishop had arranged his picnic. Was Abbott’s assertion correct in this case?
P: No, it was evidently not correct.

Q: Despite his having had excellent grounds for it?
P: Yes, but the evidence obtainable the following day by observing the weather overrode the evidence available the day before. Whether an assertion is correct or not depends on the best evidence, whether actually obtained or not, involving observations from the most suitable place and time.

Q: So was Bishop’s assertion correct?
P: He had no business making it: his reason for it was a bad one. But what he said was in fact true.

Q: Should I infer from what you have said that there must always be evidence in favour of an assertion for it to be correct, whether or not the speaker actually has or ever gets that evidence?
P: Now you really are getting into deep waters; I don’t want to answer that question. It really is irrelevant to whether semantics should be deflated.

Q: Well, but you explained the incorrectness of Abbott’s assertion by the
subsequent availability of counter-evidence to it stronger than the evidence he had for it. If the existence of evidence is not essential, I still don’t know what you mean by an assertion’s being correct. I need some general formulation.

P: Oh, well, let us just say that a statement asserted by some speaker is true if whatever else for his assertion to be correct, other than his having good enough evidence or grounds for it, holds good.

Q: That is pretty mystifying, but I’ll accept it as good enough to be going on with.

P: Perhaps I can help you by saying, what I hope is equivalent to my original answer, that truth is what must be preserved from premisses to conclusion of a valid argument.

Q: Just the condition for semantic validity.

P: Yes, but I am meaning it as applying to deductive arguments framed in natural language.

Q: It is exactly what Brandom says (even if it does not exactly fit with his account of ‘is true’). Well, I will accept what you say as clear enough to be going on with.

P: Thanks. I think it will do as a basis for discussing whether semantics should be deflated.

Q: What does this mean?

P: I will discuss Robert Brandom’s view of the matter. Brandom believes that truth is not a property of sentences or statements, and that reference is not a relation between singular terms and objects. (He also believes that extension is not a relation between one-place predicates and classes of objects, or even a one–many relation between such predicates and individual objects; but let us confine ourselves to singular terms.) He therefore deprecates asking or answering such questions as yours, namely, ‘What is it for a sentence or statement to say something true?’ You were asking in what the property of being true consists; and that, according to Brandom, is to misunderstand the grammar of the word ‘true’. You would have been similarly misunderstanding the grammar of the word ‘refer’ if you had asked, ‘What makes it the case that a given singular term refers to a particular object?’

Q: Well, as to that, it seems to me that we need to make a sharp distinction here between formal languages and natural languages. If I understood your explanation of semantic theories correctly, in a semantic theory for a formal language we simply stipulate that each individual constant is to be taken as picking out a certain particular object, and that each primitive one-place functor is to be taken as representing a particular way of mapping objects on to other objects, and so on. Then what makes it the case that an individual constant ‘a’ picks out an object o is that it has been laid down that it does, and what makes it the case that a singular term ‘f(a)’ picks out an object p is that it has been laid down that ‘f’ is to represent a mapping that carries the object o into the object p. Similarly with truth. That a formal sentence has the value true is just a consequence of the semantic roles the primitives occurring in it have been stipulated to possess, together with the rules that have been laid down to determine the semantic role.
of a complex expression formed by combining primitives of the language.

P: I agree. But for the ‘formal language’ to be regarded not just as a formalism but as a formal language, we must know what would be the content of an assertion made by the assertive utterance of a sentence of the formalism: and this is where the connection between the truth of a sentence and the correctness of an assertion must be invoked.

Q: All right. But surely Brandom was not interested in the semantics of formal languages, still less in the use of a semantic theory to characterise the validity of deductive inferences. He was interested in semantic theories for natural languages – for already existing languages currently in use for communication, and – I must add to accommodate your fuzzy answer to my question about truth – in which there exists a practice of making assertions by the utterance of declarative sentences.

P: You are surely right. That is what Brandom is interested in. And it is a semantic theory for such a language that he wishes to deflate.

Q: How is he going to do that?

P: Well, first, he accepts the account of the word ‘true’ as a device of disquotation, or, more generally, of unnominalisation. Brandom regards expressions like ‘the second law of thermodynamics’ and ‘Fermat’s last theorem’ as names of sentences. (Or, perhaps he would prefer to say, of any of a class of sentences with the same content.) Likewise, Brandom takes a term such as ‘what Jones said when asked where he was at that time’ to refer to a sentence. To apply the expression ‘is true’ to any such term is to say something with the same content as the sentence referred to. But there are also contexts involving quantification, explicitly or implicitly. For these, ‘it is true’ is understood as a ‘prosentence’, where this term is analogous to ‘pronoun’. In ‘I lost my pen, but found it again’, ‘it’ is a pronoun of laziness; it could be replaced by ‘my pen’. Likewise, in ‘You have proved the conjecture, so it is true’ the clause ‘it is true’ may be termed a prosentence of laziness. But in ‘Whenever I give you a book, you always lose it’, the pronoun ‘it’ functions as a bound variable governed by an (implicit) quantifier. Likewise, in ‘Whatever the judge said, it is true’, the clause ‘it is true’ is functioning as a bound prosentential variable. These two cases, Brandom claims, exhaust the intelligible uses of the word ‘true’, and have been explained without treating truth as a property of sentences or of anything else, or treating ‘… is true’ as a predicate.

Q: Actually, Brandom does not like quantificational explanations of pronouns, nor, presumably, of prosentences, preferring an analysis by means of his theory of anaphora, on the ground that the simplest quantificational analysis sometimes yields the wrong sense.

P: True, but he distinguishes in the first instance between the ‘lazy’ and the ‘quantificational’ use of pronouns, and in any case the distinction is quite clear. Moreover, the awkward cases can always be dealt with by means of a more elaborate quantificational rendering; sometimes Boolos’s interpretation of second-order logic by means of plural terms would help. Anyway, these details
Q: I suppose not. How is ‘... is false’ to be understood on Brandom’s principles?
P: He does not say; but I suppose that ‘it is false’ is a prosentence for the negation of the sentence on which it is anaphorically dependent, or any sentence on which it is quantificationally dependent.

Q: Very well. And how does he deal with ‘refer to’?
P: In an analogous way. It too has a disquotational or unnominalising effect, and it too is a proform-forming operator, but forming a pronoun. Thus ‘the one (or: the man) that “Leibniz” refers to (or: denotes)’ has the same content as ‘Leibniz’, so that ‘the one that “Leibniz” refers to is Leibniz’ – otherwise put ““Leibniz” refers to Leibniz’ – is true. We can also truly say things like ‘The man Warden Spooner referred to as “Aristotle” is St Paul’.

Q: Well, I suppose that Brandom is right that this analysis will explain many – very many – of the uses we make of ‘true’, ‘false’ and ‘refer to’ in colloquial speech.
P: Yes, indeed it will. But it will not explain all the uses we make of ‘true’ and ‘false’ as semantic terms of art.

Q: Brandom regards that as a merit of his theory. He thinks all uses of those expressions which cannot be explained by his theory are illegitimate.
P: I know he does. Well, what about the statement ‘There are sentences that are neither true nor false’? I am here for the sake of argument taking what is to be said to be true or to be false as a sentence (rather than a statement or a proposition), as Brandom does.

Q: What sentences are you thinking of?
P: Well, we could consider the old warhorse the sentence, considered as uttered in 2005, ‘The present King of France is bald’. Or we could consider the semantic theory that sentences in the future tense are neither true nor false when uttered, but (when they are not governed by ‘always’ or ‘never’) become either true or false at the time to which they refer.

Q: Brandom discusses ‘The present King of France does not exist’, but not ‘The present King of France is bald’. But I suppose that on his theory the sentence ‘The sentence “The present King of France is bald”, considered as uttered in 2005, is neither true nor false’ would have to have the same content as ‘The one who is King of France in 2005 is not bald and is not not bald’ – a contradiction. And similarly for the theory concerning sentences in the future tense.
P: That seems right. It must for Brandom be self-contradictory to say that any sentence is neither true nor false.

Q: I suppose that that conclusion must be agreeable to you, as a proponent of intuitionistic logic.
P: It is true, I should endorse the conclusion. But I disapprove of its being arrived at in so slick a way. Brandom would derive it (if you are right about his interpretation of ‘is false’) from two principles. (A) The generalisation of: ‘The present King of France is bald’ is true iff the present King of France is bald. And (B) the equivalence of ‘false’ with ‘not true’. (A) follows from his deflationary account of ‘is true’. Now I think that the generalisation of (A) cannot be assumed as holding
in advance of settling which type of semantic theory is correct. The consideration which drives people to accept it is the undoubted fact that someone X who commits himself to a given statement and someone Y who commits himself to that statement’s being true have made exactly the same commitment. But it does not follow that the two sentences by which they have avowed their commitments are equivalent – e.g. the two sentences ‘The present King of France is bald’ and ‘The statement “The present King of France is bald” is true’, considered as uttered at about the same date (2005 or 1760 or whenever). To grasp the content of an assertion made by the utterance of a sentence one needs to know only what I call the assertoric content of that sentence – what must hold good if the assertion is to be correct. The assertoric contents of ‘The present King of France is bald’ and of ‘The statement “The present King of France is bald” is true’ coincide, and must coincide: that was what was meant by saying that the use of either to make an assertion incurs the same commitment. But to understand a sentence completely, one must grasp also what I call its ingredient sense, namely the manner in which it contributes to the sense of a complex sentence within which it occurs; and this is not uniquely determined by its assertoric content. What is in question, in judging whether (A) holds good or not, is the ingredient sense of each of the two sentences, because they there both occur as subsentences of a complex sentence. And from the coincidence of the assertoric contents of the two sentences the truth of (A) does not follow. The principle exemplified by (A), namely that all Tarski biconditionals, as we may call them, hold good, has to be argued for, on the basis of whatever semantic theory we hold to be correct.

Q: This is very convincing in principle; but can you give me an example of what you mean?
P: Well, from the relevant Tarski biconditional we may infer: ‘King Arthur fought the Saxons at the battle of Mt Badon’ is not true iff King Arthur did not fight the Saxons at the battle of Mt Badon.

Q: What is wrong with that? You would agree with it, surely.
P: I should not agree with it, as a matter of fact. I should distinguish between the sentences:

King Arthur did not fight the Saxons at the battle of Mt Badon

and:

It is not the case that King Arthur fought the Saxons at the battle of Mt Badon.

But it does not matter very much what I think. If a sentence is neither true nor false, it follows that it is not true; and it also follows that it is not false, and hence that its negation is not true. From this it is clear that to say that the sentence:

King Arthur fought the Saxons at the battle of Mt Badon – or any other sentence whatever – is neither true nor false is inconsistent with the Tarski biconditional for that sentence.

Q: Well, why does that show anything wrong with the Tarski biconditional? You don’t think that there are any sentences that are neither true nor false, do you?
P: No, I don’t, but I repeat that it doesn’t matter what I think. It is on the basis
of my interpretation of negation, and of my understanding of what it is for a sentence to be true, that I conclude that no sentence is neither true nor false. In fact, anyone who thinks that ‘false’ is equivalent to ‘not true’ must think the same.

Q: If I am right about what Brandom would take to be the grammar of the word ‘false’, he would say that it follows immediately from the grammar of the words ‘true’ and ‘false’ that ‘not true’ is equivalent to ‘false’.

P: He would say that, yes. But it is not a stupid thing to think that, if there was no such man as King Arthur, or no such place as Mt Badon, or no such battle as the battle of Mt Badon, then our sentence about King Arthur is neither true nor false: both Frege and Strawson thought that.

Q: Brandom would agree that it is not stupid: just wrong.

P: I object to ruling Frege’s and Strawson’s view out of consideration on allegedly grammatical grounds. The matter calls for examination, not arbitrary stipulation.

Q: Very well. Deflation is not supposed to be stipulation, but a theory about the grammar of the words ‘true’ and ‘false’. But I concede that you have shown that there are views which do not respect this alleged grammar which are nevertheless worthy of examination. But why do we need a semantic theory for a natural language, whether deflated or not deflated? Surely not for the reason you explained for the semantics of a formal language?

P: The need arises from the desire of philosophers to say what meaning – linguistic meaning – is. That is to say, how the content of any assertion is determined from the words used to make it. Of course, that depends on the language being used to make the assertion; and so we arrive at a desire for a theory of meaning for a language.

Q: Does a semantic theory for a natural language constitute a theory of meaning for that language, then?

P: By no means: it is only the first stage in constructing a theory of meaning. But deflating semantics is abandoning all desire for a theory of meaning.

Q: Why?

P: Well, suppose that the deflationary theory says, as a non-deflationary theory might also do, that the name ‘Leibniz’ refers to Leibniz. The non-deflationist, taking this as a very cautious first step towards explaining the meaning of the name ‘Leibniz’, that is, in Wittgensteinian terms, its use in the language, might ask either of two questions: first, ‘What is it for the name “Leibniz” to refer to the philosopher Leibniz?’; and secondly, ‘What makes it the case that the name “Leibniz” refers to the philosopher Leibniz?’ He thinks that an answer to one or other of these questions will take us closer to having an account of the meaning or the use of the name ‘Leibniz’. But the deflationist will say, ‘You are making the very mistake I warned you against: you are taking “refer to” to express a relation between the name and the man. Nothing of the sort: it is just a feature of the grammar, in a literal sense, of the phrase “refer to”, namely its disquotational effect, that it is right to say, “The one referred to as ‘Leibniz’ is
Q: Well, he may reply so in this trivial case, but he would surely concede that the explanation of why ‘the author of the Monadology’ refers to Leibniz involves some semantic explanation of definite descriptions or of functors like ‘the author of’.

P: He would not concede that at all. On Brandom’s account the disquotational effect of the ‘refer to’ locution works as well for complex terms as for simple ones. Thus it is a grammatical truth that ‘the author of the Monadology’ refers to the author of the Monadology and a historical truth that Leibniz was the author of the Monadology. Thus we need only historical, not semantic, knowledge.

Q: Well, what answers should be given to your two questions?

P: The question what it is for a name or phrase to refer to a particular object asks what is the point, or the consequences, of taking an expression to be a singular term and to have that object as its referent. It can be answered only in the light of the whole semantic theory, just as the notion of a card’s being a trump can be answered only in the light of the rules of card games of a certain type.

Brandom rightly inveighs against the idea that there is an antecedently intelligible conception of reference or designation, for instance of the relation of a name to its bearer, that can be invoked in explaining meaning as representation. Antecedently, that is, to an explanation of the role that names, or other singular terms, play in sentences. He links this with the idea that whole sentences bear the same relation to states of affairs; but, even without this accompaniment, the conception of reference as a notion that we understand otherwise than as having a place within a whole semantic theory is as absurd as thinking that we can know what makes a card a trump in advance of learning the rules of some card game that has trumps in it. Brandom rightly stigmatises this as violating what he calls ‘the priority of the propositional’; that is, the principle that the meaning of any subsentential expression consists in the way it contributes to determining the meanings of sentences of which it forms part – one of Frege’s fundamental insights.

Q: What, then, is the point of a semantic theory?

P: A semantic theory shows how the expressions that make up sentences go to determine the semantic roles of those sentences. In the light of many semantic theories one may say that the semantic role of a sentence can be encapsulated in a semantic value – perhaps just its being true or false, or, perhaps, its being true in certain possible worlds and false in others. But we are speaking quite generally; that is, we are making no assumptions about which type of semantic theory is correct; and so I don’t want to assume anything about what the semantic role of a sentence should be taken to be, save that it must be that which determines, or characterises, the use that is to be made of the sentence in converse.

Brandom argues in favour of an inferential as opposed to a representational semantics. I am wholly with him in rejecting the idea of representation as the fundamental notion of a theory of meaning. When we have a satisfactory theory of meaning, we may explain a notion of representation – that according to
which a sentence represents a possible state of affairs, or a predicate a possible property – in terms of it – the theory of meaning. The theory of meaning fixes the notion of representation we may legitimately employ; the notion of representation is not available antecedently as that in terms of which we can build our theory of meaning.

There is a good deal of truth in the idea of an inferential theory of meaning, which I will discuss with you later. But a semantic theory is not yet a theory of meaning, only a preliminary to one; and in a semantic theory the semantic role of sentences must be the goal. Even if their semantic roles are supposed to be encapsulated in their truth-values, this is far from irrelevant to their role in inferences. Truth is what is preserved from premisses to conclusion of a valid inference.

Q: Is the validity of an inference then always to be characterised as the truth of the conclusion under every interpretation under which all the premisses are true?

P: I do not think so. Consider a three-valued semantics, with the values true (T), middle (M) and false (F). The truth-table for → (‘if–then’) is:

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<th>→</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>F</th>
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<tr>
<td>T</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>M</td>
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<td>T</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
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<td>T</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

and that for negation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>¬A</th>
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<td>T</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Then we may define “TA” to mean “¬(A → ¬A)”; it will be seen that “TA” has the value true when A has the value true, and the value false when A has either the value middle or the value false. Now do we want to say that the inference from A to “TA” is valid? Under every interpretation under which A is true, “TA” is true; but when A has the middle value, “TA” is, as it were, further removed from being true than A is. Well, of course, much depends upon the significance of the middle value in this semantic theory, and I have not explained that. I wanted only to suggest to you that that characterisation of the validity of an inference might not always be the one we want. But the semantic role of a sentence will always be closely connected, one way or another, with the
validity of inferences in which it figures.

Q: Well, what about the second of the two questions, namely what determines what object it is that a proper name refers to?

P: That, obviously, is a matter of the grounds for adopting a specific semantic theory. There is no general answer: it is a matter of the sense of the proper name in question.

Q: But are there not various theories about how reference is determined?

P: There are. Some hold that reference requires a causal connection between the bearer and the name. Others hold the Kripkean theory that it is a matter, after a supposed ‘initial baptism’, of the subsequent speakers’ deference to the intentions of previous speakers.

Q: What do you think about these theories?

P: No doubt, when the bearer of the name is causally efficacious, there is always some causal connection between it and its name: but it is difficult to see how that connection could be so described as to fit all cases and determine that object as the bearer. Besides, the bearers of proper names, even when not abstract, are often not causally efficacious: is the continent of Asia causally efficacious? Is the month of April or the game of Whist? If there is to be a theory of the reference of proper names at all, it ought to cover a wider range. As for the Kripkean theory, it has the demerit of failing to allow for unintentional shifts of reference, which do occur (Gareth Evans gave the excellent example of ‘Madagascar’).

Q: Never mind about these particular theories. Does a theory of reference, if correct, need to be known to speakers of the language?

P: Certainly, they do not need to be able to formulate it, any more than they can formulate the rules of grammar that they obey. (Consider the rule that the conjunction ‘that’ may be omitted after a verb, but not after a noun.) But the theory has to be responsive to the judgements of speakers. It could not hold good that a name in fact referred to one object, even though all speakers, when fully informed of relevant circumstances, would judge that it referred to another. The reference of a name depends on its sense; its sense is a reflection of its use. It is used in sentences; its reference goes to determine whether or not one or another sentence is true, that is, can be used to make a correct assertion. An assignment of reference to a name is to be judged correct or incorrect according as it does or does not agree with speakers’ judgements of such sentences. If a theory demands that a certain geographical region be assigned to a name as its referent, but speakers do not judge sentences containing that name according as things stand in that region, then the theory is wrong.

Q: What is this ‘sense’ of which you speak?

P: The sense of an expression is a part of its meaning. The meaning of a word or sentence reflects its use by speakers of the language; it must therefore be something that is either known explicitly by them or manifest in their use of the expression or in their responses to its use by others.

Frege, who did not have any general term for ‘meaning’, made a fundamental
distinction between components of meaning, namely sense, force and tone; even though he did not characterise either force or tone accurately, this was an essential beginning. The force attached to the utterance of a sentence tells the hearer whether the speaker is making an assertion, asking a question, expressing a wish, making a request, propounding a hypothesis, telling him or others to do something, or the like. Some words (and some constructions and inflections) serve, in part or in whole, to determine the force attached.

We saw a semantic theory as a first stage in constructing a theory of meaning for a language. Such a theory determines the category to which each primitive expression belongs, and thus the kind of role it plays in sentences. That takes us an essential first step towards characterising its sense. We lack a full knowledge of how to construct a syntax of natural languages that will serve as the basis of a semantic theory, save by modelling it on the syntax of formal languages. A fully successful semantic theory for a natural language must rest on a fully adequate syntax for the language.

The sense of any expression consists in its contribution to fixing, for any sentence containing it, what is required to determine its semantic value, in the light of how things are in the world: its truth-value in classical semantics, its truth-value in each possible world in possible-worlds semantics, the decidable property of being a canonical proof of it in intuitionistic semantics, and so forth. It does this by fixing what is required to determine the expression’s own semantic role.

The tone of an expression cannot affect its semantic value, but aids communication in other ways. It may express the speaker’s attitude to what he is speaking of; it may distinguish an especially formal or informal mode of locution; it may indicate what the speaker was presupposing, and thus carry a Gricean implicate; it may alert the hearer to what the speaker will say next; it may carry an emotive charge. Some words, such as expletives, carry only tone; some share their sense, but not their tone, with other words, as ‘passed away’ does with ‘died’.

Q: This seems a reasonable classification of ingredients of meaning. How are they related to linguistic converse?

P: To an assertion the hearer may respond in one of four ways. He may not respond overtly, preferring to keep his judgement of the assertion to himself. He may accept the assertion; he may deny it; he may challenge it; or he may demur. A denial declares that an assertion with that content can never be correct. A challenge asks the speaker to produce a justification, to give his grounds. If the justification seems to the hearer inadequate, he will of course not accept the assertion, which he views the speaker as not entitled to make; but he may well not deny it. A demurral says, in effect, ‘You may be right, but I should not put it like that’; the hearer is objecting to the tone, not the sense, of the sentence used to make the assertion.

Q: I take it, then, that a theory of meaning for the language will cover all these three ingredients of meaning?

P: Oh, yes. A theory of meaning, as I conceive of it, will give a complete account
of how the language functions. Of course, no one could in practice construct a comprehensive theory of meaning, in this sense, for a whole natural language; if we are interested in what meaning is, it is enough that we describe the *shape* that such a theory would take.

Q: Well, what conclusion should we draw about the role of a semantic theory?

P: The classification of the expressions of the language into their respective categories, in the light of its syntax as we may hope to describe it, partially characterises the senses of those expressions, and hence must be grasped by anyone if he is to understand them: it may be better to say that it lays down the *kind* of sense each expression must have (where the senses of proper names, two-place predicates and sentential operators, for example, are of very different kinds). Their specific semantic roles – for example, to which particular objects the proper names refer – need not be known to the speakers, and are therefore not part of the theory of meaning. But they are a *base* for the characterisation of the senses of expressions of the language, inasmuch as, in the light of the way the world is, the sense of each expression determines what is its semantic value (or semantic role). The speakers must know the senses of the expressions they use, and must therefore know how their semantic roles or semantic values (*Bedeutungen* – referents) are to be determined; but they need not know what those referents or semantic roles specifically are. Without the classification of the expressions into semantic categories, we should not know what form an account of their senses must have. Those senses must then be such, first, that they may be of a kind to be known by the speakers, at least implicitly, and, second, that they are sufficient to determine suitable referents or semantic roles for them. If semantics is deflated, in Brandom’s manner, we cannot even begin to envisage constructing a theory of meaning.

Q: You have been careful to try to formulate what you have said so as to be independent of the type of semantic theory, or theory of meaning, that is adopted. But can you say a little about the type that you would favour?

P: Well, I am at one with Brandom in rejecting a truth-conditional theory of meaning, though not on his deflationist grounds. It seems to me that, to arrive at a satisfactory theory of meaning, we have to ask what is it that someone needs to know in order to understand a given language and to be able to use it. It strikes me that, apart from a grasp of the different kinds of force that may be attached to its sentences, there are two salient features of the assertoric use which a prospective speaker must master. On the one hand, he must learn when he is *entitled* to make an assertion with a given content, what grounds justify that assertion. These grounds, though they will in general involve inference, will not be confined to it, since such reasoning will often rest on premises arrived at by observation. On the other hand, a speaker must understand what he is committed to by accepting a given assertion or judgement, what consequences it will have for him. These consequences, though they will in general involve inference, will not be confined to it, since they will often issue in particular actions or lines of action. A satisfactory theory of meaning must
therefore take these two features as determinative of the senses of sentences of
the language, and of its subsentential expressions as together contributing to
fix them. It is because of the prominent role that inference plays in both that
there is much truth in the claim that a theory of meaning must be based on the
notion of inference, though it cannot be based exclusively on that.

Now I have thought that, to formulate a theory of meaning, we need appeal
to only one of these two features. The ground for this is that if there is that
balance which ought to exist between these two features of use, which I have
characterised in terms of the two notions of harmony and stability, either one of
the two will be uniquely determined by the other. But I feel uncertain whether
this is a sufficient justification for thus simplifying the task of constructing a
detailed characterisation of the senses of expressions of the language. It greatly
simplifies the task of laying down the specific senses of those expressions. It will
not greatly simplify the general background to be incorporated into the theory
of meaning. In a theory which takes just one of the two features as determining
sense, it must be explained how the other feature is to be derived from that one;
but, if the theory invokes both features in specifying sense, it must still explain
what it is for them to be in harmony. My ground for doubting the strategy of
specifying sense in terms of just one of the two features of use is that we are not
entitled to assume that harmony and stability obtain in the linguistic practice
in which we – or others – grow up to participate. In some cases, for instance
that of unwarrantedly pejorative terms, they blatantly do not obtain, but we can
easily eliminate from our vocabulary the expressions to whose use this is due.
But harmony may fail for subtler reasons, without our detecting the failure;
outside formal logic, it is not an easy matter to decide whether or not harmony
prevails. If we are to describe linguistic practice as it actually is, perhaps we need
a theory of meaning in which the justification and consequences of assertions
are specified independently of one another. That would be quite a complicated
theory to have to construct; I do not much want to contemplate it.

Q: Thank you very much for your explanations.
P: Not at all: thank you for listening to me so patiently.
In his monumental 1994 work Making It Explicit, Robert Brandom announces a revolution in the philosophy of language. Brandom in some ways self-consciously models his revolution on Kant’s famous “Copernican revolution” in the Critique of Pure Reason – so much so that a clever parody posted for some time in the University of Pittsburgh philosophy department superimposed Brandom’s title on the well-known cover of the Norman Kemp Smith edition of the first Critique. With the publication in 2000 of Articulating Reasons, Brandom’s shorter guide to his philosophical program, we need only await the appearance of a B-edition of Making It Explicit to complete the parallel.

Nonetheless, I will contend that Brandom’s philosophical revolution neglects a crucial insight of Kant’s critical philosophy. I will show this by exploring one of Brandom’s favorite ways of expressing what is distinctive about his approach to the philosophy of language, his contrast between two “orders of explanation”, which he calls “representationalism” and “inferentialism”. According to Brandom, philosophy of language in the twentieth century has embraced the “representationalist” order of explanation, for which notions of representation, reference, truth, and the like are taken as explanatorily basic, and other notions, in particular notions of the correctness and incorrectness of inference, are explained in terms of them. In place of the representationalist order of explanation, Brandom advocates inferentialism, which takes broadly inferential notions as explanatorily basic. One of the main tasks of his work is then to show that representational idioms and locutions can be accounted for on this inferentialist basis. In particular, Brandom sets himself the goal of recapturing in inferentialist terms the objective evaluability of our linguistic performances. I will argue, though, that Brandom’s attempts at accounting for representational talk, and so for objectivity, fail, and that the reason that they fail is that his purely inferentialist program does not leave room for a proper conception of the objects which make up the world to which our linguistic performances are responsible, and of our cognitive relation to those objects. In a word, Brandom’s inferentialism has no room in it for that dimension of experience which Kant calls “intuition.”

The rhetoric of “orders of explanation,” “relative priority,” and so on pervades Brandom’s books. Time and again he locates his view in these terms. His view
grants explanatory priority to the distinctive features of discursive, concept-using creatures over their similarities with other sentient beings; to practical knowing-how over theoretical knowing-that; to linguistic over mental intentionality; and so on. Frequently, he presents his view as reacting against a “standard” or “normal” order of explanation, reversing it or “turning it on its head.” Where he admits antecedents to his views in other philosophers, these philosophers are usually portrayed as in the distinct minority, if not prophetic voices crying in the wilderness.

As noted above, Brandom’s revolution in the philosophy of language claims inspiration from Kant. Certainly his use of the rhetoric of “inverting orders of explanation” may be reminiscent of Kant’s famous remarks in the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

> Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them *a priori* through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an *a priori* cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us. This would be something like the first thoughts of Copernicus, who, when he did not make good progress in the explanation of the celestial motions if he assumed that the entire celestial host revolves around the observer, tried to see if he might not have greater success if he made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest. (CPR, Bxvi.)

And indeed Brandom appeals to Kant’s authority in motivating his inferentialist order of explanation. Closely associated with his rejection of representationalism is his adoption of what he calls a “top-down” rather than “bottom-up” semantic explanatory strategy. Representationalists typically begin with subsentential linguistic units – names and predicates – and their non-linguistic correlates – names refer to objects, and predicates to classes of objects, for example. Semantic features of sentences are then derived on this basis, on the model of Tarski’s famous definitions of truth and of logical consequence. Thus the usual order of explanation is from terms or concepts, to sentences or propositions, to inferential connections between sentences or propositions. In contrast, inferentialism requires that we treat sentences as prior in the order of semantic explanation to terms, since it is sentences which are caught up in inferential relations. Hence Brandom is committed to explaining the contents of subsentential expressions in terms of their contributions to the inferentially articulated contents of the sentences in which they occur.

Brandom traces this thesis of the “priority of the propositional” back to what he describes as Kant’s “claim that the fundamental unit of awareness or cognition, the minimum graspable, is the *judgment*. (MIE, p. 79) He justifies attributing this doctrine to Kant by appeal to the *Critique of Pure Reason*:
“As all acts of the understanding can be reduced to judgments, the understanding may be defined as the faculty of judging.” (CPR, A69/B94) For [Kant], interpretations of something as classified or classifier make sense only as remarks about its role in judgment. A concept just is a predicate of a possible judgment, which is why “the only use which the understanding can make of concepts is to form judgments by them.” (CPR, A68/B93) Thus for Kant, any discussion of content must start with the contents of judgments, since anything else has content insofar as it contributes to the contents of judgments. (MIE, pp. 79–80)

Brandom sees the thought which he here attributes to Kant as expressed in linguistic form in Frege's famous context principle that “it is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning”. This leads him to go so far as to speak of the “Kant-Frege strategy for explaining the concept of objects”, (MIE, p. 403, AR, p. 155) namely the strategy of explaining the concept of an object through the concept of a singular term, and the concept of a singular term through an analysis of the distinctive contribution of singular terms to the sentences in which they occur. Outlining his top-down strategy, he says “Talk of objects and object-representings and properties and property-representings would then proceed in terms of role in propositions and proposition-representings (as it does for Kant).” (MIE, p. 337)

Yet Brandom is clearly over-reading Kant here. His mistake is very like a mistake made by Hans Sluga in his interpretation of Frege, which Brandom also reproduces. Sluga points out that as early as the period of the Begriffsschrift of 1879 Frege already held to a Kantian thesis of the priority of judgment over concepts. He cites Frege: “In contrast to Boole, I begin with judgments and their contents and not with concepts. ... The formation of concepts I let proceed from judgments.” Sluga then goes on to remark that the context principle as found in Frege’s Foundations of Arithmetic of 1884 seems to imply “that there is a priority of sentence meaning over word meaning for every language, including a logically perfect one. In this stronger sense the principle would amount to the reaffirmation of the Kantian doctrine of the priority of judgments over concepts.” (GF, pp. 94–5) Brandom effectively takes over this reading of the development of Frege’s thought in his account of the antecedents of his top-down semantical strategy. Yet, as Michael Dummett has made clear, it is a mistake to see the Kantian thesis of the priority of judgment over concepts as an anticipation of the context principle: “The priority thesis concerns only concepts and functions, or, more exactly their linguistic expression; the context principle applies to words of all kinds, and is expressly invoked by Frege as applying to abstract singular terms.” Dummett’s point is that in adopting the context principle and using it as he does in Foundations, Frege is departing from the original Kantian insight that concepts – that is general representations – can only be understood as predicates of possible judgments, and moving to the distinctly non-Kantian view that all terms, general or singular, have meaning only in the context of a proposition. And he is doing so in service of the distinctly non-Kantian project of arguing that arithmetic is analytic and that objects – the numbers – can be given
to us simply through our grasp of the propositions in which names of those objects occur – so that “In arithmetic we are not concerned with objects which we come to know as something alien from without through the medium of the senses, but with objects given directly to our reason and, as its nearest kin, utterly transparent to it.” (FA, p. 115)

The crucial point here is simply that for Kant it is the understanding which is the faculty of judgment, and it is concepts which are nothing but predicates of possible judgments. But for Kant to suppose that from inference alone we could arrive at objects is a rationalist delusion. For cognition of objects we of course need not only judgment and concepts, but intuition. Kant follows the sentence which Brandom cites – “the understanding can make no other use of these concepts than that of judging by means of them” – with the remark that “since no representation pertains to the object immediately except intuition alone, a concept is thus never immediately related to an object, but is always related to some other representation of it (whether that be an intuition or itself already some other concept)” (CPR, A68/B93). As Kant famously claims:

> Our cognition arises from two fundamental sources in the mind, the first of which is the reception of representations (the receptivity of impressions), the second the faculty for cognizing an object by means of these representations (spontaneity of concepts); through the former an object is given to us, through the latter it is thought in relation to that representation (a mere determination of the mind). Intuition and concepts therefore constitute the elements of all our cognition, so that neither concepts without intuition corresponding to them in some way nor intuition without concepts can yield a cognition. ... Neither of these properties is to be preferred to the other. Without sensibility no object would be given us, and without understanding none would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind. It is thus just as necessary to make the mind’s concepts sensible (i.e. to add an object to them in intuition) as it is to make its intuitions understandable (i.e. to bring them under concepts). Furthermore these two faculties or capacities cannot exchange their roles. The understanding is not capable of intuiting anything and the senses are not capable of thinking anything. Only from their unification can cognition arise. But on this account one must not mix up their roles, rather one has great cause to separate them carefully from each other and distinguish them. (CPR, A50/B74–A52/B76)

What emerges here is that for Kant receptivity of sensibility and the spontaneity of the understanding are independent yet interdependent aspects of all of our cognition. They are interdependent in the sense that only in concert do they give rise to cognition at all; yet they are independent in that neither can be reduced to the other. Seen in this light, Kant is revealed as a philosopher who, rather than claiming to invert some standard order of explanation, refuses to take up the purported
explanatory task. Kant, faced with a traditional “rationalist” order of explanation which tries to reduce all of our cognitive life to the conceptual, and an “empiricist” order of explanation which takes sensibility as basic and tries to explain everything in terms of it, refuses the choice. Both rationalists and empiricists are right, in that both sensibility and the understanding are basic faculties of the mind; neither is right in that neither sensibility nor the understanding can be reduced to the other.

From this Kantian perspective, Brandom’s inferentialism and his top-down semantic strategy can only appear as a rationalistic over-reaction to the equally mistaken and one-sided bottom-up representationalist program. In particular, Brandom commits the same error as Frege in supposing that objects can be given to us in a way which depends only on the inferential articulation of propositional contents.

Of course, none of this yet establishes that such a Kantian criticism of Brandom is in fact justified; showing this will require a detailed discussion of some of Brandom’s arguments, a task to which I will turn shortly. But first I want to point out that my discussion of Kant opens up at least a possible alternative to Brandom’s choice between orders of explanation: representation or inference, names or sentences. On this alternative view, representation and inference, naming and saying, are independent but interdependent aspects of meaningful language. Neither can be reduced to the other, yet each can only be understood in the light of the way in which it works together with the other. In a pair of Kant-like slogans, I would like to say: representation without inference is blind, but inference without representation is empty; names without sentences are blind, but sentences without names are empty.

Brandom, in a footnote to *Making It Explicit*, admits the theoretical possibility of the sort of view I am here suggesting:

> It should be acknowledged that although the discussion of this chapter has been framed throughout in terms of a stark opposition between two complementary orders of explanation – the representationalist and the inferentialist – these alternatives are not exhaustive. Other possibilities include treating neither representation nor inference as explanatorily prior to the other. One might then go on to explain both in terms of some third notion, which is treated as more fundamental. Or one might eschew reductive explanations in semantics entirely and remain contented with describing the relations among a family of mutually presupposing concepts – a family that includes representation, inference, claiming, referring, and so on. (*MIE*, 669)

However, in the argument of the book itself such a view never surfaces as one worthy of consideration. Elsewhere, responding to John McDowell’s pressing of a similar point to the general one that I am making here, Brandom explains:

> Of course I agree that rejecting representationalist explanatory strategies does not commit one to an inferentialist order of explanation. Instead of treating one of these semantic notions as antecedently intelligible and
prior to the other in the order of explanation, one may insist that one must
start with both, and restrict one’s explanatory ambitions to illuminating
the relations between them. And I agree that bracketing or abstracting
from any substantive arguments on either side, such a strategy must be
counted as initially more plausible than either of its more ambitious
reductive competitors. But I undertake commitment to the bolder, riskier
program in full awareness of its safer alternatives - and not just because it
is good Popperian methodology to adopt the stronger, more easily falsifi-
able hypothesis to see how far it can be pressed.9

Brandom clearly thinks that his adoption of the “bolder, riskier program” is justi-
fied by the payoff – an account of representation in terms of inference and of names
and objects in terms of sentences and propositional contents. But, one might reply,
representationalists have their own accounts of inference in terms of representa-
tion, and of sentences in terms of their subsentential parts. In response, Brandom
can point to critical defects and shortcomings in these representationalist accounts.
To undercut Brandom’s inferentialism, then, one would have to point to similar
defects and shortcomings in his inferentialist explanations. The force of my argu-
ment in the rest of this paper will be precisely that: to show that Brandom’s infer-
entialist accounts of representational idioms are open to objections in many ways
parallel to the objections which Brandom himself would raise against representa-
tionalism. In order to develop this argument I will first give some indications of the
force of Brandom’s critique of representationalism. Then I will outline some of the
key features of Brandom’s inferentialist alternative. Finally I will raise difficulties for
Brandom’s account, difficulties which, I hope, will be sufficient to motivate interest
in a non-reductive alternative to both inferentialism and representationalism.

To begin with, however, what does Brandom find lacking in representationalism?
He does not ever really develop a full-fledged critique of this order of explanation,
being more concerned to set up the contrast between it and his own view – in
many cases by considering only particular variants of representationalism. However,
from the various things he does say one can tease out some more general lines of
argument. First of all, Brandom is suspicious of representationalism as involving in
some fashion the “Myth of the Given.” This would be illustrated clearly in a version
of atomistic, bottom-up representationalism such as that found in early Russell,
in which the meaningfulness of names derives from our standing in a primitive,
pre-propositional, and pre-judgmental state of acquaintance with the objects named,
paradigmatically sense-data, and the meaningfulness of all language is explained on
this foundation. However, that there is a more general problem in the vicinity is
suggested by a threefold distinction which Brandom draws between representational
purport, representational success, and representational uptake. Representational
vocabulary tends to show an ambiguity between representational purport and
representational success – when we speak of what a belief is about or what a word
refers to, we may or may not mean to imply that the intended object exists. The
representationalist tradition has tended to emphasize the issue of representational
success over representational purport, but this has also led to a failure to account for representational uptake. In other words, the representationalist tradition has neglected the problem of understanding, of accounting for what it is for a subject to take something as a representation. (MIE, 70–4) The characteristic failure of representationalism here is again represented by the Russellian view which attempts to found understanding entirely on cases of representational success, guaranteed by acquaintance – as encapsulated in Russell’s well-known “principle of acquaintance”: “Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted.”

In contrast, Brandom argues, following Wilfrid Sellars, that representational uptake has to be understood in inferentialist terms – to take something as a representation is to locate it in what Sellars calls the “logical space of giving and asking for reasons”. Notice, however, that this point does not by itself entail an inferentialist reduction of representational talk – it could easily be accommodated by the alternative, non-reductive view I am aiming at here, as making clear one of the directions of interdependence between representation and inference – representation without inference is blind. Moreover, even a pure representationalist would seem to have a response to this argument, for after all, representationalism offers an account of inferential relations in representational terms, and could it seems, make use of this account to embrace Brandom’s point.

