

Making It Problematic

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Abstract. This paper notes two problems in Brandom's approach to communicative understanding. Together, they undermine the rational and the pragmatic credentials of his project.

Logic can supply the 'oughts' when it comes to theoretical reason. The content of belief *b* can entail belief *c* so that if I believe *b* I ought to believe *c*. This sort of transition points to a very basic test of rationality. Irrationality, for example, could be indicated by believing *b*, which implies *c*, but not believing *c*. In practice, through Brandom's scorekeeping, modal reconstructions of linguistic behaviour reveal implicit structures akin to these theoretical, logical structures. Moreover, in being a pragmatist, Brandom hopes to account for *materially construed* inferences – conceptual content comes from practice, not semantic analysis.

However, in Brandom's approach lie two problems, one rational and one pragmatic, which create an issue for the coherence of his scorekeeping approach.

1 INTRODUCTION

Utterances of various types commit one to other utterances whilst entitling one to yet more. Inferences from the correct uses of concepts to their consequences, the traversing of this commitment/entitlement topography, are 'material inferences'. Material inferences *determine* the conceptual content of a concept [1, p52] and are pragmatically construed.

Chains of inference (materially construed inference in practice) taken together constitute conceptual content, with the 'meaning' of each assertion throughout glossed as 'inferential significance'. Linguistic behaviour in which a group deploys material inference constitutes a communicative practice. Conceptual content is deployed and manipulated in such practices. Critical appraisal of linguistic practice comes in the form of scorekeeping, which amounts to a fundamental social practice through which the understanding of linguistic behaviour is manifested. Scorekeeping is a basic condition of understanding linguistic behaviour for Brandom.

On this scheme, logic merely expresses what is implicit in the behaviour qua linguistic practice. The practice is prior to the theory (which is the heart of Brandom's 'logical expressivism' [2, pp109-110], and pragmatism). Taken together, however, there is a tension between different senses of validity at work here. The problem is one of the sources of normativity.

Brandom ultimately takes a phenomenalist, but non-reductionist, stance regarding normativity. The '*rightness*' of one's path from commitments to entitlements finds its root in social attitudes among groups of interlocutors. Hence the reward/sanction function [2, p44] of the scorekeeping practice ultimately rests in social attitudes. In a substantial sense, social validity *is* validity as appraisals of action must be made on the basis of group membership defined as a normative relation. Reasons come in the form of logical inferential moves gleaned

from modal reconstructions of linguistic behaviour as manifested from social practices. 'Being part of society' ultimately explains the hold of norms because membership of a group is a normative relation. Brandom's social actors' practical identities are mediated via their membership in a society and they are furnished with a suite of norm-regulated behaviour thereby.

The picture appears highly internalist in the sense that any mandate for change of what counts as valid must somehow come from the communicative resources of the established group. The 'I-thou' model of sociality [2, p39]¹ that Brandom relies upon suggests that no privileged perspective is available from which any norms might be once and for all assessed to be right, wrong or indifferent [2, pp599-600]. This is allegedly in contrast with an 'I-we' account such as in Habermas [3] wherein something transcendent is presumed. For Brandom's account, "...there can be no point of view on the privileged perspective whereby one distinguishes between what is actually correct and what it takes to be correct." [4, p57]

Given the role of attitude-to-norms that Brandom holds to be central in group membership, this seems far from straightforward. Being 'in the group' means abiding by the norms (essentially, forming pro- attitudes toward the publicly evaluable inferential practices that concepts prescribe) so this would seem to be highly sensitive to the preservation of established patterns of behaviour and practical identity-preservation. 'Practicality' here is that of the practices of giving and asking for reasons, and the meting out of sanctions based on appraisals of inferential performance in the light of acknowledged norms. As this is so bound up with identity on Brandom's scheme, on being in the group, it seems a strongly conservative account of social communicative interaction.

