

Chapter 1

Brandom's Inferentialism and Objectivity

What distinguishes a word or a sentence from mere sounds or scribbles on a piece of paper? A natural response would be that a word or a sentence (i.e. a linguistic expression) has *meaning*. There are two popular strategies to cash out the notion of meaning: the *representationalist* approach and *inferentialist* approach. In this chapter, I will do three things. In section 1, after defining the rough contours of the representationalism-inferentialism debate, I will present Brandom's inferentialism, which is the most worked-out account available of global inferentialism. Then, in section 2, I introduce one of the most contentious issue for Brandom's inferentialism: namely, how to account for objectivity of conceptual content, and why this is important. In section 3, I argue that Brandom's account fails for two reasons. First, Brandom's so-called 'objectivity proofs' are insufficient to account for the objectivity of conceptual content understood most straightforwardly. Second, Brandom's incompatibility semantics, which he relies on to defend his account of objectivity, undermines the very deontic (and dialogical) nature of meaning that his account presupposes.

1.1 Representationalism and Inferentialism

Meaning theories, or philosophical accounts of mental content and linguistic meaning, can be broadly classified under two camps: the representationalist approach and the use-theoretic approach. On the representationalist approach, conceptual contentfulness of linguistic expressions and mental states are essentially explained by appealing to the representational relation they bear to things ‘out there’: for example, a representationalist account for linguistic meaning might take sentences to represent state-of-affairs, singular terms to represent objects, predicates to represent properties, etc. So, mental states are understood as contentful insofar as they stand in correct representational relations with what it purports to represent; to understand the meaning of a linguistic expression is to know what it is that it represents.

In contrast, the use-theoretic approach maintains that the conceptual contentfulness should primarily be explained in terms of the rules according to which, or regularities that underlie, our use of linguistic expressions and concepts. The main usage of language/concepts that use-theorists have in mind, the one relevant for explaining conceptual contentfulness, is drawing inferences. Thus, a concept is taken to be contentful insofar as they stand in inferential relations to other concepts; to understand a linguistic expression is to be able to draw inferences containing them.

Crucially, representationalists need not reject that we perform inferences, and inferentialists need not reject that linguistic expressions and mental states have representational properties. In fact, they usually don’t; intuitively, both representing the world and drawing inference are two important features of human cognition and so they constitute the *explananda* of any semantic theory. Rather, what the theorist is committed to is their respective order of explanation, i.e, to provide an account of one feature in terms of the other, more primitive feature. Relatedly, a semantic theorist will also usually assume an explanatory priority relation between language and mind, that is, whether mental content should be explained in terms of contents of linguistic expression or vice-versa. For example, Harman (1982) defines his influential account, Conceptual Role Semantics (CRS), explicitly as the commitment to a mentalist and inferentialist order of explanation:

“A theory of conceptual role semantics involves the following two claims: 1. The meanings of linguistic expressions are determined by the contents of the concepts and thoughts they can be used to express. 2. The contents of concepts and thoughts are determined by their functional role in a person’s psychology” (ibid., p.242).

Indeed, as with representationalism, inferentialism is a broad church. Thus, let me now provide a brief typology of inferentialisms in order to situate Brandom’s inferentialism within the debate.

1.1.1 Varieties of Inferentialism

There are six principal ways with respect to which inferentialist theories can differ:

1. *Causal vs. Normative.* On the causal inferentialist view, meaning of expressions are determined by their actual causal role when a particular agent engages in inferential activities (namely, reasoning or asserting). On the normative inferentialist view, the meaning of an expression is determined by rules that determine the correctness of inferential activities. This distinction is due to Peregrin (2014). Writing elsewhere, Peregrin says,

“The drawing of inferences is something that happens within the causal world (in the mind, and hence in the brain); whereas rules, though underlain by normative attitudes, which are events within the causal world, are not themselves states or events within the causal order. Unlike normative inferentialism, causal inferentialism says that the meaning consists in, or is caused by, certain events, namely individual drawings of inferences by individual speakers.”¹

Causal inferentialism is thus understood as a species of functionalism about the mind; theorists like Harman and Boghossian fall under this category. Inferentialists of the normative sort include Brandom, Peregrin, and Dummett.

¹From an unpublished manuscript, “What is Inferentialism?”, available from PhilPapers.

2. *Scope.* Inferentialist meaning-theory (i.e. those that take inferential role to be *sufficient* for determining meaning) can be divided into those that attempt to account for empirical expressions and those that aim only to account for logical—and perhaps some mathematical—expressions. The former, unlike the latter, must take into account quasi-inferential relations between perception and language (or, as Sellars’ puts it, ‘language-entry moves’) on one hand and between language and action (‘language-exit moves’) on the other. Brandom (2007) labels the former camp (to which he belongs) *strong inferentialism* and the latter camp *hyperinferentialism*.
3. *Which inferences?* Following Sellars (1953), we may divide inferences in two categories: *formal inferences* and *material inferences*. Formal inferences are inferences whose correctness is determined by rules that specify the meaning of logical vocabulary involved; this is another way of saying valid in virtue of logical form. Material inferences, on the other hand, are inferences whose correctness is determined by rules that specify the meaning of *non-logical* vocabulary involved. It includes, for example, the inference from ‘1 is a natural number’ to ‘2 is a natural number’ is a valid inference in virtue of the rules governing the meaning of the concept ‘natural number’; it also includes empirical (and thus defeasible) inference from ‘It is raining’ to ‘The streets are wet,’ which is valid in virtue of the rules governing the meaning of the concepts ‘rain’, ‘street’, and ‘wet’.² Logical inferentialists mostly focus on the former kind³; those working on the semantics of natural language must also account for the latter. There is also much to say about the relation between the two kinds of inference. Brandom, for instance, thinks that inferences whose validity depends on material content is explanatorily prior to those whose validity depends on the meaning of logical constants. In other words, formal inference can be defined

²An empirically-minded observer might object that the inference from ‘It is raining’ to ‘The streets are wet’ is actually an *enthymeme*, wherein the following premise is left implicit: ‘If it rains, the streets will be wet’. An addition of this premise would, indeed, turn the material inference into a banal formal inference, namely *modus ponens*. But this is precisely the point that Sellars (1953) argues against. The correctness of the original inference is explained by appealing to the meaning of the non-logical concepts involved, which is determined by network of material inferences an expression is involved in (and especially the counterfactuals it validates).

³Mostly but not entirely, because a number of recent work in proof-theoretic semantics attempt to provide a semantics for certain mathematical concepts.

in terms of material inference, but not vice versa (Brandom, 2000, p. 55).⁴

4. *Minimal semantic unit.* In one sense, the basic semantic unit of inferentialism is uniform: it is at the level of inferential relations, or sequents, as opposed to individual term/concept or propositions which is typical for representationalist approaches. But, there is another way in which the minimal unit of semantic significance may differ. Some inferentialists think that the inferential role of a given expression can be specified by rules in relative isolation from other rules. Call this view *atomism*. As discussed in the previous chapter, this view is common in logical inferentialists. In contrast, theorists like Brandom are holists. *Holism* states that the meaning of an expression is determined by the entire network of inferential connections that make up the language. Finally, others allow for ‘semantic clusters,’ a set of expressions whose meanings are determined by their inferential links to all the others in the set, but maintain that these clusters can be isolated. Dummett’s *molecularism* is one such view.⁵ On Dummett’s conception, the meaning (i.e. the inferential role) of a logical expression, while dependent on that of other logical expressions, bear no relation to that of non-logical expressions.
5. *Naturalism.* An inferentialist can claim that meaning-determining rules are either irreducibly normative or that it can be reduced, typically by appealing to evolutionary biology, to causal phenomena. Some inferentialists do not concern themselves with this question at all (e.g. Dummett and Schröder-Heister) while other explicitly endorse either the anti-naturalistic position (e.g. Brandom) or the naturalistic position (e.g. Peregrin (2024) and Tennant (1987)).
6. *Relation to logic.* Some inferentialists think that inferentialist semantics justify their reformist views of logic (in Dummett and Prawitz’s case, intuitionistic logic and in Tennant’s case, relevance intuitionistic logic) while others opt to remain agnostic about their choice of logic. Brandom, for example, has quietist views about questions concerning the correct logic, preferring to think of logic as a useful instrument

⁴Brandom is not the only one to think this. Cf. Lorenzen & Lorenz (1978).