To this representationalist move, however, Brandom has a powerful reply. Following Sellars, he argues that the inferences which are involved in representational uptake, in understanding, include not only formal but also material inferences. I understand, for example, “red” as the representation that it is only if I have mastered the network of inferential relations between “red” and other color words, inferential relations such as that “crimson” implies “red” and that “green” is incompatible with “red”. These inferential relations are materially but not formally correct. However, the reply proceeds, representationalist accounts of inference yield only formal inference, not material inference, and so cannot explain understanding properly.

The representationalist might object, however, that this argument makes sense if the representationalist is restricted to the resources of something like Tarski’s account of truth and logical consequence, but that more sophisticated versions of representationalism can account for material inferences as well as formal inferences. Possible worlds semantics, for example, provides a representationalist framework within which we can discern entailment relations between propositions which are not formally valid. “This apple is crimson” entails “this apple is red”, for example, because there is no possible world in which the first is true and the second false.

It will be instructive to examine this reply briefly, even though, insofar as it relies on the example of possible worlds semantics, its failure can at best establish the plausibility of the argument here sketched against representationalism. We should distinguish two attitudes prevalent among those who champion the appeal to possible worlds in the philosophy of language. One attitude is that of the “possibilists”, represented by David Lewis, who take possible worlds with utmost ontological seriousness, as alternative universes just as real as the actual universe. The other,
less metaphysically demanding, attitude is that of “actualists” like Alvin Plantinga, who insist on understanding possible worlds as mere abstract entities inhabiting the actual world. Let us consider the representationalist reply sketched above in the light of these two views of possible worlds.

First of all, actualist accounts seem unable to support the representationalist reply. For actualist accounts do not really support a representationalist reduction of entailment relations at all – rather, actualist accounts of possible worlds treat modal concepts such as entailment and incompatibility as primitive. Thus, for example, Plantinga defines a possible world as a maximal possible state of affairs, where a state of affairs is maximal if it either includes (entails) or excludes (is incompatible with) every other state of affairs. At the same time, these possible worlds are taken to represent the actual world, in such a way that one of them is uniquely singled out as correct. Hence, actualist versions of possible worlds semantics are neither representationalist nor inferentialist, but instead provide a real live example of the sort of third alternative for which I am arguing in this paper.

On the other hand, Lewisian possibilism not only comes at an extravagant metaphysical price, it may nonetheless end up unable to reply to the Brandomian argument against representationalism. Lewis seeks to reduce modal vocabulary to what he thinks of as the ordinary quantificational apparatus of first-order logic. Thus, for Lewis, to say that proposition \( p \) entails proposition \( q \) is just to say that every world in which \( p \) is true is a world in which \( q \) is true. But here worlds are simply entities which our quantifiers can range over, and the only sense in which one is singled out as actual is that we happen to inhabit it. Thus the truth that “this is crimson” entails “this is red”, that is, the truth that every possible world in which this is crimson is a possible world in which this is red, is assimilated to an empirical generalization like “all ravens are black”. It then appears that only the inferences counted as formally valid by first-order (or perhaps higher-order) quantificational logic can in fact be recognized as such by Lewis.

As indicated above, all of this is intended as at most a plausibility argument against representationalism – the argument being that representationalism fails to produce an account of inference which is adequate to explain representational uptake, and so representational purport. Brandom then pursues the alternative order of explanation, taking for granted notions of inferential connectedness, and endeavoring to explain in these terms the primitive notions of representationalism. What I want to argue, however, is that Brandom’s account of representational locutions fails in a precisely analogous way to the failure of representationalist accounts of inferential locutions. Just as representationalist accounts of inference yield only formally valid inferences, so Brandom’s account of representation will yield only a formal conception of representation, and of the objects represented. (What I mean by this, I hope will emerge in the ensuing discussion.) The result will be that Brandom is unable to give an adequate account of representational success – and so also of representational purport.

My main focus will be on Brandom’s account of singular terms. This, Brandom tells us, gives the key also to an account of objects. There are roughly Kantian reasons
for thinking that this is a particularly important aspect of Brandom’s thought on which to focus attention. First, as we saw, a key difference between Kant and Frege, which Brandom overlooks in his haste to claim Kant as his philosophical ancestor, concerns the question whether a strategy which starts only with the conceptually and inferentially articulated contents of judgments, or propositional contents, can end with an account of our being given objects. Second, Kant’s negative answer to this question is important for its connection to Kant’s account of the possibility of synthetic a priori knowledge, which is of course the crux of the whole Critique of Pure Reason. For Kant, the objective validity, and so truth-evaluability, of all our judgments – even analytic judgments – in the end requires that they be referred to intuition. And synthetic judgments in particular can only be made intelligible on this basis; it is only in the intuition of an object that the unification of disparate concepts which is the mark of synthetic judgment is possible. Now when Brandom, following Sellars, takes material inferences to be constitutive of the propositional contents which they relate, he is clearly working with something in the vicinity of Kant’s synthetic a priori, as Sellars himself saw. Kant would therefore be suspicious of Brandom’s claim to be able to make such material inferences intelligible antecedently to a grasp on objects, and indeed to use such material inferences as the basis for explaining our grasp on objects. From Kant’s point of view, such a claim sins against the dictum that thought without intuition is blind.

This, nonetheless, is Brandom’s goal in the ambitious chapter 6 of MIE, which bears the subtitle “What Are Singular Terms, and Why Are There Any?”. Brandom notes a difficult challenge faced by the inferentialist order of explanation:

the notion of content as inferential role seems naturally adapted to account only for propositional content, for it is only commitments with contents of this category that can play the role of premise and conclusion in inference. But the sentences that express propositions typically have significant parts that are not sentences, which do not express propositions, and so cannot serve as inferential premises and conclusions. Yet these subsentential expressions certainly ought to be said to be contentful ... How can a broadly inferential approach to semantic content be extended ... to ... subsentential categories? (MIE, p. 335)

Brandom’s answer to this challenge is, in the first place, to understand the content of a subsentential expression as “the contribution it makes to the sense or content of sentences containing it” (MIE, p. 343). This answer, however, will not enable us to distinguish among the syntactic categories of subsentential expressions. In particular, it will not enable us to distinguish between singular terms and predicates.

Representationalists can respond that singular terms are those subsentential expressions which refer to objects, while predicates are those subsentential expressions which objects can be said to satisfy. Brandom, however, must eschew this line of explanation; he will instead try to explain the distinction between singular terms and predicates in inferentialist terms, and use this distinction in turn to explain the notion of object. To
accomplish this, Brandom combines two Fregean ideas – Frege’s Begriffsschrift account of predicates as derived from sentences by the omission and replacement of singular terms, and Frege’s account of singular terms in the Foundations of Arithmetic as those expressions which can flank the identity sign. The first idea reflects Frege’s commitment to Kant’s doctrine of the priority of judgment over concepts. Frege spells this out by defining a predicate to be the frame or pattern which is common to the family of sentences obtained when one singular term is replaced by others in a sentence. On this view, we obtain the predicate “x loves Tom” from the sentence “Tom loves Tom” by regarding the first occurrence of “Tom” as replaceable by another; we obtain the predicate “x loves x” from the same sentence by regarding “Tom” as replaceable by another name in both its occurrences. Brandom picks up this idea by stipulating that singular terms are terms which are both substituted-in and substituted-for; predicates, on the other hand are the substitutional frames into which singular terms are to be inserted to produce sentences.

This account so far, however, does not give us a handle on the notion that singular terms, as opposed to predicates, stand for objects. In the Foundations of Arithmetic, Frege, concerned to argue that the numbers are individual objects about which we can have substantive knowledge, rejected the Kantian view that objects can only be given to us in intuition. Instead, he proposed that numbers could be given to us through our grasp of propositions in which numerals occur. In particular, he insisted that to be given an object we must have fixed conditions of identity for that object; we must be able, in his words, to “recognize it as the same again.” Thus, for Frege, it is sufficient for us to be given an object that we have determined the sense of identity statements in which the name of the object occurs.

Brandom adapts this idea to his inferentialist context by distinguishing two kinds of substitution-inference in which a term can be involved. On the one hand, a term might be involved in symmetrical substitution inferences – the correctness of inferring by substituting one term for another brings with it the correctness of the converse inference, substituting the second term for the first. Such substitution inferences are characteristic of the inferences which would be backed up by an identity statement. On the other hand, a term could be caught up in asymmetric substitution inferences, such as the inference from “x is a whale” to “x is a mammal,” in which we can substitute “mammal” for “whale,” whatever x may be, but not vice versa. Such substitution inferences are characteristic of the relations of broader and narrower predicates.

Brandom’s ingenious suggestion is then this: we can define a singular term as an expression which is substituted-for and which has a symmetric substitution-inferential significance. He then provides an equally ingenious argument that there must be singular terms in this sense, if we are to be able to apply the substitutional apparatus to generate complex predicates within a language containing at least the logical resources of negation or of the conditional. He concludes that:

it is worth pointing out here that in the context of this order of explanation, to explain why there are singular terms is in an important sense to explain why there are objects – not why there is something (to talk about)
rather than nothing (at all), but rather why what we talk about comes structured as propertied and related objects. ... To ask the question, Why are there singular terms? is one way of asking the question, Why are there objects? How odd that the answer should be: because it is so important to have something that means what conditionals mean! (MIE, p. 404)

Brandom’s gloss on the question “why are there objects?” shows, however, that there is an important sense in which his account of singular terms has not yet answered the question “why are there objects?” For he has as yet given no account of the existence of objects. Brandom recognizes this: he writes that a

shortcoming in the account of picking out objects in terms of substitutional triangulation as adumbrated so far is that it is primarily addressed to the phenomenon of purported singular reference. Although general reasons have been offered motivating a direction of explanation that begins with the notion of representational purport, it remains to say something also about the success of such purport. To this end, the next section discusses what we are doing when we take it that a singular term succeeds in referring, in that the object the term purports to refer to actually exists. An account is offered of existential commitment as a kind of substitutional commitment. (MIE, p. 431)

This account of existential commitment is built on a notion of “canonical designators” – different species of existential commitments will be determined by different classes of these “canonical designators”. For example, standard numerals serve as the canonical designators for claims of numerical existence. Thus a claim like “there exists a prime number between 10 and 15” is vindicated by the fact that a suitable choice of canonical designator produces the true substitution instance “11 is a prime number between 10 and 15”. Given a singular term with the form of a definite description, such as “the smallest prime number between 10 and 15”, the question of representational success for that term can then be reduced to the question whether there is a unique canonical designator satisfying the describing predicate.

Brandom admits that on this account, “the issue of the success of their singular referential purport does not arise for expressions such as ‘121’ and ‘161’ in the same way that it does for expressions such as ‘the smallest natural number such that every larger one is the sum of distinct primes of the form $4n + 1$.’ It is to take a frankly inequitarian approach to referential purport and its success.” (MIE, pp. 441–2) He concludes that “On this relaxed account, there is no reason to boggle at claims that numbers or other abstract objects exist. One must insist only that a determinate sense have been given to such claims, by specifying the relevant class of canonical designators. ... existential claims have been given definite sense and are themselves true. (Of course, how interesting they are is another matter.)” (MIE, p. 449)

Brandom applies the machinery of canonical designators to supply accounts of fictional existence and, more importantly for our purposes, physical existence.
His explanation of physical existence relies on the idea that to say of a physical object that it exists is “to say that it exists somewhere in space and time ... that it has some address in the structured space of spatiotemporal coordinates centered on the speaker” (MIE, p. 444). He introduces terms of the form “⟨x,y,z,t⟩ from here” as canonical designators of spatio-temporal regions. These terms, like the canonical designators of numbers, are, he says “guaranteed to succeed in their referential purport.” (MIE, p. 445). However, canonical designators of physical objects involve the application of a physical sortal or common noun to a spatio-temporal region – “the horse located at ⟨x,y,z,t⟩ from here”. In this case, one is not automatically entitled to apply the relevant sortal to the region in question – thus one is not automatically entitled to take “the horse located at ⟨x,y,z,t⟩ from here” as a canonical designator of a physical object. In order to do this “one must show ... that the sortal properly applies to the region” (MIE, p. 446). Brandom comments:

The variety of spatio-temporally individuating sortals means that there is nothing useful and general to be said about how one becomes entitled to claims applying a sortal to a region. The appropriate circumstances of application for applying the sortal-derived predicate ‘... is an elephant’, or ‘... is occupied by an elephant’ to a particular space-time region are quite different from those of ‘... is (or is occupied by) an electromagnetic force field.’ But these details concern the use of these particular sortals and predicates, not the notion of existence in general. The surplus significance of a commitment to physical existence lies in the accessibility to the one undertaking the commitment (via a continuous trajectory from here-now) of a spatiotemporal region to which the sortal (or its derived predicate) is properly applicable. For that reason appealing to the notion of a predicate or sortal being applicable to a region does not make this way of thinking about physical existence circular. (MIE, p. 446)

Thus, in brief compass, I have outlined some of Brandom’s most important moves in attempting to account for the representational purport, and the representational success or failure, of singular terms, and thereby for our awareness of the world as populated by objects. It is now time for me to recite my complaints. I will first criticize Brandom’s characterization of the representational purport of singular terms – their substitution-inferential significance. I will try to show that Brandom cannot substantiate his claim to have captured the singular character of singular terms, their implicit claim to designate particular objects. I will conclude that Brandom has identified an important inferentialist necessary condition on singular representational purport, but mistakenly taken this for a sufficient condition, thereby neglecting an equally important necessary contribution from the representationalist side. I will then turn to his account of the representational success of singular terms – that is, of existence. This second line of argument will lead us, in the end, to Brandom’s treatment of demonstratives. But here again, though we will find an important inferentialist insight into a necessary condition for the use of an expression as a
demonstrative, we will also find that by treating this necessary condition as sufficient, Brandom strips himself of the resources needed to meet the difficulties developed in my arguments.

Consider first, then, Brandom’s account of the representational purport of singular terms. Brandom tells us that his approach “incorporates particularity by distinguishing between the symmetric role of singular terms in substitution inferences and the asymmetric role of predicates in substitution inferences” (MIE, p. 623). But has Brandom really captured “particularity” in this way? The worry I want to bring into focus is that through distinguishing singular terms on the basis of symmetric substitution-inferential roles, Brandom can at best have isolated roles or types that might in fact be filled each by more than one object.18

To begin to motivate this worry consider the following apparent counterexample, discussed by Brandom in a footnote to chapter 6, to the claim that singular terms can only be caught up in symmetric substitution inferences:

The inventor of bifocals is Benjamin Franklin

therefore

The inventor of bifocals is an American.

Here, apparently, we have a correct material substitution inference – “an American” is substituted for “Benjamin Franklin” – which is asymmetric – one cannot reverse the order of substitution and preserve validity, since

The inventor of bifocals is an American

therefore

The inventor of bifocals is Benjamin Franklin

would not be a correct material inference. Thus we would seem to have a counterexample to the claim that singular terms are caught up only in symmetric substitution inferences.

Brandom, however, claims that by restricting attention to substitution inferences he has blocked this apparent counterexample: “The restriction to substitution inferences is required because one may, for instance, infer asymmetrically from the applicability of a singular term to the applicability of a predicate ... These do not count as substitution inferences ... because they cross syntactic categorial boundaries.” (MIE, p. 690, fn. 33) Given that Brandom’s aim is to discern syntactic categories on the basis of substitution-inferential patterns, however, he cannot without circularity rely on a previous grasp of syntactic categories to determine what is to count as a substitution
inference. That would plainly be circular. On what grounds, then, can he assert that “Benjamin Franklin” and “an American” are of different syntactic category? 19

What this example shows is that we cannot extract from Brandom’s account a non-circular test for a single subsentential item \( t \) to be a singular term. One might think that the test would go as follows: take the item \( t \) and consider all legitimate substitution inference patterns involving \( t \) – if some of these are asymmetric, \( t \) is not a singular term, whereas if all are symmetric, \( t \) is a singular term. But the problem is that we cannot know what counts as a substitution inference involving \( t \) without knowing which other subsentential items are of the same syntactic category as \( t \) and which are not. Yet our goal was precisely to determine the syntactic category of \( t \), at least up to determining whether \( t \) is or is not a singular term.

At best, then, Brandom has provided a global test for a class of subsentential items to be a class of singular terms:

\[ T \text{ is a class of singular terms only if any correct substitution inference involving two members of } T \text{ is symmetric.} \]

As I have formulated this test, it provides a necessary condition for a class \( T \) of subsentential items to be the class of singular terms. And as such it expresses an important inferentialist insight. In Fregean terms: a self-subsistent object is that which can be recognized as the same again, under different linguistic guises; and we express this recognition through our willingness to treat the associated terms as interchangeable. But can this necessary global condition be strengthened to a sufficient condition? Can we assert that

\[ T \text{ is a class of singular terms if and only if any correct substitution inference involving two members of } T \text{ is symmetric?} \]

No, we cannot. For consider any hierarchy of genera and species, such that for each member of the hierarchy there are two distinct synonymous expressions in the language, and take all the expressions for members at the same level of that hierarchy. For example (with some idealization) consider a set of expressions like

“dog,” “canine,” “cat,” “feline,” “horse,” “equine,” and so forth.

If this is our class \( T \), \( T \) will pass the test given above: any substitution inference involving any two members of \( T \) is symmetric. Yet clearly the members of \( T \) are not singular terms. 20

Now in this case it is open to Brandom to reply that within our language there are terms that constitute a lower level in the hierarchy such as

“Poodle,” “Persian,” “Arabian,” ...

such that every member of \( T \) is caught up in an asymmetric substitution-inferential
relation with some member of this lower level. This suggests strengthening our global condition as follows:

\[
T \text{ is a class of singular terms if and only if any correct substitution inference involving two members of } T \text{ is symmetric, and there is no class of subsentential items } S \text{ such that every member of } T \text{ is caught up in an asymmetric substitution-inferential relation with some member of } S.
\]

The problem with this approach, however, is that it makes the question whether a class of items is a class of singular terms depend on what other subsentential items are available within the language. But perhaps our language is expressively impoverished. Thus, it might turn out that what look to be singular terms in our language are really just common nouns occupying the lowest level of an unfinished hierarchy of genera and species, such that in an extended form of our language, each of these putative singular terms turns out to contain below it several objects picked out by the singular terms of the extended language.

And here I have reached my first conclusion: by taking a plausible and important inferential necessary condition on being a singular term and transforming it into a sufficient condition for singular termhood, Brandom has failed to capture the full representational purport of singular terms. In particular, he has failed to capture the sense in which singular terms are genuinely singular, their particularity.

What, then, is the alternative? Recall Kant’s famous dictum that “without sensibility, no object would be given to us” (CPR, A51/B75). “Sensibility” here is of course “the way in which we are affected by objects”. One insight contained here is that the particularity of our thought is something that can only stem from our being related to particular objects, and cannot be accounted for in any other way. Thought alone, absent such a relation to the objects, can never give us anything but general concepts. My argument has in a sense merely echoed this Kantian claim in the face of Brandom’s particular attempt at a reconstruction of the notion of particularity from inferential resources alone. As we have seen, Brandom takes an inferentialist necessary condition on singular-termhood and tries to turn it into a sufficient one; but in doing so he loses hold of the other, equally necessary representationalist condition, reference to an object. In reminding us that representation without inference is blind, he ends up forgetting that inference without representation is empty.21

Turning to Brandom’s account of representational success, we will find that we are led to a similar moral. I will begin with Brandom’s discussion of abstract entities such as numbers. Here, his account of representational success comes perilously close to collapsing representational success into representational purport, in spite of Brandom’s own initial warnings that to do so is to end up “with no room for the notion of error, of representation that is incorrect or mistaken; and a notion of representation so thin as to preclude assessments of correctness provides no basis for any recognizable concept of intentional content” (MIE, p. 71). Brandom’s account of numerical existence leaves room for a distinction between representational purport
and representational success only at the level of descriptions, but not at all at the level of names. This “frankly inegalitarian attitude” towards numerals as canonical designators, according to which “the issue of success of their singular referential purport does not arise for such expressions as ‘121’ and ‘161’” makes things too easy.

My complaint can be dramatized by considering the history of Frege’s own thinking about logical objects. Brandom seems to assume that Frege unproblematically saw how to give a fully satisfactory account of numbers and other abstract objects. Thus Brandom tells us that “Frege’s discussion of abstract objects shows clearly” that it is “substitution-inferential triangulation that is what our cognitive grip on objects consists in” (MIE, p. 431). Yet Frege’s most basic use of this “substitution-inferential triangulation”, his introduction of extensions of concepts through the identity-conditions stipulated by Basic Law V of his Basic Laws of Arithmetic, ran aground on the shoals of Russell’s paradox. Frege’s own response to this predicament can be interestingly compared to Brandom’s easy willingness to assert that numbers exist. Upon being informed of the paradox by Russell, Frege replied that “[i]t seems … that my law V … is false, and that my explanations in sect. 31 do not suffice to secure a meaning for my combinations of signs in all cases”. On Brandom’s account of substitution-inferential triangulation, however, it is difficult to see what could have gone wrong with Frege’s arguments that all the signs of his logical system “have a meaning”, that is enjoy representational success. Late in his life, Frege wrote that:

One feature of language that threatens to undermine the reliability of thinking is its tendency to form proper names to which no objects correspond. ... A particularly noteworthy example of this is the formation of a proper name after the pattern of 'the extension of the concept a,’ e.g. ‘the extension of the concept star.’ Because of the definite article, this expression appears to designate an object; but there is no object for which this phrase could be a linguistically appropriate designation. From this has arisen the paradoxes of set theory which have dealt the death blow to set theory itself. I myself was under this illusion when, in attempting to provide a logical foundation for numbers, I tried to construe numbers as sets.

In his last preserved writing, Frege distinguishes three sources of knowledge: sense perception, the geometrical source of knowledge, and the logical source of knowledge. He writes, “The last of these is involved when inferences are drawn, and thus is almost always involved. Yet it seems that this on its own cannot yield us any objects.” Because of this, Frege turns to the geometrical source of knowledge to provide a basis for arithmetic as well - so that “the whole of mathematics flows from one and the same source of knowledge”. Thus Frege, unlike Brandom, would not accept the easy way out of taking numerals as canonical designators whose referential success is secured de jure. For Frege, providing a foundation for arithmetic always meant establishing in some way the existence of infinitely many numbers; and Brandom’s technique appears in...
this light to have, in Russell’s memorable phrase, “all the advantages of theft over honest toil”.25

Turning now to Brandom’s account of physical existence, the objection which I have raised to his account of numerical existence does not seem to apply so readily; for although he takes canonical designators of spatiotemporal regions to enjoy de jure representational success, the same is not true of canonical designators of physical objects, such as “the K located at \( ⟨x, y, z, t⟩ \),” from here”. Such terms must earn their status as canonical designators through the sortal K’s being applicable to the spatio-temporal region designated by “\( ⟨x, y, z, t⟩ \) from here”. Yet at this point, in spite of Brandom’s protestations to the contrary, the account becomes, if not circular, then the source of a vicious regress. For on Brandom’s account, the term “the K located at \( ⟨x, y, z, t⟩ \) from here” is a physical-object canonical designator just in case the sortal K applies to the region located at \( ⟨x, y, z, t⟩ \) from here. But, whatever criteria we might appeal to in order to determine whether this is the case, surely the sortal K applies to the region located at \( ⟨x, y, z, t⟩ \) from here just in case there exists a K in that region. But now Brandom must explain this last claim essentially in terms of a correct substitution inference to an instance of the form “CD is a K located at region \( ⟨x, y, z, t⟩ \) from here” – where “CD” is a physical-object canonical designator. Yet then “CD” must have the form “the K1 located at \( ⟨x1, y1, z1, t1⟩ \) from here”, and this term too must earn its status as a physical-object canonical designator – and we are off on a regress.

There is one way in which Brandom might try to respond to this regress, however. He might point to our capacity to use demonstratives as grounding at least some of our uses of physical-object canonical designators. This capacity is invoked, for example in his account of “epistemically strong de re belief attributions” which attribute belief in “object-dependent singular thoughts”. To attribute belief in an object-dependent singular thought, according to Brandom, is to undertake oneself an existential commitment:

\[ \text{de re ascriptions of epistemically strong de re beliefs involve existential commitments.} \]
\[ \text{... (weak) de re ascriptions ... need not involve such commitments. If someone who has never heard the name ‘Pegasus’ believes that Bellerophon’s horse has wings, I can specify the content of that belief in the weak de re way by saying that he believes of Pegasus that he has wings, without undertaking any existential commitment to the existence of such a horse. But if I say that he believes of strong Pegasus that he has wings, I am committed to his being able to pick out Pegasus by using a demonstrative, and hence to the spatiotemporal accessibility of that horse in the common environment he and I share, which is what a commitment to the physical existence of the horse comes to on the analysis presented in Chapter 7. (MIE, p. 569)} \]

This passage suggests the thought that some cases of physical-object canonical designators can be secured as anaphorically linked ultimately to demonstratives.
Thus we might turn to Brandom’s discussion of demonstratives for further illumination of the concept of physical existence, and so of non-abstract representational success. However, what we will find there, while instructive in many ways, will disappoint us in our particular quest. Brandom’s fundamental theme concerning demonstratives is this: “deixis presupposes anaphora”. What he means is this: the use of a demonstrative is an unrepeatable event, a linguistic tokening rather than a type. This event can have no linguistic significance unless it is caught up in inferential links with other linguistic performances; yet such inferential links cannot be established by uses of sentences containing the same linguistic type as that involved in the specific demonstrative event. In this sense it is impossible for a demonstrative to recur. Instead, we use anaphoric devices such as pronouns to get the effect of the recurrence of the demonstrative. This for Brandom tells us the essential function of demonstratives – they are initiators of anaphoric chains. Yet this question – the question of the role unrepeatable tokenings such as demonstratives can play in inference – becomes for Brandom the only interesting question, and he loses sight in a characteristic manner of the fact that demonstratives, after all, “demonstrate”. He writes: “it is helpful to put to one side the difficult psychological question of how scorekeepers ... correctly discern what object is being indicated or demonstrated, and also the difficult conceptual question of what makes it correct to take or treat one object rather than another as the one being demonstrated.” (MIE, p. 461) This question is “put to one side” – but never, as far as I can tell, returned to. And this is no accident. For what is being put to one side is precisely the residue of the question of representation, an ineliminable residue which Brandom’s inferentialism cannot account for, and which is equally put to one side in his account of physical existence. In other, Kantian, terms, it is the residue of intuition, of immediate cognitive contact with objects – not understood, to be sure, as prior to and intelligible apart from inference, or thought, but not simply reducible to it either, and indeed indispensable for it as well.

Hence, if my argument has had any value, we have found that Brandom’s inferentialism, like the representationalism it is supposed to supplant, is, in the end, one-sided. Just as representationalism cannot provide an adequate account of representational uptake, inferentialism cannot provide an adequate account of representational success. Brandom’s anti-representationalist arguments are salutary insofar as they remind us that representation without inference is blind; but taken as arguments for inferentialism, they lead us astray, causing us to forget the equally important insight that inference without representation is empty.

Notes
3 John Haugeland has informed me that he was responsible for this parody.
5 In this parallel, Brandom’s Locke Lectures, Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic
Pragmatism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) would have to be cast in the role of the Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science, or perhaps the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals. Of course, at this point the supposed parallel has been stretched to the point of incredulity - not to mention the problem of fitting in Tales of the Mighty Dead in some fashion.

11 Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”, in Science, Perception and Reality (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 169. Sellars says that “in characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says”.

For a very clear discussion of these positions, see Peter van Inwagen, “Two concepts of possible worlds”, in Ontology, Identity, and Modality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Van Inwagen calls actualists “abstractionists” and possibilists “concretists”.

14 “Actualism and Possible Worlds”, p. 144.
16 Ingenious or not, the cogency of this argument has been questioned, particularly by Peter J. Graham in “Brandom on Singular Terms”, Philosophical Studies 93 (1999), pp. 247–64. My discussion below does not turn on the success or failure of Brandom’s argument.
17 The following paragraphs represent one line of objection to Brandom’s attempt to capture the category of singular term in purely inferentialist terms. Related lines of thought have been developed in the literature, especially in Mark McCullagh, “Inferentialism and Singular Reference”, Canadian Journal of Philosophy 35 (2005), pp. 183–220. A much more detailed and comprehensive critique of Brandom’s inferentialist account of the syntactic category of singular terms than I can offer here is contained in my student Tom Lockhart’s dissertation-in-progress, “Frege, Singular Terms and Logical Objects”, University of Chicago.
18 Elsewhere Brandom considers another line of response to putative counterexamples turning on asymmetric substitution inferences involving singular terms, such as Fodor and Lepore’s example “Father was at Magdalen, therefore Father was at Oxford.” Unlike the example considered in the text above, this example does not involve substituting across intuitively recognizable syntactic category boundaries. Brandom’s response to this sort of example depends on restricting attention to general substitution inference patterns. (MIE, pp. 386–7) Difficulties with characterizing the notion of generality involved in this response are discussed in McCullagh, “Inferentialism and Singular Reference”. McCullagh focuses on the need to distinguish between extensional and intensional contexts of substitution, and shows that the needed distinction between extensional and intensional contexts cannot be drawn on purely inferentialist grounds. Thus McCullagh’s argument leads to a conclusion similar to mine, through a different route.
19 Peter J. Graham makes a similar point in a footnote: “the synonyms ‘a is a bachelor’ and ‘a is an adult unmarried male’ are substitutable (replaceable) symmetrically. Does
it then follow, on Brandom’s view, that synonyms are singular terms?” (“Brandom on Singular Terms,” 263, fn. 3) I note that Graham attributes this point to my brother, Philip Kremer. To which I can only say that great minds think alike.

21 In the concluding chapter of MIE, Brandom discusses Kant’s concept/intuition distinction and argues that Kant has really run together three separate distinctions into one: form and matter, general and particular, and spontaneity and receptivity (MIE, pp. 615–16). Brandom resists aligning these three contrasts, claiming that assimilating them leads to an “unworkable dualism” (MIE, p. 615). On my view, however, Kant was right to align the second and third contrasts mentioned by Brandom, in at least the broad general sense that without some mention of a representational relation to particular objects, the particularity of our thought cannot be accounted for.


25 It is worth comparing Brandom’s approach here to the neo-logicist program in contemporary philosophy of mathematics, initiated by Crispin Wright’s Frege’s Conception of Numbers as Objects (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1983). Neo-logicism attempts to revive Frege’s logicism by taking “Hume’s Principle”, that the number of Fs = the number of Gs just in case the Fs and the Gs are in one-to-one correspondence, as analytic of the concept of number. Neo-logicism thus accepts at least some stipulations of the same form as that of Basic Law V as giving us access to abstract objects. However, the development of this program has necessitated serious attempts to sort out which such stipulations can be acceptable and which need to be ruled out. (One cannot simply rule out inconsistent stipulations, like Basic Law V, and accept all others; for there are stipulations of the same form which are singly consistent but contradict one another.) While I am skeptical of the ultimate success of this Wright-inspired program, it is noteworthy that nothing like the task I have just outlined is attempted by Brandom.
15

WHAT IS LOGIC?

Bernhard Weiss

1 Introduction

What should we require of a philosophical account of logic? At first sight, at least, the following seems reasonable. We want an explanation of the subject matter of logic. That is, of what is logic the study? We want an account of the role of logic in our thought. For what do we use logical locutions? What is the role of sentences involving such locutions in our epistemology? How do we explain (or explain away) the seemingly obvious features of logic such as the necessity of logical truth? Its universality of application? Its topic-neutrality? What is logical validity? How do we apply logic? How do we exploit a characterisation of logic in arbitrating disputes about acceptable logical practice?

Thus the account faces metaphysical questions about logic’s relation to the world and epistemological questions about the role of logic in thought and the methodology of logical practice. An acceptable account of logic should deliver answers to these main questions or explain why they are misconceived, while also being extensionally adequate: categorising as logical near enough what, pre-theoretically, would have been deemed to be so.

Brandom’s inferentialism and expressivism about logic combine to yield what appears to be an attractive philosophical account of logic. In brief, the views are these. Inferentialism holds that the primary role of attributions of content is in explaining the inferential relations between sentences and language entry and exit rules in perception and action respectively: a sentence possesses its content in virtue of entering into a certain set of such relations. Expressivism holds that the role of logic is to express these inferential relations; logical locutions allow us to make explicit as claims the inferential proprieties distinctive of a given linguistic practice. Thus logical locutions enable us to represent our inferential doings as truth-evaluable claims – claims that can themselves become the subject of debate and thus can themselves figure in the ‘game’ of giving and asking for reasons. Thus logic helps to bring inferential practice within the sway of reflective rationality; having made an inferential commitment explicit as a claim it becomes susceptible to reflective endorsement or rejection. Therefore the role of logic is expressive and, as a consequence of the character of this expression, we learn that logic’s proper subject matter is argument or inference. So, importantly, it isn’t a privileged brand of truth.
A traditional view of logic as penetrating the surface appearance of language to an underlying structure in virtue of which it enables expression of thought and the representation of reality is right only in the sense that logic penetrates – by making explicit – to a structure of inferential proprieties present in the practice.

Let us consider in a little more detail the mechanics of the position just outlined. The basis is a holistic inferentialism. Onto this we build an expressivism about logic which itself falls within the scope of the inferentialist view. Thus the meanings of the logical constants are explained inferentially in terms of their introduction and elimination rules, i.e. paradigmatic grounds and consequences of their employment. The expressive function of logic requires that insertion of logic into a practice must constitute an inferentially conservative extension of that practice. That is, when we expand the language by introducing logical sophistication it must be the case that no inference between sentences in the original language becomes good, if it were not so before. Symbolically we might put this as follows, where ‘\(\vdash_o\)’ is the consequence relation in the original language, ‘\(\vdash_l\)’ is the consequence relation in the logically expanded language, and P and C are sentences in the original language:

\[
\text{P} \vdash_l \text{C} \text{ only if } \text{P} \vdash_o \text{C}
\]

(Of course, it will also be the case that \(\text{P} \vdash_l \text{C}\) if and only if \(\text{P} \vdash_o \text{C}\), where the ‘if’ direction is guaranteed by the fact that the logical language is an extension of the original language.)

Now the reason that Brandom gives for holding to the inferential conservativeness of logic is as follows. If logic’s role is to enable the expression of inferential relations between sentences, which, in virtue of these inferential relations, express a certain content, then logic had better not disrupt these inferential relations on pain of altering the very contents whose inferential relations it was attempting to articulate. Were it to fail at inferential conservativeness it would be unclear whether a logically complex sentence was expressing a hitherto accepted inferential relation or a newly facilitated one. In fact, it would be unclear just how logically complex sentences relate to inferential relations in the original language because it would be unclear how the contents of sentences change once swept up in the logically sophisticated language. In essence, logical expressivism seems to require conservativeness relative to content – a sentence must express in the expanded language just what it expressed in the original language – and, given inferentialism, this requires inferential conservativeness.

It is worth pointing out that conservativeness of this sort is more usually associated with a rejection of holism; a molecularist precisely insists, in opposition to holism, that any extension of language is only permissible when the extension is conservative relative to meanings expressible in the original fragment of language. Here Brandom succeeds in enforcing a similar view in the restricted case of logic by means of the latter’s expressive role.

We should pause to notice an important feature of Brandom’s thinking here. There is an obvious sense in which the inferential conservativeness of logic facilitates its expressive role. For, given inferentialism, we can take it that a (logic-free)
sentence expresses the same content in the extended language as it did in the original language. If we put this together with an understanding of how logical vocabulary enables us to make inferential relations explicit it becomes clear what the logically complex sentence is claiming: what inferential relation it is claiming to hold between what contents. But, pace Brandom, the expressive project does not itself require inferential conservativeness. What it requires (in addition to an understanding of the explicitating role of the expressive vocabulary) is simply a way of identifying contents expressed by sentences in the original language with contents expressed by sentences in the expressive language. The homophonic scheme, of course, hugely simplifies matters but, given that Brandom doesn’t wish to deny the possibility of identifying contents expressed by different sentences in different languages, it is by no means mandatory.

There is, in addition, an obvious alternative way to pursue the expressive project. Rather than insist that the expression of inferential relations requires a language including sentences expressing the same contents as those whose inferential relations are being articulated we could instead choose to go metalinguistic and simply refer to those sentences. Thus instead of expressing the inferential relation $P\rightarrow C$ as ‘$P\rightarrow C$’ we might instead say “$P$ entails $C$”.

There is clearly no bar to carrying out the expressive project at a metalinguistic level. But this isn’t Brandom’s interest. He is interested in the expressive project as carried out in an extension of the original language. The reason here is, I think, that he is not concerned with the role of logic in a theoretician’s view of language; rather, he is interested in logic from the point of view of practitioners. It is important that we see logic as playing a role in practitioners’ reflection on their own practice – we use logic to bring our practice within the scope of our reflective rationality – and thus it can be no part of the picture that doing so requires exiting from the practice. Thus it is a feature of the conception of logic that it is essentially an object-linguistic notion, one that rejects the metalinguistic, theoretician’s stance. This point will be important in some of the worries I try to voice below.

Having thus laid out the ground I shall now move on to probe elements of the expressivist view. More particularly I will investigate the following questions:

1. Can inferential doings be adequately expressed as claimings?
   (a) Do claimings have the right form to express all inferential doings?
   (b) Can the expressive function of logical vocabulary always be adequately explained?
2. Does expressivism give an adequate account of the epistemological role of logic?

II Inferential doings and claimings

2a The form of claimings

I want first to focus on a formal concern. Brandom takes the conditional to be the paradigmatic means of explicitating inferential commitments. So given that it is
a practical propriety of inference to infer from ‘Fred is scarlet’ to ‘Fred is red’ we then express this commitment as: If Fred is scarlet then Fred is red. But how do we extend the paradigm to cover inferences with more than one premise, e.g. from ‘Fred is male’ and ‘Fred is Mary’s sibling’ to ‘Fred is Mary’s brother’? Let’s express the form of our inference as follows ‘P₁, P₂ |-C’ (where ‘|-’ precisely does not link sentences in truth-evaluable claims). Obvious suggestions are that we codify the inference in conditionals of one or other of the following forms: (i) P₁ & P₂ → C; or (ii) P₁ → (P₂ → C). Let us consider each suggestion in turn. The first seems not to be an expression of the inference that concerns us but of the inference P₁ & P₂ |- C, which is not what we want at all. This is an inference from a single, logically complex premise to our conclusion. Of course, were we able to conjoin an expression for this inference with one for the following, P₁, P₂ |- P₁ & P₂, then we might have grounds for taking our work to be done. But finding an expression for inferences of this form is just the job with which we were engaged. So it seems we have made no progress. Consider the second suggestion. Here we seem to have missed the mark too. What we’ve expressed is the inference P₁ |- P₂ → C, which is again not what we were after. To be sure we can combine ‘P₁ → (P₂ → C)’ with ‘P₁’ and ‘P₂’ to infer C in an enthymematic inference. But that was not our task. That is, we were not asked to provide a premise which suffices to convert the materially good inference into a formally good inference; rather, we were asked to express the materially good inference. And while the former might be (presumably, is) a necessary condition for having achieved the latter it is not sufficient.¹

To be sure, lurking in the background here is a worry about what exactly it means to express an inferential doing as a claiming. One might, I suppose, simply say that an adequate such expression simply is the additional premise required to convert the materially good inference into a formally good one. If we do say this then, of course, we shall have to reject any idea that there is a unique expression of the material inference: both ‘P₁ & P₂ → C’ and ‘P₁ → (P₂ → C)’ as well as countless others will then do to express our inference. As it stands though the claim is clearly too weak since it would allow us to include as adequate expressions any claim that entailed one of the above conditionals. So we’d need to strengthen the requirement to those claims that (i) suffice to convert the materially valid inference to a formally valid one; and (ii) are not entailed by any claims satisfying (i) which they do not themselves entail. But from Brandom’s point of view the suggestion is, anyway, stillborn at its conception. Brandom wants to explain formally valid inference in terms of materially good inference. He achieves this by defining vocabulary-specific formally good inference. Given a specified vocabulary, V, he defines a V-formally valid inference using the notion of substitution and materially good inference as follows:

A V-formally valid inference is a materially good inference that retains its material goodness on any substitution of non-V for non-V vocabulary.

A formally valid inference is then one which is formally valid relative to logical vocabulary.²
Thus to complete the account Brandom needs a way of distinguishing logical vocabulary that is independent of the notion of formal validity and his thought is that here we can exploit the distinctive expressive role of logical vocabulary. But if, as recently touted, we need to characterise the expressive role in terms of formal validity the project will be circular.

