

# Brandom on material inference

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## 1. Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that the task of philosophical pragmatics of a Wittgensteinian sort consists in explaining how natural language expressions gain their meaning in a context of use. Moreover, as R. Brandom himself puts it, philosophical pragmatics should provide us with an account of the special role semantic vocabulary plays in our language practice. Pragmatics should, therefore, define the framework for conceptual analysis, i.e., among other things, it should specify the rules that govern the application of semantic metalinguistic concepts and it should make clear what results we can and what results we cannot reasonably expect from a piece of conceptual analysis.

Let us explain this point in a more straightforward way. Very loosely speaking, when we use special vocabulary to comment on the pragmatic value of an uttered content in abstraction of the act of utterance itself, we are essentially doing semantics. Ironically, there may be no real need to go into much detail about the general line of divide between semantics and pragmatics. “What is said” by an utterance may simply be a handy, though imprecise, informal concept that very successfully simplifies our manner of speaking in a range of everyday conversational situations. It may not enjoy much of a systematic nature<sup>1</sup>.

If we endorse pragmatism about linguistic meaning, we realise that what human beings do with words is prior in order of explanation to what these words mean. However, we do not have to abandon the semantic vocabulary proven useful by centuries of practice. In many cases and for many purposes, it will continue to do a good metalinguistic job. What does change is that now we have “an appeal court” which can provide further insights into the use of basic vocabulary. In this manner, philosophical pragmatics can suggest the adequate semantic vocabulary for a particular exercise in metalinguistic analysis. Such terms as “reference”, “entailment” or “concept” may be perfectly acceptable as unexplained explainers within formal semantics, but as pragmatists, we should advance an explanation as to what makes these concepts into suitable tools for a particular discourse analysis.

For instance, one of the crucial turning points in the 20th century pragmatics was the abandonment of the idea that a suitable conceptual analysis could in some way reduce any statement to a set of claims featuring exclusively directly observational concepts. It was tantamount to a realisation that expressing our subjective perceptual states is not all what we essentially do with our language. Wittgenstein’s contribution to pragmatics was a discovery to the effect that the great number of things we do with language may actually have very little in common.

The analytical tools supplied by philosophical pragmatics can in turn be put to work in a variety of fields where language is in the focus of the inquiry, ranging from reflexions on moral discourse to literary criticism. In order to perform this task properly, nevertheless, these tools must be handy and always within reasonable reach for an intelligent and informed thinker. If we spend more time inquiring into the correct use of this framework than applying it to the field we are concerned with, and if despite all the efforts to tame the beast we cannot

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<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, I do not want to commit myself by these brief remarks to either minimalism or contextualism, although they may be indicative of some bias in favour of the latter.

avoid frustrating doubts about its proper use, we would be better off getting rid of this particular pragmatic theory.

By the way, I believe that it is this feature of some of the so-called continental philosophy that provokes such deep resentment among analytic philosophers. Whenever the abstruseness of a piece of philosophical analysis (which may or may not be concerned with language, as in our case) precludes its smooth application to the lower level discourse in the same domain, the philosophical debate disconnects itself from the conceptual development of the field in question. And even more important, it relinquishes the only correctness criteria available for an exercise in abstract reflexion, while becoming increasingly self-centred.

In the two works that come under scrutiny in this essay<sup>2</sup>, Brandom analyses the semantic concept of “material inference” by means of the pragmatic vocabulary of “commitment” and “entitlement”. The privileged position of this vocabulary in philosophical pragmatics comes down to its fitness to describe the “game of giving and asking for reasons” which, as Brandom sees it, lies at the core of our language practice.

Obviously, to accuse Brandom of the analytic arbitrariness of a Heidegger would mean stretching the point way too far. However, as I hope to show in what follows, there is an ambiguity about Brandom’s project of inferential semantics that hinders us from applying it successfully within conceptual analysis. Unfortunately, it seems to me at this point that he makes deft use of the worst ruses of continental philosophy in order to conceal the lack of analytic depth that afflicts his reflexion on this topic.