⁵This typology is due to Steinberger & Murzi (2017).

to make our discursive commitments explicit.⁶

1.1.2 Brandom's Inferentialism

Brandom's inferentialism is the most worked-out global inferentialist meaning-theory. It is characterized by the following six features: 1) normative, 2) strong, 3) inclusive of formal and material inferences, 4) holistic, 5) anti-naturalist, and 6) logically quietist. More needs to be said about Brandom's inferentialism to appreciate the interconnectedness of these theses. Though I cannot give an exhaustive treatment of Brandom's several-treatises-length project here, I will nonetheless try to capture its overall shape.

Brandom's project aims to construct a meaning-theory (or, in his words, a 'theory of conceptual contentfulness') on the basis of observing the characteristics of what linguistically endowed creatures (namely, us) do in practice. A theory of what we *do*, according to Brandom, is explanatory prior to—and thus *grounds*—a theory of what we *say*; or, as Brandom puts it, "semantics is answerable to pragmatics" (1994, p.83). In this sense, Brandom picks up where Wittgenstein (1953) left off—meaning of a linguistic expression is how we use them in our social practices (viz. in a 'language game'). Unlike Wittgenstein, who held a pluralistic view about language games, according to which all the different kinds of use of an expression contribute equally to its meaning,⁷ Brandom thinks that the practice of asserting and drawing inference ("the game of giving and asking for reasons") is the uniquely privileged locus of meaning. All other use of language are derivative in relation to the game of giving and asking for reasons. Brandom writes,

"What makes something a specifically *linguistic* [...] practice is that it accords some performances the force or significance of *claimings*, of *propositionally* contentful commitments, which can both serve as and stand in need of reasons. Practices that do not involve reasoning are not linguistic or (therefore) discursive practices. Thus the 'Slab' *Sprachspiel* that Wittgenstein introduces in the opening sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* should not, by these stan-

⁶Cf. R. Brandom (2018) for details about his 'expressivist' view on logic. See also footnote 12.

⁷See, for example, Wittgenstein, 1953, §18. Various uses of language (i.e. not limited to assertion) has been studied extensively, for example, by speech-act theory. Cf. Austin (1962).

dards of demarcation, count as a genuine *Sprachspiel*. It is a vocal but not yet a verbal practice. By contrast to Wittgenstein, the inferential identification of the conceptual claims that language (discursive practice) has a *center*; it is not a motley. Inferential practices of producing and consuming reasons are *downtown* in the region of linguistic practice. Suburban linguistic practices utilize and depend on the conceptual contents forged in the game of giving and asking for reasons, are parasitic on it. Claiming, being able to justify one's claims, and using one's claims to justify other claims and actions are not just one among other sets of things one can do with language. They are not on a par with other 'games' one can play. They are what in the first place make possible talking, and therefore thinking: sapience in general." (R. Brandom, 2000, p.14, original italics).

For Brandom, then, the very possibility of human cognition comes down to the fact that we engage in the 'game of giving and asking for reasons'. This 'game' amounts to the social practice in which speakers *endorse* claims (usually in assertion, but could also be in other forms of action) and *challenge* claims due to other speakers by providing *reasons*. Drawing inference is a necessary condition for being able to play this game; for, if some claim *p* were to serve as a reason for another claim *q*, we need to be able to infer *q* from *p*. In order to perform such an inference, language itself must be structured such that one sentence can *entail* another.

So, on the one hand, language must be structured by entailment relations as to enable the practice of giving reasons. On the other hand, asking for reasons involves challenging a claim, namely as something that needs justification. Brandom thinks that challenging a claim paradigmatically involves asserting a claim that is *incompatible* with it.⁸ So, in addition to entailment relations, language must be structured by incompatibility relations. To understand a language, then, is to have a practical mastery of entailment and incompatibility relations which is a precondition for being able to play the game of giving and

⁸Brandom's articulation of incompatibility relations relies on the law of excluded middle, which is only valid in classical logic. Most inferentialists think that if inferentialism is correct, precisely due to the requirement of harmony, we ought to endorse intuitionistic logic. This creates some friction between Brandom and other inferentialist, but I will not get into this thorny issue here.

asking for reasons. Accordingly, one way to think about the meaning of a given sentence is as the union of 1) the set of sentences that it entails and is entailed by and 2) the set of sentences that are incompatible with it. More precisely, and in a slightly different, epistemological formulation, we may put it this way: to understand the meaning of a sentence is to know the claims it follows from and the claims that follow from it, as well as the claims that cannot be endorsed simultaneously with it.

Crucially, this social practice—of giving and asking for reasons—is structured by *rules* (or, ‘norms’ in Brandom’s terminology) that specify which inferential moves are acceptable and which are not. This is the content of Brandom’s *normativism*. This simple move parries the vicious circularity objection often raised against inferentialism: the meaning of an expression is its inferential role, but inference involves transition from one meaningful expression to another (and not on uninterpreted string of symbols) and so appears to presuppose the meaningfulness of expressions prior to their use in inference. So, the thought goes, inferentialists are guilty of explaining meaning in terms of inferential role on one hand and inference in terms of meaning on the other.⁹

The rebuttal goes like this. The meaning of an expression is not its role in *actual* inferences that we draw or are disposed to draw, but the *correct* inferential role specified by socially-shared rules. So, while it is true that the inferential role of expression when we actually perform inferences is explained by our understanding of the meaning of the expression, the meaning of the expression itself is determined by role-specifying social rules that exists beyond any single instantiation of reasoning.¹⁰

Now, the origin and ontological status of these rules seem to be mysterious, especially given the current philosophical climate dominated by naturalized epistemology and materialist ontology. Brandom has a complex story to tell about the emergence of rules from a more primitive social practice of taking someone (including oneself) to be *committed* to and *entitled* to certain claims on the basis of other commitments and entitlements of that speaker (an activity he calls ‘deontic scorekeeping’). For instance, a collateral commitment that comes with asserting a claim (which is in itself a commitment) would be to

⁹Cf. P. Boghossian (2014) for how a (causal) inferential role semantics might overcome this issue.

¹⁰For a more careful inferentialist treatment of the circularity objection, see Peregrin (2018).

provide a reason when challenged; moreover, when a speaker asserts a claim, they entitle anyone else to assert the same claim. The main idea is that we attribute to others (and oneself) 'normative statuses' of commitments and entitlements; this results in a complex network of normative social relationships, which gives rise to certain rule-governed patterns of behaviors, from which meaning-constitutive rules are abstracted.