What to conclude? It would seem that provided we adopt a fine-grained construal of what it is for a claim to express an inferential doing then we’ve found no answer to the original concern. Though there’s an obvious solution on a weak construal of the notion of expressing, the weak construal is intuitively unappealing and unavailable to Brandom. The nub of the problem is this. Inference is a multigrade relation, holding between any number of premises and a conclusion (or, perhaps a number of conclusions). Language doesn’t present us with expressions for such relations and compensates by providing devices for compounding expressions. The compounding role is itself logical. Brandom’s expressivism presupposes the compounding role so it presupposes and thus necessarily excludes a feature of logic.

2b The expressive function of logical vocabulary

Let us shift focus slightly. We have already found reason to wonder about what the expressive relation between a logical claim and an inferential doing amounts to. I want now to consider how we should understand logical locutions – here I’ll focus on conditionals – in their expressive role. But we’ll need to begin by stepping back to look at Brandom’s conception of the inferential proprieties that logic aims to codify.

Two deontic statuses – those of commitment and entitlement – are central to Brandom’s account. Speakers within a practice will, in virtue of their doings, count as committed to and entitled to other doings. When the relations of commitment and entitlement between doings have the right structure we shall be able to see those doings as sayings. A speaker’s deontic statuses are products of the deontic attitudes taken up towards her by other speakers. So for x to incur a certain commitment (possess a certain entitlement) is for x to do something that entitles y to attribute that commitment (entitlement) to her.

Using these deontic statuses Brandom goes on to define two notions of inferential relation and a notion of incompatibility.

Inference\textsubscript{M}: If one is committed to P\textsubscript{1} ... P\textsubscript{n} then one is committed to C.

Inference\textsubscript{N}: If one is committed to P\textsubscript{1} ... P\textsubscript{n} then one is entitled to commitment to C.

Incompatibility: Commitment to P precludes entitlement to Q (and vice versa).

The first notion of inference coincides with monotonic inferences; the second with non-monotonic inferences (hence the subscripts). Among the non-monotonic
inferences we have in view here are inductive inferences but presumably also
included are non-deductive inferences that are also not inductive. Thus the infer-
ence from ‘John is howling and writhing’ to ‘John is in pain’ might well not strike
one as inductive but is not monotonic. It will be of a piece with other inferences of
the form inference₉: If one is committed to ‘John is howling and writhing’ then one
is entitled to ‘John is in pain’.

I want here to focus on these notions of inference and to how they might give
rise to conceptions of the conditional used to express them. So we might define two
conditionals as follows:

\[ P \rightarrow M C \text{ iff if one is committed to } P \text{ then one is committed to } C. \]

\[ P \rightarrow N C \text{ iff if one is committed to } P \text{ then one is entitled to commitment }
to C. \]

Notice that each explanation defines the conditional by using the conditional. This
need not be problematic. Provided we can take the conditional on the RHS as well
understood it provides an account of the conditional concerned by using the condi-
tional in the restricted context of attributing deontic statuses.

Note too a feature of the non-monotonic conditional. We aren’t here capturing
the idea that ‘\( P \rightarrow N C \)’ is less than conclusively established. Now, this might well be
definitely true, but what it expresses is that though \( P \) entitles commitment to \( C \), the
entitlement doesn’t guarantee the truth of \( C \).

Given that there are two conditionals in play, it behoves us to ask what ‘if ... then
...’ means on the right-hand sides of these definitions. In the first definition it seems
we have the monotonic conditional in mind: being committed to \( P \) is incompatible
with not being committed to \( C \). In the second definition things are less clear. My
sense though is that here it is not the monotonic conditional that is in play: being
committed to \( P \) is compatible with not being entitled to \( C \). Let me ground my sense
by returning to the example of John howling and writhing.

Suppose that John is howling and writhing before your and my calm gazes but
that John is not in pain: he’s shamming to prove a philosophical point. Suppose
too that I know this and I am attributing deontic statuses to you. In this instance
I shall attribute to you commitment to ‘John is howling and writhing’ but I won’t
regard you as entitled to commitment to ‘John is in pain’. I think this is quite clear
from Brandom’s perspective in which undertaking a commitment and possessing
an entitlement are clearly distinguished from acknowledging the commitment and
entitlement. But we can anyway change the example. Given that I know that John
is shamming then I remain committed to ‘John is howling and writhing’ but I will
not be entitled to commitment to ‘John is in pain’. (I already have a commitment
that is incompatible with that entitlement.)

To put the point in slightly different terminology, we might say that in infer-
ce₉ the premise defeasibly provides a warrant for the conclusion. But the defea-
sibility feeds through to talk about the deontic statuses since being committed to
the premises only defeasibly entitles commitment to the conclusion. For, if it is possible for the warrant provided by the premises to be defeated, it is also possible for a suitably placed attributor of deontic statuses to be aware of this and, in such circumstances, the attributor won’t attribute entitlement to the attributee. Thus the right notion of the conditional is that in which the antecedent provides defeasible warrant for the consequent.

I said before that I did not think that the circularity in the definitions was necessarily pernicious but I couched that admission with the reservation that we understand the relevant conditional. My point now is simple. I’m pretty sure I’ve a good grasp of the monotonic conditional – I use this often in a whole range of contexts – but am not at all sure I understand the non-monotonic one. The latter is an invention of philosophers used to make a sophisticated point about the functioning of language: it is a term of art, one indeed on which considerable ink has been spilled in the course of discussing and disputing (see the considerable literature on criteria and defeasible warrants). So given my problems in understanding the notion I need Brandom to explain it to me. I fail to see that he has a such a means and thus fail to see that he has a way of explicitating a pervasive feature of our inferential practice.

III Expressivism and the epistemological role of logic

Let us begin by noting a tension in Brandom’s attempt to mesh holistic inferentialism with logical expressivism. On the one hand we are asked to accept that expressivism entails that the insertion of logical vocabulary into language must constitute an inferentially conservative extension of the original fragment of language. For, if the introduction of logical vocabulary forges new inferential links between items of the original vocabulary then, by inferentialist lights, we cannot take that vocabulary to be expressing the same contents it originally expressed. Thus when logical words are used to connect pieces of the original vocabulary they cannot be taken to be expressing relations between the original contents.

On the other hand the point of logic’s expressive role is that the material inferential connections present in the original vocabulary may constitute inferences that, reflectively, we are reluctant to endorse. Logic enables to represent the inference as a claim which can then reflectively be rejected as false or unfounded. Thus in discussing Dummett’s example of the word ‘Boche’, Brandom writes,

If one does not believe that the inference from German nationality to cruelty is a good one, one must eschew the concept Boche. For one cannot deny that there are any Boche – that is just to deny that anyone is German, which is patently false. One cannot admit that there are Boche and deny that they are cruel – that is just attempting to take back with one claim what one has committed oneself to with the other. (MIE, p. 126)

Let us consider the picture from the perspective of introducing a piece of vocabulary into language. Let us suppose we have a language containing the predicates ‘is
German’ and ‘is cruel’. Within the language there is no propriety of inference from sentences of the form ‘x is German’ to those of the form ‘x is cruel’. We now introduce the predicate ‘is Boche’ under the specification that an adequate ground for asserting a sentence of the form ‘x is Boche’ is the truth of ‘x is German’ and a consequence of the claim ‘x is Boche’ is ‘x is cruel’. Brandom’s point is that (hopefully) we would reflectively have been disinclined to endorse the inference from ‘x is German’ to ‘x is cruel’, so we will reject the concept Boche. Logic aids us in this rejection because instead of following the above metalinguistic reasoning we realise the inference as a claim – if x is German then x is cruel – and then reject this claim as false.

Note, however, that if this is an acceptable account then ‘x is German’ and ‘x is cruel’ must be taken as expressing the same contents as they did in the previous language: this was Brandom’s reason for wanting logic to be inferentially conservative. But note too that we cannot take the content expressed by the two sentences to remain invariant: this because, by the very same reasoning, the inferentially non-conservative extension of adding ‘is Boche’ to the language may alter contents expressed by sentences in the language.

Let us call the original language $L_O$ and the language extended by introduction of ‘is Boche’ $L_B$. Then the point is that we will object to the claim ‘If x is German then x is cruel’ as a claim made in $L_O$. But the purpose of the expressive role of logic requires that we reject the claim when made in $L_B$. But, by the very reasoning which led to imposition of inferential conservativeness as a constraint on the expressive function of logic, we cannot take it that the claims made by the conditionals in each language are the same.

On the one hand expressivism about logic drives a requirement of invariance of content which, in turn, requires inferential conservativeness. On the other hand the purpose of logical expressivism – rejection of bad inferences – allows that content may be invariant despite a failure in inferential conservativeness. The meshing of these two views is incoherent: if logic is expressive it fails to have a purpose.

The tension arises from trying to marry inferential holism with an account of the purpose of the expressive role of logic. We might thus try to alleviate the situation in either of two ways: we could relax the holistic outlook or we could redescribe the purpose of expressive logical vocabulary in a way that is more sensitive to holism. The latter approach would seem to be more congenial to Brandom’s outlook so let us consider it first.

As mentioned above, we will reject a certain conditional expressed in $L_O$ but want to reject a conditional expressed in $L_B$. The obvious candidate fails but so do all others – the problem is pervasive and there is no conditional expressible in $L_B$ that we can focus on as objectionable. Rather it seems that the point will have to be that there is something objectionable about operating in $L_B$ rather than $L_O$. Since $L_B$ has a fault not shared with $L_O$, and since the difference between $L_B$ and $L_O$ is the availability of the term ‘is Boche’ in the former, an acceptable and efficient remedy would be to omit the term from $L_B$, thereby returning it to $L_O$. But what would the objectionable feature of $L_B$ be? Well, it seems likely that it will lead us to treating people in ways which we disapprove and which fail to be consequences
of operating with \( L_\Omega \). But note what is happening here. First, we are no longer interested in expressing an inferential relation holding in \( L_B \) and in holding that up to our reflective gaze; rather, we are concerned about the practical consequences of operating with \( L_B \). So, (i) there is no logically expressible inference at issue; and (ii) the consequences are essentially metalinguistically expressible: we are interested in the consequences of using \( L_B \) or in comparing the use of \( L_B \) with that of \( L_\Omega \). The upshot is that we undercut the expressive function of logical vocabulary since, first, the reflective examination of the practice is not a feature at the level of the object language (or an extension of it) but is metalinguistic (so, as we noted previously, inferential conservatism would simply be out of place). Second, it is far from obvious that traditional logical vocabulary would be what is needed to express the shortcoming of \( L_B \) from the metalinguistic point of view.

There are two ways of countering this point. First, we might say that it is true that when we look at inferences expressible in \( L_B \) we fail to find one which is clearly objectionable but when we trace inferential relations back to language entry rules and forwards to language exit rules we shall find an inferential connection between entry conditions and exit conditions which, reflectively, we will be unable to endorse. Brandom distinguishes a number of types of inferentialism; only a hyper-inferentialist who thinks of all inferential relations as being intra-linguistic – a position which he eschews – will be unable to accept this reasoning. So let us concede its cogency. The point however remains. \( L_B \) need not be able to specify its own language entry and exit rules. Thus in specifying our malign inference we shall need to resort to a language which allows expression of conditions of entry into \( L_B \) and exit from \( L_B \) and we shall need to identify this commitment as a commitment of speaking \( L_B \). Again it seems the metalinguistic perspective is forced on us.

Another thought might be this. If, as a speaker of \( L_B \), one were to translate ‘x is German’ considered as a sentence of \( L_\Omega \) then one would translate it as ‘x is German’ since the bulk of the inferential connections of these two sentences in their respective languages would be shared. As Brandom says in discussing identification of content expressed across languages,

In understanding another, I am to use sentences in my mouth to attach as labels to his sentences, and thereby serving to ‘measure’ them. My interpretation is a useful one – I have understood what the other says – just insofar as the inferential moves I am committed to endorse with the noises I produce mirror (perhaps with a qualifying commentary couched in my own idiom) his. The ideal interpretation is a homomorphism, a structure-preserving mapping, from his noises onto mine, preserving the consequential structures. Where not all the moves between his noises that he is committed to the correctness of are matched by similar commitments on my part regarding my counterpart (according to the interpretation mapping) noises, only similarity, and not identity of consequential role – and so only partial understanding – is achieved. (This volume, p. 170)
So there are grounds to suppose that the objectionable conditional in \( L_0 \) will be interpreted homophonically in \( L_m \), and ostensibly it will remain objectionable. Now, one thing you might say here is that this relies on a notion of translation between languages and thus resurrects the metalinguistic approach. But I don’t think that is right – it canvasses metalinguistic reasons for thinking that the object-linguistic approach is acceptable.

What Brandom is advocating is that we can satisfy ourselves with an account according to which we operate only with a notion of inter-linguistic similarity of content. To be sure, when we apply the account to our case the conditional will be interpreted homophonically, but what reason have we to suppose that in its new setting it is an objectionable conditional? After all, if the contents expressed by the same words in either language diverge, they may well diverge with respect to properties of inference that are perfectly unobjectionable. I’m not sure what answer this question receives unless it goes back to our previous one of tracing connections to extra-linguistic features of use. As Brandom goes on to say,

\[ \text{[R]ecall that inferential role in the broad sense includes the inferential connections between circumstances of appropriate application and appropriate consequences of application quite generally – even when the circumstances or consequences of application themselves are noninferential. Thus Rutherford and I are both disposed to respond to a bolt of lightning by applying the term ‘electron’, and to respond to applying the expression ‘high voltage, high amperage electron flow’ to a bare piece of metal by avoiding contact with it. These language entry and language exit moves, no less than the language-language ones, also give us something important in common. (This volume, pp. 170–1)} \]

I suppose an additional point is this. If preservation of enough inferential role is sufficient for similarity of content, why should we suppose that logic need always be thoroughly inferentially conservative to fulfil particular aspects of its expressive role. Wouldn’t there be a much freer idea of logics capable of being developed with particular expressive tasks in mind? The insistence on complete inferential conservativeness is, I think, a laudable attempt to do justice to the sense that logic is topic neutral and universally applicable. For if a logical system is inferentially conservative irrespective of its base vocabulary then it will be capable of fulfilling its expressive role in every case. So, if this response goes through then the topic neutrality and universality of logic are not consequences of expressivism itself.

Let us return to the other suggested modification to the Brandomian picture: rejection of holism. I don’t think that this modification is likely to be at all sympathetically received by Brandom but it is worthwhile looking at, if only to gain some sense of how logical expressivism might cohere with other versions of inferentialism. It may well seem that the sort of objection just raised to logical expressivism is counter-intuitive. Surely it is plausible to suppose that had we been brought up using the term ‘Boche’ we could have explicitated the very inference
Brandom mentions and found ourselves suspicious about it. But, if that thought is right, I don’t think it points to an inadequacy in the argument rather I think it points to the falsity of holism; our thinking is conditioned by the non-holistic facts of the matter even when we’ve explicitly avowed a holistic outlook. Let us anyway see how things fare on a molecular view. If we take the meanings of the predicates ‘is German’ and ‘is cruel’ to be given by a privileged subset of their inferential roles then it is plausible to think of the introduction of ‘is Boche’ as forging an inference from ‘x is German’ to ‘x is cruel’, which is unacceptable: those predicates retain their original meanings since their canonical or meaning-determining inferential roles are unchanged and, so conceived, it is easy to accept that we have strong grounds for rejecting the inference. (Given their canonical grounds we are happy to accept ‘Gottlob is German’ and ‘Gottlob is not cruel’; ‘Ludwig is German’ and ‘Ludwig is not cruel’, and so on.)

So the view is that the meaning of a sentence is given by its canonical grounds and consequences, i.e. a distinguished portion of its inferential role. Importantly, the residual portion of that role will then have to be derivable from the canonical portion – a substantial enterprise in semantic theory is thereby born. On this scheme I don’t think that there is a difficulty in seeing logical vocabulary as fulfilling a purely expressive role; rather, the problem is that it is hard to see what we usually take to be logical constants as being distinguished by this role. So logical expressivism is extensionally inadequate.

Dummett has visited and revisited the question of whether and how logical language constitutes a conservative extension of its non-logical base. He points to a tension in the way we view logic. We want, on the one hand, to think of logical inferences as being valid because in recognising the truth of the premises we have already accomplished all that is necessary to recognise the truth of the conclusion. If $P \vdash_L C$ then in the presence of a logic, L, $P$ provides a warrant for assertion of $C$. But the logical system is sound only if when such a logic-dependent warrant is provided a logic-independent, canonical warrant for $C$ is, in some sense, available. Thus logic is conservative in the sense that no sentence in the non-logical base becomes assertible when it would not have been so before. But, on the other hand, we also want to construe logic as being epistemically useful; by means of logically facilitated inferences we arrive at conclusions that we could not have drawn prior to the introduction of logic. So conservativeness fails. The tension thus is that logical validity pushes us to see logic as conservative while the epistemic usefulness of logic pushes us away from conservativeness. The tension can, in principle at least, easily be resolved by noting an indeterminacy in the notion of conservativeness. Conservativeness is a relative notion. An extension of language may be conservative relative to possession of warrants, or may be conservative relative to the possibility of achieving warrants, or may be conservative relative to actually endorsed inferences, or may be conservative relative to inferences which would, in principle, be endorsed, or indeed may be conservative relative to truth (in which case it amounts to soundness). So we need to make our notion of conservativeness definite by specifying in relation to what it is to be determined. Dummett’s thought is that we
need to move beyond conservativeness relative to actual possession of warrants and instead need only to insist that logic is conservative relative to the in principle achievability of warrants. Equivalently, in inferentialist terms, we might say that we need to think of conservativeness as not relative to inferences actually (correctly) endorsed by speakers but only as relative to those inferences which speakers would in principle (correctly) endorse. For Dummett this involves a concession to realism and is thus a problematic suggestion. It becomes problematic again for a different set of reasons in later work where this feature frustrates his attempt to see logical constants as distinguished by self-justifying introduction rules. That complex Dummettian debate need not trouble us here.

The impact of this point on present discussion is simply this. The apparent difficulty for the logical expressivist is that if she views content as determined by the inferential proprieties actually exhibited in speakers' practice then she cannot insist that logic is conservative relative to this sort of inference and so conservative about contents expressible in the practice and maintain that logic is epistemically useful. But she need not adopt this position: she might well argue that content is determined precisely by the inferential proprieties that are only, in principle, capable of being exhibited in speakers' practice. She can then relax her notion of conservativeness in such a way as to allow both logical expressivism and an epistemic use for logic.

The crucial point, however, is this. If the expressivist moves to this latter position she had better give independent reasons for reconstruing her notion of content, that is, reasons independent of the need to explain the epistemological role of logic. For it won't suffice for expressivism to show how logic is conservative relative to a certain construal of content; what we need is for logic to be conservative relative to a construal of content that is independent of the demands of logic. Loosely put, a requirement of expressivism is that logic makes no demands on content and we cannot take ourselves to have satisfied this requirement if we construe content itself in light of logic's demands. Dummett's view precisely denies this: logic requires a construal of the semantic values of sentences in the non-logical base which has no basis in the practical capacities of speakers exhibited in the logic-free portion of language. In Dummettian terms expressivism requires that logic be metaphysically neutral, but, if logic is taken to include, for instance, routine uses of disjunction, then it simply is not. In sum, expressivism here requires that there be an account of content that enables logic to be seen as epistemically useful. Such a conception of content must be sponsored by reasons that are independent of the epistemological function of logic.

And this, ostensibly, is just what Brandom gives us; he takes it that Kant is correct in insisting that it is of the very essence of conceptual expertise that concept users are bound by norms which are objective in the sense that correctly to apply the concept cannot be equated with what individuals in a community take or what the community itself takes to be correct: ‘The status of correctness of a performance according to a rule does not collapse into the attitude of assessing the performance as correct’ (MIE, p. 52). The challenge for Brandom is thus to explain this objectivity of concepts on the basis of a view of concepts which locates the nature
of concepts essentially in their use in a social normative pragmatics, in the social practice of keeping track of deontic statuses. Brandom achieves this by emphasising the social character of the norms: the objectivity of norms emerges from consideration of the business of keeping track of different perspectives from the point of view of a given perspective. Objectivity thus does not require a perspective-free notion of how things stand independently of judgement; rather the distinction between how things really are and how they are taken to be can be seen to be embedded in the way we set about attributing commitments to others. The crucial story here is the story which focuses on the difference between de dicto and de re attributions of attitudes. Here a scorekeeper distinguishes between what a practitioner takes herself to be committed to and what, from the attributor’s perspective she is really committed to. The upshot is that we can fund a distinction between the claim that p and the claim that I claim or any practitioner claims or indeed all practitioners claim that p. Thus the correctness of the claim is not to be equated with what any designated group of practitioners takes to be correct.

There are, however, different grades of objectivity. If his account is successful, what Brandom gives us is an account that guarantees what we might call an objectivity of content: the correctness conditions associated with p cannot be identified with what the community takes those conditions to be and thus it is possible that the community is wrong in their judgement about p. So, indeed, how things are with p and how the community takes them to be in respect of p are two quite different things. Though it has been denied, this would seem to be a minimal notion of objectivity required for genuine normative grip and thus for the presence of meaning. But this much objectivity won’t suffice for the needs of logic. Imagine that p is undecidable or, perhaps better, only in principle decidable. Then, in such a case, logic will have us assert that p or not-p. Responsible epistemic agents will be unprepared either to assert p or to assert not-p (perhaps to deny p) and it is possible that, though no epistemic criticism can be made of them, they may be wrong: though judgement is withheld about p, p may well be true. Thus the way things really are with p may differ from the way they seem to be from the agents’ epistemic perspective. But this isn’t enough for logic; logic wants us to say that the way things are with p necessarily escapes the way they seem to be from the agents’ best epistemic perspective because, though the agents withhold judgement about p, in a sense, the world does not. That is, logic requires an objectivity about truth. And on this, so far as I can see, Brandom’s story about objectivity is silent.

Let me end by explaining how I think the point bites in the context of Brandom’s later, more detailed development of the programme. In his Locke Lectures Brandom defines a consequence relation based on a primitive notion of incompatibility. Logical vocabulary is then defined and he is able to go on to prove, first, that the logic will abide by classical inference rules and, second, seemingly impressive conservativeness results follow: if an entailment relation now holds between sets of sentences in the original language then it must have held previously. Brandom’s basis is incompatibility relations between arbitrarily large but finite sets of sentences. He seems to take it that the question of whether any such set is incompatible with any other such set
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is to be answered bivalently; the relation of incompatibility is determinate between finite sets of sentences. Whether or not he needs to do so is a moot point but, for the following reasons, my sense is that he does. To be sure the conservativeness results do follow very easily from the account of the meanings of the logical constants in terms of the incompatibility relations between sets of sentences. But these proofs assume that the incompatibility relations remain unchanged by the introduction of logical vocabulary and although logic, given the definitions of logical vocabulary, cannot change determinate incompatibility relations, I see no reason for thinking that it may not decide undetermined incompatibility relations. Though it isn’t Brandom’s concern – because it already involves logical vocabulary – consider the case of introducing classical negation into a negation-free logic. The extension of the language is not conservative since, for instance, the entailment $A \rightarrow B \lor C \leftarrow A \rightarrow B \lor A \rightarrow C$ is now demonstrable, which it wasn’t so prior to the introduction of negation. But, irrespective of whether or not the case is Brandom’s focus of attention, we can apply his method to demonstrate that introduction of negation is conservative: this because his method is perfectly general. The reason why the conservativeness result holds is because the method assumes that the incompatibility relation is determinate over the finite power set of sentences in the language – without that assumption it is indeterminate whether or not $I(A \rightarrow B \lor A) \subseteq I(A \rightarrow B \lor C)$ prior to the introduction of negation, but determinate that the inclusion holds after its introduction, whereas with that assumption the inclusion is guaranteed both before and after its introduction. My point is that the example shows that Brandom’s method is suspect unless buttressed by the assumption that incompatibility relations are determinate: if the assumption is made, then of course incompatibility relations are invariant on extending the language. So the base itself is generous, arguably too generous. For accordingly the assumption is that the proprieties of inference and incompatibility that speakers are able to institute in the practice determine a fully determinate incompatibility relation between arbitrary finite sets of sentences, irrespective of whether, in particular cases, speakers are able to determine those relations. It may well be that, in principle, speakers are able to do so but nothing in the proprieties that are instituted by speakers’ actual practice testifies to there being a determinate incompatibility relation in cases such as these, where capacities – those possessed only in principle – outrun actual capacities. So here logic makes a demand on the nature of the proprieties that determine content. As I said, it may well be that there is a justification for assuming that the proprieties extend in this way to cases beyond the reach of speakers’ actual capacities that is independent of the requirements of logic. But, if so, we need this second objectivity proof.

Notes

1 In his Locke Lectures (2008) Brandom talks of the entailment relation as holding between finite sets of sentences – so he contemplates multiple conclusion as well as multiple premise inferences. But, although the claim ‘$X \rightarrow Y$’ is genuine, i.e. is truth-evaluable, sentences occur as members of the sets of sentences $X$ and $Y$. So sentences do not occur as claims but as objects – the approach is metalinguistic.
There are two standard problems with such substitutional accounts. One is finding a way to distinguish logical vocabulary. The other, which Brandom doesn’t address, is that the account is language-relative.

Of course we would need to go on to characterise the meanings of these conditionals in terms of harmonious introduction and elimination rules - a task that is far from easy. So the informal explications just given would stand to the formal account as Heyting’s characterisations of the meanings of the intuitionistic constants stand to their formal explication in a Gentzen-style system. Here the informal explanation is, I take it, vital in securing the expressive function of the logical locution (just as in the Heyting account it is vital in ensuring coherence with a certain model of understanding).

See Wright and Hale (this volume) for discussion of this aspect of Brandom on objectivity.

He says, ‘Any incompatibility relation satisfying symmetry and persistence can be represented by partitioning all the sets of sentences over some vocabulary into those that are and those that are not incoherent.’ (original text of lectures, p. 13) And one set of sentences is incompatible with another just in case their union is incoherent.

Thus Brandom may well have given a justification for classical as opposed to intuitionistic logic on the basis of this assumption, which, in itself would be a noteworthy result since it may well reveal intuitionism to be an unstable position.

For what it’s worth, my hunch is that we could make some progress in constructing such an argument but it will be an argument that is based on the metaphysics of capacities not on structural features of a social practice. So it would be a very different sort of objectivity proof from the first.

References


Introduction

Robert Brandom’s *Making It Explicit* is a very long book by most standards. One reason for the length is the complex theory of meaning it contains, but another is Brandom’s stated goal to show that the theory of meaning can account for the unique semantic features of the vocabulary he uses to formulate the theory itself. If a theory of meaning satisfies this goal, then it is, in Brandom’s words, *expressively complete*. In what follows, (i) I explain his motivation for this objective and his strategy for accomplishing it, and (ii) I argue that his commitment to a broadly Kripkean approach to the semantic paradoxes prevents his theory from achieving it. I conclude by considering his options for resolving this inconsistency.

1 Expressive completeness

1.1 What is expressive completeness?

Let us begin by examining what Brandom means by ‘expressive completeness’. The topic first appears in the introduction:

The aim is twofold: to make explicit deontic scorekeeping social practices that suffice to confer conceptual contents on nonlogical sentences, singular terms, and predicates in general; and to make explicit the deontic scorekeeping social practices in virtue of which vocabulary can be introduced as playing the expressive roles characteristic of a variety of particular logical locutions. How much logical vocabulary is worth reconstructing in this fashion? In this project, neither more nor less than is required to make explicit within the language the deontic scorekeeping social practices that suffice to confer conceptual contents on nonlogical vocabulary in general. At that point it will have been specified what practices a theorist must attribute to a community in order to be interpreting its members as engaging not just in specifically linguistic practices but in linguistic practices that endow them with sufficient expressive power to say how their practices confer conceptual content on their states,
attitudes, performances, and expressions. That is, they will be able to express the theory offered here (p. xx).

The main points are: (i) Brandom is presenting a theory of deontic scorekeeping practices; (ii) this theory is supposed to explain how linguistic expressions acquire content; and (iii) language users with certain expressive resources should be able to formulate Brandom’s theory and use it to explain the meanings of their linguistic expressions. Thus, he is presenting a theory of meaning; it does not matter for my purposes what a deontic scorekeeping practice is or how it confers content on linguistic expressions. He wants his theory of meaning to work well for both logical and non-logical vocabulary, but he thinks that since these two kinds of vocabulary play quite different roles in a deontic scorekeeping practice, the theory of meaning has to treat them differently. (For the record, logical vocabulary for Brandom includes not just traditional logical terms, e.g. ‘not’ and ‘all’, but also semantic terms, e.g. ‘true’; normative terms, e.g. ‘ought’; pragmatic terms, e.g. ‘says’; and mental terms, e.g. ‘believes’.) As Brandom says, one part of the theory of meaning explains the meaning of non-logical vocabulary (i.e. it will explain how a deontic scorekeeping practice confers content on non-logical vocabulary), while another part of the theory of meaning explains the meaning of logical vocabulary.2

To understand why Brandom’s theory of meaning has these two parts, one has to appreciate his somewhat idiosyncratic views on logical vocabulary:

[A]n expressive theory of logic is presented here. ... Logical vocabulary endows practitioners with the expressive power to make explicit as the contents of claims just those implicit features of linguistic practice that confer semantic contents on their utterances in the first place (p. xix).

According to Brandom, logical terms are tailor-made for use in a theory of meaning because their characteristic role in language is to express the way in which words acquire their meanings. For the purposes of this paper, I assume that he is right about this. His views on the expressive role of logical vocabulary motivate his account of the meaning of logical vocabulary:

Explaining the features of the use of logical vocabulary that confer its characteristic sort of semantic content is accordingly explaining how the sort of expressive power the theorist requires to explain the features of the use of nonlogical vocabulary that confer semantic content on it can become available to those whose linguistic practice is being theorized about. It is this fact that sets the expressive scope of the project pursued here (p. xx).

In this passage, Brandom claims that logical vocabulary allows us to formulate a theory of how non-logical vocabulary acquires content, whereas in the previous passage, he made the same claim about linguistic expressions in general (not just the non-logical ones). Below I discuss whether the more general claim is correct.
Either way, Brandom also claims that to explain the meaning of logical vocabulary is to give an account of how to introduce logical vocabulary into a linguistic practice. Thus, the part of his theory of meaning that explains the meanings of logical terms will be an account of how these terms can be introduced into a linguistic practice.

To summarize, Brandom’s theory of meaning has two parts: one that applies to non-logical vocabulary, and one that applies to logical vocabulary. The first part explains how non-logical vocabulary acquires content by explaining how it is used in a deontic scorekeeping practice. The second part explains how logical vocabulary acquires content by explaining how it is introduced into a deontic scorekeeping practice. I call the first part of the theory of meaning, the *basic theory*, and the practice it describes, the *basic practice*. I call the second part of the theory of meaning the *extended theory*, and the practice it describes, the *extended practice*. The basic practice has no logical vocabulary, but the extended practice has enough logical vocabulary to explain how non-logical vocabulary acquires content; that is, the extended practice has enough logical vocabulary to formulate the basic theory. Brandom wants his theory of meaning (the whole thing, presumably) to be expressively complete, which means that the members of the deontic scorekeeping practice (the extended one, presumably) can formulate his theory of meaning (the whole thing, presumably).

At this point, one might have the following worry. The whole theory of meaning is not expressively complete because the members of the extended practice have access only to the basic theory, not the extended theory. For the whole theory to be expressively complete, the members of the extended theory must be able to formulate the extended theory as well.

Brandom solves this problem by ensuring that the logical vocabulary introduced into the basic practice has a special characteristic: it is in expressively *equilibrium*. A logical term is in expressively equilibrium if it can be used to make explicit the implicit norms that are responsible for conferring content on it. Brandom’s example of expressively equilibrium is the conditional found in Frege’s *Begriffsschrift*: “[Frege] finds, in the two-valued conditional, an expressively equilibrium: the inferences in virtue of which that conditional means what it means can themselves be expressed and codified by the use of that conditional” (p. 114).

Brandom continues:

One thread running through the later chapters of this work is the attempt to achieve an analog of the expressively equilibrium Frege achieves in the propositional fragment of the *Begriffsschrift*. The challenge is to show how not only the semantics, but the pragmatics outlined in the first four chapters can be made explicit, in terms of vocabulary that is introduced by specifying practices of using it that are sufficient to confer on it the content that is then employed in making explicit precisely those practices and that content. The ideal is that the theory should specify practices sufficient to confer on the various locutions considered all the kinds of content required to state the theory itself (p. 116).
Here Brandom claims that the logical vocabulary he uses to formulate his theory of meaning should be in expressive equilibrium. We can conclude that logical vocabulary not only makes explicit the ways in which non-logical vocabulary acquires content, it makes explicit the ways in which logical vocabulary acquires content. That is, logical vocabulary makes explicit the ways in which all vocabulary (non-logical and logical alike) acquires content. Again, I am not going to quibble with these claims. The final sentence of this passage reaffirms his commitment to arriving at an expressively complete theory of meaning.

We are now in a position to see that Brandom’s theory of meaning purports to achieve expressive completeness in the following way. The extended practice has enough logical vocabulary to express the basic theory. Because the logical vocabulary introduced into the basic practice is in expressive equilibrium, it can be used to explain not only how non-logical vocabulary acquires content, but how logical vocabulary acquires content as well. That is, the logical vocabulary introduced into the basic practice can be used to state not just the basic theory, but the extended theory as well. Hence, the entire theory of meaning (both the basic theory and the extended theory) can be formulated by the members of the extended practice. Therefore, the theory of meaning is expressively complete.

1.2 Motivation for expressive completeness

Why does Brandom impose the expressive completeness condition on his theory of meaning? Although Brandom never gives an explicit justification for the condition, I find several reasons that are specific to his project in Making It Explicit. However, it seems to me that there is an obvious reason for adopting it as a condition on any theory of meaning: a theory of meaning should be able to explain the meanings of all the terms it uses. If a theory of meaning uses some term whose meaning it cannot explain, then that theory of meaning is clearly inadequate. Of course, if a theory of meaning does a poor job of explaining the meaning of any term, then that counts against it, but if a theory of meaning cannot explain the meaning of a term required to state the theory itself, then that is especially troubling. The difference is analogous to the difference between a theory having a false consequence and a theory being self-refuting; self-refutation is usually (and correctly) taken to be a symptom of a deep problem.

A reason for Brandom in particular to adopt this condition is his championing inferential semantics over representational semantics. Roughly, a representational approach explains the semantic features of a word or sentence in terms of what the word or sentence purports to represent, while an inferential theory explains semantic features in terms of relations between sentences. Of paradigmatically representational locutions, Brandom writes:

This chapter looks to specify the actual expressive role played by the technical terms ‘true’, ‘refers’, ‘denotes’, and their cognates. ... It also argues that once this expressive role is properly understood, it becomes clear that
representational locutions are not suited to play the role of primitives in a semantic theory. Nailing down this point requires looking at their actual expressive role, which is not capturable in the sort of representational semantic theory that uses these notions as primitives; it is therefore necessary to work in another one (pp. 284–5).

The idea seems to be that a representational theory of meaning cannot explain the meaning of representational vocabulary. Thus, in order to ensure that one of his major criticisms of his chief rival does not also apply to his theory, Brandom imposes the expressive completeness requirement. He aims to show that an inferential theory of meaning can explain the meanings of the terms it employs.

It seems to me that several of Brandom’s positive doctrines depend on expressive completeness as well. In particular, his theory of intentionality, his account of the explicit discursive scorekeeping stance, and his views on the relation between norms and regularities all depend on the claim that his theory of meaning is expressively complete. Rather than documenting these claims, I present the final passage of the book as evidence of just how important expressive completeness is to Brandom:

Pursuing the ideal of expressive completeness requires working out an account of the practices of using various particular logical locutions – paradigmatically those used to express inferential, substitutional, and anaphoric commitments and those used to ascribe discursive commitments to others. In the end, though, this expressive account of language, mind, and logic is an account of who we are. For it is an account of the sort of thing that constitutes itself as an expressive being – as a creature who makes explicit, and who makes itself explicit. We are sapients: rational, expressive – that is, discursive – beings. But we are more than rational expressive beings. We are also logical, self-expressive beings. We not only make it explicit, we make ourselves explicit as making it explicit (p. 650).

What more needs to be said?

II Expressive completeness and internalizability

Despite the fact that I have presented expressive completeness as a condition on theories of meaning in general, Brandom’s formulation of it depends on some of the peculiarities of his approach. For example, he talks about reconstructing the way vocabulary can be introduced into a deontic scorekeeping practice so that the members of that practice can come to acquire that vocabulary. Moreover, his account of the expressive role of logical vocabulary is involved as well. Without a detailed account of these views, it will be difficult to formulate a compelling argument for my objection. However, I do not have the space to give these views the attention they deserve. Instead, I formulate the primary argument concerning Brandom’s theory of meaning in terms of an alternative notion – internalizability.
Before introducing the notion of internalizability, we must follow Dummett in distinguishing between a theory of meaning and a semantic theory:

**Theory of meaning**: a theory that specifies the nature of meaning; theories of meaning provide necessary and sufficient conditions on semantic theories.

**Semantic theory**: a theory that specifies the meanings of the sentences of a particular language or languages.

Theories of meaning tell us what meaning is, and semantic theories assign meanings to sentences; thus, a theory of meaning will provide conditions on semantic theories, and semantic theories provide evidence for or against a theory of meaning (for example, if a semantic theory that attributes truth conditions to sentences has implausible consequences when applied to sentences containing certain vocabulary, then that counts against a truth conditional theory of meaning). The following is a definition of ‘internalizable’ for semantic theories:

A semantic theory \(T\) that purports to specify the meanings of the sentences belonging to a certain language \(L\) is **internalizable for \(L\)** if and only if there exists an extension of \(L\) such that all the sentences that compose \(T\) can be translated into sentences that belong to the extension of \(L\) and \(T\) correctly specifies the meanings of all the sentences of the extension of \(L\).

Roughly, if a semantic theory requires a distinction between object language and metalanguage, then it is not internalizable for any language.

Another bit of terminology will make the definition of ‘internalizable’ much more manageable:

A semantic theory \(T\) is **descriptively complete for \(L\)** if and only if \(T\) provides a correct assignment for every sentence of \(L\).

A semantic theory \(T\) is **internalizable for \(L\)** if and only if there exists an extension \(L'\) of \(L\) such that \(T\) is expressible in \(L'\) and \(T\) is descriptively complete for \(L'\).

The latter definition is equivalent to the one given above, but it uses the notion of descriptive completeness. Now we extend the notion of internalizability from semantic theories to theories of meaning:

A theory of meaning \(\mathcal{T}\) is **internalizable** if and only if there exists a semantic theory \(T\) such that \(T\) is compatible with \(\mathcal{T}\) and \(T\) is descriptively complete for the language in which \(\mathcal{T}\) is formulated.

Notice that for semantic theories, internalizability is a relation between a semantic
theory and a language, while for theories of meaning, internalizability is a property. In addition, the last definition mentions compatibility; I assume that a semantic theory $T$ is compatible with a theory of meaning $\mathcal{S}$ if and only if the meanings $T$ assigns are consistent with the claims $\mathcal{S}$ makes about meaning (e.g. $\mathcal{S}$ explains meanings in terms of truth conditions, and $T$ assigns truth conditions). \footnote{7}

If a theory of meaning is internalizable, then there is a way of assigning meanings to the sentences that compose the theory that meets the conditions implied by the theory of meaning; that is, the theory of meaning can explain the meanings of its own sentences. Clearly, if a theory of meaning is expressively complete then it is internalizable; otherwise the members of the deontic scorekeeping practice would not be able to use it to explain how the use of their linguistic expressions confers content on them. Thus, internalizability is a necessary condition for expressive completeness; if a theory of meaning is not internalizable, it is not expressively complete.

### III Brandom on truth and the liar paradox

Despite the fact that Brandom studiously avoids appealing to representational notions like truth and reference in his theory of meaning, he recognizes that he needs to explain the meaning of sentences containing ‘true’ and ‘refers’. His view is that these terms function as anaphoric proform-forming operators. To explain what this means, I focus on the case of truth. For Brandom, just as ‘he’ is a pronoun that inherits its content from an antecedent (e.g. ‘John’), ‘“snow is white” is true’ is a prosentence, and it inherits its content from an antecedent (in this case the antecedent is ‘snow is white’). Prosentences can also inherit their content from sentences quantified over (e.g. ‘everything Helen said during the lecture is true’). Thus, Brandom endorses a version of the prosentential theory of truth. \footnote{8}

Everyone who works on truth is familiar with the liar paradox, which pertains to the following sentence:

(1) (1) is false.