2 IDENTITY PROBLEM

Can there not be a good reason to act against one's practical identity? So far, Brandom's picture seems internalist about reasons, meaning that a practical self is enacted by realising how that self ought to act, with the 'oughts' derived from social attitudes. This is how one reason becomes good rather than bad, or better than another reason. Does the sense of having a reason by being a group member fall foul of an internalist problem? To examine this, we need to explore Brandom's notion of conceptual content more closely, with particular attention to the burdens dissent places on the purported concept-wielder.

Brandom's position has the result that conceptual grasp is parasitic upon linguistic competence. This is because of the role of group membership as dealing with attitudes to norms that licence inferential transitions in light of concepts. In cases of dissent this can be problematic. Dummett [5, p454] concerns himself with cases of language use wherein the 'conditions' of

¹ There is more to be said on this in terms of the 'Rational Problem' below

making an utterance are out of 'harmony' with the 'consequences' of the utterance. The example he uses to illustrate this is the word 'Boche'.

The conditions of uttering 'Boche' are that someone is German, whereas the consequences include that they are barbarous. Where a language had not the word 'Boche' until some point, after that point, the language would be changed in a non-trivial way – hitherto unlicensed inferences could be drawn after the addition, such that the meaning of the terms would be affected. Given this, members of a community of language-users whose vernacular has the term introduced now need to include *Boche* as part of their conceptual grasp of *German*. This is because of the inferential consequences that have been introduced along with the word. To illustrate:

- 1 Lessing is German
- 2 Lessing is Boche

In a xenophobic community uttering 2 is on a par with uttering 1. They each feature in the same constellations of material-inferential transitions, hence are part of grasping the same conceptual content. As a liberal member of such a community, who one day sees the error of fearing the outsider, I could come to refuse to endorse inferences such that 'Boche' was employed as a synonym for 'German'. In so doing, I absent myself from the group of those who would endorse a set of material-inferential transitions employing 'German' and 'Boche' interchangeably.

What are the consequences of this refusal for me? It isn't open to me to:

"...deny that there are any Boche – that is just denying that anyone is German.... One cannot admit that there are Boche but deny that they are cruel – that is just attempting to take back with one hand what one has committed oneself to with the other." [2, p126]

Instead, it would seem that as a dissenter I am supposed to make explicit the consequences of uses of the concept in question and challenging the entitlement to these consequences. But surely, or certainly it would seem that, using Brandom's resources in dissent I no longer have a grasp of the concept of *Boche*. In fact, I also diminish my grasp of the concept *German*, by the lights of the group I am a member of. But then the quandary is this - It is in fact because of my grasp of the concept *Boche* that I begin to refuse to endorse material-inferential transitions that use it.² Implications of cruelty, however unjust, don't falsify sentences that contain 'Boche' rather than 'German'. So why would I, a competent speaker, endorse 'German'-containing sentences but not 'Boche'-containing sentences, and all those that follow from them? The answer seems to be twofold. Firstly, I don't want to imply Germans are cruel, and secondly I don't want people to think I believe Germans are cruel. Among my xenophobic neighbours the latter implication certainly holds. Moreover, there is a sense in which I can't press them on that. I can't suggest the implication that they believe Germans to be cruel is wrong, because they do believe that. So it is the first implication that really is problematic.

3 A RATIONAL PROBLEM

2 This point is also related to the pragmatic problem still to come.

The idea that group membership in Brandom's communities is itself a normative matter entails that the sanctions he envisages as regulating performance are, as it were, imposed *on us by us*. Both the writing of the rules, and applying them via sanctions, are functions of group membership. There is an uneasy tension in this. In fact, I think this tension leads to the inability of the situation Brandom presents to stand as a normative theory of communicative understanding.