So, inferential role is defined in terms of preservation of commitments and entitlements. Commitments, in this context, can be understood in the Dummettian fashion as the *consequence* of applying a concept; *entitlements* are the *condition* for application of a concept. So, for example, given that one is committed to 'I am a human', they ought to also be committed to 'I am a mammal'; that one is entitled to 'It is raining' entitles them to 'The streets are wet.' Incompatibility can be derivatively defined the interplay of commitments and entitlements: given that one is committed to certain claims, they are excluded from being entitled to other claims. More precisely, p and q are incompatible iff commitment to p precludes entitlement to q and *vice versa* (Brandom, 1994, p.160). In sum, rules governing (both material and formal) inference, which determine the meaning of a given expression, is cashed out as the patterns of behavior that arise within the game of giving and asking for reasons. This is what Brandom means by "grounding a inferential semantics on a normative pragmatics" (1994, p.132) or "know-that in terms of know-how" (ibid., p.135).

All this talk of 'patterns of behavior' may be reminiscent of Daniel Dennett's naturalistically acceptable and deflationary account of intentionality, in which intentionality is understood simply as an heuristic device to explain patterns of behavior exhibited by something ('an intentional system').¹¹ But Brandom thinks that linguistic practice is "normative all the way down" (ibid., p.625) since what gives rise to rules is not simply a pattern of behavior, but a pattern of behavior *instituted* by the the speakers' attitudes ('normative attitudes) of taking something to have normative status. Indeed, Brandom, doubling down on his anti-naturalism, thinks that Dennett himself ought to be committed to the irreducibility of the normative for sake of coherence (cf. ibid., p.55-62).

¹¹Cf. for example, Dennett (1991).

1.1.3 Some Usual Objections and Replies

I think that many of the usual objections leveled against it are either off-target or are largely methodological and thus does not directly affect the cogency of Brandom's argument. Objections that I have in mind are usually raised by empirically-minded philosophers that are not sympathetic to the inferentialist project in the first place.¹² Objections of this sort include the circularity problem mentioned in the section 1, as well as the idea that Brandom's theory is 'too abstract' and has little theoretical use. For instance, Williamson notes that the traditional truth-conditional approach to semantics, pioneered by Tarski (for formal language) and subsequently Davidson (for natural language), "has been basic to the massive development of mainstream formal semantics over recent decades, in both linguistics and philosophy of language, for natural and artificial languages" (Williamson (2010)). The empirical success of truth-conditional semantics means that the revisionary inferentialist semantics ought to provide a very good reason to abandon truth-conditional semantics in favor of it, or at least, to be considered as an alternative. On Williamson's view, inferentialism fails to do so: "If you want an explicit theory of how some particular linguistic construction contributes to the meanings of sentences in which it occurs, the inferentialist is unlikely to have one. Better try the referentialist" (ibid.).¹³

It is worth dwelling on Williamson's line of thinking, as it can be either read as off-target or methodological. It is off-target because, as Steinberger & Murzi (2017) note, inferentialism is a metasemantic theory (i.e. what I have, following Dummett (1991), referred to as 'meaning-theory') rather than a semantic theory. The difference is that the former tries to identify the conditions under which meaning is possible (or, in the epistemic formulation, what the speaker needs to know to understand any sentence) while the latter tries to answer 'what is the meaning of p ?' where p is an arbitrary sentence, by providing a suitable interpretation. David Lewis makes a particularly instructive remark in this context:

"I distinguish two topics: first, the description of possible languages or gram-

¹²For example, the title of Fodor & Lepore (2007), "Brandom Beleaguered," attests to this claim.

¹³These quotes were taken from Williamson's review of R. Brandom (2009), so the arguments are brief and underdeveloped there. For a more fleshed out critique of inferentialism along these lines, see chapter 4 of Williamson (2007).

mars as abstract semantic systems whereby symbols are associated with aspects of the world; and, second, the description of the psychological and sociological facts whereby a particular one of these abstract semantic systems is the one used by a person or population. Only confusion comes of mixing these two topics” (Lewis, 1970, p.19).

Williamson’s objection is clearly guilty of this confusion. Once the confusion is cleared up, we can see that it is, in principle, coherent to model language truth-conditionally (for instance, for the sake of formal semantics) while subscribing to inferentialism for the metasemantic questions.¹⁴

Yet Williamson’s complaint can also be read as a methodological one: namely, that inferentialism does not cohere well with the best understanding of reality as described by the sciences, including linguistics. Furthermore, since Brandom thinks that normativity is irreducible to causal phenomena (namely events), his project is anti-naturalistic. If naturalistic acceptability is one of the theoretical desiderata of any semantic theory, then this objection would be powerful. But, in Brandom’s case, it is not. Brandom rejects naturalized epistemology, where science and philosophy are methodologically continuous.¹⁵ On the contrary, according to Brandom, philosophers ought to

“produce new vocabularies in which we can understand ourselves and each other, and they do that by thinking about the kinds of being we are, and about the role of such vocabularies in instituting and constituting the conceptual normativity that is the medium in which beings like us live our lives” (R. Brandom, 2009, p.149-150).

By subscribing to an anti-naturalistic methodological stance about philosophy, Brandom has no real reason to oppose anti-materialism, namely, to an ontology that accepts normative objects (namely, rules). Given this, naturalists would deem Brandom’s project unacceptable, both methodologically and substantially.

¹⁴Indeed, MacFarlane (2010) suggests such an approach.

¹⁵cf. Quine (1969).

I think that the naturalistic objection is warranted, even fair. Even if we accept Brandom's view of philosophy and its relation to the natural science, we still need answers as to how normative phenomena and causal phenomena relate, or why normativity is irreducible. In my view, Brandom has thus far been unable to provide any convincing response to these questions. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the critique is based on a naturalistic position that is *external* to Brandom's theory; such an external presupposition does not affect the coherence of Brandom's arguments themselves. So, I will not consider these important and interesting questions in any more depth.

Yet, there is a related objection, which, in my view, threaten the very enterprise of global inferentialism from criteria *internal* to Brandom's theory: namely, that Brandom's inferentialism cannot account for objectivity of conceptual content.

1.2 Brandom on Objectivity

Brandom thinks that being able to account for objectivity is a desideratum of any meaningful theory, and acknowledges the difficulty inferentialists face with respect to providing such an account. However, Brandom claims that his brand of inferentialism has the resources to account for objectivity. As we will see, many commentators disagree. It is far from obvious what this notion, *objectivity*, even is. In order to get the discussion started, let me suggest a working definition:

Objectivity A sentence is *objectively correct* iff it correctly represents mind-independent reality.

Objectivity, at least in the context of our discussion, is best understood as a property, or normative status, of some claim. Objectivity in this sense is closely related to the property of truth, understood classically as correspondence with reality. So, another way to put the above thesis is that a claim is objectively correct iff it is *true*. In this section, first I will identify the reason behind the idea that accounting for objectivity is a desideratum of any meaningful theory; then, I will summarize Brandom's own account of objectivity. Finally, I will present some objections to Brandom's account.

1.2.1 The Need for Objectivity?

As an inferentialist about semantics and a pragmatist about philosophical method, both in the sense of classical American pragmatism and in the sense of later Wittgenstein, not many theoretical resources are available to Brandom to account for objectivity. Most inferentialists are (in)famous for being metaphysical anti-realists—roughly, that reality can coherently be said to exist prior to being perceived and/or articulated into sentences by rational beings—which is a commitment that typically goes hand-in-hand with deflationism about truth.¹⁶ Classical pragmatists (like Dewey and James) also evade committing to realism and a robust conception of truth, opting for quietist views about such big metaphysical questions. But, contrary to most inferentialists and pragmatists, Brandom wants to recuperate realism and objectivity within his inferentialism. Speaking about Brandom (and other pragmatists of this generation), Levine (2010) writes,

“In recent years, a renascent form of pragmatism has developed which argues that a satisfactory pragmatic position must integrate into itself the concepts of *truth* and *objectivity*. This New Pragmatism, as Cheryl Misak calls it, is directed primarily against Rorty’s neo-pragmatic dismissal of these concepts. For Rorty, the goal of our epistemic practices should not be to achieve an objective view, one that tries to represent things as they are ‘in themselves,’ but rather to attain a view of things that can gain as much inter-subjective agreement as possible. In Rorty’s language, we need to replace the aim of objectivity with that of *solidarity*. While the New Pragmatists agree with Rorty’s ‘humanist’ and ‘anti-authoritarian’ notion that the world by itself cannot dictate us what we should think about it, they demur from his suggestion that this required us to give up the notions of truth and objectivity” (p.567-568, my italics).