Using minimal logical resources and some seemingly obvious principles about truth, one can show that (1) is both true and false. Thus, from intuitively obvious assumptions via intuitively obvious inferences, one derives an obviously unacceptable conclusion. This paradox has proven to be extremely difficult to handle in part because the principles involved are so well entrenched. As a result, it is equally difficult to present a consistent and plausible theory of truth.

To avoid having an inconsistent theory of truth, Brandom adopts an approach to the liar that was proposed by fellow prosententialist Dorothy Grover:

In “Inheritors and Paradox,” Dorothy Grover elaborates an anaphoric approach to semantic paradoxes for the closely analogous anaphoric treatment of ‘... is true’ discussed above. Grover finds that the natural condition on anaphoric grounding yields an interpretation coinciding in general with
the sentences that Kripke assigns a semantic value to at the minimal fixed point, the interpretation he takes to provide the most natural model for the intuitive concept of truth. Her remarks can be applied to the present construction by means of the crucial analogy between the pronomial account of reference and the prosentential account of truth (pp. 321–2).

This passage makes clear that Brandom wants to use Grover’s approach not just for the liar paradox but for the related paradoxes that affect the notion of reference as well. Brandom does not say much more about the semantic paradoxes than this. However, a bit more about Grover’s approach is necessary before we can see why it is incompatible with Brandom’s expressive completeness requirement.

One might notice that the anaphoric antecedent for a sentence like (1) is that very sentence. In order to determine the content of (1) (according to the prosentential theory of truth), one must first determine the content of (1) – an impossible task. Thus, in cases like this, there is no antecedent with a content of its own for the prosentence to inherit. Grover argues that, for this reason, (1) does not have any content whatsoever.9 Moreover, the same result holds for any sentence that does not inherit its content from independently contentful sentences. In the literature on the liar paradox, these sentences are said to be ungrounded. Thus, Grover claims that ungrounded sentences are meaningless.10

Kripke was the first to give a rigorous definition of groundedness as part of his highly influential approach to the liar paradox, according to which paradoxical sentences are neither true nor false.11 Grover remarks on the similarity between the prosentential theory of truth and Kripke’s approach to the liar when she writes, “it is interesting to note that [the set of occurrences of sentences that acquire content independently and grounded inheritors] corresponds, roughly, to that set of sentences to which Kripke has assigned a truth value at the smallest fixed point” (Grover, 1977: p. 599). The smallest fixed point is an artificial language Kripke presents to illustrate his views on truth; in the smallest fixed point, only grounded sentences have truth values, and all the ungrounded sentences are truth-value gaps (i.e. neither true nor false). However, Kripke stops short of saying that ungrounded sentences are meaningless – he thinks they are meaningful, but they lack truth values.12 Nevertheless, Grover and Kripke agree that a solution to the liar paradox requires one to identify the ungrounded sentences of a language, and they both use Kripke’s definition of groundedness.

To sum up, Brandom proposes a prosentential theory of truth and endorses Grover’s approach to the liar paradox, which was designed for a prosentential theory of truth. Grover’s approach to the liar paradox appeals to Kripke’s distinction between grounded and ungrounded sentences, and her approach implies that all ungrounded sentences are meaningless. Therefore, Brandom endorses a broadly Kripkean approach to the liar paradox, with the added twist that the sentences Kripke identifies (i.e. the ungrounded ones) are meaningless.

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IV The objection

At last we are ready to see why Brandom’s views on the liar paradox are incompatible with his commitment to expressive completeness as a condition on his theory of meaning. The problem stems from the fact that Kripke’s theory of truth, like almost all theories of truth, cannot apply to the language in which it is formulated upon pain of contradiction. That is, Kripke’s theory of truth has to be formulated in a language (i.e. the metalanguage) that is expressively richer than the language to which it applies (i.e. the object language). If Kripke’s theory were applied to the language in which it is formulated, it would be inconsistent for the following reason. Recall that Kripke’s theory implies that sentence (1) is a truth-value gap, and consider the following sentence:

(2) (2) is either false or a truth-value gap.

An argument analogous to the one mentioned above shows that (2) is both true and either false or a truth-value gap. Thus, Kripke’s theory has to be restricted so that it does not apply to languages with the resources to construct sentences like (2), which give rise to what is called a revenge paradox. The result is that although his theory employs the concept of a truth-value gap, it cannot apply to a language that contains a word expressing this concept (likewise for several other concepts it employs — e.g. groundedness, paradoxicality, and exclusion negation). Kripke, of course, freely admits this fact about his theory:

It seems likely that many who have worked on the truth-gap approach to the semantic paradoxes have hoped for a universal language, one in which everything that can be stated at all can be expressed. (The proof by Gödel and Tarski that a language cannot contain its own semantics applied only to languages without truth gaps.) Now the languages of the present approach contain their own truth predicates and even their own satisfaction predicates, and thus to this extent the hope has been realized. Nevertheless the present approach certainly does not claim to give a universal language, and I doubt that such a goal can be achieved. First, the induction defining the minimal fixed point is carried out in a set-theoretic meta-language, not in the object language itself. Second, there are assertions we can make about the object language which we cannot make in the object language. For example, Liar sentences are not true in the object language, in the sense that the inductive process never makes them true; but we are precluded from saying this in the object language by our interpretation of negation and the truth predicate. ... The necessity to ascend to a meta-language may be one of the weaknesses of the present theory. The ghost of the Tarski hierarchy is still with us (1975, p. 714).

Because Kripke’s theory of truth does not apply to any language capable of expressing it, the semantic theory Kripke offers is not internalizable for any language.
As the following argument shows, the commitment to a Kripkean approach to the liar renders Brandom’s theory of meaning expressively incomplete. Let $\mathcal{I}$ be Brandom’s theory of meaning, and let $T$ be a semantic theory that is compatible with Brandom’s theory of meaning (i.e. $T$ attributes meanings – inferential roles – to particular sentences of particular languages). Let $M$ be a language in which $\mathcal{I}$ is formulated. The question is whether $T$ assigns the right meanings to the sentences of $M$; I argue that it does not.

Kripke’s theory of truth is part of $\mathcal{I}$ because $\mathcal{I}$ uses it to identify meaningful sentences (recall that $\mathcal{I}$ implies that ungrounded sentences are meaningless). Since $\mathcal{I}$ includes Kripke’s theory of truth, Kripke’s theory of truth and the semantic theory implied by his theory of truth are expressible in $M$. Moreover, Kripke’s semantic theory is part of $T$ (i.e. the semantic theory compatible with $\mathcal{I}$); otherwise $T$ would not be able to determine which sentences are even meaningful, much less attribute the right meanings to them. However, Kripke’s semantic theory is not internalizable for $M$ (otherwise it would be inconsistent); thus Kripke’s semantic theory is restricted so that it does not apply to $M$. Therefore, no semantic theory that includes Kripke’s semantic theory applies to $M$; in particular $T$ does not apply to $M$. In other words, $T$ does not attribute the right meanings to sentences of $\mathcal{I}$ because it does not attribute any meanings to them. Therefore, no semantic theory compatible with Brandom’s theory of meaning attributes the right meanings to the sentences that compose his theory of meaning. Hence, Brandom’s theory of meaning is not internalizable. Given the relation between internalizability and expressive completeness, his theory of meaning is not expressively complete – his theory remains forever inaccessible to those in the deontic scorekeeping practice it purports to describe.

We can summarize the objection by saying that Brandom’s theory of meaning implies that ungrounded sentences are meaningless, and it uses the account of groundedness given by Kripke’s theory of truth; however, one cannot use this account of groundedness for languages that can express Kripke’s semantic theory (assuming Kripke’s theory of truth is consistent). Therefore, one cannot use Brandom’s theory of meaning to explain the meanings of sentences that belong to a language in which Brandom’s theory of meaning is formulated.

V Consequences

What is Brandom to do? The obvious choices are to give up on the expressive completeness requirement or give up the Kripkean approach to the liar paradox. Given the centrality of the expressive completeness requirement to his overall project, it is clear that he should give up the Kripkean approach to the liar paradox. However, if Brandom wants to retain his expressive completeness condition, he has some work to do – it is not just a matter of surveying the approaches to the liar paradox and picking the right one. The problem Kripke’s theory faces is ubiquitous – everyone wants a theory of truth that does not give rise to revenge paradoxes, but no one knows how to construct one. Recently, several approaches have appeared that are promising, but even so, the news is not good.
Tim Maudlin and Hartry Field have each proposed approaches to the liar paradox that do not need to be formulated in an expressively richer metalanguage. Brandom could replace Kripke’s theory with either Maudlin’s theory or Field’s theory. However, there are two major problems with this change. First, some of the sentences that compose these theories are ungrounded. Thus, they are not available to Brandom since he claims (following Grover) that all ungrounded sentences are meaningless.

There are independent reasons for thinking that Brandom should avoid any theory of truth that implies all ungrounded sentences are meaningless. For example, lots of obviously meaningful sentences are ungrounded (e.g. ‘no sentence is both true and false’). If Brandom wants to do justice to our intuitions about meaningfulness, then he should adopt a theory of truth that does not have this consequence. In addition, whether a sentence is grounded is not determined by its meaning. That is, one can specify two sentence tokens of the same type that have the same sentential meanings, the same subsentential meanings for their subsentential parts, and the same referents for their singular terms, but one is grounded and the other is not. Groundedness can depend on virtually any fact one can imagine, while meaningfulness does not. Thus, if one accepts that ungrounded sentences are meaningless, then one has to accept that whether a sentence is meaningful can depend on virtually any fact that one can imagine, and that is radically implausible. Therefore, Brandom should avoid any approach to the liar that implies ungrounded (or even paradoxical) sentences are meaningless.

I do not know whether a prosentential theory of truth can be made to work with the idea that ungrounded sentences are meaningful, but I am sceptical. It would require a new account of how sentences acquire their content from anaphoric antecedents. According to a prosentential theory, a sentence like ‘no sentence is both true and false’ acquires its content from all the sentences it quantifies over (including itself), so it would have to inherit its content (in part) from itself. I do not see any way to explain how this occurs. If that is right, then adopting either Maudlin’s theory or Field’s theory would force Brandom to give up the prosentential theory of truth.

The second problem (with replacing Kripke’s theory with Maudlin’s theory or Field’s theory) is more subtle. Let us assume that Brandom can construct a version of the prosentential theory of truth that does not imply that ungrounded sentences are meaningless and that he replaces Kripke’s theory with either Maudlin’s theory or Field’s theory. Brandom’s new theory of meaning would be expressively complete (or at least, the objection presented here would not show that it is not expressively complete). However, there is still a problem with replacing Kripke’s theory with either Maudlin’s theory or Field’s theory: both of them have to be restricted so that they do not apply to certain languages (e.g. languages with exclusion negation). That is, both of these approaches work only for particular artificial languages, and these languages do not contain certain expressive resources (e.g. exclusion negation, other non-monotonic sentential operators, strong truth predicates, idempotent determinacy operators, and so on). Maudlin makes the implausible claim that there is no such thing as these resources (presumably, what we take to be words that express...
them are meaningless), while Field says that they are meaningful but “not intel-
ligible” (he does not elaborate on what he means by this). If one (e.g. Brandom)
is in the business of providing a plausible theory of meaning, then one should
probably avoid a theory that clearly does not apply to certain obviously meaningful
expressions (e.g. exclusion negation and the rest), even if one does not need them
to formulate the theory of meaning itself.

Instead of trading Kripke’s theory for Maudlin’s theory or Field’s theory, there is
one other alternative that might work: an inconsistency approach to the liar. On an
inconsistency approach, people who possess the concept of truth are led to accept
the premises and reasoning involved in the liar paradox by virtue of their compe-
tence with the concept of truth. There are several versions of this approach that have
been proposed, and they avoid the problems faced by Maudlin’s theory and Field’s
theory. Moreover, given Brandom’s comments on words like ‘Boche’, an inconsis-
tency approach to the liar seems like something he would find plausible. However,
it is unclear whether they avoid revenge paradoxes altogether. If they do, then one of
these might be a good choice for Brandom. It is also unclear whether they are compat-
ible with the prosentential theory of truth (although it seems to me that they are not).
Thus, adopting one would probably require a new theory of truth.

One final alternative would be to agree with the inconsistency theorists that truth
is a defective concept, and argue that Brandom’s theory of meaning need not apply
to discourse involving these concepts. This, in effect, would be to decide that he
does not need any theory of truth at all. It seems to me that since ‘true’ is mean-
ingful and Brandom is presenting a theory of meaning, his theory would need to
work for ‘true’. Thus, I do not see this line of thought as very promising.

In conclusion, Brandom’s commitment to producing an expressively complete
theory of meaning is incompatible with his choice of a broadly Kripkean approach
to the liar paradox – the Kripkean account of groundedness guarantees that his
theory of meaning does not apply to any language in which it can be formulated. He
does have several options for rectifying this situation, but they all seem to require
giving up his prosentential theory of truth. Moreover, the jury is still out on whether
any of them can actually do the work he requires of them.

Notes

1 Brandom (1994); hereafter all citations are to this work unless otherwise specified.
2 See also p. 641 for another discussion of expressive completeness.
4 pp. 639–43.
6 Dummett (1991, pp. 20–2); Dummett uses ‘meaning-theory’ instead of ‘semantic theory’,
but the distinction is the same.
7 The notion of internalizability is developed in more detail in Scharp (ms); note that in
the more detailed treatment, I distinguish between descriptive completeness and descrip-
tive correctness. I ignore that distinction here for simplicity.
8 See Grover, Camp, and Belnap (1976) where the prosentential theory was introduced;
see also Brandom (2002).
10 Notice that although all paradoxical sentences are ungrounded, not all ungrounded sentences are paradoxical; e.g. ‘no sentence is both true and false’ is ungrounded, but not paradoxical (it quantifies over all sentences – including itself – but no paradox results from trying to assign a truth value to it – it is obviously true).
11 Kripke (1975).
13 One might think that there are independent reasons to think that Brandom’s theory of meaning (as it is presented in Making It Explicit) is not expressively complete. In Between Saying and Doing (2008), Brandom presents a theory of modality that is sorely lacking in Making It Explicit. If the theory of meaning in Making It Explicit requires modal vocabulary (and it certainly appears to), then the absence of a theory of modal vocabulary in that work guarantees that the theory of meaning presented there is expressively incomplete. However, Brandom might hold out the hope that once the theory of meaning is augmented with the account of modality in Between Saying and Doing, it is expressively complete. It seems to me that this is the right interpretation of his motives. If so, then he still faces the problem I present in this paper.
15 The same point applies to paradoxical sentences as well.
16 There is also the dialetheic approach to the liar (i.e. the one that implies that some sentences are both true and false); however, aside from the fact that it implies that some sentences are both true and false, it suffers from the same problems as Maudlin’s theory and Field’s theory. See Priest (2006) for details.
20 Thanks to Robert Brandom, Michael Williams, Cristina Lafont, A. Duncan Kerr, Seth Ard, Peter Gildenhuys, Brad Cokelet, and audiences at the University of Munich and the University of Pittsburgh for discussions of the issues raised in this paper.

Bibliography


TRUTH AND EXPRESSIVE COMPLETENESS

— (ms) “Truth and Internalizability,” manuscript.
Michael Dummett’s pioneering work from the 1960s onwards on the metaphysics and epistemology of meaning has bequeathed an outstanding challenge to contemporary philosophy of language: to show how a broadly use-based, or assertibilist conception of linguistic competence can underwrite a satisfying account of language mastery and of the full range of norms and contents that it embraces, or to show – once and for all – that it cannot, and that in order to do so, more traditionally Realist materials are needed. Robert Brandom’s landmark researches fashion a more thoroughgoing answer to this challenge than can be found in the writings of any other living philosopher. Here, however, we review one aspect of his answer – better, his answer to one aspect of the challenge – which seems to us continually problematical, and attempt to explain why, as it seems to us, a more orthodox ‘assertibilist’ approach than Brandom’s may yet better serve the purpose.

I Assertibility, truth and objectivity

Brandom’s approach assumes – in contrast to that of, say, Quine – that for the purposes of the sought-after account of language mastery, use – the patterns of practice that have to be mastered – may be normatively characterised, in terms of notions of propriety and impropriety understood on the broad model of allowable moves in a game. Descriptions of use – the data on which the account of meaning is to be built – will thus consist in the characterisation of what moves are permissible, or mandated, or forbidden for a particular player of the language-game in a particular context. Brandom also follows Dummett’s lead in taking assertion to be the basic form of move on which the theorist of meaning should concentrate. It is thus normatively conceived assertibility-conditions – conditions of proper assertion – that are going to play the central role in the attempt by Brandom’s ‘pragmatist’ (henceforward: the Assertibilist) to construct a workable philosophical semantics.

Any such project has to confront a familiar and awkward-looking hazard – the fact that, as Brandom stresses, assertoric practice is essentially subject to a norm which contrasts with warrant. I may with full warrant – hence commendably – assert what is actually not so, and I may unwarrantedly – hence reprehensibly – assert what, luckily for me, is so. But untruth is still a form of failure, a way for even the
best-warranted assertion to be in bad standing; and truth is still a form of success, a point of commendation for even the most capricious claim. How, using just the kind of materials which the Assertibilist allows himself, can a conception of the content of moves be constructed which will allow them – as they must be, if they are assertions – to be subject to both these apparently contrasting norms?

Call that the Truth question. It is not, on the face of it, identical to another question, on which Brandom expends a more explicit effort. This is the Objectivity question: can the Assertibilist provide for the emergence of assertoric moves whose contents are objective in the specific sense that they do not describe the situation of the agent – what is or is not permitted, or prohibited, for her in that particular context – nor other features of her attitudes? Assertibility is relative to an assertor, to her context and state of information in relevant respects. But the content of what is asserted is, typically, not so relative. The Objectivity question concerns the recoverability of contents of this kind on the basis of materials legitimately available to the Assertibilist.

Any viable assertibilism has to address both questions. In ‘Objectivity and the Normative Fine Structure of Rationality’, Brandom gives most of his attention to the Objectivity question – though one may well gather the impression that he feels he is thereby treating the Truth question, without clearly separating the two. But however that may be, the questions are – at least initially – distinct. Reflect, for one thing, that the Truth question is not restricted to objective contents – a contrast between truth and warrant applies equally to claims that are not objective in Brandom’s sense. For another, it is not clear why a good answer to the Objectivity question would necessarily have to say anything about truth. Any assertibilist construction of a general contrast between objective and non-objective claims must ultimately proceed by reference to differentiating patterns of use in the light of norms which are recognised as legitimate assertibilist materials from the outset. If such a construction can be given, then rather than issuing in the emergence of truth as a superintendent norm on assertoric practice generally, one might expect it to show, rather, how certain differences – normally thought to require a contrast between truth-conditions and assertibility-conditions – may be explained without bringing in truth-conditions, and hence without any need to invoke the notion of truth at all. Indeed, some, though not all, of Brandom’s remarks suggest that this is his own perspective. He writes, for example:

The fact is that the distinction between sentences sharing assertibility conditions and sharing truth-conditions ... can be made out in terms of commitments and entitlements, without the need to invoke the notion of truth.5

This suggests that Brandom views the Objectivity question as crystallising the real challenge posed by the Truth question, but in a purer form, absent a theoretical prejudice. But other passages convey a different impression. He allows, for example, that there is a challenge
to show how the conceptual raw materials ... [the assertibility] approach allows itself could be deployed so as to underwrite attributions of propositional content for which this sort of objective normative assessment [in terms of truth and falsity] is intelligible.7

At this point, then, there is a worry that a conflation may be at work in Brandom’s thinking between explaining how the assertibility-conditional approach can sanction propositional contents for which ‘objective normative assessment’ is intelligible, and explaining how it can sanction propositional contents which are objective in the sense of concerning matters other than the situation/perspective of a thinker/asserter. The Truth question requires the Assertibilist to explain how he can recognise the distinction between the two distinct norms over assertoric practice of truth and assertibility – where the distinctness of these norms involves their potential extensional divergence, in the sense that conformity with either norm is consistent with failure to conform with the other. The Objectivity question requires the Assertibilist to explain the distinction between a range of contents, of which we may take the schematic

It is assertible that \( p \)

as representative, which are non-objective in the sense that they involve an essential reference and relativity to the epistemically relevant circumstances, attitudes, and so on, of some player or group of players in the assertoric practice, and the corresponding objective content that \( p \).

What is the relation between these two questions/explanatory tasks? Does discharging one of them put one in position to discharge the other? If so, is there a preferred direction of explanation?

Let’s first flag the possibility of answering the Objectivity question on the basis of an answer to the Truth question. One obvious strategy for the Assertibilist is to seek to directly construct a notion out of his basic materials which appropriately contrasts with assertibility itself and which behaves in relevant respects as a notion of truth should. A natural candidate is superassertibility. A content is superassertible, roughly, if warranted by some accessible state of information and by all accessible improvements of it. The identification of truth with superassertibility provides a very straightforward answer to the Truth question. Assertibility in a given state of information need not imply superassertibility as characterised. And superassertibility need not imply assertibility in any particular (present) state of information. Further, it is only a little less obvious that it provides a very straightforward and agreeably simple answer to the Objectivity question. For suppose truth is superassertibility. If, in a certain context \( c \), it is assertible that \( p \), then that this is so – i.e. that it is assertible in \( c \) that \( p \) – is itself superassertible. But that leaves it entirely open whether the content that \( p \) is itself superassertible. And conversely, it can perfectly well be that it is superassertible that \( p \), without its being assertible in context \( c \) that \( p \). In short, \( p \) and it is assertible that \( p \) have different superassertibility-conditions, hence different truth-conditions, and so differ in content, just as required.
If we credit Brandom with clarity about the distinction between the Truth question and the Objectivity question, then the foregoing order of explanation contrasts with the direction he would appear to favour – according to which, instead of building on an answer to the Truth question to get an answer to the Objectivity question, we are to start from an answer to the Objectivity question. So suppose the Objectivity question somehow satisfactorily answered in assertibilist terms, so that we have recovered a difference in content in general between:

It is assertible that \( p \) (briefly \( A(p) \))

and plain \( p \). Now introduce – for we can hardly be barred from doing so – a truth predicate, or truth operator, governed by the standard Equivalence scheme:

It is true that \( p \iff p \) (briefly \( Tr(p) \iff p \))

The assumed difference in content between them involves a potential divergence in the assertibility-conditions of the contents \( A(p) \) and \( p \). That is, either may be assertible without the other being so. So suppose, first, that the latter is assertible but that the former is not, i.e. \( A(p) \) but \( \neg A(p) \). Then applying the Equivalence scheme to \( A(p) \), we have that \( Tr(A(p)) \) but \( \neg A(p) \). Hence the senses of the operators, \( Tr(\cdot) \) and \( A(\cdot) \), are distinct. Suppose, conversely, that \( A(p) \) is good, but \( p \) is not, i.e. \( A(p) \) but \( \neg A(p) \). Taking \( A(p) \) for \( p \) in the Equivalence scheme and contraposing, we obtain \( \neg Tr(A(p)) \), and hence

\[ A(p) \text{ but } \neg Tr(A(p)). \]

So again \( Tr \) and \( A \) diverge.

This gives distinct predicates – or more precisely, operators – of truth and assertibility, but that is so far consistent with deflationism about truth. To complete an argument against deflationism, one now needs to argue not just that these predicates/operators diverge in extension, but that truth is a distinct norm from assertibility. For this it suffices that \( Tr \), introduced as by the Equivalence scheme, is normative over the discourse concerned. We believe that this should not be regarded as relevantly controversial, but will merely take it for granted here.\(^5\)

In sum, given an answer to the Truth question – given that a norm appropriately contrasting with assertibility has been supplied – it is straightforward to answer the Objectivity question. And conversely, given an answer to the Objectivity question, we can explain how truth and assertibility predicates will diverge in behaviour in a way that may be taken to reflect the existence of distinct norms which they respectively express.

It appears, then, that with some qualifications, the Truth question and the Objectivity question can in principle be tackled in either direction, so to say, in confidence that success with one will lead to success with the other. So the Assertibilist has two salient possible strategies. One is to tackle head-on the distinction between truth
and assertibility, to fashion a conception of truth out of assertibilist materials suitable for recovery of the essentials of the intuitive contrast between the two notions, and to proceed in the kind of way outlined above to the distinction of objective contents from others by the means it provides. The other is Brandom’s actual route: to provide directly for a distinction between objective and non-objective contents in assertibilist terms, and thereby to recover a device, again as outlined, to discharge (the uncontroversial aspects of) the role of ‘true’. A salient question is why Brandom forsakes the former, rather more straightforward-seeming strategy. But before getting to that, let us explain why we at least can foresee no clear prospect of success following the route he actually takes.

II Brandom on the Objectivity question – the ‘normative fine structure of rationality’

Say that two claims are co-assertible just in case any body of information warranting the one warrants the other and conversely. Then any claim that is objective in Brandom’s sense – that is, is not about the attitudes or informational situation of any particular subject or group of subjects – will be co-assertible with certain non-objective claims. Such are the respective pairs:

“The swatch is red”    “That the swatch is red is properly assertible by me now”

“I will write a book on Hegel”    “I foresee that I will write a book on Hegel”

“All ravens are black”    “We have a body of evidence corroborating the claim that all ravens are black and no significant counter-evidence”

How can the Assertibilist properly differentiate these contents? No doubt their differences are indeed manifest in differences in the assertibility-conditions of claims in which they are respectively embedded: for instance the negations of each of the contrasted pairs will have different assertibility-conditions, as will conditionals in which they are the respective antecedents. Thus, for example, the negation of “The swatch is red” will be co-assertible with “That the swatch is not red is properly assertible by me now”, not with “That the swatch is not properly assertible by me now”. But these differences are apt to seem unintelligible so long as the Assertibilist allows, what may seem undeniable, that the content of a negated, or conditional claim must be construed as a function of the content of the claim negated, or of the antecedent and consequent, and that the contents of the latter, ingredient claims are fixed by conditions of assertibility. The problem posed for the Assertibilist by these pairs is not to find differences in conditions of warranted assertion of containing statements to reflect what are the intuitive differences in their contents, but to do so in a way that respects semantic compositionality and the other presuppositions of the view.
Brandom’s response is that assertibilism needs to operate with a more finely discriminated notion of assertibility. Specifically, we are to distinguish between what a speaker ought to assert, or be prepared to assert, qua entitled to it and what a speaker ought to assert, or be prepared to assert, qua committed to it. How is this to help the distinction of the co-assertible pairs? The intended notions of entitlement and commitment need interpretation, of course, but one would expect – though more about this shortly – that the members of such pairs would have the same entitlement conditions. The expectable proposal therefore has to be that they can, in effect, be distinguished as commitments. But what Brandom suggests, while in keeping with that, is actually more subtle. Reflect that the intuitive differences in content between members of the pairs issue in differences concerning which claims they are respectively compatible or incompatible with. For instance, the non-objective members of the pairs will in general be compatible with the falsity of the objective members; and the objective members will in general be compatible with the non-satisfaction of certain necessary conditions for particular subjects’ being in the informational states described in the corresponding non-objective claims. Brandom’s idea is to try to construct a notion of incompatibility out of materials provided by his finer-grained conception of assertibility that will enable the reflection of these intuitive differences.

But can he succeed? We’ll canvass three specific difficulties – though in fact they are all aspects of the same problem.

Brandom’s suggestion is that a move M be regarded as incompatible with a move N just in case a commitment to the first precludes an entitlement to the second. An immediate intuitive difficulty is that it is hard to see how there can ever actually be such a ‘preclusion’ in the kind of case – where the commitments and entitlements in question are to assertoric claims – which it is Brandom’s goal to explicate. Presumably there is to be no requirement of ancestral entitlement in one’s commitments – consequences of beliefs which one holds prejudicially, or dogmatically, or otherwise without entitlement, are no less commitments on that account than those which flow from beliefs to which one is entitled. Indeed, this is no mere presumption but a presupposition of Brandom’s whole approach. If he were to restrict the idea of commitment in such a way as to require, to the contrary, that commitments must be based on anterior entitlements, then – assuming the transmissibility of entitlement across entailment and other relations of commit-
entitlement to a different move. The point is rather that if we, as it were, peek ahead and help ourselves to an ordinary understanding of assertions, and what it is to be committed to or entitled to endorse them, then commitment, so long as it does not have to be entitlement-based, and entitlement simply pass each other by. What one ought to accept because one is committed to it is one thing; what one ought to accept because one’s informational input warrants it is quite another. There are no collisions or ‘preclusions’ between these domains.

What follows is that Brandom’s proposal needs a better interpretation of ‘preclusion’ – one compatible with the capacity of virtually any assertoric (or doxastic) commitments and entitlements peacefully to co-exist in fact. The obvious thought is that the modality involved in preclusion should be read along the broad lines of illegality, rather than impossibility. But now a second difficulty needs to be reckoned with. Suppose commitment to move M so precludes entitlement to move N. What the Assertibilist may not do in the first instance is understand this as a relation between the (putative) contents of M and N. Rather the preclusion must – in the context of Brandom’s project – be understood quasi-extensionally: it will have to be understood as consisting just in the circumstance that – as far as the legalities are concerned, as it were – any situation in which one is committed to M is thereby a situation in which one forfeits any entitlement to N. Incompatibility, that is, has to be a pragmatic relation in the first instance, a relation turning, in the light of the controlling norms on move-making, just on the physiognomy and context of moves – the construction of a consequential semantic relation, one turning on their content, being precisely what Brandom is in the business of attempting.

So what? Well, we now need to be very clear about what it is to answer the Objectivity question. In order merely to distinguish the members of the relevant kind of objective/non-objective pairings, Brandom has only to show that certain of their inferential connections are somehow different. However merely somehow distinguishing objective statements from (putatively) co-assertible non-objective ones is not enough. In addition, they have to be distinguished fully and correctly: the Assertibilist has to show specifically how he can make a contrast between the members of such pairs which is a correct reflection of the conceptual relations which the propositions in question actually respectively bear to propositions at large. The challenge is not merely to get some kind of distinction going between objective/non-objective pairs but to track the detail of the conceptual compatibility/incompatibility relations which they respectively actually sustain across contents in general.

To see why one might be pessimistic about the prospects, reflect that the relevant kind of incompatibility – the semantic incompatibility which obtains, for example, between “That the swatch is red is properly assertible by me now” and, say, “No one knows anything about the colour of the swatch” but does not obtain between the latter and “The swatch is red” – is of course symmetric. So any successful pragmatic surrogate for it had better be symmetric too. We may take it accordingly that Brandom’s surrogate – that a commitment to one move (legally) precludes entitlement to the other – has to be symmetric. Hence if we are trying to determine whether the pragmatic surrogate correctly reflects the different semantic compatibility
relations which a pair of moves, M and M*, respectively bear to a particular move, M+ – let it be, for instance, that intuitively M* is incompatible with M+ but M is not – it cannot matter whether we put the question as:

Is an entitlement to M+ precluded by a commitment to M*, but not by a commitment to M?

or as

Does a commitment to M+ preclude an entitlement to M*, but not an entitlement to M?

Focus, therefore, on the latter form of the question. And suppose that M and M* are co-entitlements (i.e. that, as far as the legalities are concerned, any situation in which one is entitled to one is a situation in which one is entitled to the other.) Let it be that a commitment to M+ does indeed preclude entitlement to M*. On the quasi-extensional understanding of preclusion, that just means that the legalities require that any situation in which one is committed to M+ is a situation in which one is not entitled to M*. But now, since M and M* are co-entitlements, we have that the situations in which one is not entitled to M* are all and only situations in which one is also not entitled to M. So commitment to M+ must preclude entitlement to M as well.

In other words, provided preclusion is understood quasi-extensionally, and the pairings of objective and non-objective contents which exercise Brandom are all cases of co-entitlement, then his proposal has to be impotent to draw the intended distinctions in full and correct detail. The contents of “That the swatch is red is properly assertible by me now” and “The swatch is red” are indeed distinguished by their differing incompatibility relationships to “No one knows anything about the colour of the swatch”. But if this distinction has to be recovered in terms of Brandom-incompatibility, quasi-extensionally construed – in terms of there being a legal proscription on situations of commitment to “No one knows anything about the colour of the swatch” involving entitlement to “That the swatch is red is properly assertible by me now” but no such proscription on their involving entitlement to “The swatch is red” – it goes fugitive. For the legalities require, by hypothesis, that any situation in which one is not entitled to the second is one in which one is not entitled to the third either, and conversely.

This assumes, to be sure, that the relevant kind of objective/non-objective pairs are co-entitlements. But that they are may seem no more than a restatement of the basic datum for the problem – that to be entitled to assert p is to be entitled to assert that one is entitled to assert p, and so on. At one point Brandom seems to question this, suggesting in particular that reliabilism might open a gap between entitlement to a claim and the possession of good reason to believe that one is so entitled. But this move seems confused. For one thing, if reliabilism may make one’s first-order entitlements inscrutable, it can presumably do the same for one’s
second-order entitlements as well. (One form of externalist misgiving about the KK-principle involves the same confusion.) But more important, if such a gap can be opened – whether by reliabilism or however else – then there already is the solution to the Assertibilist’s initial problem! Brandom’s proposal, and the attendant break-up of assertibility into commitment vs. entitlement, will not be needed. In short: if Brandom allows that the objective/non-objective pairs are co-entitlements, it seems his proffered apparatus cannot get their semantic compatibility/incompatibility relationships right; and if he doesn’t so allow, he doesn’t need that apparatus to distinguish them.

At this point, the reader may begin to suspect that any notion of incompatibility that does draw the sought-for distinctions cannot be understood in the quasi-extensional way the Assertibilist ought to understand it, but has rather to be understood in terms of an independently achieved conception of assertoric content. If a commitment to M is to preclude an entitlement to N in the kind of way that is needed, then the relation between the two moves has to be something like this: that, because of their respective contents, one cannot rationally and clear-headedly endorse both moves simultaneously – cannot rationally and clear-headedly recognise the entitlement alongside retention of one’s antecedent commitments. What merits remark, finally, is that even this notion – whose unreconstructed appeal to rationality surely must anyway put it beyond the base materials of assertibilism sanctioned by Brandom’s game analogy – won’t deliver the intended contrasts unless taken in a specifically anti-assertibilist way.

To see why, consider how the proposal might work in response to a particular example – say, the third pair above:

(i) All ravens are black
(ii) We have a body of evidence corroborating the claim that all ravens are black and no significant counter-evidence.

Now, (i) is, whereas (ii) is not, incompatible with

(iii) A grey raven is nesting in the Cairngorm Mountains.

Hence a commitment to (i), but not a commitment to (ii), should preclude entitlement to (iii). But while it’s true that one could not rationally and clear-headedly welcome an entitlement to the belief that a grey raven is nesting in the Cairngorms alongside a commitment set that included the belief that all ravens are black, the same would also be true if one’s commitment set included the belief (ii), whereby there is a body of evidence corroborating the claim that all ravens are black and no significant extant counter-evidence. For while (iii) is not inconsistent with (ii), an entitlement to it is.

The pair, (i) and (ii), are a prototype of the kind of difference – between an objective content and a corresponding non-objective content – which Brandom sets himself to differentiate. Yet it seems that even when we understand a commitment’s precluding an entitlement not merely quasi-extensionally but – surely illicitly, in
the present context – in terms of the rational impossibility of accepting the entitlement alongside continuation of the commitment, we fail to recover an appropriate contrast between (i) and (ii) in relation to (iii). Recognition of an entitlement to (iii) is rationally incompatible with a continuing commitment to (ii), no less than to (i). The difference is that it is the fact of an entitlement to (iii) which is inconsistent with (ii), and the content of an entitlement to (iii) which is inconsistent with (i). But there seems no prospect of recovering this difference unless we have the means to appeal not merely to rational incompatibilities between acceptance of entitlements and commitments in general but to the narrower sub-class of such in which the incompatibilities are sustained purely by the contents of the commitments and entitlements in question. And once we have that narrower focus, of course, it will anyway be incidental that the contents in question are envisaged as commitments and entitlements respectively – and then the pragmatics of commitment and entitlement will no longer have any role to play in the explication of the incompatibilities.

III  Brandom’s doubts about the ideal assertibility approach

Our central concern in the preceding sections has been to assess Brandom’s preferred answers to two challenges confronting his kind of assertibilism, encapsulated in what we have been calling the Truth and Objectivity questions. The first of these, recall, is the question: How, using just the kind of materials available to the Assertibilist, can we construct a conception of the content of moves which allows them to be subject to the two contrasted norms of truth and warranted assertibility? The second takes off from the fact that, while warranted assertibility is relative to the assertor, to her context and to her state of information in relevant respects, what she asserts is typically not so relative. The Objectivity question is then: (How) can the Assertibilist provide for the emergence of assertoric moves whose contents are objective, in the specific sense that they do not concern the situation of one who makes those moves – and in particular, those features of her situation bearing upon what moves are permitted or prohibited? The challenge is to explain how to do justice, in assertibilist terms, to the contrast between contents which are, and contents which are not, objective in this sense.

If the arguments we have presented thus far are good, they justify a degree of pessimism about the prospects of Brandom’s attempts to meet these challenges. Our aim in what follows is to canvass the merits of the alternative approach briefly adumbrated in section 1, which remains within the assertibilist framework, but which tackles our two questions in the opposite direction to that followed by Brandom. On this approach, recall, we focus initially on the Truth question – what the Assertibilist needs to circumscribe is a property of contentful moves meeting two conditions: first, its possession by a move (or, perhaps better, by its content) entails that the move is in some sense a good or correct one; and second, a move’s possessing or lacking the property is independent of its being warranted.

As Brandom observes, one fairly standard move made by those who’ve favoured this direction has been to attempt to characterise a suitable property in terms of
some sort of idealisation of ordinary warranted assertibility. What is true is to be identified with what would be assertible by a thinker operating under certain idealised conditions – full information, unblemished rationality in assessment of evidence, and so on. Brandom characterises the approach in these terms:

The attempt by assertibility theorists to satisfy this central criterion of adequacy of semantic theories has typically taken the form of appeals to some sort of ideality condition. Assessments of truth are understood as assessments of assertibility under ideal conditions (what Sellars called ‘semantic assertibility’) – of what claims one would be entitled to or justified in making if one were an ideal knower, or given full information, maximal evidence, at the end of inquiry, and so on.

and rapidly dismisses it

I’m not going to argue the point here, but my own view is that this sort of strategy is hopeless. If it is the best available, we should just give up the assertibilist project.14

In a note to this passage, he explains:

My thought is that there is no way to specify the ideality in question that is not either question-begging (in implicitly appealing to a notion of truth) or trivial, in the light of the sensitivity of the practical effects of otherwise more ideal status for one belief both to the falsity of collateral beliefs and (even more damaging) to ignorance concerning them.15

We are inclined to agree that the particular type of proposal Brandom targets in these remarks – broadly, the conception of truth as consisting in assertibility under ideal conditions – faces serious, probably insurmountable difficulties. That it is usually irredeemably unclear what would constitute the relevantly ideal circumstances; that the counterfactual, ‘S would be assertible for an ideally situated judge’, seems to call for a categorical ground which, one would suppose, should be the real concern of the philosopher interested in truth; and that paradoxes flow from applying truth, so construed, to assertions inconsistent with the antecedent of such counterfactuals16 – are just three! But these seem not to afflict the quite different approach we are recommending, on which an assertibilist concept of truth is to be constructed, not by identifying truth with assertibility under ideal conditions, but in terms of the idea, roughly, of a content’s being and remaining assertible under – informationally speaking – ordinary but indefinitely improving conditions. A little less roughly, the idea is that a content is superassertible if and only if it is, or can be, warranted, and some warrant for it would survive arbitrarily close scrutiny of its pedigree and arbitrarily extensive increments to or other forms of improvement of our state of information.17
This characterisation is, of course, quite vague in important respects – in particular, further clarification of the key notions of ‘state of information’ and ‘improvement’ is certainly desirable, and may well be needed before we can profitably consider whether superassertibility really does avoid the difficulties besetting idealised assertibility. But – assuming that doubts on that score can be satisfactorily answered – we are already in position to see that the identification of truth with superassertibility provides a straightforward answer to the Truth question. For it is clear enough, first, that superassertibility is a property whose possession by a contentful move – or, perhaps better, by the move’s content – marks the move out as, to that extent and in that respect at least, a good or correct one. Superassertibility is evidently something at which we do and should aim in our assertional practice, just as it should be if it is to constitute a notion of truth. But second, and crucially, while aiming at superassertibility is inseparable from aiming to make only warranted assertions, being superassertible and being warranted are clearly distinct and independent properties. Provided, as it is reasonable to assume, warrants for assertion may be defeasible, we may be warranted in asserting a content which is not superassertible, because no warrant for that content is without defeaters. And conversely, since superassertibility demands only that a content can be (stably) warranted, not that it actually is, a content may be superassertible but not warrantedly assertible in any particular (present) state of information. Thus being true (= superassertible) and being warranted are distinct norms – distinct ways for a contentful move to be correct, just as the Truth question requires.