## 2. Assertion, commitment and entitlement in Brandom

In order to perceive clearly why Brandom’s version of the project of inferential semantics misfires, I suggest that we should first reconstruct his deontic scorekeeping model of discursive practice. On Brandom’s account, propositional content is conferred on natural language sentences within the game of giving and asking for reasons. Assertions correspond to the most basic moves in this game - their performances have the normative value of acknowledging a doxastic commitment. For Brandom, to undertake a commitment always means to acquire a certain social status and doxastic commitments are no exception to this rule. Once it is undertaken, the question of entitlement to a social status may arise. Brandom holds that the notion of the inferential role a commitment plays within a net of other commitments and entitlements (to these commitments) provides us with a finer-grained understanding of propositional content than just the “single-sorted notion of propriety of circumstances and consequences of performance”<sup>3</sup>.

The content of a claim can be properly represented as the three-dimensional inferential role it plays in commitment-preserving, entitlement-preserving and incompatibility relations in which it stands to other propositional contents.

Since all this abstract language inevitably stirs perplexity in the reader, let us take a closer look at what happens, on Brandom’s account, when a sentence with the propositional content  $p$  is publicly uttered by a competent language practitioner (B) and interpreted by a *scorekeeper* (A).

Once B asserts  $p$ , the first thing for the scorekeeper A to do is to add  $p$  to the list of commitments she attributes to B.

The second thing for her to do is to attribute to B any commitment that is a commitment-preserving consequence of  $p$ , given the rest of commitments she attributes to B and the committive-inferential role she associates with  $p$ .

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<sup>2</sup> Brandom, R. 1994. *Making it Explicit*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.  
2008. *Between Saying and Doing*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Brandom, R. 1994. *Making it Explicit*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, p.159.

The third thing she must do is to assess whether any of the entitlements she previously attributed to B are not precluded by his new commitment to *p*. She can attribute entitlement to any committive-inferential consequences of commitments she considers B as entitled to.

The fourth step in the score-keeping process is the attribution of entitlement to any claims that are entitlement-preserving consequences of commitments B is held to be entitled to.

And as a last thing on the list, A must assess B's very entitlement to *p*, whether by "looking at good inferences having it as a conclusion and at premises to which B is committed and entitled", by attributing *default entitlement*, or by authorizing B to inherit this commitment by *testimony*.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Criticism of Brandom's model

Let us begin our criticism by stating one preliminary point. It seems that this model of semantic interpretation relies heavily on the strict Gricean distinction between *what is said* and *what is implicated*. Pragmatic interpretive inferences, in Brandom's own words, are not linked to the content of a claim, but rather to the performance of claiming it<sup>5</sup>. Naturally, there may be a way of defending such a conservative position, but anyone who supports the view that pragmatic interpretive inferences play a significant role in determining the propositional content of utterances should be suspicious of Brandom's theory.

My first doubt about this view of autonomous language practice has to do with the fact that on this account the scorekeeper may attribute entitlement to commitments contracted for wrong reasons. In the fifth step, namely, the scorekeeper may grant entitlement to *p* by virtue of there being good inferences from other claims to which the speaker is committed and entitled that have *p* as consequence. However, it is the scorekeeper who assesses the goodness of these consequence relations, not the speaker. It may well happen that the speaker is committed to *p* by virtue of an inference that is considered invalid (or bad) by the scorekeeper's lights.

This problem comes to the fore when we assess past entitlement to contents that we actually consider false at the moment. Can we under certain circumstances be entitled to have false beliefs? This is an old question in epistemology, which Brandom does not address directly. Be it as it may, we should be aware that this is a conceptual, rather than a factual problem. We understand what is being meant by considering a false belief as justified and we understand as well the rationale for sometimes using the notion of justification in a stronger sense. What an adequate epistemological theory should do is to provide an explanation of how these two senses of "justification" interact.

Since Brandom seems to have the weaker sense of justification in mind when he introduces the notion of *entitlement* (that is why he defines knowledge as justified true belief, and not simply as *justified* belief), it follows that a scorekeeper sometimes can attribute entitlement to the commitment to a false proposition believed for wrong reasons.