Now, why should Brandom demur from giving up the notions of truth and objectivity? I take it that the main reason for this is Brandom’s dissatisfaction with the pragma-

¹⁶Indeed, this is the main thesis of Dummett (1991). The point is to ‘dethrone’ *truth* as the master concept of semantics, replacing it with *assertibility* and/or *validity*.

tists' (especially Rorty's) positive philosophical contribution. In order to better understand this, let us review the interrelation of Brandom's and Rorty's thoughts.

Brandom's philosophy is heavily influenced by that of Rorty, who was one of his doctoral advisor (the other being David Lewis).¹⁷ In particular, Brandom's philosophy takes heed of Rorty's *anti-representationalism*, which is one of the most radical critiques of philosophy as such. In his book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty (1979)), Rorty sets out on a pragmatist crusade against representationalism. At the heart of Rorty's pragmatist and anti-representationalist thesis is a rather simple epistemological consideration. Rorty thought that epistemology is condemned to Agrippa's trilemma, whereby justification of knowledge is either circular, results in an infinite regress, or supposes an unjustified foundation on which all cognition rests. The first two options, according to Rorty, lead to skepticism. The first option appears to lead to solipsism: if justification indeed moves in a circle, rationality begins to appear disconnected from reality, or as John McDowell provocatively put it, like "a frictionless spinning in a void." (1994, p.11) The second option is equally troubling. We need only to make two plausible assumptions about the nature of justification: that justification is a binary relation between the justifier (e.g. "It is raining outside") and the justified (e.g. "The streets are wet"), and that justifiers can only transmit antecedently possessed rational warrant. Since it is, in principle, always possible to question the justificatory status of the justifier, the second option generates an infinite regress and thus leads to skepticism. In order to put a stop to the regress, one must posit a foundation. This remaining option, embraced by philosophers hitherto, is the main target of Rorty's attacks.

Rorty identifies and attacks two kinds of foundationalism: one that takes sense-experience to be a given that needs no further justification and another that admits a kind of cognition that is immediate and nonrepresentational, which serves as the foundation for all representational cognition. Empiricist philosophers, falling in the former camp, commits what Sellars dubbed the 'Myth of the Given,' which is, crudely, to falsely suppose that entities that cannot be reasons (i.e. propositionally contentless items like pure sense-datum) can stand in inferential or justificatory relation with those that can be (i.e. propositionally

¹⁷The clearest articulation of Brandom's intellectual debts to Rorty is found in R. B. Brandom (2022).

contentful items). Rationalist philosophers fall in the latter camp, assuming that subjects have privileged and infallible access to nonrepresentational states, paradigmatically Descartes' *cogito* and Plato's cognition of the Forms. In both cases, the foundations are deemed dogmatic by Rorty as they are irreducibly subjective—or based on first-person experience—and cannot be subject to further rational inquiry. This is what Rorty (1970) means when he says, "incorrigibility [is] the mark of the mental."

But what exactly is the connection between representationalism and epistemological foundationalism? Rorty thinks that philosophers are forced into accepting foundationalism because they are cornered into the intolerable choices offered in Agrippa's trilemma, and what brings the trilemma into view is their shared commitment to representationalism, in particular, the idea that reality can be truthfully represented in language and in thought. This is the crux of Rorty's critique: representationalism necessarily commits us to traditional epistemology, which in turn leads us to foundationalism and thus dogmatism; thus, we must abandon the idea that language and thought essentially aims to represent reality. Rorty, in a pithy slogan, summarizes this point: "cognition is for coping, not for copying." (1979, p. 11) This is, for Rorty, the essential pragmatist critique of epistemology and of representationalism that he attributes to later Wittgenstein, as seen in, for example, the following aphorism: "If I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do.'"

Given that Western philosophy from Plato onwards—and especially analytic philosophy—essentially aims at truthfully representing reality in language, according to Rorty, philosophy needs a radical reorientation. The validity of his argument leading up to such a radical conclusion notwithstanding, Brandom acknowledges the force of Rorty's epistemological criticism of representationalism. Rorty's critique can be seen as a fertile ground from which the philosophy of Brandom sprouts. Indeed, Brandom's philosophy can be understood as an attempt to flesh out a constructive theory of meaning, contra 'therapeutic' quietism. In doing so, Brandom rejects that constructive theorizing is futile, while staying true to the lessons from Rorty's critique of representationalism, namely its two central theses of the incorrigibility of the mental and social pragmatism about normativ-

ity.¹⁸

One of the upshots of the forgoing discussion is that reality (i.e. what we purportedly represent) cannot on its own normatively constrain us. In other words, the world and things in it are not the sort of things that can justify our beliefs and assertions, since to suppose that it can is to fall victim to the Myth of the Given. This ‘anti-authoritarian’ move leaves an explanatory vacuum for beliefs and assertions formed on the basis of perceptual experience—if we cannot appeal to ‘how things are’ as the ultimately source of justification for them, how are perceptually-formed beliefs and observational reports possible?

In fact, Brandom is acutely aware of the obvious pitfall of his *doktorvater*’s views: if all norms that determine the correctness of a claim is conventional, then we are faced with the threat of relativism (i.e. the correctness of a claim depends solely on the conventions of a linguistic community). From there, it is a short step to anti-rationalism—along the lines of the oft-cited Nietzschean dictum, “there are no facts, only interpretations.” Since Rorty embraces relativism of this kind, critiques leveled against Rorty along these lines are legion—including critiques of the so-called ‘postmodernism’, a movement wherein Rorty is sometimes placed. I will refrain from developing these critiques further, since I think that it is rather easy to see why untamed relativism about epistemic normativity is troubling.

Since linguistic rules, according to Brandom, arise within some a given practice, this seems to imply that rules are *social conventions*. Conventionalism may not be a problem for some specific and isolated semantic clusters (e.g. for rules governing the meaning of logical or mathematical vocabulary¹⁹), it is not, in general, attractive for the holist. Conventionalism implies relativism, in the sense that rules that are conventional are also only rules in the context where such conventions hold, namely in the context of a particular linguistic community. Problems arise in particular for rules governing empirical concepts as conventionalism seems to imply that the conditions and consequences of applying them

¹⁸A worked-out interpretation of Brandom’s philosophical project as a response to Rorty’s can be found in Bouché (2020).

¹⁹Since claims brought forward in these domains are typically understood as *analytic*, the meaning of concepts belonging to these categories can be conventional and yet lead to substantive truths.

(for example, ‘electron’) is a matter of social convention. But shouldn’t the meaning of such concepts be, at least in part, determined by the ‘things out there’?