Further, superassertibility seems to give us an equally straightforward and agreeably simple answer to the Objectivity question. For suppose truth is superassertibility. If, in a certain context c, it is assertible that p, then that this is so – i.e. that it is assertible in c that p – is itself superassertible. But that leaves it entirely open whether the content that p is itself superassertible. And conversely, it can perfectly well be that it is superassertible that p, without its being assertible in context c that p. Whether or not p is assertible is relative to and depends upon the context; whether or not p is superassertible does not. In short, precisely because p and ‘it is assertible that p’ have different superassertibility-conditions, hence different truth-conditions – context relative in the case of the latter, but not in the case of the former – they differ in content, and do so in just the manner required to answer the Objectivity question.

IV Brandon’s doubts about superassertibility answered

Superassertibility, then, offers seemingly straightforward and promising answers to the two leading questions confronting any Assertibilist. Since those answers, in sharp contrast with any approach which seeks to identify truth with assertibility under ideal conditions, appeal only to arbitrary but ordinary improvements on ordinary conditions of assertion (and specifically, of our state of information), and make no play with the problematic notion of some kind of idealised conditions, one might naturally suppose that the superassertibilist approach can avoid the objections which
arguably sink idealised assertibility approaches. And since the contrast is obvious enough, one might then wonder what may have deterred Brandom from embracing it. The answer, of course, might simply be that he thought he had a better one – in terms of commitments and entitlements. But it seems that he does in fact take superassertibility to be vulnerable to essentially the same difficulty as he urges explicitly against idealised assertibility in the note from Articulating Reasons quoted above, and against so-called Success Semantics in 'Unsuccessful Semantics'. In each case – that of the identification of truth with superassertibility, that of identifying truth with idealised assertibility, and that of Success Semantics – the possibilities of error and ignorance play havoc, he thinks, with the proposed characterisation of the target notion. In the second, the characterisation of ideal conditions of assertion will give incorrect results if ideality is consistent with the assertor’s holding relevant false beliefs, or being ignorant of relevant facts, but will be viciously circular if it explicitly excludes these possibilities. In the third, the attempt to characterise a belief’s truth-condition as that condition which guarantees the success of any action motivated by that belief coupled with an appropriate desire misfires because failure may result from false collateral beliefs or relevant ignorance – and again, there appears to be no way to exclude these possibilities without begging the question. In the first, the same two possibilities cause trouble for the key notion in the characterisation of superassertibility – that of an improvement in our information state. We have, unfortunately, no explicit published statement of the difficulty in this case. But in some unpublished notes, Brandom is quite explicit, even if somewhat tentative:

The suspicions I express about ideal assertibility theories do extend to superassertibility. But they are suspicions – I haven’t done the work necessary to claim an argument. My general worry concerns the way in which account is taken of the effect of a) false and b) missing collateral information on the (super)assertibility assessment of target claims. In this case the suspicions take the form of a dilemma. Either the ‘improvements’ of informational or epistemic situation under which assertibility is to be stable are so specified as to rule out the acquisition of false collateral information, or they are not. I doubt that the former condition can be achieved noncircularly (i.e. without appeal to a truth-like notion). And if one can acquire false collateral beliefs while generally improving one’s epistemic situation – surely the general case – then one has no way of ensuring that these collateral falsehoods do not infirm the assertibility of the target claim. That is, in this case nothing will be stably assertible under epistemically improving circumstances. Even if this dilemma can be avoided for false collateral beliefs (error), I see no prospects for avoiding it for missing ones (ignorance). Yet the inferential effects of the latter are every bit as dire as those of the former.

The worry, apparently, is that the proposal to identify truth with superassertibility must get stuck on one or other of the horns of a dilemma – or more precisely, of a
pair of dilemmas, one concerning error, the other ignorance – turning on the key
notion of improvement in information state. Either transitions to improved infor-
mation states are so characterised that they may include acquiring false beliefs (or,
we might add, losing true beliefs), or they are restricted so as to allow only acquisi-
tion of true beliefs (or jettisoning false ones). On the first alternative, – the thought
appears to be – no warrant can be stable under arbitrary improvements of informa-
tion state, since there will be, for any warrant, possible ‘improvements’ which involve
acquiring false beliefs (or dropping true ones) which disrupt it. On the second, this
pitfall is avoided, but – unless some way is found to enforce the required exclusions
without explicitly deploying the notions of truth and falsehood – the proposed
account of truth as superassertibility collapses in vicious circularity.

A similar – and if anything, worse – dilemma confronts us, Brandom suggests,
over ignorance. We are less confident here about just how the dilemma is supposed
to go. In general terms the thought is presumably to the effect that either we char-
acterise improvements in such a way as to allow them to consist with ignorance of
germane matters of fact, or we don’t, with bad results either way. And it’s reasonably
clear that the evil which is supposed to result on the second alternative is some
sort of vicious circularity. What is less clear – to us, anyway – is just how allowing
improved information states to involve ignorance of relevant matters is supposed
to cause trouble. However, we’ll shelve that question for the present, since there
are other reasons to doubt the effectiveness of the proposed dilemma(s) which are
unaffected by the answer to it.

It is, first, just not clear that, even if it should prove necessary to deploy the notion
of truth in explaining what constitutes an improved state of information, the resulting
circularity must be vicious in the context of the project at hand. It would be so, of
course, if the aim were to provide an analysis of the concept of truth in terms of super-
assertibility. What is not clear is that someone sympathetic to Brandom’s general
project has to take on that aim. The Truth question calls for an explanation how
an assertibilist notion of content can be subject to contrasted norms of truth and
warranted assertibility. That doesn’t obviously call for any analysis of truth. What it
does require, on the present proposal, is that we should be able to see how aiming for
superassertibility can constitute a norm distinct from warranted assertibility, and so
exercise a distinctive regulative influence on our assertoric practice. There is a clear
distinction between criticism of an assertion as unwarranted when made, on the one
hand, and criticism of it as shown to be incorrect by subsequent disruption, in an
improved information state, of any warrant we may have had for it, on the other – and
this distinction is not obviously undermined by the (supposed) impossibility of satis-
factorily explaining what constitutes an improvement without appealing to the notion
of truth. It is equally unclear that the superassertibilist answer to the Objectivity ques-
tion is put in jeopardy by the circularity; the requisite contrast is made out in terms of
two types of content having different superassertibility-conditions – the identification
of those conditions as truth-conditions is inessential to the answer.

It may be, then, that the circularity horns of the proposed dilemmas are too
blunt to do much damage, even if it should prove impossible to avoid appeal to the
notions of truth and falsehood in giving a satisfactory account of what constitutes an improvement of information state. But it seems to us that, even if that prospect should prove illusory, there are other defensive moves open to the superassertibilist. Let us focus, initially, on the dilemma turning on error. There seem to be at least two ways in which the damaging effects of allowing improvement to include acquisition of false beliefs can be avoided without inducing potentially vicious circularity.

In the case of the error version of the dilemma, the problem seems straightforward enough – either (a) we characterise improvement of information states in such a way that achieving an improved state can’t involve acquiring some false beliefs, or (b) we don’t (i.e. it is allowed that adding some false beliefs might form part of an overall improvement in information state). (a) is trouble – so the thought goes – because there is no way to bar such ‘improvements’ without using truth-words, and so lapsing into vicious circularity. (b) is trouble, because any warrant will be liable to disruption by suitable addition of false beliefs – that is, for any warrant for any proposition \( p \), there will be some false proposition \( q \) such that belief that \( q \) would disrupt that warrant, and some overall improved information state including the belief that \( q \) – with the upshot that no warrant will be stable under arbitrary improvement of information states, and hence that no statement will be superassertible.

Well, even if, as urged on the first horn, one cannot non-circularly proscribe ‘improvements’ which include the addition of false beliefs, it is certainly not obvious that the second horn is effective. There could be no objection, on grounds of circularity or otherwise, to insisting that if an information state is to constitute an improvement on its predecessor, any new beliefs it incorporates, even if false, must be warranted. The point here is that while, for any given warrant for a content \( p \) that is a candidate for superassertibility, potentially disruptive augmentation of our information state by false but still warranted beliefs must remain a possibility, the chances of achieving such disruption diminish with successive improvements. For – or so we may reasonably presume, and so, certainly, Brandom has no right to assume false – enlargements of our stock of warranted beliefs will render it more and more difficult for additional false beliefs to be warranted. While disruption by false but warranted beliefs may postpone achievement of a stable warrant for any given content \( p \), it is at best not clear – and at worst rather implausible – that every warrant must eventually succumb to such disruption unless false additions are proscribed.

Further, it is arguable in any case that ‘improvements’ involving false beliefs can be excluded without circularity. At least, provided that one is allowed propositional quantification (in effect, second-order quantification through zero-place predicate position), one might – at least to a first approximation – define a notion of improvement which avoids the difficulty on the (b) horn of the dilemma as follows:

\[
\text{J improves on I } \iff \exists p (p \in J \land p \notin I \land p) \land \neg \exists p (p \in J \land p \notin I \land \neg p) \land \\
\forall p ((p \in I \land p) \rightarrow p \in J)
\]

This expresses the intuitive idea that one’s information state improves when one acquires a piece of new knowledge (first clause), one doesn’t acquire any new false
belief (second clause), and one doesn’t lose any knowledge one previously possessed. And it does this without using any truth words. To be sure, it might be complained that our definition is too narrow, since intuitively, an improvement might come about by jettisoning some false belief, rather than by acquiring a true one. But that could be handled by expanding the first conjunct above to:

\[ \exists p ((p \in I \land p \notin J \land p) \lor (p \in I \land p \notin J \land \neg p)) \]

That is, one improves one’s information state by either acquiring a new true belief, or by dropping a false one, provided that one doesn’t acquire any new false belief or lose any true one.

As already remarked, Brandom claims that even if the superassertibilist can somehow wriggle out of the dilemma turning on error (false beliefs), there is a matching dilemma turning on ignorance (missing beliefs) which is both unavoidable and at least as serious – ‘the inferential effects of the latter [ignorance] are every bit as dire as those of the former [error]’. But while it is reasonably clear why and how false beliefs, if allowed to intrude in improved information states, might be supposed to threaten the disastrous consequence that no warrants can be stable under arbitrary improvements – although we have queried this – it is quite unclear why or how missing (true) beliefs are supposed to do so. Brandom is clearly right in thinking that relevant ignorance poses a serious, and possibly lethal, problem for Success Semantics – since an action motivated by a true belief and appropriate desire may just as easily fail to bear the desired fruit because its agent suffers material ignorance as it may be thwarted by her false collateral belief(s). But how, exactly, is the possibility of material ignorance supposed to threaten the identification of truth with superassertibility? Brandom doesn’t say. One might conjecture that his idea is that if improving one’s information state is consistent with remaining in ignorance, the ‘missing beliefs’ could – for all one knows – disrupt any one of the warrants one has, or might acquire, for any given belief – with the upshot, as with interfering false beliefs, that nothing can be superassertible, since no warrant can be stable. The underlying thought would seem to (have to) be that while improvement in information state may always reduce ignorance, it never reduces it to zero – there is no such thing as achieving (or at least knowingly achieving) a complete information state, in which all truths are known.

We hesitate to attribute this line of argument to Brandom, since it seems so clearly addled. For one thing, if that were the alleged difficulty, Brandom’s dilemma structure would, in the case of ignorance, be quite inept. For if there really were a difficulty here, it could not be avoided – even at the alleged cost of circularity – by recourse to truth-idioms. It is just a fact of cognitive life that ignorance doesn’t get entirely eliminated – even if we somehow got to know everything else, we wouldn’t, and couldn’t, know that we had done so, so there would remain at least one fact of which we would be necessarily ignorant. So it would be a problem anyway, circularity or no.

But in fact it is not a problem – at least, not for the identification of truth with superassertibility. We should distinguish two claims:
(i) ineradicable ignorance means that nothing is superassertible
(ii) ineradicable ignorance means that claims about what is superassertible are always defeasible.

Claim (i) is false – what the ever present fact (or at least presumption) of ignorance does mean is that any given warrant may turn out not to be stable (‘may’ is epistemic here); but that is consistent with there being warrants which are in fact stable – and that is all that superassertibility requires; claim (ii) is true but harmless – indeed, it is exactly what the proponent of superassertibility should expect and indeed desire.

It thus appears – to us, at least – that the supposed dilemma turning on ignorance is spurious, and that while it is reasonably clear how mistaken, as opposed to merely missing, beliefs may be thought to pose a serious problem for the superassertibilist approach to the Truth and Objectivity questions, there are effective replies to the dilemma turning on error. Our tentative conclusion is that the more straightforward treatment of those questions based on superassertibility remains the Assertibilist’s best option. We look forward to learning Brandom’s reasons for thinking otherwise.

Notes
1 Centrally, of course, the monumental Making It Explicit itself (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994a) together with the much briefer development of many of the same themes in Articulating Reasons (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
2 For light on the distinctively normative character of Brandom’s pragmatism, and its relation to earlier thinkers – especially Wittgenstein – see Brandom (1994a), chs. 1 and 2 (especially pp. 21–3, 76, 101, 110, 123, 132, 137), ch. 5 (especially pp. 289, 296, 300, 322), and ch. 8 (591–2), and Brandom (2000), ch. 6.
6 Brandom confirms that this is his view in ‘Notes for Reply to Crispin Wright’s “Comments on Brandom’s “Objectivity and the Normative Fine Structure of Rationality””’. These unpublished notes formed the basis of Brandom’s reply to Wright’s commentary at the Central Divisional meeting of the APA at Pittsburgh in April 1997. We are grateful to Robert Brandom for his permission to refer to, and subsequently quote from a revised version dated the same year.
8 For argument to this effect, see Wright (1992), ch.1. This is in effect an argument against deflationism about truth. But that is as it should be, since the Truth question only arises on a non-deflationary perspective. For a deflationist-assertibilist, there is, in effect, only the Objectivity question.
9 See Brandom (2000), pp. 190ff. In Brandom (1994a), a more complicated theory is defended – for a brief but very clear account of which, see Brandom (2000), p. 221, n. 7. But the complications have, so far as we can see, no impact on the issues under discussion here – hence our focus on the somewhat simplified presentation of Brandom’s ideas in his later and shorter book.
10 Brandom says surprisingly little about how he would like the reader to interpret them.
11 Cf. Brandom (2000), p. 194: ‘We can say that two assertible contents are incompatible in case commitment to one precludes entitlement to the other.’
If it weren’t, that would be an independent, and lethal, objection – but in fact it is clear that Brandom’s definition entails that incompatibility is symmetric. See n. 11.


Ibid., p. 219, n. 3. Brandom develops the line of objection suggested here against one particular proposal in his earlier paper Brandom (1994b).

Alvin Plantinga seems to have been the first to spot this kind of wrinkle – see Plantinga (1982).

For more detailed explanation, and discussion of the conditions under which super-assertibility may serve as a truth predicate, see Wright (1993), pp. 411–25; and Wright (1992), pp. 44–61.

See n. 6.

It might be objected that propositional quantification somehow sneaks in the notion of truth by the back door, or is somehow equivalent to employing truth words. But (i) this is just implausible – propositional quantification is simply the limiting case of quantification into predicate position (the 0-place predicate case), and the claim that second-order quantification in general is equivalent to truth talk is surely wrong; anyway (ii) Brandom will hardly object to it on this ground, given the predilection he evinces for a version of the prosentential theory of truth in his ‘Notes for Reply to Crispin Wright’.

See the last two sentences of our extended quotation above, from Brandom’s notes. Much of Brandom (1994b) is devoted to arguing for a parallel claim about the damaging effects of ignorance on the success semantical proposal under fire there.

Thus in Brandom’s delightful example, his lack of knowledge that wet weather has so swelled the cupboard door that it cannot be opened may thwart his efforts to obtain cookies, in spite of his true beliefs that there are cookies in the cupboard and that the cupboard is in the pantry, just as easily as could a true belief that there are cookies in the cupboard, combined with a false collateral belief that the cupboard is in the kitchen. See Brandom (1994b), p. 175.

References


Part IV

BRANDOM’S RESPONSES
REPLY TO ALLAN GIBBARD’S “THOUGHT, NORMS, AND DISCURSIVE PRACTICE”

Robert Brandom

Allan Gibbard’s judicious paper focuses on the issues of the normativity and sociality of intentionality. He sees that there are a lot of things one could mean by both of these terms, and so that we must start by trying to get clear about exactly what is being claimed. On the topic of normativity, I take my starting point from Kant. One of his master ideas is that judging and acting (the fundamental cognitive and practical intentional acts) are things that we are in a distinctive sense responsible for. They express commitments. They are acts of endorsement. Generically, they are acts that change one’s normative status. Kant’s deontology is not specific to his practical philosophy. It penetrates to the core of his understanding of discursiveness in general, on the cognitive or theoretical side no less than the practical. We are to understand judging and believing in deontic terms, terms of what performing such an act or being in such a state obliges or permits one to do (or, as I would prefer to put the point, what it commits or entitles one to).

We can apply this idea too in thinking about what we are doing when we take someone to make claims or have beliefs. When I say “John believes observation requires perceptual experience”, I am doing two things. Since this is a judgment of mine, I am undertaking or acknowledging a commitment myself: a commitment as to how it is with John. But I am also attributing a commitment to John: a commitment as to how it is with the activity of observation. Ascribing propositional attitudes is taking someone to be an intentional system. And doing that is taking up an essentially normative attitude toward that individual. Intentionality is a normative concept.

Is meaning (Gibbard sometimes says “mental content”) a normative concept? The Kantian idea we began with is that intentional acts and states have normative significances. But what about their contents? For Kant, intentional contents (whether what is endorsed is a judgeable content or a practical maxim) are articulated by concepts. And concepts are generically rules. That is to say that for Kant, concept is a normative concept. What they are rules for doing is synthesizing a unity of apperception. I think that doing that is extracting inferential consequences (acknowledging what else one is committed to by committing oneself to \( p \)) and
extruding incompatible commitments (which one cannot be entitled to, given that one is committed to \( p \)). Concepts stand to one another in relations of material inferential consequence and incompatibility, which determine how applications of those concepts are correctly synthesized with other concept applications. The concepts one applies (the content of a judgment) determine what else one is committed and entitled to by that endorsement, and what other commitments one cannot be entitled to, given that endorsement. Conceptual content just is what determines these normative relations. So conceptual content is also a normative concept.

That does not mean that all concepts are normative concepts. We can still distinguish between normative and non-normative concepts by looking at their role in practical inferences: inferences that display reasons to do something. Normative concepts make explicit endorsements of patterns of practical reasoning. Cruel is a normative concept, because that it would be cruel to do A gives me a reason not to do A. That the ball is red does not by itself give me any reason to do anything except acquire a belief to that effect. (I discuss the expressive role distinctive of normative vocabulary in more detail in chapter 4 of *Making It Explicit*, and chapter 2 of *Articulating Reasons*.)

In MIE I employ a social notion of normativity. It is the product of two ideas. First is the Enlightenment idea that normative statuses, such as being committed, are only intelligible in a context that includes normative attitudes such as acknowledging or attributing commitments. Second is the idea that determinately contentful normative statuses are only intelligible in a context that includes the normative attitudes of others, who attribute a commitment, hold one responsible for it. (Otherwise, the thought is, “whatever seems right to me will be right”, to paraphrase Wittgenstein.) A theory of this shape is not the only way to go. One might instead, with Dennett, look to optimality of design to fund norms, or might appeal to Millikan’s very sophisticated counterfactual-evolutionary notion of proper function (which rises to the level of primitive meaning for such cases as bee-dances and beaver tail-slaps only in specifically social contexts of communication). My suggestions on this general point – is normativity in general and as such social? – are meant in an open-minded, irenic, experimental spirit.

It is common to think of social accounts of some phenomenon (meaning, normativity, truth ...) in terms of the contrast between an individual and a community. Consensus theories of truth are like this, as are Kripke’s and Wright’s versions of what they take to be Wittgenstein’s notion of meaning. By contrast to these “I–we” approaches, I take the normativity implicit in intentionality to be of what I call the “I–thou” variety. The sense in which discursive practice is social is that it essentially involves a distinction of social perspective, between what one is doing in acknowledging a commitment (oneself) and attributing a commitment (to someone else). (Recall that an ascription of propositional attitudes involves both.) For instance, if we ask what one is doing in taking S to know that \( p \), the traditional JTB account says that one is doing three things: taking S to believe that \( p \), taking that belief to be justified, and taking it to be true. On my deontic scorekeeping view, what one is doing is attributing to S a commitment to \( p \), attributing to S an entitlement to that commitment
to $p$, and finally acknowledging a commitment to $p$ (endorsing it) oneself. The normative pragmatic difference between the belief condition and the truth condition is just the difference between attributing a commitment and acknowledging it.

Now any situation that admits of a distinction of perspective of this sort is going to count as having a social structure, in my “I–thou” sense. (‘I’ is the perspective of acknowledgment, and ‘thou’ or ‘you’ the perspective of attribution.) Gibbard considers a solitary orangutan, and asks whether memory could not suffice to underwrite the distinction of normative attitudes that I insist on. Couldn’t the orangutan attribute commitments to its past self, and distinguish those from the ones it now acknowledges? I do not know whether orangutans can do that, nor whether if as a matter of fact one has to interact with others of one’s kind in order to master the distinction of normative attitudes, that is a broadly empirical requirement or a conceptual one. But if creatures can take up the different perspective to timeslices of themselves, then the relation among those timeslices is social in my sense. For I am only claiming that intentionality must be social in the sense that it must admit of the distinction of perspectives between the attitude of attributing a commitment (or other normative status) and the attitude of acknowledging it.

If that requirement does not stem from a thesis about normativity in general, where does it come from? From the specifics of the normativity implicit in intentionality. For as I understand it, the representational dimension of discursive intentionality (concept use) depends on the social distinction of perspective between the normative attitudes of attributing and acknowledging commitments. There are species of representation that this is not true of, but the representational dimension of propositional content – and hence conceptual content generally – has this feature. I indicated above that we could begin to get a handle on conceptual content by looking at material (non-logical) relations of inferential consequence and incompatibility. But doing that will not immediately help us understand what we are saying when we say that our thought and talk is of or about something, that it represents things as having certain properties and standing in various relations.

In MIE I work with the general methodological principle that one should understand what is implicit in terms of how it can be made explicit. The representational dimension of discourse is made explicit in ordinary language by the use of terms such as ‘of’ and ‘about’ (in terms of which, I would claim, we should understand the topic that leads us to introduce such technical terms as ‘represents’ and ‘refers to’). This is the ‘of’ of “John is thinking of humans,” and the ‘about’ of “John is talking about empirical concepts,” not the ‘of’ of “The pen of my aunt,” and the ‘about’ of “The book is about 800 pages long”. The home language game of these terms when they are expressing intentional directedness at objects, I claim, is de re ascriptions of propositional attitude. That is, it is their use in contexts such as “Clarke claimed of a man who positively enjoyed hanging counterfeiters that he invented the calculus”. Asserting such a de re ascription does not commit one to the corresponding de dicto ascription: “Clarke claimed that a man who positively enjoyed hanging counterfeiters invented the calculus.” There must be some underlying de dicto ascription that one could assert as partial justification of the de re one, but it might be something
quite different, such as “Clarke claimed that Isaac Newton invented the calculus.” What goes in the scope of the ‘that’ in these lightly regimented ascriptions is a specification of the commitment attributed by the ascriber. But remember, ascriptions involve both attributing a commitment and acknowledging one. What goes in the scope of the ‘of’ in de re ascriptions is part of the commitment the ascriber acknowledges, not part of the commitment he attributes. Thus it may be the speaker who claims that Isaac Newton positively enjoyed hanging counterfeiters – a fact of which Clarke was quite ignorant. The speaker explicitly marks the fact that picking out the individual by the term “a man who positively enjoyed hanging counterfeiters” is his responsibility, part of the commitment he undertakes, rather than part of what he attributes, by putting it inside the scope of the ‘of’. Those de re ascription-forming terms mark the division of perspective between the doxastic commitment that is attributed, and the identificatory commitment that is acknowledged.

If all that is right (and of course, I am making a long story quite short here), then grasping the sense of these representational locutions (the ones that make explicit the representational dimension of concept use), understanding their expressive role, requires placing them in a context that includes the social distinction of normative perspective, between attributing and acknowledging commitments (which first came into view here in thinking about knowledge). This is the basic argument that the normativity implicit in discursive intentionality must be social in the perspectival “I–thou” sense.

Notes

1 Officially, ‘meaning’ is not one of my words; I see it as a potentially misleading reification that invites unproductive individuative questions. (‘Meaningful’ is OK.) But I don’t need to be difficult about this point (which comes up again in my reply to Fodor and Lepore) here.

2 This story is told in chapter 8 of Making It Explicit, and more compactly and with fewer complications in chapter 5 of Articulating Reasons.
REPLY TO CHARLES TAYLOR’S “LANGUAGE NOT MYSTERIOUS?”

Robert Brandom

Charles Taylor’s essay is characteristically thoughtful and profound. He highlights crucial aspects of discursive practice that I leave in the background. And in the manner of the Hegel he and I both admire, Taylor provides a rich and multi-faceted account of various historical currents of thought that still buffet us today, as a way of thinking about where we might go from here.

As Taylor recognizes in his sympathetic opening characterization of the aims, themes, and considerations that animate my project, I am working within a broadly pragmatist tradition that includes not only the classical American pragmatists, but also the early Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein. My pragmatism is distinguished from theirs, however, by being joined to a kind of philosophical rationalism. It is this unusual combination of commitments that draws me to Hegel. Dewey and James are concerned to emphasize the continuities between our sophisticated linguistic use of concepts and the skillful coping of our nonlinguistic animal cousins and ancestors, and to minimize the differences. (This theme is central for Peirce, also, but unlike the others, he also does have rationalist sympathies.) The Heidegger of Sein und Zeit brings to the fore the sea of practical abilities and forms of implicit understanding on which the raft of reason floats. Wittgenstein combines those thoughts with a picture of language as an unsystematic motley, the contingent, unplanned, unsurveyable collective result of a host of dynamic processes by which practices mutate and evolve in response to pressures and opportunities largely extrinsic to the practices they shape. Language for him is all suburbs, merging imperceptibly into the surrounding and supporting countryside of nonlinguistic practices, and having no downtown.¹

But I think language does have a downtown, and that it is the practice of giving and asking for reasons. I think nothing deserves to be called a “language” unless some of its performances have the practical significance of claims about how things are – which is to say that some of its expressions must be declarative sentences, they must express propositional contents, and some utterances of them must be assertions. And what is propositionally contentful is essentially, and not just accidentally, what can play the role both of premise and conclusion in inferences in which one serves as a reason for another. Sprachspiele that do not contain a region with this structure, that do not accord any performances the status of claimings in
this sense, can be vocal practices, but should not be thought of as verbal ones. Put less dogmatically, I am concerned with what it takes for a language game to be of this kind, what makes this species of practice (the ones I want to call “discursive” and see as the only kind that involves the use of concepts) possible, and what it makes possible. Practices that do involve the making of claims and giving and asking for reasons (a package deal) form a natural kind. And engaging in practices of this sort distinguishes a special kind of practitioner: beings who can undertake and attribute conceptually articulated commitments and responsibilities, creatures who live, and move, and have their being in practical normative space of reasons. We are many things, but I am concerned with us as this kind of being.

Taylor, too, is a pragmatist, who has given his own distinctive turn and added his own original insights to the tradition of Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein. Like them (and unlike our common hero, Hegel) he is not a rationalist. It is this strand in my thought that is the source of the suspicions he voices in “Language Not Mysterious?”. Much of what is right-headed in recent and contemporary philosophy has been the result of recoiling from the excesses and beginning to fill in the blind spots of various traditional rationalist programs. Taylor is worried that my rationalist form of pragmatism threatens to repeat old mistakes, forget various hard-learned lessons, and relinquish much of our hard-earned progress. I am sympathetic to the insights Taylor is concerned to convey and protect. But I do not see them threatened by the version of rationalism I am defending. I think his case consists largely of guilt by association of it with other, more familiar forms of rationalism.

The particular challenge that Taylor mounts concerns the relation between what he calls the “everyday fact-establishing and practical package” – what I am claiming is downtown in the city of language, and offering a rationalist reading of (which reading Taylor is not here contesting) – on the one hand, and a realm of “articulative/disclosive” symbolic forms that are not conceptual in my sense. Plastic art, music, and ritual articulate, express, convey, and disclose, but they do not do so by saying that things are thus-and-so. They are precisely not the making explicit of something in the sense I explore. (Taylor also mentions myth, narrative, and poetry as articulative/disclosive phenomena. These seem to me to be a different kind of case, since I take them all to depend essentially on our capacity to make claims, describe things, and apply concepts. Here perhaps we should say that they deploy those abilities in a way that also has an articulative/disclosive dimension that does not simply consist in what is explicitly said or described.) The question Taylor raises is whether the practices of making claims, giving reasons, and saying how things are that I offer an account of in Making It Explicit is autonomous. Is it a language game one could play though one played no other? Can one believe, or know, or understand the explicit claim that things are thus-and-so unless one also is able to understand things that are disclosed in ways that, while perhaps broadly symbolic in Cassirer’s sense, are not conceptual in the narrow propositional sense that I render in terms of inference and reasons? (Could one understand mere descriptions and explanations unless one could also understand what else besides descriptions and explanations is conveyed by myth and poetry?)
This is a very interesting question. (And notice that it is not the question of whether knowing-that presupposes knowing-how, whether our capacity to make things explicit depends on a background of implicit practical capacities. That is a thought that is fundamental to all pragmatists, whether of the minority rationalist faction or not – hence agreed-upon common ground between Taylor and me.) The strongest sense Taylor gives to the question is whether “this narrowed realm of reason can suffice to decide all the inescapable issues of human life. [So what] what the disclosive dimension yields is not essential for these issues.” Some kinds of rationalist might indeed have been tempted by such a claim, but nothing in my rationalism commits me to anything like this very strong claim. It might well be that issues of absolutely vital importance to human life can be addressed only by helping ourselves to considerations that go well beyond the rational side of our nature. Rational animals are, after all, not only rational, but animals.

I draw a bright line between conceptual understanding and other kinds of symbolic disclosedness. And I do claim a distinctive kind of privilege for practices of giving and asking for reasons (which are, I claim, always also practices of making claims and offering descriptions and explanations). Does asserting that privilege involve claiming (implausibly and perhaps perniciously) that the reasoning-and-fact-stating package of practices could stand alone, could itself be a language game that one played though one exercised no other sort of symbolic abilities? No. My claim is that every autonomous language game must include practices of giving and asking for reasons. It might well be, as far as anything I have said is concerned, that every autonomous language game also must include other kinds of symbolic disclosure. That is, in the sense Taylor is concerned with, I do not claim that the “factual-practical is self-sufficient”, except in the sense that I can give sufficient conditions for what one is doing to be doing that without having to mention symbolic forms in a wider sense (even if in fact you couldn’t have one without the other). Again, for all I’ve said, it might be that there could be practices making possible non-conceptual disclosure (ritual, music, plastic art), even if the practitioners do not also engage in the kind of inferentially articulated practices that constitute concept-use (and so don’t have concepts even of ritual, music, and art). Such creatures (perhaps our hominid ancestors?) would not yet have crossed the boundary into discursiveness. They would not in my sense be sapient – and perhaps that is a verdict that Taylor’s line of thought should make us uncomfortable with (or maybe lead us to conclude that the sapient/sentient distinction I often work with is just too crude to be serviceable here).

There remains the question of whether the idea of creatures who engage in discursive practices in my sense who do not engage in any other disclosive symbolic ones is in the end intelligible. (I repeat that nothing in Making It Explicit entails that it must be.) One methodological strand in MIE (possibly a perverse one) has been described as the enterprise of “vandalizing Neurath’s boat”. This is the conceptual project of stripping down discursive practice to the minimal shell that will remain afloat – where “floating” in this context means retaining the capacity to express propositions, make claims, give reasons. Thus I ask whether it is intelligible that
there should be rational creatures who are not logical creatures. (I say it is. McDowell disagrees.) Could there be concept-users in my sense who do not have the expressive resources provided by propositional-attitude ascribing locutions? (Again, I don’t see why not.) Could there be creatures who made claims and inferences from the claims of others, but engaged in no co-operative practical undertakings? (I think this is intelligible, Habermas does not.) In general, I think there could be creatures who are very much unlike us in many important ways who could nonetheless be like us in that they can say or think that things are thus-and-so. We might be able to tell no good story about how there could come to be creatures of these sorts. But that would not make unintelligible descriptions of what they would have to do in order to be using concepts but not engaging in various other sorts of practices, however pitifully expressively impoverished they might be. So I am committed to entertaining the question Taylor asks, even though I am not, as far as I can see, committed to any particular answer to it. He thinks the answer must be “No”, and he might be right. But I suspect that he is assuming that the creatures in question must be like us in many more ways than just being concept-users. And it might be that at the level of abstraction at which I am prepared to consider the possibility of a positive answer, the question has been drained of any interest it might have for thinking about us humans.

Notes
1 Cf. Philosophical Investigations 18: “Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.”
REPLY TO DANIEL DENNETT’S “THE EVOLUTION OF ‘WHY?’”

Robert Brandom

Dan Dennett’s generous, statesmanlike paper is a well thought-out invitation to find a way to combine our somewhat different perspectives into a single binocular vision of the common phenomena we address. I agree entirely with his assessment that we agree about a great deal – including issues on which our views put us at odds with those of the greater part of our philosophical colleagues. We share large-scale, orienting methodological commitments to thinking of intentionality in normative terms, to seeing assessments of rationality as ineluctably bound up with attribution of contentful thought (followed out by wanting to start semantically with inference rather than representation), to working out some version of the “stance stance”, and to preferring macoreductions rather than micoreductions of intentionality (moving up to the environmentally, including socially, situated organism rather than down to the neurons). Although he does not mention such matters of detail, there are also quite specific issues on which he and I agree in taking positions that leave us in a tiny minority. One such is understanding the distinction between 

\[ \text{de dicto} \] and \[ \text{de re} \] as concerning kinds of \[ \text{ascriptions} \] of beliefs (and other attitudes), rather than indicating different kinds of \[ \text{beliefs} \].

One issue he points to as being worth some effort to sort out further concerns the complex conceptual relations between simple (nonlinguistic) intentional systems and communicating, interpreting, linguistic ones – as I would like to say, between \textit{practical} and \textit{discursive} intentionality.\(^1\) Practical intentionality is a way of being directed towards objects that is exhibited already both by nonlinguistic animals and by the sort of wall-following robot Dennett mentions here. The core structure shared by both its organic and its inorganic exemplars is Test-Operate-Test-Exit feedback control loops, in which external objects figure both as responded to and operated on in a goal-seeking fashion. I take it to be a criterion of adequacy of an account of discursive intentionality (my explicative target in \textit{MIE}) that it be intelligible how creatures initially exhibiting only the abilities necessary for practical intelligibility should, by their social interactions, come to be properly described as talking with one another, saying things to one another, acknowledging and attributing specifically propositional commitments and entitlements. In the order of being (as they used to say), we can all agree that simple, practical intentionality precedes discursive, communicating, interpreting intentionality.
I am concerned, however, to argue that conceptually there is also a reverse order of priority. When we characterize our well-designed, generally successful TOTE-looping goal seeker as a Dennettian simple intentional system, we attribute to it beliefs and desires. These are intentional states that essentially, and not just accidentally, have propositional contents. In talking this way, we are using terms that are necessarily parasitic on their applicability in their home language-game of talking about discursive intentional systems. We are, as Dennett says, substantially stretching the terms. There is nothing wrong with that. Indeed, over the years Dennett has detailed eloquently and persuasively the many benefits we get in this particular case. But when we want to be careful with and explicit about such a linguistic extension by model-plus-commentary, we must not forget about the commentary. The bit of commentary I want to emphasize here is that nothing non- or pre-linguistic creatures can do can underwrite attributing to them intentional states whose contents are specifiable by the declarative sentences of some language – say, English. Nothing the dog can do can warrant our characterizing what it believes is buried near the tree is a bone, or that it is a tree that it is buried near. Those concepts have their boundaries delimited by a network of inferences that relate them to other concepts. And what a merely practically intentional creature can do cannot be sufficiently articulated and normatively controlled in the right way as to warrant literal attribution of states whose contents are specifiable by the use of those of our concepts. We can do useful predictive and explanatory work by exploiting a rough mapping of the creature’s non-conceptual states onto our sophisticated conceptual network, using the latter as a kind of measurement system for it. But when we do that we must never forget that that sort of ‘belief’ cannot be the conceptually basic kind of belief. I doubt that Dennett would deny any of this, though these considerations lead me to find some of his rhetoric potentially misleading.

The main question Dennett raises concerns the significance of my “neglect of evolutionary considerations”. He acknowledges that I have limited the question I am addressing so as to render such considerations irrelevant to that question. I am concerned to say what doing the trick consists in, what you have to do to count thereby as having done the trick – where the trick is being able to say or think that things are thus-and-so, to be engaging in discursive practices of giving and asking for reasons, making claims, and so being in states and producing performances that possess or express propositional contents in the most conceptually fundamental sense. The question of how the trick is done – how creatures situated, wired up, and trained as we are could come to engage in practices and display abilities that qualify as discursive in this demanding sense – is explicitly put to one side. I do acknowledge, of course, that it is a criterion of adequacy of the account I offer that it be possible to tell such a story. If we could show that organisms roughly like us could not in principle keep deontic score on each other, achieve sufficient (if always fallible) mastery over the various sorts of inferential-consequential relations I invoke, and so on, then that would show that we are not doing what I say we must be doing in order to be talking. Also left outside the scope of the project is the question of how there came to be, or could have come to be, creatures who could do the trick.
Now I think there are good and sufficient reasons for restricting my question as I do. It is hard enough, by itself. Further, I think it is a more fundamental question. Surely it is important to begin by being as clear as possible about exactly what the trick is, when addressing the questions of how the trick is done and how creatures of a certain sort could come to be able to do it. These are the terms in which I would like to think of the potential contribution my work makes to furthering the projects of those who concern themselves with questions of engineering and etiology. Insofar as I have made any progress towards an answer to my question, the criteria of adequacy for answers to the other sorts of questions are that much clearer and more definite. In this respect, I want to embrace Dennett’s irenic suggestion that these different approaches can be seen to be complementary.

Further, I do not think of myself as being in a position to rule out in advance that broadly evolutionary approaches (from below, in the hierarchy of intentionality) might provide a workable alternative account of the kind of normativity characteristic of intentionality. My form of a social approach to normativity is only one alternative. In this connection I second Dennett’s mention of Ruth Millikan’s work. Her modal, evolutionary notion of Proper Function underwrites the application of a rich normative vocabulary already for simple, practical intentional systems (and, indeed, for suitable sub-intentional systems). And when that notion is transported into a social environment and applied to communicating systems, she is able to make out a detailed case that sophisticated structures characteristic of specifically discursive intentionality become intelligible. I have the greatest respect for this work, and take it that Millikan has provided a live, worked-out alternative to the kind of essentially social normativity I appeal to.

There is one aspect of Dennett’s rhetoric that invites a line of thought I do want to resist, however. That is the “It’s pretty, but what is it for?” question. I do not think we illuminate the issue of what language is by asking what it is for, what selective advantage it could or did provide our ancestors – though of course, there might be an answer to that question that would be interesting for other reasons. Evolutionary approaches to language often find a congenial ally in the tradition that thinks of language generically as a tool or instrument. I think this is an association they should be wary of. It applies to the case of discursive practice a model of instrumental intelligibility. This is where we make sense of something by showing that it is a suitable means to some end, a way of achieving a goal. I take it that there are two principal background conditions of the applicability of this form of intelligibility: the goal must be specifiable independently and in advance of specifying the means, and it must make sense for that goal to be achieved by alternate means. I do not think either of these conditions is met in the case of language. If we think about it as language, what it is “for” is expressing propositions. Because of its productivity – the fact that anything that can talk at all can formulate an indefinitely large number of novel claims, claims that no one in the history of the world has ever before so much as contemplated – language makes possible the entertainment of a vast array of novel potential ends and goals. It is not open to your dog to aim to reform the international monetary system, prevent global warming, or determine
the mass of neutrinos. What makes something a language is that it makes this goal attainable. But that is not a goal that one could have in advance of speaking. (As Sellars says: “One could always simply not speak – but only at the cost of having nothing to say.”) And there are in principle no other means possible for achieving that particular goal.

