

Assertion and Inference

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Abstract. In this introduction to the tutorials I will give a brief sketch of the place of Brandom's ideas in the network of "classical" authors, focusing on some of the central tenets introduced by *Making it Explicit (MIE)*, which antecedes the ideas developed in *Between Saying and Doing (BSD)*. I give here a schematic presentation with some references to pages in *MIE* and *BSD*.

1 Classic Authors: Background

Differently from many contemporary analytic authors, Brandom makes often references to classical philosophical traditions, from rationalism to pragmatism, and references to classical authors are easy to find in his books. Among these authors I think it useful to quote what I think are some of the main contributions in Brandom's work:

Kant contributes as the typical representative of rationalism and for his conception of normativity: to be rational is to be bound by rules (both in theoretical judgements and in practical actions); the authority of rules derives by our endorsing them, by our acting according to our *conceptions* of the rules (*MIE* 50-52; see 30-36)

Frege is taken first of all as the author who claims the priority of judgment over concepts - recovering a Kantian idea which has dismissed by Kant's successors - and his consequent idea of the sense of a sentence as its inferential potential. The other main aspect of Frege is the distinction between conceptual content and force, a distinction basic for any pragmatic account (*MIE* 79-81; 107-116).

Dewey and *Peirce* are taken to reinterpret what is meant with "pragmatism", insisting on what one is doing when one takes something as true. To understand the use of "true" we need to clarify what we are doing when we make a claim, when we make an assertion (*MIE* 286-288).

Wittgenstein is taken first of all as the author of rule following considerations. Brandom claims that the Wittgensteinian point is to make sense of the idea of *norms implicit in practice*, which can avoid the reduction of understanding to interpretation on the one hand or to natural reactions on the other. The point is that norms belong to a custom, a practice or institution (*MIE* 29; see also McDowell 1984).

Sellars, who is said to have introduced Kant into Analytic Philosophy, is taken as an example of the reaction against the myth of the given (see introd. to Sellars 1997)

and as the proponent of the basic idea of what he calls "socratic method", that is "a way of bringing our practices under rational control, by expressing them explicitly in a form in which they can be confronted with objections and alternatives." (*MIE* 106)

2 Basic Ideas: Background

Beside these general ideas there are more specific points which Brandom takes from different authors although expressing doubts and reservations. Brandom's work is entangled with a complex networks of concepts and topics (from material inferences, to conservativeness, from preception to substitution...) which cannot be easily summarized. I will speak therefore of *some* of the concepts Brandom partially takes from other authors. to give at least a hint on some influences on his thought. This will be useful to find at least a thread to follow: his treatment of assertion.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's influence is linked to his treatment of rule following and language games; however Brandom puts some doubt on Wittgenstein's conception of language games, as they included just "vocal" practice which do not deserve to be called *language* games (Brandom is referring to the language game of the builders in Wittgenstein 1953, § 2; see *MIE* 172 and *BSD* 42). Here Brandom's stance is that to have a proper language game you need to have the practice of assertion.

Wilfrid Sellars: Brandom refers strictly to Sellar's notion of "game of giving and asking for reasons". It is a notion of language game where assertions are the basic case: we ask for the grounds of an assertion and are ready to give reasons for what we assert. An assertion is something which stands *in need of* a reason and it is also something that can be *offered as* a reason. (*MIE* 167)

Michael Dummett's theory of meaning as use has received much attention in Brandom's work, taking Dummett's idea that we need to generalize Gentzen's model of introduction and elimination rules for logic to a general theory of meaning (*MIE* 116-118): learning to use a statement involve the mastery of the conditions under which we can justify the statement and the the consequences of accepting it. Against Dummett's idea to restrict a systematic theory of meaning only to the justification (or assertibility) conditions, Brandom insists on treating also the consequences, giving a prominent role to the commitment of accepting the consequences of our assertions (the reason is that assertions with the same assertibility conditions may have different consequences *MIE* 121-122).

David Lewis 1974 suggests the fundamental idea of scorekeeping; he suggests to treat our normal rule governed conversation as a game which evolves according to scorekeeping like it happens in baseball; the element of the conversational score are things like presuppositions, boundaries between permissible and impermissible actions, and so on. Scorekeeping in conversation is perspectival: playing a conversational game means, among other things, that different people keep track of the commitments and entitlements of the other participants, attributing them commitments and entitlements.

Richard Rorty was a teacher of Brandom and his main influence is to be found in the attempt to build a philosophy where "representation" is not the first step. Fighting

against the idea that philosophy must be the "mirror of nature" (Rorty 1980), Brandom tries to recover objectivity through inference and social practice.

Charles Chastain 1975 suggested a unusual way of thinking of Kripke's treatment proper names. While Kripke said that the reference of a proper name is fixed through a causal chain, Chastain begun to think to the actual ways we keep a chain of reference going: anaphora, that is the use of picking what antecedes in a discourse with pronouns and other indexicals... (John had a daughter; *she* was very nice...). Causal chains become in this perspective a disguised way to speak of anaphoric chains. Discussing the basic role of indexicals and demonstratives (deixis) in the structuring of our context dependent utterances, Brandom reaches a strong conclusion: deixis presupposes anaphora, given that no use of demonstratives can be properly set out unless in a chain of anaphoric links; to use a demonstrative is first of all to put an anaphoric initiator (MIE 307-310).