This brings us to the fore one of the principal criticism of global inferentialism: in Williamson’s (2010) words, “since inferential relations do not fix truth and reference, meaning has not been adequately tied to the language-independent world.” This is a problem that Brandom inherits from Dummett’s assertibilist account of meaning. Dummett’s assertibilist account seeks to replace the central role occupied by truth-conditions in traditional semantic theorizing with assertibility conditions. But such a project runs into a familiar problem: norms that governs assertibility (the norm of rational warrant) appears to be distinct from the norm of truth, which determines the correctness of an assertion in a way that is fundamentally different from the correctness conceived of as rational warrant. This problem gives rise to what Wright and Hale (2010) call the *truth question*:

“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?” (p.276-277).

In addition to an account of truth, inferentialism needs an account of a related but nonetheless distinct phenomena of objectivity. Assertibility conditions are, in general, relative to the situation of the epistemic agent (including what information she has access to); however, the content—understood either in inferential and representational terms—is not in general relative.²⁰ This observation gives rise to the objectivity question: “can [Brandom] provide for the emergence of assertoric moves whose contents are objective

²⁰Special cases may include the use of the first-person pronoun.

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?” (ibid., p.277).

If all rules are understood as conventional, the inferentialist view amounts to giving up on both truth (as something distinct from norms that govern assertibility conditions and consequences) and objectivity understood as perspective-independence of content. Such a move would bring inferentialism dangerously close to Rorty’s view, and charges of anti-rationalism and skepticism about the very possibility of *genuine* normativity (which is to be contrasted with arbitrary rules, like that of etiquette) start to creep in. Thus, the chief motivation behind Brandom’s attempted rehabilitation of objectivity can be seen as a way out of the unpalatable consequences relativism brings.

1.2.2 Brandom’s Account

Acknowledging the threat of conventionalism, Brandom writes,

“The identification of objectivity with intersubjectivity [...] is defective in that it cannot find room for the possibility of error regarding that privileged perspective. [...] The alternative is to reconstrue objectivity as consisting in a kind of perspectival form, rather than in a nonperspectival or cross-perspectival content. 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” (1994, p. 599-600).

So, Brandom is clear in rejecting Rorty’s proposal of replacing objectivity with *solidarity* (or ‘intersubjectivity’), conceived of as the collective agreement by epistemic subjects within a linguistic community. The perspective of the ideal linguistic community is still, on Brandom’s view, just another perspective; it can be wrong, and thus, be criticized. In doing so, he rejects what he calls the ‘I-we’ account of sociality, which, as Kiryushchenko (2021) notes, coincides, in essence, with Peirce’s model of inquiry under which the ultimate epistemic subject is the entire epistemic community, which constitutes a regulative

ideal for rational inquiry. On Peirce's view, the ideal epistemic community provides a public criteria of truth, in the sense that what would be held true by the ideal community would coincide with truth. So, objective truth on this view is defined as a privileged perspective of the epistemic community at-large that meets certain conditions.

Brandom's alternative construal of objectivity is built on top of his pragmatic model of deontic scorekeeping, which upholds an 'I-thou' account of sociality. According to the 'I-thou' account, the perspective of each epistemic subject is "at most *locally* privileged in that it incorporates a structural distinction between objectively correct applications of concepts and applications that are merely subjectively taken to be correct" but, in contrast to the 'I-we' account, "none of these perspectives is privileged in advance over any other" (Brandom, 1994, p.600). Here, Brandom echoes Davidson's explanation of the pragmatic origins (i.e. within the context of primitive forms of linguistic communication) of objective representational content. Davidson (1984), expounding on a model of communication which he calls 'radical interpretation', writes,

"[...] the concepts of objective truth and error necessarily emerge in the context of interpretation. The distinction between a sentence being held true and being in fact true is essential to the existence of an interpersonal system of communication. [...] Someone cannot have a belief unless he understands the possibility of being mistaken, and this requires grasping the contrast between truth and error [...] [but this contrast] can emerge only in the context of interpretation, which alone forces us to the idea of an objective, public truth" (p.170).

Like Davidson, Brandom thinks that the ability to appreciate the distinction between 'what is taken to be true' (subjectively) and 'what is true' (objectively) emerges only in his model of deontic scorekeeping—which is "the social practices of attributing and acknowledging commitments and entitlements, which implicitly institute [normative] statuses" (Brandom, 1994, xvii) In fact, 'deontic scorekeeping practices' can be seen as the systematized generalization of Davidsonian radical interpretation.²¹

²¹Seen in this light, Brandom's model of pragmatics (viz. deontic scorekeeping) can, in principle, be cut

The exact structure of ‘deontic scorekeeping,’ which is essential to fully understanding Brandom’s account of objective representational content, is (perhaps overly) complex. For now, noting a few things about it should suffice. The fundamental move in deontic scorekeeping is the *attribution* of commitments. By attributing a commitment p to someone, the scorekeeper (or the discursive agent) notes three things. First, the scorekeeper attributes to the subject the assertion/belief that p ; second, that the subject commits to provide a reason when the truth of p is challenged; and third, that the subject commits to all of the claims that the scorekeeper believes are (materially) entailed by p . Whether the subject acknowledges them or not, claims that stand in material entailment relation to p are thus understood as the subject’s *undertakings*.

Using the resources of the deontic scorekeeping model (as well as his semantic model based on entailment and incompatibility relations), Brandom produces a pair of what he calls “objectivity proofs.”²² In particular, he shows that the following two inferences are, in general, impermissible:

No First-Person Ignorance (p) [$p \rightarrow$ I claim that p]

No First-Person Error (p) [I claim that $p \rightarrow p$]

The main idea of the proofs are that in both cases (of the above inferences), the antecedent and the consequent have differing incompatibility relations, due to the fact that attribution of a commitment to an epistemic subject does not automatically entitle her to that commitment. To illustrate this point, consider the following claims:

1. The swatch is red.
2. The claim that the swatch is red is properly assertible by me now.
3. Rational beings never existed.

off from his inferentialism about meaning. In fact, Macfarlane (2010) argues that the Davidsonian truth-conditional semantics is compatible with Brandom’s pragmatics. This threatens Brandom’s project at-large due to Brandom’s claim that his semantic theory grounded on his model of pragmatics; if his pragmatics is compatible with truth-conditional semantics, it is not clear, by Brandom’s own lights, why we should prefer an inferentialist semantics.

²²I will not treat these proofs in depth for the sake of concision. Cf. *ibid.*, p.605 for details.

It is clear that 1. and 2. have the same assertibility conditions. But, their propositional contents are different, due to the fact that their consequences differ. In particular, 1. is compatible with 3. but 2. and 3. are incompatible. The asymmetry between 1. and 2., shows that objectivity can be explained entirely on inferential grounds: some claims, namely empirical ones, are objective in the sense that their truth does not depend on any attitude (of endorsement or rejection). Thus, Brandom writes, “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” (1994, p. 604). The idea is that semantic correctness—i.e. proprieties of an inference—does not collapse into any given scorekeeper’s perspective. Furthermore, if we were to give up this simple idea, every scorekeeper would take herself to be omniscient and incorrigible (ibid., p.605), bankrupting the entire deontic scorekeeping model. Therefore, in line with the Davidsonian take on radical interpretation, Brandom thinks that this recognition must be shared by all speakers, constituting a necessary structural feature of deontic scorekeeping practices.

Now, recall my provisional characterization of objectivity: a claim is objectively correct iff it correctly represents mind-independent reality. Compare this with Brandom’s own take:

“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” (1994, p.63).