Of course, this is not to say that we could not find out that the advent of language was adaptive in an evolutionary sense because it made possible something quite different – say, more efficient utilization of resources through cooperative or coordinated activities. That would tell us something about how we came into language, but not about what language (that form of life) is. I do not object to the other enterprise. I am just cautioning against too quick an embrace of an alliance of that evolutionary explanatory project with a view that seeks to explain what language is – what one has to be doing for it to be talking that one is doing (in the sense of describing or stating) – by thinking of language as a tool for achieving some purpose.

I agree that I have “refused to address an entirely appropriate question” – not only the evolutionary etiological question, but also the engineering question. That seems to me an innocuous matter of division of intellectual labor. I am not yet convinced that dividing the questions in this way “actually distorts the analysis at the higher level”. It might well be that my account would benefit from supplementation by attention to some of the “quite uncontroversial themes in the considerable naturalistic literature on the evolution of communication”. But I’m not sure what lack in the treatment of my question such supplementation would supply. I do agree that adding such considerations would not commit us to “any doctrinaire scientism or evolutionism that might seem to threaten the philosophical austerity of the project”. But I don’t see that there is any “suspicious residue of magic” clinging to an account that grounds meaning in community without addressing the optional (though important) further question of how we came to have such communities.

Notes

1 I say some more about his terminology and some of the relations I envisage between the phenomena in chapter 6 of Between Saying and Doing (Oxford University Press, 2008).

2 I have sometimes used the terminology of “sense-dependence without reference-dependence” to make closely related points (for instance, in chapter 6 of Tales of the Mighty Dead [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002]).
Sebastian Rödl sees an unresolved and irresolvable tension between two fundamental commitments he finds motivating *Making It Explicit*: the conception of the mind as normative (of intentionality as an irreducibly normative phenomenon), and a “conception of philosophy as explaining mysterious phenomena”. The former is a Kantian idea, pursued both by Sellars and by Wittgenstein. The latter is, he says, “a legacy of the naturalist-empiricist tradition”. The first of these is clearly and explicitly avowed throughout the book. To attribute the allegiance to naturalism and empiricism, however, requires Rödl to read between the lines – indeed, I think, to misread between the lines.

Two features of the methodological aspirations of *MIE* ground the attribution I will contest. One is to explain meaning in terms of use, where use is specified in normative terms. Rödl thinks that the invocation of ‘explanation’ inevitably involves scientistic reductionism of either a naturalist or an empiricist sort.¹ The other is to show that to treat normative vocabulary as irreducible to non-normative vocabulary need not be to treat it as mysterious. Rödl’s suspicions are aroused by the image of philosophy dispelling a possible mystery. One would only think norms are in danger of seeming mysterious if one’s antecedent view of the world were that of the naturalist or empiricist. So if I address the worry that norms might seem mysterious, I must be buying into such a world-view. And there is an obvious tension between such a world-view and the claim that what normative vocabulary expresses both cannot be expressed in non-normative terms and is essential for describing the practices of using words in ways that make them conceptually contentful.

But one need not share a worry or concern in order to take it seriously and address it. One might instead respond to actual worries by giving reasons to reject central features of the framework that gives rise to the felt difficulty. The two ways I offer to dispel any lingering discomfort that readers (including, of course, naturalists and empiricists) might have with the notion of appealing to irreducibly normative vocabulary in my account of meaning are the account (in chapter 4) of the expressive role distinctive of normative vocabulary (codifying the endorsement of patterns of practical inference), and explaining what reasons might justify using normative vocabulary in saying what some group of practitioners are doing. Neither of these is reductive. The first itself makes essential use of normative notions. It appeals to
practical commitments (commitments to do something), which are the conclusions of practical inferences, and to the normative attitude of endorsing patterns of practical reasoning.

Rödl sees the invocation of sanctions in pursuing the second softening-up strategy as an empiricist or naturalist reduction of the bindingness of norms to their non-normatively specifiable causal consequences, and quotes Tugendhat to good effect in characterizing such a strategy and its presuppositions. Laying out such a position, Gil Harman argues, for instance, that while the best causal explanation for various features of electron-talk is that there really are electrons that we are talking about and otherwise interacting with, it is not the case that the best causal explanation for moral-value-talk is that there are moral values that we are talking about and otherwise interacting with. All the causal-explanatory work there is to be done can be done by appeal to moral attitudes, to beliefs about values, rather than to the values themselves. If the appeal to sanctions in demystifying the use of normative vocabulary is of this sort, then Rödl would be right to see that as in irresoluble tension with the claim that normative vocabulary is both essential to the specification of discursive practice, and in principle not reducible to or explainable in non-normative terms.

My appeal to sanctions is not of this kind, but the difference is subtle and easy to miss. I am not purporting to offer, in non-normative terms of sanctions, sufficient conditions for creatures to be engaged in norm-instituting practices. I do aim to give sufficient conditions for it to be norms that an interpreter takes members of a community to be instituting by their practical attitudes. The thought is that if, according to the interpreter, some responses of practitioners to each other’s performances have the practical significance of sanctions, of rewards and punishments, then that interpreter is taking the practitioners to be treating each other’s performances as appropriate or inappropriate (as opposed to sorting them into some sort of non-normative classes, as loud or surprising or funny). On this basis, I take it that a naturalist could justify taking a community to be engaged in norm-instituting practices if their responses to each other’s performances have the matter-of-factual effect of positively or negatively reinforcing those performances – that is, making them more or less likely to be repeated in response to the same stimuli. But I then go on to point out that this model does not require such matter-of-factual effects. Suppose some hominids reliably negatively reinforce entering the central hut if one does not display a leaf from a particular tree. (They beat offenders with sticks.) An interpreter could then legitimately treat as a reward for some other behavior, say, building a fire, giving the fire-builder such a leaf. For that is altering their normative status, giving them a license or entitlement they did not have before. And that can be taken to be rewarding the fire-building, even if being given a leaf does not positively reinforce the fire-building (intuitively, because the fire-builder happens not to care about entering the central hut). This is normative sanctioning. I claim that it is coherent to take a community to be instituting normative statuses (such as entitlements) even if, according to the interpretation, all the sanctions are of this normative type, and none are matter-of-factually reinforcing. In such an interpretation, it
is “norms all the way down”. This is evidently not a reductive naturalist-empiricist account of the sort Rödl objects to. Only one of the “roots of MIE” that he sees as being in tension is actually part of the project.

At the end of the book (in chapter 9), the idea that normative statuses are instituted by normative attitudes is reconciled with the irreducibility of normative vocabulary by claiming that, from the point of view of an interpreter, it is properties of scorekeeping, norms governing that activity, rather than actual scorekeeping that is taken to institute normative statuses. This view is part of the “collapse of levels” – the final move in the book – in which the role of interpreter (outside the practice) and scorekeeper (inside the practice, according to an interpreter) are seen to coincide once the expressive resources needed to express the theory of MIE have been reconstructed within the discursive practice in question. Rödl complains that this view is inconsistent with the earlier reductionism he diagnoses in the appeal to sanctions. But that is because there never was any reductionism. It is true that earlier talk of “institution of normative statuses by normative attitudes” has now been sharpened to talk of “institution of normative statuses by properties of normative attitudes”. But this is expository progress, not a conceptual tension. It should be compared to the progression from the discussion of circumstances and consequences of appropriate application, in chapter 2, which uses a single-sorted normative notion of appropriateness, to the treatment of circumstances and consequences of commitment and entitlement, in chapter 3. An initially crude formulation is refined. It is true that that means that some of the motivating remarks that were formulated in the cruder terms need to be revised, and that fact apparently is what misled Rödl on this point.

More deeply, though, there is a methodological tension – though not, I think, a contradiction – that pervades MIE and is not resolved there. I think it may stand behind some of Rödl’s concerns. An important aim of the book is to introduce and develop a notion of expression, of making explicit, or explicitation. This sort of expression is not only a topic of the book, it is what the book itself aims to do for discursive practice. It is to give us the expressive tools that allow us to say what it is we have to do to count thereby as saying something. So, for instance, I want to make explicit (to say) what one needs to do in order to count as acknowledging and attributing commitments, and using normative vocabulary. Making explicit in this sense is offering a kind of account. That kind of account contrasts with explanations in any reductive sense. But often enough, the language of explanation is used for explicitation. I do not systematically reflect the distinction in my rhetoric. I want to persuade the reductionist that offering an account of the explicitating sort ought to suffice, by itself, to dispel any lingering air of mystery that might attach to intentionality or normativity. Rödl misses that, and so is led to the suspicions he expresses in claims such as: “Rooted in the empiricist-naturalist tradition, Brandom thinks meaning and intentionality, speaking and acting, are mysterious phenomena, which he must explain.” That one need not be so rooted or motivated to address the perception of mystery, and need not address it by offering reductive explanations, is perhaps made particularly clear for us in this volume by Charles Taylor’s complementary concern.
that I am in danger of losing or obscuring the mystery of discourse (by saying too much about what we are doing in talking). The perspective from which he perceives a mystery is surely not that of “the empiricist-naturalist tradition”.

Notes
1 These are, of course, not the same, though Rödl’s purposes do not require him to go into the differences and affinities between them. I discuss these programs in chapter 1 of Between Saying and Doing, and again in the Afterword.
REPLY TO JOHN MACFARLANE’S “PRAGMATISM AND INFERENTIALISM”

Robert Brandom

It is a pleasure to read John MacFarlane’s sure-footed, sophisticated discussion of the relations between pragmatism about the relations between pragmatics and semantics, on the one hand, and semantic inferentialism, on the other. I certainly agree that one can be a pragmatist without being an inferentialist. I take it, for instance, that Wittgenstein thinks that the principal criterion of adequacy of semantic theories is the extent to which they codify proprieties of use, and so is a pragmatist in the relevant sense. His views about the myriad contingencies that influence the development of discursive practices, though, lead him to be skeptical about the utility of associating meanings of any sort with utterances – whether those meanings are construed representationally, inferentially, or in any other way. Quine is another pragmatist who is more than a little skeptical about semantics, but who is representationalist when he does indulge in it.

On my view, inferring and asserting come as a package. These are the kinds of doings in terms of which I think we should understand conceptual contents, to begin with, propositional contents: the ones that are asserted and stand in inferential relations. My idea is to think of asserting something as undertaking a distinctive kind of commitment (a normative pragmatics) and of that distinctive kind of commitment as what is suitably inferentially articulated, in that it can play the role both of premise and of conclusion in inferences (an inferential semantics). I despair of giving an account of asserting in terms of speaking truly, of putting a proposition forward as true, of representing things as being thus-and-so, or anything along these lines. But I certainly don’t claim to be able to show that no such account could possibly work. I would be happy to lay inferentialist pragmatism alongside a well worked-out truth-conditional pragmatism, if we had such a thing. (MacFarlane seems to be more sanguine about this prospect than I am.)

But is inferring a doing in the deontic scorekeeping account of discursive practice in *Making It Explicit?* After careful consideration, MacFarlane does not see that it is. He cannot find a special act or performance of inferring. And he properly cautions us, on Harmanian grounds, not to confuse inferential relations with inferrings. I think his suggestion that we look to scorekeeping as a relevant doing is helpful, but I would appeal to it somewhat differently than the ways he considers. If I, as scorekeeper, take it that there is a good commitment-preserving inference from \( p \) to \( q \),
then I take it that if you or anyone else asserts $p$, you are obliged (committed) to do something else, namely, to acknowledge commitment to $q$. And that is to say that I take you to be committed to inferring $q$ from $p$. If you are not prepared to acknowledge commitment to $q$ (and have not withdrawn $p$), then you have failed to do what you are obliged to do: inferring $q$ from $p$.

MacFarlane asks a large, orienting question. Is what is defended the relatively weak claim that “semantics is not conceptually autonomous from pragmatics; semantic concepts get their significance through their relations to pragmatic concepts”? Or is it the much stronger claim that “the fundamental semantic concepts can be defined in purely pragmatic terms”? I want to say that the proffered alternatives are not exhaustive. The idea is that one can say in a pragmatic vocabulary what it is one needs to do in order thereby to make semantic concepts applicable to one’s performances and the expressions that play a suitable role in them – that is, to be conferring conceptual content on them. From the other side, we can say what it is about one’s discursive doings that is made explicit by the use of semantic vocabulary such as ‘true’, ‘refers’, and ‘of’ or ‘about’. These are not definitions in the traditional sense.1

The project is, as MacFarlane indicates, to elaborate a notion of commitment to a claimable content, starting with a notion of commitment to do something. What else does uttering $p$ assertingly commit one to do? Downstream, one is committed to acknowledging commitment to its (commitment-preserving) inferential consequences, and so, if $q$ is one of them, to be disposed to utter $q$ assertingly as well. Upstream, one is committed to vindicating one’s entitlement, by suitable deferral to other asserters, or by uttering assertingly sufficient (entitlement-preserving) grounds or reasons one is also entitled to (unless one’s claim is vindicated as observational knowledge via a scorekeeper’s endorsement of a corresponding reliability inference). Failure to do those things is properly punished by sanctions. These are normative sanctions, consisting of alterations in normative status in the eyes of scorekeepers, who change their normative attitudes – what entitlements they attribute – accordingly. For an interpreter to take it that a community is engaging in discursive practices, and so is conferring propositional content on its utterances, is for the interpreter to take it that norms of this shape govern the adoption of deontic scorekeeping attitudes by practitioners. Once again, this is not a definition. It is an account of what an interpreter needs to do, in order thereby to be taking it that the practices of those being interpreted confer propositional contents on their performances.

Notes

1 One of the larger tasks of Between Saying and Doing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) is to say what they are, and what one is doing in offering accounts of this sort.
Jeremy Wanderer’s clear and constructive paper shows that focusing on challenges is indeed a useful tool for thinking about a variety of pragmatic issues that in Making It Explicit I did not pursue as far as he has here. Two ideas that prove particularly helpful are the distinction between speech acts that are targeted (in that they in a distinctive way alter the normative statuses of some who might overhear them) and those that are addressed (in that the reciprocal acknowledgement of the address is an essential part of its being the act that it is). I accept his argument that challenging must be understood as being second-personally addressed, in order for it to play the role it is envisaged as playing in the practice of giving and asking for reasons described in MIE. So understanding it acknowledges a crucial second-person dimension to the model that both helps to vindicate the motivating rhetoric that contrasts its “I–thou” conception of sociality1 with traditional “I–we” conceptions and offers a satisfying response to some of Habermas’s worries on this score. More generally, I think the conception of the second person that emerges from Wanderer’s discussion (contrasting as it does with the one Habermas is working with) is worthy of further exploration in its own right, quite apart from the good it does when recruited to address these technical issues inside the system of MIE.

It follows that if the role of challenging is taken over by the assertion of incompatible claims (as I suggest might be done), then those assertions, too, must be taken to be addressed. Indeed, we might take the difference between ordinary assertions and those that are functioning also as challenges simply to consist in the fact that the latter are addressed.

Wanderer brings all these considerations to bear in the context of a fascinating discussion of some issues in the recent literature on the epistemology of testimony. This conceptual juxtaposition yields the suggestion that all assertions be thought of as second-personally addressed. This seems to me an interesting and promising variant and development of the MIE apparatus.

Notes
1 Discussed in my reply to Gibbard, see pp. 297–300.
This paper takes its point of departure from an idea about language with which I wholly agree:

[O]nly concretely located agents ... can have a first-person perspective or voice ... [T]here must be room for such first-person perspectives within a theoretical account of discursive practice, in order for it to successfully make sense of meaning, discourse, or normative statuses.

I do not agree that Making It Explicit does not have the theoretical resources to accommodate such a perspective. Further, I do not think that the considerations the authors advance require us to add to our picture any other speech acts that should be given the same theoretical weight that I give to assertion.

I assign an absolutely unique and central role to asserting. It is for me distinctive and criterial of specifically discursive practice that some speech acts are accorded by it the pragmatic significance of assertings: claimings, which purport to say how things are. Asserting, which comes as part of a package with inferring and inferential relations among claimables, is downtown in the city of language. To be conceptually contentful is in the first instance to be claimable, and all other sorts of conceptual content are to be understood ultimately in terms of such claimable (hence propositional) content. When I am vandalizing Neurath’s boat, and so trying to specify the absolutely minimal conditions on a practice deploying propositional contents (being a practice in which something can be said, so thought), the one and only speech act that must be present is asserting. According this sort of unique, defining significance to asserting is a bold and antecedently implausible conjecture. I think it is often useful to adopt a Popperian philosophical methodology: developing and defending the strongest, most easily falsifiable not-yet-falsified hypothesis. We learn a lot from seeing for what reasons, and to what extent, such a hypothesis needs to be qualified and amended. But even then, it is important that the bit where one takes it back be preceded by a bit where one actually says it.

So I think the right thing to do with the assertionalism that consists in giving to asserting the sort of privilege and pride of place that I do is to do what Lance and Kukla do: look to see what such an approach must overlook or leave out. And it is surely fair
enough in general to say that I am much more concerned with understanding what it is for us to be rational animals than with what it is for us to be rational animals. The broadly pragmatist line of thought shared by James and Dewey, the early Heidegger, and the later Wittgenstein is not the rationalist pragmatism that joins me to Hegel. The emphasis on practices of giving and asking for reasons – hence on asserting and on inferential articulation is something of which this tradition is reflexively suspicious, associating rationalism in any form with the kind of intellectualist platonism from which pragmatism recoils. Pursuing a rationalist pragmatism without falling back into those traditional ways of thinking that pragmatism diagnoses and treats is an Eiertanz, and calls for critical attention. Nonetheless, I do not think the reasons offered in this paper yet show the need for “substantial enrichment” of the framework, if the issue is what the minimum required for an autonomous language game is.

Consider the first person. I agree that

I must understand and recognize not only the shape of the normative web of commitments and entitlements, and not only how new speech acts change this web, but where I am located within this web: which scores are mine and which changes in scores affect me. This perspectival character is a logical condition for any of these scores making any difference to me at all.

And that distinguishing of one’s own score cannot be understood just as another piece of third-person knowledge. But this fact is built deeply into the structure of MIE. As will be recalled from my discussion of Gibbard’s paper, the deontic score-keeping account is an account of discursive practice as social in the sense that it is articulated by the fundamental distinction of social normative perspective between attributing a commitment (to someone else) and acknowledging it (oneself). It is that basic distinction between deontic attitudes that fills in the “I–thou” form of sociality that is contrasted with more traditional “I–we” versions. This distinction is of the essence of the account of knowledge attribution (in connection with traditional tripartite JTB accounts) and its relation to assertion. And when (in chapter 8) we look at the propositional-attitude-ascribing locutions that make attributions explicit in the form of claimables, we see that we must sharply distinguish acknowledging a commitment from attributing it even to oneself. The whole notion of scorekeeping turns on scorekeepers’ mastery of this sort of “first-personality”. So invoking its necessity cannot serve as a reason to move beyond an assertion-based story that incorporates this distinction of social perspective.

The same holds for the considerations Lance and Kukla raise concerning perception: “Perceptual episodes must be understood as first-personally structured, agent-relative events” –

my perception will only yield new entitlements for anyone if they originate with me – no one else but me can be the first to pass on my perceptual entitlements. But this can only happen if I recognize my perceptual episodes, in a normatively rich sense, as mine ...
All true, but already incorporated in the deontic scorekeeping model. A perceptual judgment is the *acknowledgment* of a commitment elicited by the exercise of a reliable differential responsive disposition. Only if the reliably elicited response is acknowledging, rather than attributing, a commitment does it count as having the special default entitlement characteristic of observation. Only in that case will another scorekeeper endorse a reliability inference.

Of course perception and agency are necessary features of any autonomous discursive practice. To keep score at all, one must be able to respond to the assertions of others. That is why chapter 4 is in part one of MIE. Perceptual judgments are also a necessary feature of any discursive practice that confers empirical content on the expressions that play a suitable role in it. My remarks in passing (intended in a “for all I know” spirit) about the possible intelligibility-in-principle of conceptual content isolated or insulated from inferential connections to language entries and language exits is a gesture toward the possibility of a non-autonomous region of discourse, for instance some pure mathematics, in which such contents might live.

Recognitives, it is pointed out, do not possess entitlements that “license others to do just what they did”. True. But that much is already true of observation reports. For there are important differences between the entitlement of a reporter – whose own reliability is the issue for a scorekeeper – and anyone testimonially inheriting that entitlement from the reporter. For the heir’s reliability as a reporter is not at all at issue for the scorekeeper. So the reporter’s claiming has a unique status, not inherited by those who inherit from it an entitlement to the same content. Since this feature is already exhibited by various kinds of assertions, its existence cannot oblige us to extend or modify the assertional framework.

The crux of the argument, I think, is this:

But if recognitive entitlement – the entitlement that comes from a receptive first-person encounter with the empirical world – plays a distinctive role in justification, then this distinctiveness must itself be able to be brought into the space of explicit critical examination within the game of giving and asking for reasons. But this requires that our language have the resources for making recognitive discourse explicit.

“Must be able to be”, “our language must have the resources”, elsewhere the authors say that the language must “accommodate” explicitly recognitive locutions. I agree that it is always possible to introduce explicit locutions and speech acts to express the special practical status of commitment-acknowledging speech acts such as observation reports. The question is whether it is necessary in order to have an up-and-running autonomous discursive practice. Why could it not be that scorekeepers must in practice distinguish between entitlements due to the combination of a reporter’s responsively elicited acknowledgment of a commitment and the scorekeeper’s endorsement of a corresponding reliability inference (from the commitment attributed on the basis of the reporter’s acknowledgment to the scorekeeper’s own acknowledgment of a commitment with the same content) and those
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testimonially or otherwise inherited from such acknowledgments, without that being something the scorekeeper has the expressive resources explicitly to say? Lance and Kukla claim that otherwise we will have fallen into the Myth of the Given. But that is just silly. Everything in view is inferentially, and so conceptually, articulated. There is a distinction between commitments one is and those one is not entitled to. That one might not be able to justify, by further claimings, some conceptually articulated commitment scorekeepers could nevertheless attribute either as entitled or as not does not bring givenness into the picture. “If we could never recognize, in language, other people’s discursive expressions of their own, first-person experience, then such experience could not function as a reason.” Granted, except “in language” covers a slide here. We have to be able to recognize that distinction practically, in our scorekeeping. And that means we could mark it overtly by a special explicitating expression. But need we actually do that, deploy those expressive resources, in order to acknowledge the distinction in our scorekeeping practice?

It can sensibly be argued on other grounds that we must be able to argue about whatever it is that entitles us to a commitment, if the whole game is to count as rational, hence as semantogenic. McDowell, for instance, argues along these lines that the idea of a language without logical vocabulary is unintelligible. In such a putatively rational but not yet logical practice, one could challenge claims, but not inferences. For one has no way to say that one does or does not endorse the inference from \( p \) to \( q \), unless one has the expressive resources provided by conditionals. He might be right about that. But I do not see that he is. Participants in a discursive practice that is rational but not yet logical would have no way to reason or resolve disputes about their inferential practices. They would not be semantically self-conscious. They would not be very much like us. But could they still claim that things are thus-and-so, even though they were deprived of this dimension of critical self-consciousness. I do not see why not.

At any rate, this is the issue. Lance and Kukla are engaged in an extended effort (of which this piece is only a part) to enrich the framework of MIE so as to include discussions of the expressive roles of all sorts of locutions not treated there. I applaud this enterprise. But the features of discourse they properly point to as essential – principally the distinctive sort of first-person recognition they discuss – are already built into the basic structure of deontic scorekeeping. A fortiori, it is not necessary to move beyond an assertion-centered account in order to incorporate those features. And the claim that they must be overtly marked by explicit locutions or speech acts, though interesting, and perhaps colorable, is not, I think, successfully established here.

Notes

1 Discussed in my reply to Gibbard, see pp. 297–300.
REPLY TO JOHN MCDOWELL’S “BRANDOM ON OBSERVATION”: CHICKEN-SEXERS AND RYLEANS

Robert Brandom

In his vigorous, sophisticated paper, John McDowell mistakes a disclaimer of originality for an argument from authority. I attribute the two-ply view of observation to Sellars because it was his texts that made this way of thinking about things visible to me. (I find variants of it in both Quine and Davidson, as well.) In “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” the account is, to be sure, entangled with other commitments – some of which seem to me not as promising. McDowell thinks that separating out this stripped-down, purified notion of observation reports both obscures important aspects of Sellars’s views, and results in a less powerful and insightful story than his actual one.

The account in question sees the capacity to make observation reports, or perceptual judgments, as the product of two in-principle separable component abilities. One is the capacity reliably to respond differentially to some kind of stimulus. This genus of capacity is not restricted to its discursive species. Not only sentient creatures who are not sapients, such as non-human vertebrates, but even sessile invertebrates and various kinds of mechanical devices exhibit capacities of this sort. Blind people and the ten percent of the male population that is red-green colorblind can know that things are red, but they cannot see that they are red, cannot observationally report the visible presence of red things, because they lack the necessary reliable differential responsive disposition (RDRD). The other component ability is the capacity to deploy the concepts applied in the observation report or perceptual judgment. What Sellars calls the “Myth of the Given” is the idea that there could be a kind of state or episode, say perceptual experiences, such that the capacity to be in such a state or undergo such an episode both presupposes no mastery of concepts and also constitutes knowing something, or having evidence for a claim. Observation reports and perceptual judgments are eligible candidates to qualify as knowledge, and so, the view is, they must involve the application of concepts.

But not all concepts are observational concepts or have observational uses. As Sellars recommends we use the terms, purely theoretical concepts are those whose only appropriate circumstances of application are as the conclusions of inferences. Concepts of observables are concepts that in addition to having inferential uses, also have noninferential ones. For Sellars, what makes something conceptually contentful is its playing a suitable role in inference. No concept is noninferential in the sense that its application cannot serve as a premise in an inference in which that
application serves as a reason for the application of others, nor as the conclusion of an inference in which applications of other concepts serve as reasons for applying that one. Grasping a concept requires having sufficient practical mastery of its role in reasoning. But not all applications of concepts are the conclusions of processes of reasoning or inference. Some are noninferentially elicited, as the exercise of reliable differential responsive dispositions. Those, the proposal is, are the observational concepts. The minimal, stripped-down view is that all that is required for something to be an observation report is that it be the application of a concept that is noninferentially elicited as the exercise of an RDRD to respond to things, situations, or events of a certain kind by applying that concept.

Sellars invokes the separability of the two component abilities not only in characterizing the Myth of the Given, but also in the discussion that leads up to the treatment of the other myth, in the second half of EPM: the Myth of Jones. (At the end of the essay, he says “I have used a myth to kill a myth.”) In order to set up that story, it is important for Sellars to establish that concepts are not intrinsically theoretical or observational – so, that properties or facts are not intrinsically theoretical or observable. Concepts that start off life as purely theoretical can acquire observational uses. The distinction between the theoretical and the observable is methodological, not ontological: a matter of our mode of access to things (purely inferential, or also noninferential), not of the kind of things they are. Thus the (now ex-) planet Pluto first swam into our ken as a theoretical entity, postulated to account gravitationally for perturbations in the orbit of Neptune. Its existence, mass, position, and other properties could only be known inferentially, by being deduced from what we could observe about Neptune. But more powerful telescopes let us see it, and so report features of it (e.g. its color) by exercising RDRDs culminating in the application of concepts that before could only be applied as the result of processes of inference. The nature of Pluto didn’t change when we crossed that purely methodological boundary (any more than it did when we recently decided it doesn’t deserve to be called a “planet” after all).

Sellars’s radical claim is that we should think of all purely theoretical concepts (gluon, gene, dark matter) as in principle having the same possibility that Pluto did, of coming to have observational uses. This is not an ad hoc commitment on his part, elicited by his desire to make a point in the philosophy of mind by understanding features of our awareness of our thoughts and sense impressions as ones that could have resulted from purely theoretical concepts coming to have observational uses. It is a central element of his philosophy of science generally. Seeing the distinction between theoretical and observable objects, properties, and facts as methodological rather than ontological is the basis for his realism about theoretical entities, and of his diagnosis of the ultimately semantic misunderstandings that mistakenly led some philosophers of science to take instead an instrumentalist line about them. The Myth of the Given depends on understanding some things (what is given) as intrinsically observable – which is why the Myth of Jones, according to which some mental episodes started off life as theoretical entities, and only later acquired their liability to being observed, is an important part of a response to the Myth of the Given.
The stripped-down, two-ply account of observation that I both endorse and attribute to Sellars is, it seems to me, a pretty straightforward extrapolation from these considerations. I’ll have something more to say about the attribution further along. But the question of what recommends the two-ply account philosophically seems to me the more important one (although McDowell only addresses it briefly, at the end of his piece), so I will begin by saying something about that before addressing the exegetical issue.

The following considerations seem to me to speak for the minimal conception of observation:

- First, it is simple. The two components are individually intelligible and evidently separable: theoretical concepts do not have noninferential circumstances of application keyed to RDRDs, and nonlinguistic creatures have RDRDs. It makes sense of what used to be called the “theory-ladenness” of observation: the way in which what one can see depends on what else one knows. For one’s response to stimuli to count as observation, it must consist in the application of concepts, and their content depends on their inferential relations to other concepts.
- This understanding of observation supports the account of ‘looks’-talk that Sellars offers: in saying that something looks F one is exercising the same RDRD as in saying how things visibly are, but modifying the usual response by withholding the application of the concept F.
- It draws a good line between the perception of linguistic creatures and of nonlinguistic ones (only the physiology of the RDRDs is in common).
- It does not fall into the Myth of the Given (since one must have concepts in order to be able to observe anything) characteristic of Cartesian conceptions of experience, including their empiricist species. But it is not behaviorist either, in spite of the invocation of RDRDs, since it is compatible with understanding concept-application as essentially a normative matter of endorsement, commitment, and so on.
- It makes sense of the Sellarsian insight that the difference between observable and unobservable states of affairs is methodological, not ontological, and it makes sense of the possibility of theoretical concepts coming to have observational uses, which is the broader theoretical background against which the Myth of Jones story is told.
- Finally, it makes sense of something important to McDowell: the observability-in-principle of normative states of affairs. All that is required for one to be able directly to observe what someone means, or that an act is cruel, is that one have mastered the relevant concepts (know one’s way in practice around its inferential vicinity) and have acquired the RDRD noninferentially to respond to at least some instances by applying the concept.

It seems to me to have two principal drawbacks. Nothing at all is made of phenomenology. Any “raw feels” that may be present during the process of observation are at most part of the mechanism of the RDRDs. And it draws an unintuitive
and possibly implausible line between what is and what is not observable. I think allowing normative properties, relations, and states of affairs into the tent of what is observable in principle is worth it. A striking feature of the view is that it appeals only to perceptual judgments: applications of concepts wrung from those who are properly wired-up and trained as exercises of their RDRDs. Perceptual experiences, if any, are only contingently involved. This is the feature McDowell most objects to. But what is his story about the observability of norms, including the semantic ones involved in being able immediately (noninferentially) to hear what someone means – and not just what noises she makes (a phenomenon McDowell and I agree it is important for a theory to save)? Are there perceptual experiences of meanings? Of cruelty? How would we go about finding out the right answer to that question?

But does Sellars endorse a picture like the two-ply one? Or is his view more like the one McDowell attributes? I think one powerful piece of evidence against his attribution is the Myth of Jones. My stories about the lessons of “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” focus on the first half of the essay, before Jones comes on the scene. The second half, where Jones is introduced, is more important for McDowell’s reading. But if McDowell’s reading of Sellars is right, then the story of the prehistoric genius Jones is incoherent. For on Sellars’s story, before Jones introduces the concepts of sense impressions and thoughts – and so before the transformation of those concepts from theoretical into observational concepts, concepts of things of which the ones who have those sense impressions and thoughts can be immediately, noninferentially aware – our Rylean ancestors were rational, discursively intentional creatures. They had beliefs, desires, and intentions, as well as semantic vocabulary to apply to them and to their propositionally contentful utterances. What they did not have is the concept of inner episode, and hence they cannot be aware of such episodes as perceptual experiences. If they have something like that (and if Jones’s theory is true, they already do), then it is part of the causal mechanism of their RDRDs, of which they are no more conscious than they are of any of the multifarious happenings in their visual cortices that are part of the causal chain of reliably covarying events that culminate in noninferentially elicited judgments about their surroundings. This fits with my minimal conception of observation. But McDowell’s account cannot admit perceptual experiences of which their subjects are systematically unaware. (Parrots and cats share physiology with us, but don’t have the concepts needed to have perceptual experiences.) For on his account, to be rationally responsive to the world (a necessary condition of having empirically contentful conceptual states) requires making a conscious move (about which one can be critical) from claimable-containing experience (which proposes a proposition, but does not yet endorse it) to perceptual judgment. The Ryleans could not do that, so they cannot have empirically contentful states. Everything McDowell says about the chicken-sexers must be true of the Ryleans. Their reliability is just a mystery to them. If called on to justify their noninferential judgments, the best they can do is invoke their reliability as evidence for the truth of the claims that result from that reliable belief-forming mechanism. They could, of course, introduce a locution marking an utterance as the product of such a process, and treat interlocutors as
default-entitled to all such sincere utterances, without having to offer inferential justifications. But so could the chicken-sexers. The Ryleans are in just the same boat as the chicken-sexers. So either McDowell’s objection does not entail that no semantic contents can be deployed by creatures whose only mode of observation is the minimal kind common to chicken-sexers and Ryleans, or McDowell must contest the intelligibility of Sellars’s Ryleans. That would be OK with me; I hold no special brief for the Ryleans. But if so, then McDowell is departing in a big way from Sellars’s own view. So on the exegetical question, it is a substantial advantage of the minimal two-ply account of observation that it does not immediately rule out of court as unintelligible Sellars’s “Rylean ancestors”.

McDowell closes by proposing that the distinction between inferential and noninferential knowledge be made on epistemological grounds of how the claims can later be justified, rather than on matter-of-factual aetiological grounds of how they were acquired: “knowledge is inferential if the only way to vindicate its status as knowledge is to invoke the goodness of an inference to what is known from something independently within the knower’s epistemic reach.” I think this is an interesting and promising suggestion. It will appropriately class as noninferential knowledge not only perceptual judgments but also the deliverances of memory and, on some accounts (non-evidentialist approaches, which Wanderer discusses in his contribution to this volume), even testimony. We will still need to distinguish the perceptual cases at least by their sensitivity to concurrent stimulation.

But McDowell talks as though we had to make a choice: either an epistemological criterion or an aetiological one. That cannot be right, because the actual provenance of a judgment or belief can be epistemologically relevant. And observational knowledge would seem to be a case in point. What distinguishes observational knowledge from knowledge that is the product of memory or testimony is precisely the process by which it was acquired. What one does in justifying a memory claim is explicitly to say that it is a memory claim (or to convey that same information less explicitly). And similarly for perceptual claims. “I can see that \( p \)”, offered as a justification for a prior claim that \( p \) is not, it is true, a premise or a bit of evidence from which we are to infer that \( p \). It is claiming credibility for the claim that \( p \) precisely by invoking the process that resulted in one’s coming to believe it. It is credible as the result of that sort of process.

The chicken-sexers’ claims, as imagined, are the products of the right sort of process to be credible as the results of that sort of process. But the chicken-sexers themselves are not in a position to claim that credibility in the same way that ordinary perceivers do. They can only justify their claims inferentially, by invoking the reliability of whatever process produced them. That indeed marks a difference between these minimal cases and the paradigmatic cases of observational knowledge. Is that difference enough to settle it that we, who are assessing their claims, and who do, by hypothesis, know that their claims are credible as the products of a reliable sort of noninferential responsive process that is, like the uncontroversial cases of observational knowledge – and unlike knowledge acquired by memory, testimony, or inference – appropriately sensitive to concurrent stimulation, should
not treat what they have as observational knowledge? Not, I think, because even if true it does not qualify as knowledge at all. McDowell does not claim that chicken-sexers who know they are reliable don’t know the sexes of the chickens. But is it *observational* knowledge? McDowell’s proposal, in effect, is to treat it as not observational knowledge, but as a species of inferential knowledge: inferential knowledge not acquired by inference.

At this point it seems to me we may have reached a point where all that is at issue is choice of terminology. We can either, as I have suggested, see two sorts of observation, distinguished by whether the observer can or cannot offer noninferential justifications of the results of her reliable differential responsive dispositions to respond to concurrent stimulation. Or we can, as McDowell prefers, see two sorts of inferential knowledge, distinguished by whether it was acquired by inferential processes, or by exercising reliable differential responsive dispositions to respond to concurrent stimulation. It looks as though clarity can be equally well served by either terminological decision.

So what difference does it make which we choose? In either case we are laying alongside the traditional division of kinds of knowledge into (at least) those produced by processes of perception (in the paradigmatic sense), memory, testimony, and inference a further category: one that is like the products of perception in being the result of the exercise of reliable dispositions to respond differentially under concurrent stimulation, and like the products of inference in being only inferentially justifiable. McDowell and I would agree that at least some knowledge of normative states of affairs belongs in this category, wherever exactly it is located in the map. The question I have asked, in the spirit of vandalizing Neurath’s boat of which I have already spoken in these replies, is whether if some creatures did not have perceptual knowledge in the *narrow*, uncontroversial sense, but had suitably close analogues of all the other kinds of processes, we could be entitled to think of them as nonetheless making claims and having knowledge. Could the responsiveness to reality of some discursive practitioners – no doubt, ones quite different from us – be “chicken-sexing all the way down”? I do not see why not. McDowell, as I understand him, thinks the answer must be “No.” The empirical contentfulness of claims and states (which qualify as intentional states because of such contentfulness) requires a kind of openness to the layout of reality that requires perceptual experiences, which he takes it the chicken-sexers in the story lack.

If that is in fact his view, McDowell must take it that perceptual experiences (judgeable, hence conceptually articulated, but as-yet-unendorsed “shapings of visual consciousness”) go with perceptual judgment in the narrow sense that includes the capacity to offer noninferential justifications of the judgments they give rise to. I cannot see that that can be true by *definition*, either of “non-inferential justification of claims made by exercising reliable dispositions to respond differentially under concurrent stimulation” or of “perceptual experience”. And I am baffled by what it could mean as an empirical claim.

But perhaps I am guilty of running together an earlier line of argument concerning perceptual experiences with a newer one couched in terms of the proposal for a
purely epistemological criterion of noninferential knowledge. In that case we can ignore questions about perceptual experiences. The issue then becomes what the justification is for giving the epistemological category of judgments that arise as the result of exercising reliable dispositions to respond differentially to concurrent stimulation and can be justified noninferentially the transcendent, indeed transcendental, semantic significance that McDowell accords it.
REPLY TO ROLAND STOUT’S “BEING SUBJECT TO THE RULE TO DO WHAT THE RULES TELL YOU TO DO”

Robert Brandom

Roland Stout is concerned, as I am in chapter 4 of *Making It Explicit*, to offer an account of rational agency that entitles one to endorse Kant’s understanding of the difference between agency and the causal processes characteristic of the rest of the natural world as the difference between acting according to a conception, representation, or idea (Vorstellung) of a rule and acting according to a rule. In Sellars’s sophisticated treatment of this idea in “Some Reflections on Language Games”, he satisfies this desideratum by requiring that rule-guided (as opposed to merely regular) activity involve an actual representation of the rule, and be sensitive to that representation in the sense that changing the representation (while holding other factors constant) changes the behavior. It was clear already to Sellars that such a definition cannot be appropriate to the normativity that articulates discursive intentionality, since responding appropriately to representations of rules already requires understanding the concepts in terms of which the rule-representation is couched. Stout is principally concerned to introduce quite a different way of understanding the Kantian dictum, in terms of second-order rules enjoining the following of first-order rules. He recommends a shift from describing agentive processes as using rules to describing them as referring to rules – second-order rules.