And there is more. According to Brandom, entailment-preserving inferences are in general non-monotonic and defeasible. However, when assessing the speaker's entitlement to a claim, the scorekeeper matches *speaker's* commitments with inferences *she* endorses. It may therefore occur that the speaker is not committed to a defeasor (i.e. a claim which, combined with the original premises, renders the inference invalid) of one of these inferences, which is nonetheless held true by the scorekeeper. In spite of that, the scorekeeper is forced to entitle the speaker to the conclusion of this inference.

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 158.

This outcome may actually be desirable in some cases, since we can easily imagine circumstances under which ignorance of the truth value of a certain proposition may be warranted. However, this kind of situation falls short of constituting a universal rule. More often than not, we hold people responsible for their lack of knowledge - they *might* not, but they *should* have been aware of the actual defeasor of their inference.

Now Brandom's idiom, of course, has a means of describing similar situations - he might resort to the notion of unacknowledged, yet undertaken commitments in order to explain away the alleged anomaly. However, it seems to me that these two notions (on the one hand, the informal notion of a claim that *should* be believed in a certain situation, and on the other, the theory-laden notion of an unacknowledged commitment) fall short of being equivalent. First of all, Brandom argues that this kind of commitment is attributed by virtue of it following by commitment-preserving consequence relation endorsed by the scorekeeper from another commitment acknowledged by the speaker. But we should not forget that on Brandom's account commitment-preserving inferences are monotonic and that we may hold a person responsible for not having a particular belief because of not having carried out a defeasible inference (of an inductive sort, for instance). On the other hand, there are many commitment-preserving inferences which require such degree of computational ingenuity that, for purposes of attributing entitlement to other claims, the scorekeeper may occasionally exonerate the assessed epistemic subject from the obligation of believing their conclusions (although he would still be committed to these conclusions in Brandom's sense if he acknowledged commitment to their premises). Moreover, Brandom had better give us an account of a non-inferential way of undertaking commitments so as to deal with cases of propositions which "should be believed" on the strength of perceptual or testimonial evidence.

One last problem on the entitlement side of the divide - Brandom states that acknowledgment of new commitments can add as much as subtract previous entitlements. Well, it is clear how it can subtract entitlements, since the new commitment may stand in incompatibility relations to those entitlements. However, it is much more obscure how it possibly could add entitlements. If the speaker is not entitled to the commitment in question, it can hardly warrant any new beliefs in the first place. And if he is already entitled to this commitment, no new entitlement seems to be gained by acknowledging it.

We have already briefly mentioned the role the commitment-preserving inferences play within the process of deontic scorekeeping. On acknowledging a commitment, the speaker entitles the scorekeeper to attribute to him any other commitment that follows by commitment-preserving inference from the acknowledged one. The strange thing, though, is that it is once more the inferences endorsed by the scorekeeper that close the speaker's score under commitment-preserving entailment. In other words, the scorekeeper considers the speaker as committed to all claims which by her lights non-defeasibly follow from the commitments he acknowledges.

But is it really true that we mercilessly impose the inferences we approve of on our fellow man? Since the scorekeeper does not take the speaker to be committed to the same *claims* she endorses, why should she do the opposite when *goodness of inferences* is at stake? I may disagree with someone who rejects a particular inferential pattern, but I may respect the coherence of their position by not attributing to them unacknowledged commitments which I know they would attempt to disavow if questioned.

I suspect Brandom is keen to put forward such a strong claim because he regards concepts as imbued with normative force - and this is one way of spelling out this idea. However, it is not the *only* way and neither is it, I believe, a *fortunate* way of doing so. It is exactly this proposal that forces Brandom to abandon the unitary concept of material inference and analyse it instead into the three inferential conceptual relations mentioned above. He is forced to distinguish between entailment-preserving inferences and commitment-

preserving inferences, because it would be hugely implausible for the scorekeeper to automatically attribute commitment to unexpressed claims on the basis of defeasible consequence relations. However, very little seems to have been achieved by this move apart from making a muddle of the intuitive notion of material inference. Suppose, for instance, that (to our great awe) an established formal system of deductive reasoning turns out to be inconsistent. Then it is possible that we may disagree about the feature of the system which, according to our lights, is responsible for the havoc. You may withdraw your allegiance from one derivational rule, and I may do the same with another rule. And although I may deem you completely confused, I would recoil from considering you as committed to the consequences of the application of the rule you have rejected.