Given that the primary way in which we apply conceptual norms is in asserting a claim, Brandom would, I think, assent to my characterization of objectivity, albeit in a qualified manner. The qualification would come in at least three ways. The first and most obvious qualification would be that the above objectivity thesis is not to be interpreted as a *metasemantic* claim: namely, as a metalinguistic statement specifying the semantic representational content of the sentence in the object language, akin to Tarski’s celebrated T-schema and its appropriation by Davidson in his account of meaning (viz.

truth-conditional semantics). The truth condition of a claim is never settled in the sense that on one is, nor would they ever be, in an epistemic position to assert, for arbitrary sentence *S*, the claim “*S* is objectively true” without being subject to challenges or being exonerated from the possibility of error. In other words, objectivity does not consist of a theoretical rendering of representational content from a perspective-free ‘view from nowhere.’

This brings us to the second qualification: the representational content of an expression²³ in general, and the meaning of the predicate ‘correctly represents mind-independent reality’ (i.e. the classical interpretation of the truth predicate) in particular, is to be explained in terms of its *expressive roles*, namely, as locutions that allow speakers to make explicit exactly what someone’s inferential commitment is, in virtue of which deontic scorekeeping is done (as in the example given above). As such, an expression’s representational content is ultimately explained in terms of the expression’s role in deontic scorekeeping practices.²⁴

1.2.3 Three Kinds of Semantic Objectivity

Before moving onto objections to Brandom’s account of objectivity, let us now summarize the discussion up until now. Reinikainen (2021) offers a useful typology of the notions of objectivity discussed by Brandom:

- (AI) A norm *n* is attitude-immanent for community *C* iff it is not possible for everyone in *C* to be mistaken about the correct applications of *n*.
- (AT) A norm *n* is attitude-transcendent for community *C* iff it is possible for everyone in *C* to be mistaken about the correct applications of *n*.
- (PO) A norm *n* is properly objective for community *C* iff the world of objects partially determines the correct applications of *n*.

²³This includes including that of subsentential expressions and, in Brandom’s terminology, ‘*De re* ascription’ of propositional content.

²⁴Brandom promises us an inferentialist explanation of representational content and of a realist notion of objective truth, but strictly speaking, this is inaccurate; he explains representation by appealing to his pragmatic theory, which can, in principle, be severed from his inferentialism. See footnote 24 for more.

The weakest form of objectivity is AI. Mostly this form of objectivity applies to non-discursive norms such as norms of etiquette. For such norms, “it makes no sense to suppose that [the community] could be wrong about this sort of thing” (Brandom, 1994, p.53). This form of objectivity is clearly insufficient for Brandom’s aim of avoiding relativistic consequences about norms and thus rational practices.

Next, AT stands in contrast to AI in that the conditions for applying norms that satisfy AT are not necessarily and sufficiently determined as correct by the linguistic community (or a subgroup of experts therein). In other words, the consensus of the linguistic community can be wrong about circumstances under which norms are applied. Importantly, Brandom says that norms governing the inferential role of expressions fall under this category: they are distinct from AI norms precisely because only conceptual norms are rightly called attitude-transcendent (1994, 53-54). In this sense, AT is a more demanding criteria for norms than AI.

Finally, PO states that at least part of determinant of correct concept application is the mind-independent world. It is by far the strongest form of objectivity considered here. To satisfy PO, the negative view of objectivity, as consisting in acknowledgement of the possibility of error even from the point of view of the linguistic community, is not sufficient; the norms themselves must be subject to correctness of the representational content determined by the world of objects.

As Reinikainen (2021, p.63-66) points out, according to Brandom, the three kinds of semantic objectivity are layered and continuous, in the sense that AT is grounded on AI and PO on AT. The original source of semantic normativity, according to Brandom, is the normative attitudes (of ‘taking-true’) of the speakers. This is a view he calls *phenomenalism about norms* (1994, 25). Once norms are sufficiently entrenched (or ‘instituted’) in practice, then they satisfy AI. Then, once the primitive discursive practice develops sufficiently, the thought goes, some norms—namely conceptual norms—begin to satisfy AT. As mentioned earlier, the explanation for the shift from AI to AT is given essentially along Davidsonian lines. This is when discursive practice—or deontic scorekeeping practice—can be said to be fully up-and-running. It is also at this point, according to Brandom, that norms begin to satisfy PO: in recognizing the possibility of error, speakers also rec-

ognize that the source of semantic normativity is not just their normative attitudes. The source is extended to the world of objects, such that the objects come to be ‘incorporated’ in the practice and as such begin to dictate what our conceptual norms should be. So, while semantic normativity is, at base, grounded in normative attitudes, the recognition that the world in part ought to shape conceptual norms allows the world to exert normative authority over our discursive practices. This is the view Brandom calls *normative phenomenalism* (ibid., p.627).

1.3 The Problem with Brandom’s Account

Brandom’s account of objectivity is persistently attacked by critics from all kinds of different considerations. Here, I will develop two such objections: i) that Brandom wants to endorse PO, but in fact his explanation, mainly consisting in his objectivity proofs, only support AT and ii) that if Brandom wants to (forcibly) explain PO in terms of incompatibility, he needs not only an *deontic* modal, but an *alethic* modal notion of material incompatibility relations. In either case, Brandom cannot vindicate objective representational content, it comes without heavy metaphysical commitments.

1.3.1 Objection 1: Objectivity proofs yield AT, but not PO

Brandom promises us accounts of AT and PO which, according to him, naturally emerge in deontic scorekeeping practices. In particular, Brandom writes that his objectivity proofs show that “the facts as construed in this work are independent of what anyone or everyone is committed to” (i.e., AT), which as a result make possible “genuine fact-stating discourse, for they incorporate practices of asserting claims and inferences according to their objective correctness—a kind of correctness that answers to how things actually are, rather than how they are taken to be, by anyone (including oneself) or everyone” (i.e., PO) (1994, p.606-607).

But, as various commentators have noted under different guises, Brandom’s account of objectivity really amounts to AT and fails to deliver on PO.²⁵ In particular, even if we

²⁵See, for example, Levine, 2010; Gibbard, 2010; Reinikainen, 2021.

assume that Brandom's objectivity proofs go through and that the threats of the *No First-Person Ignorance* condition and the *No First-Person Error* condition have been dealt with, it still does not show that PO holds. Let us assume that AT holds, namely, in virtue of the fact that any one perspective can in principle be wrong.

But how do we get from AT to PO? Brandom suggests that acknowledging the possibility of error of any given perspective implies an acknowledgement of the normative force (or 'authority' in Brandom's terminology) of something other than the normative attitudes that institute social norms: namely, objective reality. To illustrate the general idea, consider Brandom's favorite example of how PO might emerge out of AT (1994, p.332-333):

1. The subject has a normative attitude such that she is disposed to draw the inference "If some substance tastes sour, it will turn litmus paper red."
2. The subject perceptually experiences a substance that tastes sour.
3. The subject then sees that in fact the substance turns litmus paper blue.
4. The subject acknowledges her practical failure, nixing her commitment to infer "If some substance tastes sour, it will turn litmus paper red."

In this example, the subject's normative attitudes undergo a change owing to the subject's experience of a chain of causal events. So, normative phenomena are intertwined with causal phenomena. The example undoubtedly shows that the world enforces causal constraints on our normative attitudes, in the sense that certain physical changes in the world caused changes in the subject's disposition to draw certain inferences or accept certain claims. But, this causal constraint is describable in a purely naturalistic vocabulary; it is far from obvious how the world can *normatively* constrain our normative attitudes, that is, how facts can *justify* the subject's moves in the deontic scorekeeping model. The subject *ought* to alter her commitments given her acknowledgement of her own error; the fact that her disposition to draw certain inferences changed due to causal events in the world does is just that: a fact. A fact could only exert normative force (the force of

'ought') on the subject only on her acknowledgement that inferences (and thus concepts) she endorses ought to be in accordance with facts.