For the purposes of this volume, Stout motivates this positive account – surely interesting in its own right – by pointing out what he sees as shortcomings in the MIE approach. Let me begin by addressing those worries. The account I offer seeks to maintain as close an analogy as possible between agency and perception. In perception, properly wired up, trained, and socially situated creatures have reliable dispositions to respond differentially (RDRDs) to various ranges of stimuli, under appropriate conditions, by acknowledging discursive commitments. In the presence of visible red things, they might acknowledge commitment to the claimable “That is red”. Exercising intentional agency is responding to acknowledgment of a practical commitment by producing a suitable performance. So one might respond to acknowledging a commitment to pushing the green button by pushing the green button. Perception, as what Sellars calls a “language-entry transition”, is responding to a (generally) nonlinguistic situation by acknowledging a doxastic commitment: taking something (to be) true. Acting, as what Sellars calls a “language-
exit transition”, is responding to acknowledging a practical commitment by making something true. In each case, where successful, the content of the commitment acknowledged and what is true of the situation responded to or produced are the same: they “fit” rationally.

This is a “two-ply” account of rational agency, which decomposes that general capacity into two aspects: an element of conceptually articulated endorsement, and a reliable differential responsive disposition. In the previous exchange we saw McDowell raising objections to this structure on the side of perception. he would direct comparable complaints to this way of thinking about agency. Stout also diagnoses a dangerous bifurcation in the account of agency, but it is addressed to a different way of carving things up. He sees something being lost in dividing the process of acting into two stages, rather than (as McDowell did for the analogous case of perception) in seeing it as the collaboration of two capacities. He says:

I think that Brandom’s attempt to explain the process of acting according to reason as a two-stage process of acknowledging a rule and then responding to that acknowledgment can give us a distorted conception of the causal process that constitutes action. The distortion arises if in the two-stage model the rationality characteristic of agency is confined to the first stage – the production of attitudes. It looks like this must be the case because it is only in this first stage that the rules themselves are involved. In the second stage it is the agent’s attitudes to the rules not the rules themselves that are involved in the process. Since the agent’s attitudes to rules and reasons are not themselves rules or reasons it looks as if the transition from these attitudes to things actually being made to happen in the world around does not itself involve the rationality characteristic of agency.

The acknowledgment of a practical commitment that constitutes the first stage of the agentive process is my version of Kant’s “representation or conception of a rule”. The merely regular processes of nature do not involve normative attitudes: taking or treating something as appropriate, or (in the more articulated scheme of MIE, which recognizes two sorts of deontic status) as what one is entitled or committed to do. Acknowledging a practical commitment – a commitment to do something, to bring about a conceptually specified state of affairs, make true a proposition – is the analog of intending, when the intentional state idiom of belief and intention is transposed into the idiom of deontic statuses and attitudes. In effect, the two stages of agency I decompose things into just correspond to forming an intention and acting on that intention. Is there really something conceptually defective about distinguishing these? Isn’t it a bit of pretheoretical common sense that at least sometimes, we first form an intention, and then later act on it? In an ordinary case, in the morning I form the intention to attend the meeting at noon. As long as nothing interferes, as I keep track of the time that intention matures (as Sellars puts it) into the intention in action to attend the meeting now. And if I am properly trained and capable, acknowledging that intention just is going to the meeting. Of
course, sometimes we do not find temporally separable phases. There need not be prior intentions. What I just called (following Searle) an “intention in action” is a case where, in my favored terminology, producing the performance is the acknowledgment of the commitment. That is what happens when, in the middle of a long session at my keyboard, I suddenly jump up and start walking around the room. I need not have planned in advance to do that for it to be fully intentional. The act that counts as acknowledging (and so undertaking) a commitment to stand up and walk about may just be doing so. But it is not these cases that Stout is pointing to.

Rather, his worry is addressed to a structure that saw reasons apply only to the adoption of attitudes, with a subsequent purely causal process then linking the attitudes to performances. But, first, reasons for action are reasons to make a claim true, that is, to make an actual difference in the world. The reasons reach all the way out to the performance. They are reasons to adopt an attitude – to acknowledge that commitment – only in a secondary and derivative sense. And, second, the idea was to make the notion of a Kantian rational will no more mysterious in principle than our capacity to respond to visible red things by calling them red. If we see no obstacles in principle to understanding the capacity of creatures to respond to red things by doing something that has the social normative significance of undertaking a corresponding commitment (to those things being red), we should similarly see no obstacles in principle to understanding the capacity of creatures to respond to something that has the social normative significance of undertaking a practical commitment (to pushing a button) by doing something: pushing the button. But it is important to realize that in both cases, the responsive capacity in question is itself a rational capacity. For in each case, the response must “fit” the stimulus, and that “fit” is a matter of the proper applicability of concepts. In perception one must respond to a situation by taking-true something that is true of that situation. And in action one must respond to a commitment to make-true some claimable by producing a situation in which it is true. The capacity to do that – in either direction – is a rational capacity.

In the case of perception, there can be nondiscursive creatures who can respond differentially to the visible presence of red things. All that is required for a discursive creature to be able to perceive red things is to have the conceptual capacity to acknowledge a commitment to the presence of something red – which is something blind people can do – and to hook that response up to the same sort of RDRD exhibited by the nondiscursive red-responder. That is what I have called (in chapter 2 of Between Saying and Doing) “response substitution”. But what one gets by doing that – substituting one response one can already produce independently as the response elicited by a stimulus to which one can already independently respond differentially – is a rational capacity. It is essentially, and not just accidentally, the capacity to apply concepts in circumstances in which it is appropriate to apply those concepts: appropriate according to the content of those concepts. Corresponding remarks apply to the case of rational agency. In that case, the RDRD that can be exhibited by nondiscursive creatures is the capacity reliably to respond differentially to some stimulus or other (not, a fortiori, to the acknowledgment of a practical
commitment) by pushing the green button. That is not a rational capacity, but it becomes one when hooked up as a stimulus to the acknowledgment of practical commitments to make-true some claimable one can already take-true.

So I do not think that Stout is right to worry that a two-stage story must inevitably (or that mine does) restrict rationality to one stage. That the positive story he tells about agency has a different structure, however, is not something that needs to be motivated by the supposed defects of an alternative. The view Stout is recommending is a subtle one, and I do not pretend to see all the way to the bottom of it. But I want to close my remarks by raising a pair of questions about that constructive proposal.

The view is that, as Stout puts it:

[T]he behaviour of rational agents is still subject to rule – a second-order one that makes reference to other rules. The behaviour of a rational agent is subject to the rule, “Whatever the first-order rules say should happen should happen.” But subjection to this rule is not a separate process coming after the real work of rational agency. Subjection to this second-order rule just is sensitivity to reason.

As he is using the terms, agents are sensitive to norms, and natural objects are merely subject to them. So the passage just quoted says that rational agents exhibit a regularity: the regularity that they are sensitive to reasons. That seems just to say that rational agents are sensitive (differentially responsive) to reasons (first-order rules). I am all in favor of the methodological strategy of specifying norms implicit in practices in terms of the process of making them explicit (as rules). But it is hard to see what conceptual advance is being made by invoking second-order rules here. The challenge is to understand sensitivity to reasons. My first question is then: what is the surplus explanatory value of putting things the way Stout does?

My second question concerns the notion of sensitivity to rules or norms. It is of the essence of my social approach to normativity to take being subject to normative assessment as primary in the order of explanation, and to see the issue of sensitivity to those norms – the question of how good one is at satisfying the obligations or fulfilling the commitments assessors attribute – as a secondary and subsequent one. To treat someone as a rational subject, as a knower and agent, is in the first instance to take her to be obliged to have reasons for what she says and does. The question of the extent to which she is capable of fulfilling that obligation is a different one. Of course, if someone is never able to offer reasons, that might be good reason to question the wisdom or point of taking her to be rational in the first place. But rationality in the normative sense is a matter of liability to assessment as to one’s reasons. Rationality in the descriptive sense arises only once commitment to rationality in the normative sense has been undertaken. I take all of this to be good Kantian doctrine. So my final question is whether Stout’s focus on rational sensitivity is really the best way to develop the Kantian clues with which he begins.
Notes
2 I lay out what I take to be Kant’s views in the vicinity in the first of my Woodbridge lectures, chapter 1 of *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas*, forthcoming from Harvard University Press.
Fodor and Lepore begin their piece with a salutary methodological observation: orders of explanation are sensitive to pragmatic context, above all to the interests and purposes that prompt them. So it is sensible to ask what the context is in which I am recommending a “top-down” order of semantic explanation, which talks first about what sentences express, and only later about the contribution that the presence of individual words makes to what sentences containing them express. The context is the project I have been calling “philosophical” semantics, by contrast to “formal” semantics. The former concerns how expressions have to be used, or how items must function, in order properly to be thought of as semantically contentful. The latter concerns how, once semantic interpretants of some sort have been associated with some expressions or other items, they can be understood as determining what semantic interpretants are associated with others.

I agree that semantics should not be confused with epistemology, but I do not take it that avoiding such a confusion requires banishing considerations of understanding from our discussion of meaning. Unlike Fodor and Lepore, I agree with Dummett that meaning and understanding are co-ordinate concepts, in the sense that we are not going to understand one of them without understanding the other. The connection can safely be ignored when we are pursuing the project of formal semantics, since it appeals to an antecedent notion of semantic content as part of its explanatory raw materials. But philosophical semantics is obliged to say what semantic contents are and how they get associated with linguistic expressions or psychological states and events, and in the context of that project I do not believe that issues of what grasping or understanding semantic (which for me just is to say conceptual) contents consists in can safely be relegated to a different compartment, labeled “epistemology”. “Ontological dependence” is not a phrase I know how to use, so I am unable to say whether the claim that in thinking about how the use of expressions makes them mean what they do one should first offer an account of the use and meaning of sentences, and then appeal to that to explain the use and meaning of their semantically significant components, I am undertaking a commitment regarding the ontological dependence of some kinds of contentfulness on others.

Fodor and Lepore are worried that I want to be on both sides of the debate concerning an analytic/synthetic distinction. In fact I just wanted to point out that
inferentialists have options. *Making It Explicit* is clear about not treating any inferences essentially involving an expression as in principle semantically irrelevant, in the sense of having no bearing on what one is saying by using that expression. This is a radical policy, which requires giving up many things we have become accustomed to say about conceptual content. Indeed, in a certain sense it involves in the end giving up the idea of conceptual content – since the essential contrast between inferences that articulate the contents expressed by the use of locutions and those that do not goes missing. That is why, by the end of *MIE* (in chapter 8), the ability involved in ‘deploying a concept’ by successfully using an expression is described in terms of the practical capacity to navigate between different doxastic perspectives, in the sense of being able to keep score on what an interlocutor has committed or entitled herself to by using the expression, and what difference doing so makes to one’s own score. So long as interlocutors can do this, they can communicate, even though the relativity to scorekeeping perspective of commitments and entitlements makes it ultimately inapposite to talk about some content that has been, as it were, transported from the one mind to the other.¹

But that is not the only way one might seek to work out an inferentialist semantics. (*MIE* presents only one way of developing such an account.) One could instead seek to distinguish a special class of content-constitutive inferences, and identify the contents of concepts with what is articulated by inferences of this kind. There are many ways one might seek to make such a distinction. As an example, I mentioned Sellars’s idea (which he thinks is also Kant’s) that a good thing to mean by ‘concept’ results if one treats all and only the nomologically necessary inferences as articulating the content of concepts. That is, Sellars proposes to use “conceptually necessary” in this context just to mean “nomologically necessary.” This strategy, too, requires us to give up some things we are accustomed to say. For instance, conceptual necessities on this account are clearly not in general knowable *a priori*. Fodor and Lepore find the Sellarsian strategy unintelligible because they treat a distinction between conceptual necessity and nomological necessity as fixed in advance. Discovering a new law concerning, say, water need not be thought of as changing our concept. It can be thought of instead as finding out something about the concept we already had. Recall that on this line, we don’t know all about the contents of our concepts just by “having” them in the sense of being able to apply them. When we discover the specific gravity of water² we find out something about what we have, even though we didn’t know it, all along been committing ourselves to by calling something ‘water.’ Our conceptions change – that is, our views about what follows from and is incompatible with what – but that does not mean we must understand ourselves as talking about different things.

Fodor and Lepore think of an account of conceptual content as centrally concerned with “possession conditions”. This is sensible in their setting, but not at all in the one I am working in. For I accept what I take to have been a lesson Kant taught: to think of concepts as rules or norms we bind ourselves by (I would say, by using expressions that are part of a public language). For us (post-)Kantians, the principal question does not concern our grip on concepts (e.g. is it “clear and
distinct”) but their grip on us. The issue is what is required for my use of an expres-
sion to have made me properly subject to normative appraisal as to the correctness
of what I have said, along a number of semantic dimensions, according to that
norm, rather than none, or some other. It is in this context that I work initially (in
chapter 2 of MIE) with Dummett’s generalization of the Gentzen model of intro-
duction and elimination rules for logical connectives to circumstances and conse-
quences of appropriate application. Those are later (by chapter 3) distinguished into
circumstances that commit one to an application of the concept and those that entitle
one to it, and similarly for the consequences of application. The key point is that
these are thought of as setting standards for a scorekeeper’s assessment of a perfor-
mane. How good one’s practical grasp of what one is committing oneself to by using
a word (say, “molybdenum”) to make a claim, what would entitle one to it, and so
on, is not, from this point of view, a question semantic theory should address.

The “relational” view of intentionality put forward in chapter 3 of MIE sees
language and thought coeval in individuals. But the arrival of thought – discurs-
ive intentionality, the capacity to have specifically propositional attitudes – in indi-
viduals always presupposes already up-and-running discursive practices: the public
language one does not so much learn as come into and find oneself in. Talk just
of “intentionality” does not cut fine enough to permit discussion of this process of
coming into language. Doing that is coming to exhibit discursive intentionality: to
be a concept-user in the sense of undertaking and attributing conceptually, which is
to say inferentially, articulated commitments. My story presupposes a lot of practical
intentionality: the capacity to direct oneself towards (be “onto”) things in all the
ways that the more capable sort of prelinguistic creatures can do. My picture is that
the young ones have to catch on to various social proprieties, acquire a good bit
of practical know-how about what we do and do not do, what is fitting and appro-
riate, without yet having (being able to deploy) concepts such as appropriate. That is
why the project of the first part of MIE is explicitly described as being to show how
to elaborate non-discursive practical capacities described in a normative vocabulary,
into capacities that are genuinely discursive (hence describable in a vocabulary that
is intentional in the narrower and more demanding sense that goes with concept-
use, propositional commitments, and so on).

The child must first acquire sufficient mastery of the responsive dispositions
that in her elders are exercised in the making of language-entry moves resulting in
perceptual judgments and observation reports: for instance, responding to visibly
red things by making what is still just the noise “red”. And she must begin to make
the sorts of connections that in her elders constitute the making of language-
language moves, paradigmatically inferential ones. When she is good enough at
doing so (how good that is is not a matter for semantic, but for social, prudential,
and existential decision-making), she can begin to be held responsible for doing what
only then begins to have the significance of making moves in the public game. If
the 18-month-old totters into the living room and as her first coherent utterance
pronounces “Daddy, the house is on fire,” she will not, typically, be taken to have
claimed, nor to have thought, that the house is on fire. If a 4-year-old produces the same utterance, she will be held responsible: “What makes you think so? Do you smell smoke? Where did you see fire?” and so on. She is then expected to know what counts as evidence for the claim she is making, and what appropriate consequences of that claim are. But this is still largely know-how, a matter of being able in fact to respond appropriately. She has come into the language in the sense of being able to use it to commit herself. That transition happens as much outside her, in her change in social status, in how her fellows keep deontic score on her, as it does inside her, in her capacities to respond appropriately to the demands made on her, to fulfill the responsibilities she is now treated as able to undertake. (Of course we can make sense of cases in which one wants to say that an individual deserves to be treated as able to undertake such discursive responsibilities, although as a matter of fact that is not how her community treats her.)

Any semantic view that sees the meaningfulness or contentfulness of some items as depending essentially on the inferential relations they stand in to other such items (what I have called “weak inferentialism”) is going to be to some degree or other holistic. No such item will have the content it does all by itself, apart from the content expressed or possessed by other items. But could any such view be workable? It is widely believed, and has been particularly forcefully argued by Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore, that no holistic semantics can account either for the projectibility of language or for its systematicity, and hence not for its learnability. That is, it is argued that only on the assumption that semantics is compositional can we account for the determinateness of the semantic values of an indefinite number of novel compounds of simple expressions, for the fact that wherever some syntactic combinations of those simple expressions have semantic values so do others systematically related to them, and for the fact that speakers of a language can produce and understand an indefinite number of novel compounds, systematically related to one another by their modes of formation, upon mastering the use of the simple expressions and modes of formation.

Compositionality is a constraint on formal semantics. But, it is argued in effect, since holism is incompatible with compositionality, it serves also as a constraint on philosophical semantics. For whatever reasons we might have to think that what people do (their use of linguistic expressions, or the functional role played by their inner representations) should be understood as underwriting the association of their utterances or states with semantic interpretants that essentially depend on their inferential relations to other such items must be overridden by the demand that those semantic interpretants behave compositionally. Otherwise, the projectibility and systematicity, of thought and language, and the learnability of language will be unintelligible.

This is a very plausible and powerful argument. In the face of it, Fodor and Lepore are obviously frustrated, saddened, and bemused by my perversity in continuing to try to make an inferentialist semantics work, in spite of its inevitably holistic character. They have my sympathy. They might be right that it is ultimately not only
a quixotic, but a doomed enterprise. But if it is, I do not believe that the failure of compositionality is the reason. In *Between Saying and Doing*, I present a formal semantics for logical, modal, and nonlogical expressions in terms of *incompatibility*. I believe that it constitutes a counterexample to some of their fundamental claims. The argument that projectibility and systematicity (and hence learnability) require semantic atomism, because they require compositionality in a sense that presupposes atomism, is fallacious. It depends upon systematically overlooking the possibility of semantic theories that have the shape of the incompatibility semantics for classical and modal logical vocabulary. For although that semantics is *not compositional*, it is fully *recursive*. The semantic values of logically compound expressions are wholly determined by the semantic values of logically simpler ones. It is *holistic*, that is, *noncompositional*, in that the semantic value of a compound is *not* computable from the semantic values of its components. But this holism within each level of constructional complexity is entirely compatible with recursiveness between levels. And this is not just a philosophical claim of mine. The system I am describing allows us to *prove* it. (In this context, proof is the word made flesh.)

I cannot here rehearse the semantics developed there. The idea is that the conceptual content expressed by each sentence is represented by the set of sentences that are materially incompatible with it. (Actually, the content of each set of sentences is represented by the set of sets of sentences incompatible with it, but never mind.) One sentence \( p \) entails another, \( q \), just in case everything incompatible with \( q \) is incompatible with \( p \). The negation of \( p \) is introduced as its minimal incompatible: what is entailed by everything incompatible with \( p \). One consequence is that one can alter the semantic interpretant of \( \neg p \) (what is incompatible with it), while holding fixed the semantic interpretant of \( p \) (what is incompatible with it), by altering what is incompatible with something, \( r \), that is incompatible with \( p \). So the semantics does not have the *semantic sub-formula* property; one cannot compute the semantic value of a compound expression such as \( \neg p \) as a function of the semantic value of its component, \( p \). In this specific sense, it is a holistic semantics.

But the semantic values of all the logically compound sentences are computable entirely from the semantic values of *less complex* sentences. It is just that one may need to look at the values of *many* – in the limit *all* – the less complex sentences, not just the ones that appear as sub-formulae of the compound whose semantic value is being computed. The semantics is *projectible* and *systematic*, in that semantic values are determined for all syntactically admissible compounds, of arbitrary degrees of complexity. It is *learnable* – at least in principle, putting issues of contingent psychology aside, in the ideal sense we have been working with. For the capacity to distinguish the incompatibility-sets of primitive propositions is, in the context of the semantic definitions of the connectives in terms of incompatibilities I have offered, *sufficient by algorithmic elaboration* for the capacity to distinguish the incompatibilities of all their logical (including modal-logical) compounds – and hence for the practical capacity to distinguish what is a consequence of what.

What semantic *projectibility*, *systematicity*, and *learnability-in-principle* require, then, is *not* semantic *atomism* and *compositionality*, but semantic *recursiveness* with respect to

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complexity. That is entirely compatible with the semantics being holistic, in the sense of lacking the semantic subformula property, which is the hallmark of atomism and compositionality. And the argument for this claim is not merely the description of an abstract possibility. The incompatibility semantics for logical vocabulary provides an up-and-running counterexample to the implicit assumption that semantic recursiveness is achievable only by compositionality. Having compound expressions exhibit the semantic sub-formula property is only one way of securing recursiveness. The standard arguments for semantic compositionality are fallacious.8

Notes
1 See the discussion of the Lockean “transportation model” at MIE 7:V:3, pp. 477ff.
2 Perhaps not the best example, since water standardly provides the unit for specific gravity.
3 Notice that I can say this sort of thing without committing myself to identifying and individuating concepts, or conceptual contents (though sometimes, when it seems harmless, I do speak with the vulgar and use such expressions).
4 This issue is mentioned already in my reply to Dennett. I say more about the distinction in chapter 6 of Between Saying and Doing.
6 I offer a somewhat different, but no less daunting argument against the intelligibility of holistic semantics (together with a reply) in chapter 6 of Tales of the Mighty Dead.
7 Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, in chapter 5 and the Appendix to it.
8 A more charitable way to put things would be that compositionality – which really amounts to semantic recursiveness – has been confused with the semantic sub-formula property. Thus Fodor and Lepore’s The Compositionality Papers opens with this definition:

Compositional is the property that a system of representations has when (i) it contains both primitive symbols and symbols that are syntactically and semantically complex; and (ii) the latter inherit their syntactic/semantic properties from the former. (p. 1)

On this definition, the incompatibility semantics is fully compositional. But Fodor and Lepore go on to draw atomistic consequences from compositionality that in fact only follow from the semantic sub-formula property. So the confusion I am concerned to point out is in play, however we decide to specify it.
REPLY TO DANIELLE MACBETH’S “INFERENCE, MEANING, AND TRUTH IN BRANDON, SELLARS, AND FREGE”

Robert Brandom

I wholeheartedly agree with Macbeth’s most general point: there are many ways to develop the idea that inferential relations articulate a central and essential aspect of semantic content. Inferentialism is indeed a house of many mansions. In Articulating Reasons I introduce my own approach as motivated by three thinkers I call “the sage of Jena, the sage of Oxford, and the sage of Pittsburgh,” namely Frege, Dummett, and Sellars. I think that Sellars and the Frege of the Begriffsschrift are strong inferentialists. That is, in addition to the weaker claim I just offered as epitomizing semantic inferentialism, they also think that inferential role, sufficiently broadly construed, determines semantic content. For the artificial languages of logic and mathematics, with which he is principally concerned, Frege seems to endorse the still stronger view I call “hyperinferentialism”: the view that in these cases inferential role narrowly construed suffices to determine semantic content. So Macbeth’s compare-and-contrast exercise addresses figures at the heart of the retrospectively discerned tradition (expounded in further detail in Tales of the Mighty Dead) within which I situate my enterprise. In a real sense, my interest lies more in the inferentialist genus than in the particular species I develop. But it seems to me that the best way to promote the promise of such a constellation of ideas is to select from it a set of claims that can be argued to provide overlooked insights, and to assemble them into a whole that represents a progressive development both of the tradition from which they are drawn and of the current state of play in discussions of the topics they address. That is what I try to do in Making It Explicit. In her sophisticated and suggestive discussion, Macbeth identifies strands of thought in Sellars and in Frege that are not picked up in MIE, and argues that they are worthy of incorporating in such a contemporary synthesis.

Since I agree with and applaud the general tenor of Macbeth’s useful and enlightening essay, I will confine myself to three brief observations, one about each of the three figures she discusses. I want to begin by entering one quibble about the way Macbeth sets up her knowledgeable and generally reliable discussion of my account. The theory of MIE is presented as only one way of working out an inferentialist semantics. To that end it is combined with a number of in-principle independent commitments. I do not claim, and I do not believe, that inferentialism as such entails
social perspectivalism about conceptual content. It does so only in the context of other optional collateral commitments. Some of those, such as embedding an inferentialist semantics within a broadly normative pragmatics are, I think, common ground to all three of us. The Wittgensteiniann idea of understanding semantic normativity, as I do, in the first instance in social terms is emphatically not a thought one can find in Frege’s relatively sparse remarks about the activities of judging and asserting – though it is clearly alive in Sellars. A further optional collateral commitment that structures MIE that even Sellars does not share is following Quine in not singling out a privileged class of inferences taken to be the only ones that matter for conceptual content. Sellars takes a different methodological path here, identifying the content-constitutive inferences with the counterfactually robust ones – indeed, with the subclass of those that are underwritten by laws.1 I don’t go this way in part because I think that one need not master even these inferences in order to count as able to bind oneself by conceptual norms. But I don’t deny that a workable and interesting inferentialism could be developed along these lines, and that Sellars has gone some considerable distance in that direction. (I addressed this issue in my response to the essay by Fodor and Lepore.)

Like McDowell, Macbeth directs her attention primarily to my endorsement of a “two- ply” approach to observation, which I associate with Sellars. Perhaps Macbeth’s most interesting suggestion about Sellars in this vicinity is that I do not pick up a further critical element in his account. She says:

On Sellars’s view, noncognitive impressions of sense do not “guide minds” in the sense of merely causing us to have certain thoughts (which seems to be Brandom’s view). Nor do they “guide minds” by providing us reasons, justifications, for our thinking as we do (which Sellars thinks would constitute an instance of the Myth of the Given). Instead the noncognitive impressions of sense are to guide minds dynamically, as it were, by being, retrospectively, the (ineffable) causes of our finding things to be thus and so within whatever conceptual scheme we actually employ, and prospectively, through the development of ever more adequate theories of what there is, the (effable) causes of linguistic pictures that in the limit correctly depict those causes.

This is a fascinating suggestion, distilling a dark but important portion of Sellars’s system: the maddeningly gnomic and incomplete story about how intuitions guide the application of concepts, where causes meet reasons. I would love to see a developed and filled-in account of how a story along these lines might go (not least because of the way it makes contact with how I think Hegel addresses the corresponding issue as it arises in his very different setting).

Macbeth’s discussion of Frege is fascinating, but here, too, I would like to register some disagreements. I am not sure that the invocation of the important distinction between natural and symbolic languages cuts as deeply here as she thinks. Frege does seem to intend his semantics to apply to both – as he does, explicitly, in such
later essays as “On Sense and Reference” and “The Thought”. Formal languages are not at all the topic of MIE. The languages I reconstruct are admittedly regimented, but they are regimented versions of various aspects of natural languages. I do distinguish between formal semantics and philosophical semantics. Formal semantics stipulates the association of some semantically relevant whatstheses with basic expressions, and shows how on that basis to compute associations of semantically relevant whatstheses with other expressions, formed from the basic ones by composition and (crucially) decomposition. Philosophical semantics concerns rather the processes or practices by which semantically relevant whatstheses get associated with expressions by how they are actually used. In these terms, Frege practices exclusively formal semantics. In this connection, I think Macbeth’s characterization of him as employing a two-stage strategy – first associate senses with contextless expressions, then associate Bedeutungen according to how the expressions are used – is tendentious (though suggestive). Frege says essentially nothing about use. What assignments of Bedeutungen are relative to (as Macbeth has emphasized in her ground-breaking book Frege’s Logic) is analyses. These, in turn, are relevant to the role the expressions play as components in larger complexes. But that is exactly a matter of formal semantics, not the philosophical semantics that looks to the use of the whole expressions. Frege’s commitment to the context principle might be motivated by concerns about use connected with an implicit semantics. But if so, the philosophical semantic concern with how senses are associated with sentences, what “grasp” of such senses consists in, and so on, is not only left implicit but is largely inchoate. Further, as Macbeth has set things up, if I were covertly taking symbolic languages as my model, I ought to proceed in a semantically atomistic, bottom-up fashion, as does model-theoretic formal semantics. But the Inference-Substitution-Anaphora (ISA) semantic approach of MIE is the reverse of that.

Another point of supposed contrast between my view and Frege’s also seems to me spurious. “For Frege, inferential articulation is internal to concepts, rather than a relation between concepts,” she claims. There might be a difference of emphasis or presentation here, but not, I think, a deep distinction. The point of the internal complexity Frege’s Begriffsschrift makes explicit and perspicuous is precisely to determine the inferential role of sentences formed by the application of concepts so articulated. The internal articulation and the external relations to other concepts are two sides of one coin. Indeed that conceptual contents and inferential relations are two sides of one coin is of the essence of the inferentialist approach to semantics. That is particularly clear in the ISA version.

As I indicated to begin with, I do not at all contest the contention that other sorts of inferentialism are possible. Macbeth pitches the considerations she assembles from Sellars and Frege as impugning the plausibility of the one I present. She could be right. But the principal issue for me is not the extent to which the MIE account is antecedently plausible, but how workable and powerful it is. Even according to Macbeth’s very sympathetic account, the scope of Frege’s inferentialism is much more restricted than that of MIE. As she reads it, his is addressed only to artificial languages, whereas I intend to address every possible language in which claims can
be made. And Sellars’s path-breaking inferentialism is far less detailed and well worked-out than mine. Appeals to the inferential roles referred to by dot-quoted expressions such as •red• are ubiquitous in his post-“Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” work. But it is largely a black-box notion, a place-holder standing in for a large promissory note that is never redeemed. In any case, the overall inferentialist enterprise can only benefit from thoughtful point-by-point assessments of the sort on offer here.

Notes
REPLY TO MICHAEL DUMMETT’S “SHOULD SEMANTICS BE DEFLATED?”

Robert Brandom

The appearance of Michael Dummett’s magnificent, magisterial *Frege: Philosophy of Language* in 1974 not only ushered in the golden age of Frege studies, but was a professional watershed for me personally. Upon reading it then as a second-year graduate student, I believed I saw for the first time how the philosophy of language hung together as a subject (for instance, why we worried about some topics and not others), how it could serve as a link between logic and the rest of philosophy, and how semantics, sufficiently broadly construed, might really be able to play the role of “first philosophy”. For better or for worse, I was deeply impressed, too, by its form – by the philosophical ambitions that could be achieved in a single large, coherent, comprehensive work, every one of its nearly 700 pages containing an original argument, telling consideration, or suggestive connection between apparently disparate topics that ended up being tightly bound together and organized intelligibly by the web of such filiations. The nearly twenty years it took him to write it could not, I thought, have been better spent. (Its total absence from the first edition also taught me the indispensability of a thorough and well thought-out index for the ability even of a committed reader to navigate successfully around such a massive text.)

In terms of the philosophical content of the ideas, my debts to Dummett’s treatments of a myriad of specific topics, from assertion to singular terms to the conceptual significance of multivalued logic and beyond are indenumerable. At the most general level, his thoughts over the years about the relations between meaning and understanding, on the one hand, and meaning and use, on the other, have been critical in shaping my own thoughts about the relations between pragmatics and semantics, and indeed, about the nature of discursiveness.

The conclusion I draw from his patient, open-minded contribution to this volume is that we still agree about far more than we disagree about. In my reply to Macbeth I invoked the distinction between formal and philosophical semantics: the former concerned with computing the semantic values of some expressions from those of others, the latter concerned with what kind of semantic values expressions should be taken to have, what it is about the use of expressions in virtue of which they are associated with semantic interpretants at all, and in particular with just the ones the theorist has assigned them, rather than some others. I do not take it that the analysis I offer of ‘true’ and ‘refers’ as anaphoric prosentence- and pronoun-forming operators...
tells against their use in formal semantics. It is entirely compatible with the possibility of our learning a lot about expressions, ultimately, about the relations between the use of some and the use of others, from compositional and decompositional relations among them expressible in terms of truth conditions and extensions. As I have put the point elsewhere, I am a deflationist about the explanatory role of the terms ‘true’ and ‘refers’, not about their expressive roles. Once we have properly introduced them, they help us say things that we cannot say without them – just as pronouns anaphorically dependent on (and so “bound” by) quantificational antecedents generally do. (They are as essential for saying things such as “Everything that Frege said is true,” as they are for saying things like “If you are tempted to conclude that something Frege said is false, you should think about it again”.) Formal semantics must be done in an expressively powerful metalanguage, and in that context it can be all right to appeal to the expressive capacities of terms such as ‘true’ and ‘refers’. Doing so only becomes a problem when one seeks to appeal to them at the outset of one’s explanatory enterprise in philosophical semantics. (That is why I think Quine got things back to front in appealing to the notions of bound variable and domain of quantification, whose home language-game is formal semantics, in offering philosophical explanations of the notions of singular term and existence.)

Dummett does not disagree with this conclusion. He says “I am wholly with [Brandom] in rejecting the idea of representation as the fundamental notion of a theory of meaning ... the notion of representation is not available antecedently as that in terms of which we can build our theory of meaning.” And his reasons are essentially mine: what is expressed by terms such as ‘true’, ‘refers’, and ‘represents’ can in principle only be explained as part of a much more comprehensive story about the use of sentences to make assertions, and about what is involved in practically understanding such uses. What these classical semantic locutions express does not represent a sort of antecedent, unmovable conceptual Archimedean point that can be leveraged into an understanding of all the rest of discursive practice. That is why Dummett says such things as “I am at one with Brandom in rejecting a truth-conditional theory of meaning ... [T]o arrive at a satisfactory theory of meaning we have to ask what it is that someone needs to know in order to understand a given language and be able to use it.” And it is why he agrees:

Brandom rightly inveighs against the idea that there is an antecedently intelligible conception of reference or designation, for instance of the relation of a name to its bearer, that can be invoked in explaining meaning as representation. Antecedently, that is, to an explanation of the role that names, or other singular terms, play in sentences. He links this with the idea that whole sentences bear the same relation to states of affairs; but, even without this accompaniment, the conception of reference as a notion that we understand otherwise than as having a place within a whole semantic theory is as absurd as thinking that we can know what makes a card a trump in advance of learning the rules of some card game that has trumps in it.
It is for precisely this reason that I insist that one cannot first explain a notion of truth conditions, which only then is used to explain derivative concepts of assertion and meaning. My account of the expressive roles of ‘true’ and ‘refers’ as anaphoric dependents that inherit the substitution-inferential contents of their antecedents is just a way of filling in the details of the argument that they are not in principle available as raw materials from which to elaborate an explanation of the contents that they inherit.

I conjecture that Dummett does not see that we have no quarrel here because he is not situating the anaphoric account in a conceptual field marked out first by the distinction between formal and philosophical semantics, second by that between explanatory and expressive deflationism, and third between semantics done in terms of ‘true’ and ‘refers’ and semantics pursued instead in terms of inference, substitution, and anaphora. In his essay he does explicitly acknowledge the first and the third of these distinctions; doing so is part of what we agree about. As he sets things up, semantics “is only the first stage in constructing a theory of meaning. But deflating semantics is abandoning all desire for a theory of meaning.” In his sense, that is entirely true. But it is because he is not keeping in mind all three of the distinctions I have pointed to that he can think that I am doing something that counts in his sense as “deflating semantics” – as both this passage and his title put it. My explanatory deflation of ‘true’ and ‘refers’, based on an anaphoric account of their expressive roles, disqualifies them from playing a certain kind of explanatory role in philosophical semantics. But I offer a robust alternative, in terms of inference rather than reference.

And with this enterprise, Dummett is entirely in sympathy – as indeed he ought to be, for it was inspired in no small part by his own work. My starting point (as is clear from the way the idea is introduced in the second chapter of Making It Explicit) was precisely his botanization of the use of linguistic expressions as articulated into two principal components: their circumstances of appropriate application and the appropriate consequences of their application. As Dummett puts his point here:

On the one hand, he must learn when he is entitled to make an assertion with a given content, what grounds justify that assertion. These grounds, though they will in general involve inference, will not be confined to it, since such reasoning will often rest on premisses arrived at by observation. On the other hand, a speaker must understand what he is committed to by accepting a given assertion or judgement, what consequences it will have for him ...

A satisfactory theory of meaning must therefore take these two features as determinative of the senses of sentences of the language, and of its subsentential expressions as together contributing to fix them. It is because of the prominent role that inference plays in both that there is much truth in the claim that a theory of meaning must be based on the notion of inference, though it cannot be based exclusively on that.
I go beyond his account in two crucial ways. First, as he himself puts it:

Now I have thought that, to formulate a theory of meaning, we need appeal to only one of these two features. The ground for this is that if there is that balance which ought to exist between these two features of use, which I have characterised in terms of the two notions of harmony and stability, either one of the two will be uniquely determined by the other. But I feel uncertain whether this is a sufficient justification for thus simplifying the task of constructing a detailed characterisation of the senses of expressions of the language. It greatly simplifies the task of laying down the specific senses of those expressions. It will not great simplify the general background to be incorporated into the theory of meaning. In a theory which takes just one of the two features as determining sense, it must be explained how the other feature is to be derived from that one; but, if the theory invokes both features in specifying sense, it must still explain what it is for them to be in harmony. My ground for doubting the strategy of specifying sense in terms of just one of the two features of use is that we are not entitled to assume that harmony and stability obtain in the linguistic practice in which we – or others – grow up to participate. In some cases, for instance that of unwarrantedly pejorative terms, they blatantly do not obtain, but we can easily eliminate from our vocabulary the expressions to whose use this is due. But harmony may fail for subtler reasons, without our detecting the failure; outside formal logic, it is not an easy matter to decide whether or not harmony prevails. If we are to describe linguistic practice as it actually is, perhaps we need a theory of meaning in which the justification and consequences of assertions are specified independently of one another. That would be quite a complicated theory to have to construct; I do not much want to contemplate it.

It is exactly such a “complicated” theory that I do construct in MIE. The two components, circumstances and consequences of application, are treated as in principle varying independently. In place of the formal “harmony” between them that in the very special case of specifically logical vocabulary takes the form of a requirement of inferential conservativeness, I put the commitment to the material goodness of the inference from the circumstances to the consequences of application. I understand such substantive material inferential commitments to articulate the content of the non-logical concepts exhibiting those circumstances and consequences of application. This is the core of the substantive inferentialist semantics I propose as an alternative to truth-conditional ones. Thought of in inferential terms, that traditional account in terms of truth conditions appeals to individually necessary conditions that are also jointly sufficient for the application of each concept. Such a view includes an assumption that rules out in advance the substantive material inferential connection that can obtain between the circumstances and consequences of application of an important scientific concept such as “mass” or “temperature of 1084° C”, or even a defective one such as “Boche”.

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The second way in which I develop Dummett’s underlying insight is systematically to distinguish between circumstances of appropriate application that entitle one to apply the concept in question, and those that commit one to do so, and correspondingly between those consequences of application that one is entitled to draw and those one is committed to draw. From my point of view, Dummett’s restriction, evident in the first of the passages I quote just above, of the circumstances of application just to those that entitle one to apply it, and of consequence of application just to those one is committed to, runs together two quite different distinctions. Again, the result is to complicate the picture beyond what one might want to contemplate. But splitting the single normative status of appropriateness into the two notions of commitment and entitlement results in a theory with substantial expressive and explanatory advantages. Indeed, I argue that it is exactly this move that makes it possible to rectify the most damaging failings of traditional assertibility theories (of both Dewey’s and Dummett’s sort) and to render intelligible the objectivity of empirical conceptual contents within the confines of a normative account of the use of such concepts.²

In sum, I believe – and I think that Dummett’s own text here offers ample reason to concur – that he ought to regard MIE as I always have intended it: as offering friendly amendments to and (admittedly “complicated”) developments of his own ideas.

Notes
2 In chapter 8 of Making It Explicit, and chapter 6 of Articulating Reasons.
Michael Kremer’s essay exhibits a comprehensive understanding of the complex way that various lines of thought in Making It Explicit interlock and support one another. He does not try to evaluate the treatment of any one topic (singular terms, existential commitments ...) in isolation from others, perhaps discussed in quite distant parts of the book, that bear on it. This willingness and ability to engage with the whole work makes Kremer both an unusually reliable expositor, and a particularly telling critic.