Brandom is aware of the fact that on his account of commitment, the scorekeeper must carry out yet another task in order to keep track of the speaker's epistemic situation. She must make a distinction between those commitments the speaker acknowledges (or is disposed to acknowledge), those she attributes to him although he might not acknowledge them explicitly, and those he would attempt to disavow on being questioned. It is only the former ones which are *pragmatically efficient*, that is, only these commitments have to be taken into account when predicting or explaining the speaker's behaviour.

This brings us to a final point in this somewhat merciless assessment of Brandom's theory of deontic scorekeeping as a basis of autonomous language practice. At no point does Brandom provide an explanation of the kind of benefit that accrues to the scorekeeper through her partaking in this complex, time-and-effort-consuming exercise. There is a fundamental difference between the above account and the approach taken for example by a theory based on cognitivist premises (e.g. the Relevance Theory). Although they admittedly differ in focus and objectives, there is a lack of intuitiveness to the former which renders its application to the actual language practice extremely cumbersome. One of the reasons for this unsatisfactory performance is the fact that we ignore the motivation behind the actions of the people involved in deontic scorekeeping. "The game of giving and asking for reasons" is an unexplained explainer in Brandom, but the lofty label should not lull us into accepting the ambiguity that lurks behind it.

#### 4. Incompatibility semantics

An alert reader will have noticed that I have eschewed any reference to the third pillar of the material inference, that is, the incompatibility relations among claims. I have done so on purpose - I believe this topic deserves an independent section. Brandom does not elaborate on the subject in *Making it Explicit*, but he devotes an entire chapter to the project of incompatibility semantics in *Between Saying and Doing*. We have seen by now that the interplay between attributions of commitments and entitlements is by no means clear. This result bodes ill for Brandom's analysis of incompatibility relations and, unfortunately, the premonition turns out as warranted.

Let us see. This is what Brandom says in the Lecture 5<sup>6</sup>:

"So we may ask: do *incompatibility*-entailments similarly generalize some kind of inferential relation that we already recognize in other terms? I think that they do, and that the inferences in question are counterfactual-supporting, modally robust inferential relations, the kind of inferences made explicit by *modally qualified conditionals*. [...] I argued in Lecture 4 that there is an intimate connection between the conceptual contents expressed by vocabularies and the counterfactually robust inferences they are involved in."

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<sup>6</sup> Brandom, R. 2008. *Between Saying and Doing*. New York: Oxford University Press, p.122.

We should, therefore, review the argument from the Lecture 4, in order to see the nature of this “intimate connection”. Brandom explains there that the material inference is in general non-monotonic. Therefore, “epistemically responsible believers face a potentially intractable updating problem”, as commitment to any new claim is potentially incompatible with each of the older ones:

“Language users who do not (because they cannot) do that [that is, review all of their beliefs every time they acquire a new commitment, M.A.], must practically distinguish, among all the inferences that rationalize their current beliefs, which of them are update candidates, in the light of the current change of belief [...]. That is practically to associate with the new belief a set of material inferences of which it is a potential defeasor. [...] I conclude that in view of the non-monotonicity of material inference, the practical task of updating the rest of one’s beliefs when some of them change is tractable in principle only if those who deploy a vocabulary practically discriminate ranges of counterfactual robustness for many of the material inferences they endorse.”<sup>7</sup>

I apologize for the lengthy quotations, but they are quite indicative of what I consider as a huge *non-sequitur* in Brandom’s argumentation. Because “to associate with a belief the set of material inferences of which it is a potential defeasor” and to represent the conceptual content of a claim as its role within a set of counterfactually robust inferences are two vastly different, if not actually opposed, tasks. Indeed, both operations make use of the concept of the range of counterfactual robustness for an inference. But while the former task consists in determining the outer frontier of robustness for a particular *non-monotonic* inference, the latter task amounts to looking for *monotonic* inferences featuring a particular claim. In other words, in the second case the range of counterfactual robustness comprises each and every claim of the language considered. If we endorse inferentialism about propositional content, it is obvious that both these operations shed some light on the meaning of the claims in question, but it is also apparent that each of them uncovers quite different aspects of the meaning of these claims.