But PO requires the claim that objects themselves constrain norms: if we want to say that, for instance, norms governing the concept 'litmus paper' is objective in the sense specified by PO, we need an explanation of why/how litmus paper (the physical object) can partly set the standard of *correctness* of applying such norms. Since correctness must always be cashed out in normative terms, it is at best unclear, on Brandom's explanation, how objects (or perceptual experience) themselves, rather than our acknowledgement of the importance of them, can exert normative force on us.

Brandom goes on to tell us, rather programmatically, that in order to understand how the world can normatively constrain us, we must give up the opposition between reality on one side and thought/talk on the other. Brandom appeals to a Tractarian picture of the world as composed of states-of-affairs ("The world is everything that is the case, a constellation of facts" (1994, p.333)) and quotes with approval the following aphorism from the *Investigations*: "When we say, and mean, that such-and-such is the case, we-and our meaning-do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: this-is-so." The discussion remains extremely opaque here, but Brandom's stance seems to suggest a kind of metaphysical idealism, wherein thought/talk is identified as such with the world. "What is lost" by assuming this metaphysical thesis, according to Brandom, "is only the bifurcation that makes knowledge seem to require the bridging of a gap that opens up between sayable and thinkable contents-thought of as existing self-contained on their side of the epistemic crevasse-and the worldly facts, existing on their side" (ibid.).

Brandom elaborates on these programmatic remarks in subsequent works, most notably on his recent works grappling with Hegel's idealism.²⁶ But this is not the place to evaluate Brandom's metaphysical views. We will touch on this topic when we get to Brandom's construal of the principle of harmony in Chapter 3. For now, it suffices to notice that such a radical metaphysical stance requires more substantiation and justification than a mere few lines of allusion to Wittgenstein can deliver. In fact, if indeed Brandom's account of objectivity relies on his quasi-idealistic metaphysics, he fails to deliver on the

²⁶Cf. R. Brandom (2019)

promise of accounting for objectivity from the theoretical resources afforded by his deontic scorekeeping model of discursive practice. That is, his main project of the second half of *Making It Explicit*, namely to derive an account of objectivity and objective representational content by taking the pragmatic model of discursive practice as the sole theoretical primitive, falls short by his own lights.

1.3.2 Objection 2: Scepticism about Incompatibility Semantics

The trouble for Brandom's account of objectivity doesn't end there. Recall the two inferences (viz. No first-person ignorance condition and no first-person error condition) that threaten the very possibility of objectivity (conceived of as AT) within the deontic scorekeeping model. The content of Brandom's objectivity proofs is to show that, in each of the two cases, the antecedent and the consequent do not share the same extension for incompatibility relations. Given Brandom's account of objectivity relies heavily on the notion of material incompatibility, any criticism raised against incompatibility semantics threatens to take down Brandom's account of objectivity with it.

Once again, incompatibility is explained pragmatically in terms of the interplay of commitments and entitlements: p are q incompatible iff a commitment to p precludes entitlement to q and vice versa. Now, the immediate question is what this 'preclusion' amounts to. On the most obvious reading, the nature of this preclusion should be understood in *deontic* modal flavor: a commitment to p makes it *impermissible* to be entitled to q , and vice-versa. In other words, given an antecedent commitment to p , one ought to be not committed to q and vice-versa. But, this simple analysis collapses the two kinds of deontic status—i.e. commitment and entitlement—into one, namely as commitments. So, this brings us to an interpretative problem: why do we need to appeal to the interplay between 'commitment' and 'entitlement' to cash out the notion of incompatibility?

The answer is that in order to fully appreciate the difference between the deontic statuses, one must understand that, for Brandom, assertions are "implicit knowledge claims" (1994, p.200); and, to cash out the notion of knowledge, one must appreciate the distinction of social perspective between *attributing* a commitment (to someone else)

and *acknowledging* or undertaking it (oneself). On one hand, a subject's (S) attribution of a commitment (p) to another subject (A) amounts to the claim, 'S is committed to 'A is committed to p '; on the other hand, (S)'s acknowledgment of A's commitment (p) amounts to the claim, 'S is committed to p .' Leveraging the distinction between attribution and acknowledgment, Brandom can refashion the classic tripartite analysis of knowledge as justified true belief in his deontic scorekeeping model in the following way: attribution of knowledge to someone as a conjunction of attribution of a commitment (corresponding to the belief condition), attribution of an entitlement (corresponding to the justification condition), and acknowledgement of a commitment oneself (corresponding to the truth condition). Therefore, as Brandom notes, "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" (2010, p.361-362).

So, the correct pragmatic analysis of incompatibility relation is necessarily multi-perspectival, or, more specifically, dialogical.²⁷ So, it is rather misleading to define incompatibility in a monological (or uni-perspectival) way as 'a commitment to p precludes entitlement to q and vice versa.' But while the deontic modal rendering of incompatibility (i.e. in terms of rights and obligations) secures us the distinction needed for AT, it is once again insufficient for PO. The deontic reading secures us AT because it allows us to draw a distinction between the propositional content of objective statements (like 'The swatch is red') and non-objective statements (like 'That the swatch is red is now assertible by me'). Showing that assertibility conditions on their own do not determine content (i.e. consequence of application is just as important) is enough to show that at least some conceptual norms are not dependent on any particular discursive perspective. However, to vindicate the claim that content is partly determined by objects themselves (PO), you need more than that. As Hale & Wright (2010) note,

²⁷Brandom is at times very clear on this point: "The conceptual contents employed in monological reasoning, in which all the premises and conclusions are potential commitments of one individual, are parasitic on and intelligible only in terms of the conceptual contents conferred by dialogical reasoning, in which the issue of what follows from what essentially involves assessments from the different social perspectives of interlocutors with different background commitments" (1994, p.497).

“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” (p.282).

So: while the deontic modal rendering of ‘preclusion’ (i.e. in terms of rights and obligations) secures us the distinction needed for AT, it is once again insufficient for PO. For, what is needed in order to vindicate PO is a alethic modal rendering (i.e. in terms of possibility and necessity), which allows us to define the semantic notion of *inconsistency* in terms of the pragmatic notion of incompatibility. If Brandom’s explanation for objectivity can be read so as to vindicate PO, the incompatibility between, for example, ‘That the swatch is red is now assertible by me’ and ‘Rational beings never existed’ must hold in virtue of the world, or, given that Brandom echoes the Wittgensteinian claim that the world is composed of facts, in virtue of objective facts that make up the world. In other words, the incompatibility between the above claims must be involving an impossibility, understood alethic modally: if p and q are incompatible, then it is impossible for $p \wedge q$ to be true.