It fails owing to a defect in representing the necessary symmetry between speakers that must hold in order for a communicative encounter to really be communicative, as opposed to a linguistic encounter wherein the force of argument is not the sole motivator. In failing to reflect a central condition that underlies the very possibility for communicative understanding, Brandom's position risks a potential deficit of rationality in situations of disagreement and with it an associated asymmetry in the game of giving and asking for reasons [1, p183]. His scorekeeping mechanism thus fails fully to underwrite a linguistic communicative encounter. Given membership of a group is a normative affair, no group member has adequate enough a grasp of the open-ended possibilities of free expression to settle disagreement. In fact, disagreement itself cannot be described as content is defined in terms of endorsed material inferences. Thus, my refusal to endorse pattern *A* means I have a different concept when I disagree.

On Brandom's scheme, group membership means we have swallowed the norms of the group as governing the game of giving and asking for reasons – that is how we have gotten to take part at all. Group membership is a 'thick' notion. Clifford Geertz [6, pp3-30] made famous this term, adapting from Gilbert Ryle. A thick description of human actions is one that explains not just the action, but its context as well, so that the action becomes meaningful to an outside observer. As such, this notion of group membership can stand in the way of communication where disagreement occurs. It does so as in virtue of the disagreement (controversy over a term's use or extension, say) the dissenter is not free to utilise certain reasons and certain patterns of reasoning. This foreshortens the very idea of the game of giving and asking for reasons that is supposed to be the engine of scorekeeping.

The social arrangement upon which Brandom's communicative structure runs seems not robust enough to sustain a potential critique of the norms it runs on, according to Habermas [3, p343]. The central notion of I-thou sociality "...is the relation between an audience that is attributing commitments and thereby keeping score and a speaker who is undertaking commitments, on whom score is being kept" [2, p508]. The relations are social through and through on Brandom's reasoning and so any point of view from which appraisals of practice might be made will itself be a social point of view and, in being such a view, will be possessed of the same practical norms as any other such point of view:

"If the practices attributed to the community by the [interpreting] theorist have the right structure, then according to that interpretation, the community members' practical attitudes institute normative statuses and confer intentional content on them; according to the interpretation, the intentional contentfulness of their states and performances is the product of their own activity, not that of the theorist interpreting that activity. Insofar as their intentionality is derivative – because the normative significance of their states is instituted by the attitudes

adopted toward them – their intentionality derives from each other, not from outside the community. On this line, only communities, not individuals, can be interpreted as having original intentionality.” [2, p61]

The force of an utterance can be altered intentionally, but more worrying for theorists such as Habermas is the potentially systematic way in which a system of socially valid norms could restrict expression. The kind of I-we perspective apparent in Habermas uses the notion of a ‘universal audience’ whose posited views can stand as an evaluative backdrop to cases of evaluative practice: “The fundamental intuition connected with argumentation can best be characterized... by the intention of convincing a universal audience and gaining general assent for an utterance” [3 p26]

What is socially valid could well occur within a system riddled with inequalities such that a given speaker or set of speakers are routinely unable to participate freely in communication. We might have a linguistic system on such an account, but not necessarily a communicative system. So how is a biting reappraisal of norms possible such that their *rational* validity is at stake, over and above their *social* validity? The contention up to now is that it is not. Moreover, correctness and incorrectness in the use of a concept reflects the group member’s grasp of a concept as reflective of established practice. Thus, normativity comes from tradition, not the free use of reason or unfettered argumentation.

Brandom seems to recognise this potential issue as he asks:

“How is it possible for our use of an expression to confer on it content that settles that we might all be wrong about how it is correctly used, at least in some cases? How can normative attitudes of taking or treating applications of concepts as correct or incorrect institute normative statuses that transcend those attitudes in the sense that the instituting attitudes can be assessed according to those instituted norms and found wanting?” [2, p137]

On the I-thou picture relied upon, and the further view that it is “norms all the way down” [2, p44] when it comes to considering normative attitudes, it seems the only way available is via the adoption somehow of a perspective more like a Habermasian I-we social model, wherein a stance can be taken upon what is correct as opposed to what is taken to be correct. The norms upon which communicative practices in an I-thou society runs are products of modal reconstruction of certain practices of inference patterns. They come about through the free and open-ended use of reason. However, when it comes to dissent, a social actor’s ability to draw upon the unfettered resources of language and reasoning is curtailed as it is supposed that their very grasp of potentially contestable concepts rests upon their acceptance of the norms legislated prior to their deployment.