Donald Davidson is another main source of inspiration for Brandom, from the theory of triangulation to the treatment of indirect speech; here I want to point to one of the main tenet of Davidons's philosophy, that is meaning holism. The mastery of the meaning, or the use of *an* expression involve mastery of the uses of *many* expressions. Meaning holism has been accused of making communication impossible; an answer is to pass from the idea of communication in terms of sharing or grasping a common meaning to an idea of communication as cooperating in a joint activity (MIE 479).

3 Assertion and Inference

One of the central point of Brandom's original inferentialism is the definition of the meaning of a sentence in terms of its inferential power, as a development of what Frege had said in his *Begriffsschrift* (§3). To understand a sentence is to understand its consequences, given certain collateral assumptions, and to understand the grounds for asserting it (grounds which may be logical but also perceptual: apparently to see something red is a ground to assert that something is red). Brandom develops his particular way of an *inferential semantics*, where the definition of conceptual content is specified (grossly) as a point in a network of inferences. Apparently one need not to know the impossible task to know *all* the inferences connected to a concept; one will count as mastering the concept if he is able to make *enough* of the right inferences in the context in which the concept is used. Inferential semantics alone would take a lot of space to be summarized; here I want to point to the way in which inferential semantics is embedded inside a normative pragmatics.

Normative status and material incompatibility of commitments

We might see the attempt to connect inferential semantics to normative pragmatics as a way of specifying - in Austin terminology - felicity conditions of assertions. Going back to Sellars terminology we may say that to make an assertion implies to be able to play the game of giving and asking for reasons. Standard felicity conditions for an assertion say that the speaker should sincerely believe what he assert and also have justifications for the content of the assertions. Brandom, as we have seen, insists also on the necessity to give space to the recognition of the consequences of an asser-

tion. He gives us therefore two normative dimensions which form what we might call the felicity condition of a correct assertion:

1 *entitlements*: a speaker must have justification for what she asserts, she must be entitled by some objectively recognizable grounds (either logical or empirical)

2 *commitments*: a speaker must commit herself to the consequences of what she asserts, given her mastery of the conditional relation.

Commitments and entitlements are normative statuses needed for a speaker to perform a correct speech act of asserting. These "normative" statuses correspond to the traditional primitives of *permission* and *obligation*. In this distinction Brandom places a central tenet of his theory: the notion of material negation or incompatibility:

"two notions are incompatible with each other if commitments to one precludes entitlement to the other" (MIE 160).

Apparently the significance of making a claim - whose content is expressed by the use of a particular sentence - depends on other collateral commitments other people may have. Therefore there may be different consequences derived by different sets of beliefs that are held by different persons. This makes a systematic theory of meaning almost impossible: how can we define the meaning of a sentence in terms of its possible consequences when they depend on collateral assumptions and commitments? How communication become possible? This question is a traditional one against holism - made by Dummett 1973: if meaning is defined holistically, if it depends on the different perspectives of different speakers, what you mean with an expression will be different by what I mean with the same expression; therefore agreement or disagreement will become impossible and communication will become a mystery nobody can really explain. Here the move made by Brandom as we shall see now - is another pragmatic move.

Normative attitudes and the answer to the problem of holism

We are not only driven by linguistic exchange to have entitlements and commitments to what we claim; we also report what other people say. Reported speech is a long debated topic since Frege, and its main problem is the substitution *salva veritate* of coreferring expressions. Brandom realizes that we have different kinds of reported speeches, which depend on the attitudes we have towards what other people say. We may simply report what another person has said, without being committed to the content of what is said, but *attributing* commitments to the speaker. On the other hand we may acknowledge what a person claims and *undertake* what she claims.

Attributing and *Undertaking* are two different (normative) attitudes towards what other people claim. When we make an assertion we undertake a certain kind of commitment, and we make it manifest in the way we accept or reject substitutions, for instance, in reported speech. If I say that Mary does not believe *of* Benjamin Franklin that is the inventor of the lightning rod I do not undertake what she says, but I *attribute* her that belief; on the other hand, if I say that John believes *that* Benjamin Franklin is the inventor of the lightning rod, I undertake John's assertion, and in so doing I accept to substitute "BF" with "the inventor of the lightning rod".

We have so far distinguished two levels of norms: (i) commitments and entitlements, which are the basic status of our treating the sentences we assert; (ii) attributing and undertaking, which are the basic attitudes we have towards the contents of other people assertions. This should be enough¹ to face the above mentioned problem of defining communication in a holistic vision: communication does not require the previous sharing of common contents, but it is a process in which speakers converge towards the same concepts in the activity of attributing and undertaking commitments to certain inferences and substitutions.

Asserting and inferring are therefore internally related practices. Assertion becomes the basic tool in inferential semantics and pragmatics; in fact verbal practices like orders acquire their inferential meaning only in a language where we already have assertions. A case it made by Brandom also relatively to promises, which become understandable only on the background of assertions, and the entitlements and commitments which are defining the act of asserting (*MIE* 163-165). In the new terminology of *Between Saying and Doing* assertion becomes "the minimal kind of doing which counts as saying" (*BSD* 42). Put in semantic terms we may say that only what can stand in inferential relations can count as the content of an assertion (*BSD* 43).

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¹ Actually Brandom suggest that we need a third step, which permits us to do for deontic attitudes what those attitudes do for deontic statuses (*MIE* 637); but some simplification is needed is such a short introduction.