Brandom seems to be aware of this issue. Despite his insistence that incompatibility can only arise in a dialogical setting (i.e. in the context of ‘I-thou’ sociality), Brandom is open to the idea that a semantics, understood monologically without explicit reference to the underlying pragmatic context, can be abstracted and coherently articulated as a formal semantics in the form of incompatibility semantics (although the pragmatic layer would necessarily be part of this theory, only implicitly). Already in *Making it Explicit*,

Brandom claims *en passant* that p and q are *inconsistent* given that they stand in material incompatibility relation, according to which inconsistency is understood as a formal semantic notion grounded on a more primitive material notion of incompatibility, analogue to how formal inference is explained in terms of material inference (1994, p.160, p.672). But the idea that incompatibility relations can yield a formal semantics comes to fruition in *Between Saying and Doing* (2008). The suggestion there is that we could represent the propositional content expressed by a sentence by the set of sentences that express propositions incompatible with it (or, more precisely, represent propositional content as a function that takes as inputs set of sentences and output the set of sets of sentences that are incompatible with it). Incompatibility is cashed out, alethic modally,²⁸ along the following lines: p and q are incompatible iff it is impossible for p and q to hold simultaneously. Furthermore, for Brandom, incompatibility semantics is ‘directly modal’ by which he means, “it does not proceed by defining (non-modal) truth at an index, and then generalizing over indices.” Here again, lurking in the background is Brandom’s idealism.²⁹

Rosenkranz (2001) provides an interesting critique of Brandom’s account of objectivity based on this alethic modal reading of ‘preclusion’, where the tension between the two claims are cashed out as inconsistency. According to Rosenkranz, “it is part of our ordinary conception of truth as objective that there are some claims which it is not inconsistent to think true even while there are no warrants on whose basis they may be asserted” and that “this much even the anti-realist is willing to concede” (p.236).³⁰ For example, consider Goldbach’s conjecture: it is possible to imagine that it is true (or that it is false), even if we have no way of justifying it (or its negation) and therefore asserting it (or its negation). Accordingly, Rosenkranz thinks Brandom is minimally committed to the following claim:

If p is apt for objective truth, then ‘ p & $\neg Wp$ ’ is not inconsistent

²⁸This might be a controversial claim, but I think nonetheless it must be attributed to Brandom; if incompatibility is still understood as a deontic notion even at the semantic level, it is subject to an obvious objection along the lines of Rosenkranz (2001). Rosenkranz’s argument will be evaluated in what follows.

²⁹There are many obvious objections to this project. In particular, Brandom rejects any kind of possible-worlds semantics for modal terms, and it is unclear whether his account adequately captures the meaning of modal terms—he says it can; others (e.g. Turbanti (2011)) say it cannot. But here I will merely flag this issue.

³⁰Here, he cites Crispin Wright, Dummett, and Brandom himself to substantiate the claim.

where Wp is read as ‘There are no warrants for p .’ Then, Rosenkranz proves that according to Brandom’s characterization of incompatibility in terms of entitlements and commitments, there are no claims that are apt for truth. In particular, the proof shows that Brandom’s definition of commitment, entitlement, and incompatibility entails the following two conditionals:

$$1. (Cp \& E \neg Wp) \rightarrow \#$$

$$2. (C \neg Wp \& Ep) \rightarrow \#$$

Here, Cp is read as ‘a commitment to p is undertaken,’ Ep as ‘There is an entitlement to p ,’ and $\#$ as a symbol for inconsistency, “which is akin to that for *Falsum* but whose exact interpretation I leave open” (Rosenkranz, 2001, p.236). To give a concrete example, the first conditional might be the something like: the commitment to ‘The swatch is red’ precludes entitlement to ‘It is not the case that the swatch is red is properly assertible by me now’. The second conditional would then be: the commitment to ‘It is not the case that the swatch is red is properly assertible by me now’ precludes entitlement to ‘The swatch is red.’ So, ‘The swatch is red’ and ‘It is not the case that the swatch is red is properly assertible by me now’ is inconsistent. Given the definition of incompatibility, this entails that for any arbitrary p , ‘ $p \& \neg Wp$ ’ is inconsistent. Even informally, this much is intuitive.

I will not go through the proof in detail, contenting myself with two observations. The first is that Rosenkranz’s proof arguably shows not only that PO cannot be sustained within Brandom’s theory, but also AT. If indeed Brandom’s characterization of the deontic scorekeeping practices entails the claim that ‘ $p \& \neg Wp$ ’ is inconsistent in the sense that it is impossible for a claim to be true and none of us have justification for it, it seems to imply that we could never be wrong about anything we assert with warrant. (It should be noted that Rosenkranz’s argument is reminiscent of the infamous *knowability paradox* due to F. Fitch (1963) which plagues most anti-realist views, which says that “all truths are knowable” entails “all truths are known.”) And of course, these are not consequences that Brandom would accept. By now it should be quite obvious that the source of these troubles is the alethic modal construal of preclusion (i.e. in terms of inconsistency) which

completely drops the inherently deontic and dialogical dimension of material incompatibility. Understood deontically, the incompatibility of ' $p \ \& \ \neg Wp$ ' is straightforwardly analyzed as a typical example of structural irrationality: one ought not to endorse p given her antecedent commitment to $\neg Wp$, and vice-versa. This is completely uncontroversial, as it says nothing about objective facts.

However, given that Brandom wants to account for PO and doing so requires an alethic modal reading of preclusion, it is admittedly not clear where exactly the deontic dimension should fit in. Yet again, Brandom's arguments seem to trade on his metaphysical view developed most fully in R. Brandom (2018), under which there is a certain kind of identity between deontic and alethic modalities. Here it suffices to note that such a story incurs heavy metaphysical commitments, and that no such story is available within *Making it Explicit*, nor is it possible to tell it within the theoretical aims of the book.

Second, it should be noted that Rosenkrantz's proof is valid in classical logic, but not in intuitionistic logic: his proof makes use of *reductio* (but, of course, it is possible to create a *reductio*-free proof, only we would need to introduce the law of excluded middle or other intuitionistically invalid theorems). As noted earlier, Brandom, unlike most other inferentialists, is logically quietist: he endorses an expressivist view of logic, according to which logical vocabulary is distinguished by its 'expressive role' in *Making It Explicit* the inferential relations that articulate the semantic contents of the concepts expressed by the use of material concepts. If one offers this logically expressivist, semantically inferentialist answer to [the question, "how to distinguish between logical and non-logical vocabulary?"], the [question "which logic is correct?"] lapses" (Brandom, 2018, p.70). So, Brandom thinks that classical and intuitionistic logic are compatible, in the sense that they both help us make our commitments explicit, albeit in different contexts. This is a point of tension between Brandom and most other inferentialists, who think that intuitionistic logic is the correct (or, at least, more coherent) logic in virtue of the fact that operational rules for some classical connectives are inharmonious. This point will be developed further in the following two chapters.

1.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was three-fold: i) introduce readers unfamiliar with Brandom's inferentialism to its basic tenets, ii) provide a detailed exegesis of Brandom's take on objectivity, and iii) identify some issues with Brandom's account of objectivity. With regards to iii), the upshot is that PO cannot be coherently defended, at least, by relying on resources on Brandom's main (i.e. non-ad hoc) theoretical assumptions. To generalize slightly, Brandom's realist ambitions seem to stand in tension with his commitment to inferentialism; trying to account for PO even risks giving up AT, which is an aspect of objectivity that, in my view, Brandom is able to account for.

But why does Brandom want to account for PO? As far as I can tell, there is little to no such need.³¹ If I am correct in identifying Brandom's main concern as preventing our discursive practices to go off the rails (i.e. something that Rorty-style relativism might imply), an account of objectivity is, while sufficient, not strictly necessary. All we need to avoid the charge of relativism is an adequately articulated normative constraint on meaning-conferring linguistic rules in order to discriminate between defective rules (and thus incoherent concepts) and legitimate rules (and thus coherent concepts). As we will see in the next chapter, logical inferentialists try to articulate such a normative constraint for rules in the form of the principle of harmony. The full relevance of the principle of harmony for natural language will not be clear until the third chapter.

³¹Besides, in my view, it is probably a lot less metaphysically taxing to argue for PO by incorporating insights from the empiricist tradition, i.e. the argument that perceptual experience can normatively constrain our beliefs and assertions. I will touch upon this in my last chapter, but a full treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this project.

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