At any point where adjudication of norms might be hoped for, a deficit in rationality is apparent as a palpable asymmetry exists between;

- a) the codification of norms constitutive of group membership and
- b) the contestability of said norms and their conceptual heirs

The asymmetry results in a dysfunctional game of giving and asking for reasons. The consequence is an incomplete picture of

communication *qua* practice aimed at understanding. This is a problem for the rationality of the approach.

4 A PRAGMATIC PROBLEM

Logical validity clearly plays a significant role in Brandom’s picture as it is upon assessments of inference patterns that scorekeeping takes place. In linguistic communication, however, utterances typically do more than assert propositions, propositions that ought to be able to feature as premises and conclusions of inferences.

The appropriateness of using a proposition as one does in Brandom’s scheme closely models the appropriateness denoted by a logician’s validity; a claim to validity in logic is a claim to have provided sufficient reasons, in the form of adequate assumptions and valid inferential moves, for a conclusion to be accepted. An argument is valid if it proceeds from true premises to true conclusions. In communication, however, it seems odd to be limited in this respect.³

Certainly, an utterance in communication can be called valid if it fulfils the criteria for validity for a logical conclusion. Going beyond this, Brandom does acknowledge the role of informal inference in communicative meaning (e.g. [2, p119]). However, it is arguable that in his account, a lot is made of inferential *roles*, but too little of inferential *rules* that must be acknowledged come what may.⁴

At any rate, authors such as Copi and Burgess-Jackson [7] explore informal dimensions of validity that seem familiarly available in communication. One sense of this can be understood in terms of the *warrantedness* of uttering *p* that go beyond a narrow conception of logical validity. If we were to be limited to validity in the formal logician’s sense then it seems we could be cut off in certain instances from being able to assess certain pretty important conversational data.

In Brandom’s scorekeeping model, conversational participants seem to be logicians in some central respect. This is fine, of course, but not complete. What is socially valid in the conception of conversation for such logicians is what’s logically valid. But the contention here is that this is incomplete, and that with *I-Thou* sociality contestation of the standards themselves is not possible. *Mutatis mutandis*, with *I-Thou* sociality socially valid norms can’t be challenged be they what they may. It is worth looking at just one example of a common linguistic practice, that of implicature [8], to expand upon this.

Conventional implicatures are detachable but not easily cancellable. ‘Detachable’ means that through rephrasing with other word choices, their meaning can change. ‘Non cancellable’ means that the implied inference the implicature points to is being bound up with the terms used. By contrast, *conversational* implicatures are easily cancellable but not detachable, so they can seem to suggest an inference that can be denied and they can be rephrased but carry the same meaning. One way of seeing this is by focussing on pejorative words.

Beginning with a return to the *Boche* example from above, via Williamson’s [9] treatment of it, we can see the conventional/conversational implicature contrast in action;

³ Bellorini [10] criticises Brandom’s position in similar terms

⁴ Rainey [11] discusses a role that logical rules might play in reasoning that could augment Brandom’s position. Unfortunately, the topic is too far out of scope to explore here.

- 1 Lessing was German
- 2 Lessing was Boche

1 and 2 are truth-value equivalent, though they differ in implicature. Thus the implicature is detachable, but once we deploy sentence 2 we are bound to that implicature. Trying to mitigate the xenophobic implicature by saying 'Lessing was Boche but I don't intend to suggest Germans are cruel' just "...adds hypocrisy to xenophobia" [9, p64]. 2 is, therefore, illustrative of a conventional implicature. The following is an illustration of conversational implicature:

- 3 Helen is in Paris or Belfast
- 4 Helen is in France's capital or the birthplace of the Titanic

3 and 4 are truth-value equivalent, but no matter which is uttered, or any equivalent, the implicature is made that we don't know which location Helen is enjoying. This implicature is easily cancellable, however, simply by saying something such as 'I know which place, but I'm not telling the likes of you!'