He is certainly right to see inferentialism as approaching Kantian thought from a rationalistic direction. And he is right that one principal locus of that rationalism is agreeing with Frege that objects can be given to us in a way that depends only on the inferential articulation of propositional contents. Kremer thinks this is an “error” of Frege’s, whereas I regard it as an insight. I think Frege is exactly right to address the question of whether numbers are objects by investigating whether numerals can be properly introduced as singular terms. If so, and if they figure essentially in some true claims, then they succeed in referring to objects. I suspect that the reason this seems wrong to Kremer is that he, like Kant, is fixated on empirical objects as the paradigm of objects. Semantic reference to and knowledge of them surely does require some analog of intuition. But as I see things, Frege introduced a much more abstract notion of object, and with it, of reference, than had previously been available. In Kantian terms, it is a purely “formal” concept of object. One advantage of theoretically proceeding this way – by first defining a very abstract and generic concept, and then specializing it to the empirical case – is that we get a much better grip on what role “intuition” or some analog must play in order to be the way empirical objects are “given to us” semantically and epistemically. (In the end, does Kremer think numbers are not objects? If they are, does he think they are not “given to us”? Or does he think they are empirically given to us?) The pragmatist-Wittgensteinian point that we have to get the concept of empirical object (of “middle-sized bits of dry goods”) first, and then extend and generalize against that practical background says nothing against the intelligibility of the concept of object in general that we can arrive at in that way, nor against its availability for a theoretical order of explanation of the sort I am recommending.
So I resist the charge that I “overlook” Kant’s insistence on the necessity of sensible intuition for empirical objects to be given to us. Rather, with Frege, I want to work to begin with with a more general concept of objects and of what it is for them to be semantically “given to us”, in the sense that we can make claims and have thoughts about them. The contribution of “sensuous intuition” to the semantic availability of objects “given to us” empirically is then to be accounted for by showing how the demonstratives used in noninferential reports (which are the results of exercising reliable differential responsive dispositions subject to reliability inferences by scorekeepers) can initiate anaphoric token-recurrence chains that play the role in substitution inferences of genuine singular terms. Working in this top-down way, we can see at each stage exactly what are the criteria of adequacy that the higher-level notion places on the lower-level one that plays the role specified by the higher level (for instance, material inference on subentential substitution, substitution inference on anaphoric chains).

Although MIE is principally a constructive rather than a critical enterprise, Kremer correctly identifies one of the lines of objection to representationalist orders of semantic explanation that is implicit there as consisting in a complaint about its relative neglect of the question of understanding. He points out that there are good reasons to think that this lack is not satisfactorily remedied even by the way in which material proprieties of inference can be represented within intensional possible world semantics. (I think of the development of this sort of semantics for non-logical expressions – paradigmatically by David Lewis, for instance in “General Semantics”, as well as by Kaplan, Stalnaker, and Montague – as the “second wave” in the modal revolution. The first was Kripke’s supplying a semantics for modal logic in the form of completeness proofs for all the better-behaved ones in terms of the algebraic properties of accessibility relations between possible worlds, and the third being his use of the apparatus to discuss the semantics – and in a wholly new sense, the metaphysics it expresses – of proper names and demonstratives.) He then mounts a sophisticated argument for the conclusion that there is a corresponding deficiency in my account of representation: only a formal, and not a material, conception of the representation of objects is, he thinks, provided. While the conclusion of this argument chimes with that of the complaint that I have forsaken Kant for Frege in “overlooking” the role of intuition in giving objects to us, the objection here is internal to my account. I explicitly adopt a methodological strategy of treating what he and I agree is a necessary condition on singular representational purport – namely, playing the syntactic role of being substituted for and the semantic role of having a de jure symmetrically substitution-inferential significance – as also a sufficient condition of genuine singular-termhood. He agrees that something is defined this way, but thinks that it is only a formally, and not a materially adequate notion of singular representational purport.

Kremer’s first attempted counterexample is the pair ‘Benjamin Franklin’ and ‘an American’. These both fit syntactically into the same places (preserving sentencehood on intersubstitution), but semantically are involved in asymmetric inferences: the inference from “The inventor of bifocals is Benjamin Franklin,” to “The inventor of bifocals is an American,” is a good one, but not the other way around.
But in chapter 6, on singular terms, I am working in a regimented language without quantificational expressions such as ‘an American’. They are introduced only in chapter 7, on the basis of the prior discussion of singular terms. The justification for this procedure is that I claim that the two kinds of expression are not on the same semantic level: one must already be able to understand the use of genuine singular terms in order to understand the use of quantificational expressions. This is to endorse a Fregean rather than a Quinean order of semantic explanation. Quine started with quantifiers and bound variables, and introduced proper names and definite descriptions on that basis. But this procedure requires working in a very strong metalanguage, and ignores the question of how it is to be understood. Frege sees, properly, that the notion of complex predicate (in Dummett’s terminology) that is required for quantification is available in principle only as the result of substitutional decomposition of sentences formed with simple predicates and genuine singular terms – which must, accordingly, in a philosophical, as opposed to a merely formal semantics, in principle be made available first, before quantifiers are introduced. The account of singular terms presented in chapter 6 of MIE is part of a constructive project in a regimented language that is built up in stages, not part of a project that starts with a full-blown natural language and analyzes it. The strategic justification for this procedure is that the whole of part two of MIE is conceived of as having the task of showing how the conceptual raw materials assembled in part one suffice, in principle, to introduce a whole panoply of familiar semantic structures: semantic vocabulary such as ‘true’ and ‘refers’, singular terms and simple and complex predicates, identity locutions, demonstratives and pronouns, definite descriptions, proper names and propositional attitude ascriptions de dicto and de re. In the context of that project of stepwise construction, it is perfectly legitimate to work in a context in which quantificational locutions have not yet been constructed. Once they have been introduced (in chapter 7), they are available for analytic work also. So when the full apparatus is in play, the very fact that we have two expressions that are syntactically substituted-fors intersubstitutable saving sentencehood, yet involved in asymmetric substitution-inferences, warrants the conclusion that at least one of them is a quantificational expression. And that diagnosis would be confirmed by seeing how ‘an American’, but not ‘Benjamin Franklin’ can serve to initiate two sorts of anaphoric chain: one behaving quantificationally, the other not (since ‘an American’ can also serve to introduce anaphorically a particular person – see the discussion of ‘a Republican Senator’ in chapter 5).

Unlike many who have considered the MIE treatment of singular terms, Kremer realizes that the fact that synonyms such as “a is a bachelor” and “a is an unmarried male”, though they do stand in symmetric intersubstitution relations, also stand in asymmetric relations to other expressions, such as “a is a male”. The definition “singular term” being considered requires that such expressions stand only in symmetric substitution-inferential relations. That is why expressions at the same level of a hierarchy of genera and species, such as ‘feline’ and ‘canine’ do not qualify: they both stand in asymmetric relations with terms such as ‘mammal’. As Kremer puts the point:
$T$ is a class of singular terms if and only if any correct substitution inference involving two members of $T$ is symmetric, and there is no class of subsentential items $S$ such that every member of $T$ is caught up in an asymmetric substitution-inferential relation with some member of $S$.

He continues:

The problem with this approach, however, is that it makes the question whether a class of items is a class of singular terms depend on what other subsentential items are available within the language. But perhaps our language is expressively impoverished. Thus, it might turn out that what look to be singular terms in our language are really just common nouns occupying the lowest level of an unfinished hierarchy of genera and species, such that in an extended form of our language, each of these putative singular terms turns out to contain below it several objects picked out by the singular terms of the extended language.

But in the cases in question, the expressive impoverishment requires that the species in question precisely not stand in a hierarchy of genera and species. For if they do, then there will be asymmetric species-to-genus but not genus-to-species substitution inferences. And in that case, the expressions do not at all mean what they do in English. In particular, they cannot be being used to classify particulars as falling under kinds – since those kinds would stand in asymmetric inclusion relations. And notice that we are not just talking about what primitive predicates or sortals are available in the language. If we have any other terms that can be combined, for instance, logically, with ‘feline’, we will get terms such as ‘domesticated feline’ (‘feline and domesticated’), which will stand in relations of subordination (or – if we have ‘or’ – superordination) with ‘feline’ and so stand in asymmetric inferential relations with it. Thus the sort of expressive impoverishment Kremer is envisaging is very radical: logical vocabulary is precluded, as well as any related classifiers. How would one justify the claim that the original terms served to classify at all?

While it might be hard to say just what the terms would mean in these bizarre contexts, it does not seem to me that the conclusion that they are indicating some strange kind of particular is one we can rule out. I think rather that such a situation is like what happens with the downward Löwenheim-Skolem theorem. It tells us that we can find countable models satisfying theories that say that there are an uncountable number of things. The conclusion to be drawn from this ‘paradox’ is that ‘uncountable’ in the languages under the countable-model interpretation does not mean uncountable. The expressive impoverishment of the language under that interpretation makes it mean something else – something hard to translate into English. From an inferentialist point of view, what Kremer points to is the way what is expressed by one locution can, indeed, depend on what other vocabulary is available in the language. But surely it is not an untoward result that if ‘canine’ and ‘feline’ existed in a language in which they stood in no relations of subordination or
superordination to other sortals (since any such relations would underwrite asymmetric substitution inferences), they would have to mean something quite different from what they do in languages in which such relations do exist. Indeed, I think they would be unintelligible as classifying at all.

Kremer’s final argument concerns the notion of representational success, rather than representational purport. In particular, he addresses the broadly inferential understanding I offer of existential commitment. He raises a number of insightful points. But his objections depend on assuming that we antecedently know what we mean by ‘exists’ when it is used in contexts as different as numerical and physical existence. The point of my discussion was to try to say explicitly what that implicit understanding comes to. To this end, I claim that whenever we use ‘exists’ in a definite sense, we are implicitly making reference to a class of canonical designators. So, for instance, when I claim that there exists an even prime number, and there does not exist a greatest proper fraction, what I am doing is committing myself to the correctness of some Peano successor numeral ō of such that “ō is even and prime” is true, and to there being no such successor numerals ō and ō such that “ō/ō is the greatest proper fraction” is true. The claim is that this is exactly the same sense of ‘exists’ that I am using when I say “The winged horse Pegasus does not exist.” The difference is that the parameter that such claims are implicitly relativized to, the set of canonical designators, is terms specifying occupied spatio-temporal regions accessible from here-and-now. It is true that I do not offer analyses also of Peano successor numeral (but I suppose we agree that others have done that), nor of occupied spatio-temporal regions accessible from here-and-now. Kremer is right that I would look to the use of demonstratives were I to try to fill in the latter notion. And here it seems to me entirely licit that, in keeping with the overall scorekeeping methodology of MIE, I say only what it is for some scorekeeper to take a demonstrative (applied as the result, according to the scorekeeper who endorses the corresponding reliability inference) of exercising a reliable differential responsive disposition, and do not pretend to say in a general theoretical fashion what it is for such a taking to be correct. Doing that is, according to the theory, just adopting another substantive scorekeeping perspective. It is true that more could be said about how the adequacy of such perspectives are to be normatively assessed. To do that would be to talk about the sort of evidence there is for endorsing various reliability counterfactuals. No doubt such a discussion would involve some of the sorts of considerations Kremer wants to see included under the heading of “taking seriously Kantian sensuous intuitions”. But I do not see that any of these facts impugn the account of the significance of existential commitments in terms of substitution inferences and canonical designators. And there are no grounds that I can see to conclude that the semantic apparatus of inference, substitution, and anaphora is expressively incapable in principle of incorporating the sorts of considerations that Kremer misses.

At the most general level, Kremer is concerned to insist that “inference without representation is empty”. I agree – in the sense that there cannot be inferential (and hence broadly assertional) practices, the kind of practices that confer propositional
content, unless those contents exhibit a representational dimension. For it is a central claim of MIE that it is only in the context of deontic scorekeeping practices articulated by the distinction of social perspective between attributing a commitment (in the first instance, to someone else) and acknowledging it (oneself). And that distinction of social perspective is what is made explicit by the representational locutions of everyday language that are the basis for philosophers’ more technical ones. These are the locutions that we use to distinguish what we are saying or thinking from what we are talking or thinking about: terms such as the ‘about’ of “John was talking about lions” (but not the ‘about’ of “the book is about 700 pages long”), and the ‘of’ of “I am thinking of a number between 1 and 10”, (but not the ‘of’ of “the pen of my aunt”). One of the things we discover in part two of MIE is that if something is propositionally contentful in the sense of being suitably inferentially articulated, it does therefore, whether we know it or not, represent how things are. If in addition, its inferential role involves the right kind of substitution inferences, then it represents particulars as having properties and standing in relations. The bold (which just is to say antecedently implausible) claim is that nonetheless, in the order of explication we can make explicit enough of the inferential articulation of propositional contents to show that it entails the answerability of those contents to what they in that normative sense count as being about, without having to have yet said anything at all about representation. The idea of inference without representation turns out to be unintelligible. But we show that by talking about propositional content to begin with in purely inferential terms, and come to see that in doing so we have assembled all the raw materials needed to make sense not only of the expressive dimension of such content (what it let us say), but also the representational dimension (what it lets us talk about).

Notes


2 Noninferential reports, reliable differential responsive dispositions, and reliability inferences are discussed in the first half of chapter 4 of MIE. Substitution inferences and singular terms are discussed in chapter 6. Demonstratives, anaphoric chains, and the role of token-recurrence structures in substitution inferences are discussed in chapter 7. The account of aboutness and representation in general is in chapter 8.


4 I am, of course, using ‘true’ here to form a prosentence, to express the class of claims to which I am committing myself.
The two classical problems in the philosophy of logic are the demarcation problem and the correctness problem. The first is to answer the question “What is logic?” in the sense of saying what is distinctive of logical vocabulary or logical concepts. How are they to be demarcated from non-logical ones? Is second-order logic logic? Are modal operators logical operators? Is the set-theoretic epsilon logical vocabulary? The second is to say what the correct logic is: is it classical logic or intuitionism? Is it some modal logic (if so, which one?) and non-modal logic is just a fragment of it? My answer to the demarcation question is an expressive one: the expressive role distinctive of logical vocabulary is to make explicit in propositional form the broadly inferential relations in virtue of which non-logical locutions mean what they do. More specifically, in the language of Between Saying and Doing, it is to be both elaborated from and explicative of such inferential relations. On this account, the question of correctness lapses. No reasonably well-behaved logic is any more correct than any other (though some – such as classical logic – have other distinctive virtues such as being able to specify in their own terms the inferential roles of their own vocabulary). The right question is rather which aspects of inferential role do the various kinds of vocabulary serve to make explicit. Thus the classical two-valued conditional lets us say that an inference is good in the sense that it does not have true premises and a false conclusion. (Admittedly, this is a pretty weak endorsement of an inference, but it is still an important good-making property of inferences. Those that do not have it are bad.) The intuitionistic conditional lets us make explicit assessments of an inference as good in the sense that there is a recipe for turning a proof of its premises into a proof of its conclusion. C. I. Lewis’s hook of strict implication lets us claim that an inference is good in the sense that it is impossible for its premises to be true without its conclusion being true. And so on. I take it that there is no definite totality of dimensions along which we might want to assess the goodness of inferences, and so no definite totality of possible logical vocabulary.

This explicative semantic role distinctive of logical vocabulary puts demands on how it can be introduced. We ought to be able to introduce it (specify how it is correctly to be used) by elaborating the use of the non-logical vocabulary it serves to explicate. The proprieties of material inference characteristic of the use of non-logical vocabulary should settle how it is correct to use the logical vocabulary. And
introducing the logical vocabulary should be inferentially conservative with respect to that field of antecedent material inferences – though once the logical vocabulary has been introduced, it may induce practitioners to alter their prior practice, in the light of what it now allows them to say about that practice. Appreciating how these two demands can be met shows us how logic can satisfy both the condition of semantic transparency (that what it makes explicit was already implicit in the use of non-logical vocabulary) and that of analytic efficacy (that it allow us to say something important about the use of non-logical vocabulary that we could not say without it).3

In his contribution to this volume, Bernhard Weiss asks a number of penetrating questions about my way of working out this general approach to the philosophy of logic. The first concerns the capacity of conditionals to make explicit the endorsement of multipremise inferences. Weiss observes correctly that most of the material (non-logical) inferences we might want to assess critically have many premises. (They are also in general non-monotonic – a point we will be reminded of below.) Just how are these to be expressed by conditionals? He points out that I am not methodologically permitted to appeal to a notion of formal validity in doing so, since I want to define inferences as good in virtue of their logical form with respect to some logical vocabulary just in case they are materially good inferences, and remain so on arbitrary substitution of non-logical for non-logical vocabulary. My answer to this question is one that he considers. To codify multipremise inferences, one must simultaneously introduce the conditional and conjunction – just as to codify incompatibilities one must simultaneously introduce modal operators, negation, and conjunction (or conditionals).4 Indeed, I would say that making it possible to make explicit multipremise inferences is the principal expressive role characteristic of conjunction.

The normative pragmatics employing two kinds of deontic status – commitment and entitlement – in Making It Explicit supports three kinds of inferential connections: commitment-preserving inferences, generalizing deductive inference to the material cases; entitlement-preserving inferences, generalizing inductive inference to the material cases; and incompatibility entailments, which are modally robust. Weiss asks about the conditional employed in the second of these, when we say, for instance, that if an interlocutor is entitled to commitments to p1, … pn, then she is prima facie entitled to q. This should just be read extensionally, to say that anyone who is entitled to commitments to p1, … pn is prima facie entitled to q. The thought that something fancier must be meant comes, I think, from the fact that unlike the consequential relations associated with commitment inheritance and incompatibility, these are merely defeasible, (hence, merely prima facie) scorekeeping consequences. As explained in chapter 3 of MIE, the idea is that first the scorekeeper adds to the interlocutor’s score entitlements to commitments that are the conclusions of good entitlement-preserving inferences from other commitments she is entitled to, and then subtracts entitlements to any commitments that are incompatible with any other commitments the scorekeeper attributes to that interlocutor. For the idea of incompatibility is that for two claimables to be incompatible is for commitment to
one to preclude *entitlement* to the other. What gives the appearance that a special conditional must be appealed to in the scorekeeping rule for entitlement-preserving inferences is just this two-stage procedure. That the conclusion is merely *prima facie* just marks that it can be undone by collateral incompatible commitments.5

The third concern Weiss raises is about what happens when a non-logical language L₀ is extended to another language Lₓ by the addition of an expression ‘Boche’ which adds a new inferential link between the two expressions ‘German’ and ‘cruel’, already in use in L₀. I am not sure what potential trouble he envisages here. ‘Boche’ is not a bit of logical vocabulary. The effect of its addition is inferentially nonconservative. Since the inference from ‘German’ to ‘cruel’ (via ‘Boche’) now becomes a good one, the contents of the concepts expressed by ‘German’ and ‘cruel’ do change somewhat. But, the thought is, one still might not want to accept that inference, even though it is licensed by the presence of ‘Boche’. If the language has a conditional (which can be added to either language conservatively), then one can explicitly consider and reject the conditional statement “If someone is German, then he is cruel,” and hence criticize the concept expressed by ‘Boche’. If one rejects it, one will then change the contents expressed by ‘German’ and by ‘cruel’. The conservative introduction of “if ... then ___” lets one see and say that one has incompatible commitments in Lₓ: one is both committed to endorsing the inference from what is expressed by ‘German’ to what is expressed by ‘cruel’, because one has ‘Boche’ in the language licensing that inference, and one is committed to rejecting it, because one denies the conditional “If someone is German, then he is cruel.” Resolving that incompatibility requires changing one’s concepts. That is indeed a consequence of introducing the conditional – since otherwise one could not explicitly deny the inferential connection between what is expressed by ‘German’ and what is expressed by ‘cruel’. But that does not make introducing the conditional itself non-conservative, as introducing ‘Boche’ is. It merely reveals an incompatibility that was already there. (If the user of Lₓ is willing to accept the conditional codifying the inference licensed by ‘Boche’, then the introduction of the conditional will not motivate a change of concepts.)

The “objectivity proofs” in chapter 8 of *MIE* show that the apparatus can make sense of conceptual contents that are not equivalent to those of any claims about what interlocutors are committed or entitled to – not to what I am committed or entitled to, and not even to what all of us are committed or entitled to. That is, I think, an important feature to demonstrate for an account that begins in the vicinity of traditional assertibility theories, which cannot underwrite such a distinction. But I agree that this notion is in a certain sense *minimal*. It does not, by itself, explain what it is for us to grant authority over a dimension of correctness of what we say to *objects* and *properties* that we in that normative sense count as talking and thinking about. For that we must look also to the account of what is made explicit by *de re* ascriptions of propositional deontic attitudes, and to the account of singular terms and existential commitments. The adequacy of this constellation of theoretical commitments to that purpose was one of the topics of Michael Kremer’s contribution to this volume. Weiss puts pressure on the account of objectivity from
a different direction. He asks whether it can make sense of the claim that even for an undecidable-for-us proposition $p$, still we know that either $p$ or $\neg p$. It is true that this issue is not explicitly addressed in MIE – and in particular, not by the objectivity proofs there. But chapter 5 of Between Saying and Doing shows how to understand our unconditional commitment and entitlement to classical tautologies such as this, entirely in terms of the same notion of incompatibility that is appealed to in those objectivity proofs in MIE. The unconditionality of such commitments can be expressed using ‘true’ (and understanding the expressive role of that locution prosententially). But it is potentially misleading to think of that fact as an expression of the objectivity of a notion of logical truth.

Weiss closes his essay with the observation that in BSD the introduction of logical vocabulary is proved to be inferentially conservative only in the context of the assumption that the incompatibility relation is determinate over the (finite) power set of sentences in the language. I do not see that this point in any way impugns the demonstration of conservativeness. For if the assumption is relaxed, and the underlying material incompatibility relation is allowed to be indeterminate in some cases, what is lost as a consequence is not the conservativeness of the logical vocabulary, but only the determinateness of incompatibility, and hence inferential, relations between logically compound sentences. And surely that is just what we should expect: logical compounds defined entirely in terms of the underlying material incompatibility relations will inherit some indeterminateness from any indeterminateness of their definition base.

Notes
1 See for instance Quine’s Philosophy of Logic, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
2 Oxford University Press, 2008.
3 I discuss these twin demands at greater length in chapter 2 of Between Saying and Doing, op. cit.
4 As I do in chapter 5 of Between Saying and Doing.
5 This issue comes up again in my reply to Hale and Wright.
REPLY TO KEVIN SCHARP’S
“TRUTH AND EXPRESSIVE
COMPLETEENESS”

Robert Brandom

The philosophical study of truth is typically a bifurcated enterprise. One focus is on the role of truth in semantics and theories of meaning. Another is on the role of truth in semantic paradoxes. Although there are topics that arise in both arenas, such as truth-value gaps, investigators whose primary interest lies in one area seldom devote much attention to the other. Kevin Scharp is a notable exception. He has shown that we can learn a great deal by bringing these subfields into conversation with one another. The current paper is a good example of how considerations native to the discussions of the semantic paradoxes can be deployed to yield surprising constraints on semantic theorizing more generally.

I believe that the patient, careful argument presented in Scharp’s paper succeeds in showing what it sets out to show. A theory expressively powerful enough to express Kripke’s theory of truth cannot be expressively complete in the sense that the account offered in Making It Explicit aims to be. I resist the inference, however, from this claim to the conclusion that:

Therefore, one cannot use Brandom’s theory of meaning to explain the meanings of sentences that belong to a language in which Brandom’s theory of meaning is formulated.

Why is that conclusion not warranted?

I would like to point out first how expressively complete the idiom whose semantics is reconstructed in MIE is. The semantic theory presented there for non-logical expressions centers on the nested notions of inference, substitution, and anaphora (ISA). It is shown how to introduce logical vocabulary sufficient to make explicit inferential, substitutional, and anaphoric relations, solely on the basis of the prior use of the non-logical expressions. (This is the relation I analyze further in Between Saying and Doing (BSD) as the meaning–use relation I call elaborated-explicitating.) Along another dimension, according to similar standards propositional attitude-ascribing locutions and normative vocabulary are introduced, as making explicit central aspects of the deontic scorekeeping pragmatics of MIE. Conditionals, negation, and alethic modal vocabulary (as Scharp indicates, discussed in much greater detail in BSD) which make explicit inferential relations, and identity and
quantifiers, which make explicit substitutional relations, are introduced into the idiom for which an inferential and substitutional semantics is provided. (One might contrast this with semantic theories such as Fodor’s or Dretske’s, which center on alethic modal relations, but do not apply to modal vocabulary – which is left to a promised later stage in a “divide and conquer strategy.”)

The account that MIE offers of the expressive role characteristic of the vocabulary in terms of which traditional semantic theory is expressed, ‘true’ and ‘refers’, is that they are anaphoric proform-forming operators. But notice that this vocabulary is not appealed to in stating the substantive positive semantic or pragmatic theories of MIE. The semantics on offer there is in terms initially of inference, not of truth. So expressive completeness does not require that truth be discussed at all. As far as the main project of MIE is concerned, chapter 5, in which the notion of anaphora is appealed to in order to specify the expressive role characteristic of ‘true’ and ‘refers’, though it offers an example of the expressive power of the ISA apparatus, could be excised from the book without damage to the rest of the project. It is part of the application of the apparatus developed there, not part of the apparatus itself. The account of anaphora and anaphoric token-recurrence structures, in chapter 7, is what must be capable of being formulated in terms of the vocabulary whose score-keeping significance has been specified, in order to satisfy the demand of expressive completeness. But that account is not itself couched in terms of ‘true’ and ‘refers’ – and a good thing too, else the account of the use of those locutions as anaphoric proform-forming operators would be circular. Instead, it says what a scorekeeper has to do in order thereby to count as taking or treating one tokening as anaphorically dependent on another. To do that the scorekeeper must take it that the anaphorically dependent tokening inherits its substitution-inferential commitments (in the case of singular terms, the simple material substitution-inferential commitments made explicit by identity claims) from the tokening that is its anaphoric antecedent.

Why, then, given that the account of ‘true’ and ‘refers’ is not part of the semantic theory of MIE, but only an application of it, and hence stands outside the scope of the commitment to expressive completeness, is the material about it included in the book at all? The reconstruction of the essential representational dimension of intentionality in terms of a social normative pragmatics and an inferential semantics is done in chapter 8, where the distinction of social perspective that is made explicit by the use of terms such as ‘of’ and ‘about’ to form de re ascriptions of propositional attitudes is discussed. This, too, does not appeal to ‘true’ and ‘refers’ (except in passing, for the very special case where the whole claim is exported from within the scope of the ‘that’ operator in regimented ascriptions to be put in the scope of the ‘of’ operator – as in “The Senator claimed of the first sentence of the Communist Manifesto that it was true.”). Even so, I thought that it was worth showing, in the terms of the theory of discourse practice of MIE, just what the expressive role of the vocabulary traditional semantic theories appealed to in articulating the representational dimension of intentionality is – and so why that important expressive role (anaphorically inheriting conceptual content) precisely disqualifies these expressions from playing fundamental explanatory roles in semantic theorizing. Indeed,
early on I considered structuring the book so that this discussion came first, motivating a dissatisfaction with truth-conditional theories of meaning (which, as Frege presciently if incipiently realized, presuppose a notion of content and so cannot be used to explain it) which an inferentialist alternative could then be wheeled in to remedy. I ultimately rejected that way of pitching the project, on the grounds that it was not necessary to hold the constructive project hostage to such a narrow, specialized motivation.

The aim of the discussion of the expressive role characteristic of traditional semantic vocabulary was, then, in part ground-clearing. But I also wanted to show how the apparatus that would be developed in the rest of part two of the book let us do a much better job of specifying those expressive roles even than the work that had motivated it and on which it builds. The authors of the original prosentential theory of ‘true’ had neither extended the account to ‘refers’ and its cognates, nor offered a general account of the anaphoric relations that played the key role in their account. The apparatus of MIE made it possible to do both. (There were also more technical advantages: the anaphoric proform-forming operator account permitted better treatment of the role of sentential modifiers such as tense and modal operators in truth claims, and offered a systematic perspective on the variety of ways of specifying anaphoric antecedents.) It is important to realize, though, that the aim was not to introduce a cleaned-up concept of truth, which would be fit to appeal to to do serious semantic explanatory work. If that were the aim, it would be appropriate to worry about the formulability of semantic paradoxes using that concept. It was rather to reconstruct the expressive role played by our inherited traditional semantic vocabulary of ‘true’ and ‘refers’. And it is an essential feature of those locutions that they do admit anaphorically ungrounded, paradoxical uses.

Notes

1 This point is the focus of my essay “Explanatory vs. Expressive Deflationism about Truth,” in Schantz, What is Truth?
REPLY TO BOB HALE AND CRISPIN WRIGHT’S “ASSERTIBILIST TRUTH AND OBJECTIVE CONTENT: STILL INEXPLICIT?

Robert Brandom

Standing on the shoulders of the giant, Michael Dummett, Crispin Wright and I are among the very few who have tried to elaborate workable semantic theories that use assertibility as their central concept. Hale and Wright’s contribution to this volume continues a long-standing friendly discussion about how best to pursue that goal.

Hale and Wright think that I focus on the issue of objectivity to the exclusion of the issue of truth. I agree that these are different, but I address both. Making It Explicit offers an account of where the contrast between a truth-norm and a warrantedness-norm comes from pragmatically. In particular, it offers an account of what one has to do in order to manifest in practice one’s grasp of that distinction. It shows up as a product of the distinction between the two deontic statuses of commitment and entitlement, on the hand, and of the distinction of social perspective between attributing a commitment (to someone else) and acknowledging or undertaking it (oneself), on the other. In the deontic scorekeeping pragmatic idiom, what corresponds to taking someone to have knowledge in the (old-fashioned, but still important) sense of justified true belief consists in attributing a commitment (corresponding to the belief condition), attributing an entitlement (corresponding to the justification condition), and undertaking a commitment oneself (corresponding to the truth condition). So, for instance, standing in a darkened room, you might report the visible presence of a lit candle ten feet in front of you. That is a commitment you undertake, and that I attribute to you. And we might both take it that you are entitled to that commitment, since under normal circumstances you are a reliable reporter of nearby lit candles in darkened rooms, and you have no reason to believe that anything funny is going on. But if I know, as you do not, that there is a mirror five feet in front of you, and that the image you see is of a candle to your left, separated from you by an opaque curtain, I will not take it that your justified belief is true, and hence will not take you to know that there is a candle ten feet in front of you.

On this understanding, the distinction between the norm of truth and the norm of warrant only becomes practically visible when one is keeping score on someone else’s deontic statuses. For it is only from that point of view that belief, truth, and
warrant can come apart. In the context of a general account of deontic statuses of commitment and entitlement to commitments, the distinction of social perspective between undertaking and attributing such statuses is what underwrites the distinction between norms of warrant or assertibility and norms of truth. If that is right, then the next challenge becomes to say how the commitments and entitlements involved can be understood to have conceptual contents that are objective in the sense of not reducing to what someone or everyone is committed or entitled to. That is the argumentative context in which and background against which I turn to the objectivity issue.

Hale and Wright’s objection to my demonstration that the two-sorted deontic framework of commitments and entitlements can make sense of conceptual contents that are not equivalent to those of any claims about who is committed or entitled to what – including what I and even all of us always are committed or entitled to – is the product of a failure to understand the interactions between entitlements and incompatibilities in the dynamic context of keeping deontic score – in particular, the distinction between initial and final entitlements. For a scorekeeper to treat two claimable contents as incompatible is for her to withhold attribution of final entitlement to one whenever she attributes commitment to the other. As described in chapter 4 of MIE, incompatibilities matter at the third stage of the scorekeeping process. In response to a new assertion by some interlocutor, the scorekeeper first adds a corresponding commitment to the interlocutor’s score, and attributes as well commitment to any other claimables that the scorekeeper takes to be commitment-consequences of it. At the second stage, if the scorekeeper takes the interlocutor to be entitled to those new commitments, the scorekeeper adds to the interlocutor’s score prima facie entitlements to any claimable contents that are the consequences of good entitlement-preserving inferences that have them (along with any other commitments to which the interlocutor is similarly entitled) as premises. At the third stage, the scorekeeper considers whether the interlocutor has any commitments that are incompatible with those to which prima facie entitlement has been attributed at the second stage. If so, entitlements to those commitments are subtracted, yielding a final score of what the interlocutor is (according to the scorekeeper) committed and entitled (now, not just prima facie, but all things considered). Final entitlements are what the scorekeeper attributes to the target after going through the three-stage process of computing the pragmatic deontic significance of an assertional speech act.

Hale and Wright fail to distinguish the provisional entitlements attributed at stage two from the final entitlements that survive the winnowing by incompatibilities at stage three. For this reason, they do not understand that two claims, such as \( p \) and “I am committed to \( p \)”, could be “co-entitlements” in the sense that one is prima facie or provisionally entitled to one in exactly the same circumstances in which one is prima facie or provisionally entitled to the other (they have the same conditions of warranted assertibility) while being incompatible with different claims (the latter, but not the former, is incompatible with “No one has any opinion about \( p \)”, for instance). If two claims were “co-entitlements” in the sense that an interlocutor is
finally, not just provisionally, entitled to them under the same circumstances, then they would indeed have to have the same incompatibilities, and would in that sense be synonymous. But the point of the objectivity proofs is that it does not follow that because an interlocutor is provisionally entitled to two claims under the same conditions, that they do have the same incompatibilities. These are exactly the cases I appeal to in my counterexamples.

There are really two issues here, one systematic and one empirical. The systematic question is whether one can coherently specify a scorekeeping practice in which two performances (paradigmatically assertions of declarative sentences) that have the same prima facie or initial entitlement potential (in that one is initially entitled to them under the same circumstances) nonetheless have different final entitlement potentials because they stand in different incompatibility relations. It is clear that the answer to this question is ‘Yes’. Indeed, there is a kind of consistency proof of this claim: this feature is incorporated in the up-and-running computer implementation of the basic deontic scorekeeping practice, GoGAR (for game of giving and asking for reasons) that John MacFarlane develops and maintains at his website. The empirical issue is whether there is any reason to think that a model so constructed reflects any features of actual discursive practice. That is the issue that my examples address.

The same conclusion can be arrived at by a different route by noticing that because two claims are co-assertible in the sense that one is prima facie entitled to one in just the same circumstances as one is prima facie entitled to the other, it does not follow that they have the same commitment consequences. We can regiment a use of ‘foresee’ so that I am provisionally warranted in asserting “I foresee that Bob will write a book about Hegel”, exactly when I am provisionally warranted in asserting “Bob will write a book about Hegel”. (Of course, their final entitlement potential is different, since only the latter is incompatible with “I will die in the next ten minutes”.) But the two claims have very different consequences. The latter commitment entails “Bob will write a book about Hegel”. The former does only in the presence of a special set of collateral commitments concerning how good at foreseeing I am. My overall claim is that subdividing Dummett’s notions of circumstances of appropriate application of expressions and appropriate consequences of application by distinguishing circumstances that commit one to a claim from those that entitle one to it, and again distinguishing consequences one is committed to by a claim from those it entitles one to provides just the resources someone who understands discursive pragmatics in terms of assertibility needs to make sense of the objectivity of the contents expressed by sentences that play suitable roles in those assertional practices.

Hale and Wright next turn to criticisms I have leveled against the notion of superassertibility as providing a truth-like norm that contrasts suitably with that of here-and-now warrant. It seems to me that, as defined, it is bound either to define the wrong norm, or to be viciously (vacuously) circular. On the first horn of the proposed dilemma, there are lots of norms we can assess claims according to that contrast with assessments of evidence or warrant. We can assess claims accordingly
as they are or are not witty, hip, interesting, charmingly irreverent, pleasing to God, and along many other dimensions. Superassertibility no doubt defines a norm that contrasts with warrantedness. But how truth-like is it? Here everything turns on what counts as an “improvement of one’s information state”. Are we to stipulate that only the addition of true claims counts as “improvement”, or not? If we are, then the problem lies on the circularity horn of the dilemma, which I’ll discuss below. If not, then my worry is that it is easy to envisage circumstances in which false claims qualify as superassertible, because the presence of other false claims in our “information state” immunize them from what would otherwise serve as counterevidence. My false belief that boiling hides in water with birch bark, but not with oak bark, will cure and tan them will remain robust and maintainable if my information state has been ‘improved’ by the addition of the false belief that birch trees produce acorns, and have rough, brown, vertically striated bark and lobed leaves, while oaks have white, horizontally striated bark and oval, saw-toothed leaves.

At this point I worry that we are talking past each other due to some methodological misunderstanding about just what is at issue. Hale and Wright suggest (which I am quite willing to grant) that we could legitimately at least insist that whatever false beliefs were added and counted as improvements to our information state must be warranted (presumably, by other elements of the information state). They ask to be allowed to assume that this condition will at least “render it more and more difficult for additional false beliefs to be warranted”. Perhaps, quantifying over all the possible courses of development of some information state, this is so statistically. But so what? It is still possible (it will happen on some of the legitimate developments-by-improvement of the initial information state) that false beliefs remain stably warranted, and so superassertible. I take that to be enough to show that the norm of superassertibility, while undeniably distinct from here-and-now-warrant, is not a truth-norm. For it permits us to endorse false claims.

I am nonplussed by their conclusion:

While disruption by false but warranted beliefs may postpone achievement of stable warrant for any given content, p, it is at best not clear - and at worst rather implausible – that every warrant must eventually succumb to such disruption unless false additions are proscribed.

This seems to get the relevant quantifier wrong. The question here is whether something true can fail to be superassertible (we were just worrying about whether what is superassertible can fail to be true). My objection to identifying superassertibility as a truth or truth-like norm from this direction is not that every true claim will fail of stability of warrant, and hence superassertibility, on every possible course of improvement of an information state unless false collateral information is proscribed. It is that for any true claim and any information state, unless false collateral information is proscribed, on some possible improvements of that information state, the true claim will not achieve stable warrant. That seems to me to be sufficient to show that the norm of superassertibility is not a truth norm.
Wright and Hale do, it seems to me, successfully defend their view against the objection that if false beliefs are allowed in as collateral evidence, then nothing will count as superassertible, because every claim can be infirmed by such false evidence. For superassertibility requires only stability de facto, not de jure. So if false collateral information cannot be ruled out, some claims will be superassertible and some not, and depending on the actual course of inquiry, among those that are superassertible, some will be true and some will be false. But it seems to me that the proportion of those is a matter of contingent fact that is essentially independent of their truth and falsity. I do not see that we can even say that probability of a superassertible claim being true is higher than the probability of its being false, nor that the probability of a true claim being superassertible is higher than that of a false claim being superassertible. For we are talking about an infinite number of beliefs and an infinite number of ways inquiry could go. There will be an infinite number of bad cases (false superassertibles and truths not superassertible) and an infinite number of good ones. Probabilities are no help here.

But Hale and Wright are willing to embrace the other horn of the dilemma. It is possible, they claim, to proscribe false collateral information without appeal to truth, and so without circularity. They suggest that we can define what it is for an information state \( J \) to improve on an information state \( I \) by requiring three things:

\[
\begin{align*}
(i) & \quad \exists p [p \in J \land p \not\in I \land p] \\
(ii) & \quad \neg \exists p [p \in J \land p \not\in I \land \neg p] \\
(iii) & \quad \forall p [(p \in I \land p) \rightarrow p \in J]
\end{align*}
\]

Clause (i) uses propositional quantification to say that one improves one’s information state by adding any claim \( p \) such that \( p \). Clause (ii) adds that improvements do not add claims \( p \) such that \( \neg p \), and clause (iii) that one doesn’t lose any claim \( p \) such that \( p \). The question, of course, is whether such a definition of ‘improve’ is circular in the context of the overall project. It is true that it does not use the word ‘true’. But that hardly settles the issue. I do not see how it can be licit to appeal to propositional quantification in the context of the project of defining – in a broadly assertibilist framework – a truth-like norm. For if it were licit, there is a much shorter path to the goal, which does not require the notion of improvement of an information state. We could introduce the following definition:

\[ \forall p [p \text{ is superduperassertible } \iff p] \]

Now there is no worry about superduperassertibility coming loose from truth. And if the proposed definition of ‘improvement’ is legitimate, I can see no reason why this one is not, since it appeals to no primitives not appealed to in that definition. But it also seems clear that no conceptual advance whatever has been made in this case. As an account of a truth-norm, proposing to assert \( p \) just in case \( p \) is explanatorily vacuous. I submit that the same is true of superassertibility with the proposed definition of ‘improvement’.
Wright and Hale disavow any intention to offer an analysis of the concept of truth. But they do aspire to construct a notion that both contrasts with that of warranted assertibility (a criterion of adequacy they surely do fulfill) and is truth-like in important respects. (The point of the previous criticisms has been to question the extent to which this criterion of adequacy has been satisfied.) But the point of the whole enterprise depends on not being allowed to help oneself to substantially truth-like notions in the construction itself. Propositional quantification provides for just the expressive power of “semantic ascent” that Quine identifies (agreeing in this respect with prosententialists such as myself) as the key expressive role of ‘... is true’. It should accordingly be proscribed from the raw materials of a construction that is supposed to illuminate the notion of truth every bit as much as from the primitives appealed to in an analysis.

So it still seems to me that either superassertibility defines the wrong norm – one that will in many ordinary cases diverge from truth – if false collateral information is not precluded, or collapses into explanatory and analytic vacuity if it is so defined as to exclude false collateral information.

Notes

1  This issue arose already in my reply to Weiss.
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