At the end of the Lecture 5, Brandom concludes that “S5 accordingly has some claim to being *the* modal logic of consequence relations, whether material or logical.”<sup>8</sup> We are now in a position to see why this extremely suspicious affirmation does not hold. The reasons for rejecting it are at least twofold - first, there is a sense in which Brandom may be seen as *begging the question* when he provides incompatibility interpretations of the logical vocabulary; and second, the properties of standard consequence relations (that is, those which are amenable to codification in terms of standard incompatibility relations) contradict Brandom’s own dictum to the effect that “material inferences are generally non-monotonic”.

When Brandom defines the inferential roles of logical constants, his avowed purpose is to reach a result as close to our classical logic as possible. In other words, by no means does he proceed in an inductive way, taking a thorough look at the inferential behaviour of this vocabulary in the natural language material inferences. The adequacy of the classical logic for this task is presupposed all along the way. Neither does Brandom offer any independent justification for his incompatibility-interpretation of modal operators; although he could possibly put up an interesting case here. Does it come as a surprise that in the end Brandom “discovers” that the resulting system is S5, the non-modal part of which is just the classical propositional logic?

In the closing stages of the Lecture 5 Brandom poses the question of the requirements a consequence relation must fulfill in order to allow us to calculate on its basis a standard incompatibility relation, which would in turn semantically warrant it. He identifies two such criteria for what he calls *standard consequence relations*:

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 139.

1. General Transitivity  $\forall X, Y, Z, W \subseteq L [(X \vdash Y \ \& \ Y \cup W \vdash Z) \rightarrow X \cup W \vdash Z].$

2. Defeasibility  $\forall X, Y \subseteq L \left[ \sim (X \vdash Y) \rightarrow \exists Z \subseteq L \left[ \begin{array}{l} \forall W \subseteq L [Y \cup Z \vdash W] \\ \exists W \subseteq L [\sim (X \cup Z \vdash W)] \end{array} \right] \right]$

However, “defeasibility” is here used in a sense different from above. This is because standard consequence relations in this sense are non-monotonic, as monotony is trivially entailed by general transitivity together with the reasonable supposition that a set of claims incompatibility-entails each of its subsets:

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| 1. $A \cup C \vdash A$   | <i>presupposition</i>                                     |
| 2. $(A \cup C \vdash A \ \& \ A \vdash B) \rightarrow A \cup C \vdash B$ | <i>GT: <math>X/A \cup C; Y/A; W/\emptyset; Z/B</math></i> |
| 3. $A \vdash B \rightarrow A \cup C \vdash B$                            | <i>reduction of the antecedent; 1,2</i>                   |
- QED*

However, Brandom has said before that “material inferences are generally non-monotonic.” The upshot is that we cannot assume that the two categories (material consequence relations on one hand and standard consequence relations on the other) are either extensionally or intensionally equivalent. By no means are we therefore warranted in claiming that “S5 is *the* modal logic of material consequence relations.” A long story short, incompatibility semantics is not fine-grained enough to codify the logic of material consequence relations, as it operates only *within* ranges of counterfactual robustness of inferences. And this is how the things should be.

## 5. Conclusion

I do not claim that Brandom does not have the means to modify his theory and/or blunt the force of the criticism I have addressed to him. The point of this brief essay was rather to show that Brandom pays strikingly little heed to the details of his exposition and is prone to make giant argumentative leaps he does not stop to justify. He goes to great lengths to explain how his theory relates to some tortuous passage in Hegel, or how his analytic pragmatism can account for Kant’s theory of transcendental unity of apperception, but he takes pleasure in eschewing the important questions about the framework of his proposal. I sincerely believe that inferentialism should reset its course in order to safeguard the important innovations it introduced. A return to moderate Wittgensteinianism might be the correct path to follow.