An important feature of general discussion is exploiting the implicatures that carried by terms and phrases. A conventional implicature can carry a meaning-relevant force, its impact being provided by the implicature's non cancelability. Trying to cancel a conventional implicature adds hypocrisy to insult. So it is part of linguistic, communicative competence to be able to exploit or avoid this in practice. This phenomenon is not restricted to offensiveness. In fact, the exploitation of implicature is a pervasive way of making oneself understood. Specifically with reference to the discussion of Brandom, it is key in terms of what a speaker wishes themselves to be taken as being committed or entitled to infer. In Brandom, however, it is not clear how this phenomenon fits in.

Part of Brandom's account of assertability, a part that underwrites some of his view on how commitments are undertaken, relies upon a notion of 'introduction' and 'elimination rules':

"What corresponds to an introduction rule for a propositional content is the set of sufficient conditions for asserting it, and what corresponds to an elimination rule is the set of necessary consequences of asserting it, that is, what follows from doing so." [2, p118]

It seems clear that 'what follows from x' and 'necessary consequences of asserting x' cover different territory, at least possibly. Meaning what I want to mean needn't rely upon the elimination rules that are in play for a given concept. Rather, I may mean what I want to based in the exploitation of an implicature *qua* non-cancellable, detachable element of a word's acceptable scope of comprehension. Conversely, in not wanting to be taken to be meaning something offensive, I may refrain from use of a particular concept owing to its conventional implicature. This is an informal logical relation, not one readily characterisable in terms of modally reconstructed deductive links between terms sentences linked via material inferences.

Implicature in general occurs where words are used in communication. Conventional or conversational implicatures and introduction or elimination rules aren't the same thing, moreover. Yet each have a clear role in the determining of what a speaker is committed or entitled to infer. Thus it would seem that a familiar, straightforward part of meaning, the use or

refusal to use terms on the basis of their implicatures, is not accounted for in Brandom's model of communication.

The result of this omission is that the game of giving and asking for reasons is again foreshortened as a rich means of meaning via a familiar practical method is left out of the account. This omission, moreover, tells against Brandom's model as a thoroughgoing pragmatic model as this pervasive practice is not readily accommodated by the modal reconstructive methods of the interlocutor as scorekeeper.

Exploiting or avoiding conventional and conversational implicatures is a skill one develops through being familiar with pragmatic elements of language use. It is indicative of the practical skill of being a competent or an able language user. As such it would best be accounted for in a theory that aims at being a pragmatic account.

As it stands, however, the resources available to the Brandomite provide only a puzzle about conceptual grasp; whether or not a concept is grasped in cases where inferential endorsements are refused. This abstract puzzle misses the obvious, pragmatic point that linguistic communication that uses or refuses to use terms with discernible conventional implicatures performs a clear pragmatic function in discourse. Meanings can rely upon exploitations of implicature. Communicative understanding can therefore rest upon recognition of these implicatures. An account that can't accommodate them is therefore an incomplete picture of understanding linguistic communication.

5 CONCLUSION

On this analysis, Brandom's picture of things has a rational problem in being unstable regarding what conclusions follow from what conceptual deployments. It also has a pragmatic problem in omitting from the account at least one very familiar and pervasive part of general discursive practice. These problems seem to have shared roots in the development of Brandom's social vision and its role in generating normativity.

Ultimately, both the form and content of discussion is threatened. So too is the critical engine, scorekeeping, that is meant to keep the game of giving and asking for reasons on the rails. In fact, given the connections between conceptual grasp, the normativity of *I-Thou* sociality and the foreshortened critical function these lead to, the very nature of asking, of questioning at all, seems imperilled.

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