

THE PRAGMATICS OF INFERENTIAL CONTENT

ABSTRACT. Carnap took the content of a particular sentence or set of sentences to consist in the set of the consequences of the sentence or set. This claim equates meaning with inferential role, but it restricts the inferences to deductive or explicative ones. Here I reject a recent proposal by Robert Brandom, where inductive or ampliative inferences are also meant to confer contents on expressions. I argue that if Brandom's inferentialist picture is upheld, and both explicative and ampliative inferences confer meaning, one consequence of this is that the content of a sentence is to be read off from our ways of rationally altering our beliefs. Meaning and content then are largely concepts of pragmatics, with no clear theoretical interest. My critique affects certain aspects of Dummett's meaning-theoretic picture too, and the discussion also links up with the development of 'dynamic semantics'.

1.

On a common view, semantics is the study of the *content* of linguistic expressions, performances, and intentional states. Pragmatics, by contrast, has the job of studying the *force* or *significance* of the things that can *have* those contents. To account for the 'practical significance' of intentionally contentful states, attitudes, and performances, is of particular importance to Robert Brandom's project of 'making it explicit.'¹ His program is to detail a story of this practical significance of an intentional state or performance in terms of *implicit norms* that govern the use of linguistic expressions.

The connection of the pragmatic project with the semantic one is that the former is held to require an inquiry into the semantic content of attitudinal states and performances. Attitudes and performances can only have a practical significance if they have a semantic and indeed, propositional content, that can determine this significance in context. What we are told about this connection, for example, is this: "[T]he theoretical job of the contents (...) is precisely to *determine*, in context, the particular significance of being in or attributing the states those contents are associated with" (p. 68, my emphasis; see also p. 359). I think we can conclude from this that if we look at particular language uses, performances, or attitudinal states, there is a sense in which their semantic contents are meant to be fixed (in whatever way they are fixed) already. Also we find that pragmatics



“seeks to determine in a systematic way the pragmatic significance of [a] contentful performance” (p. 133), which would seem to assume that the contents are already there for pragmatics to spell out what they consist in.

Brandom’s answer to the question of what having content consists in, appeals to *inferential roles*. By looking at the role an expression plays in inferences, we see what its content is. Brandom’s project of ‘making it explicit’ is one of rendering in an evaluable and propositional form the ‘inferential commitments’ which are implicit in language use. The goal is to put content, as conferred by a net of inferential relations, open to critical view. Concepts are to be notated in a way that they “wear their contents on their sleeves” (p. 109).

Suppose, for example, that we wish to know what the meaning of the logical connective “&” is. One way of answering this question is to tell what rules of inference govern its use. According to Gentzen, there are two kinds of rules, one rule which tells when a sentence containing this connective can be asserted, and another rule which tells when the connective can be eliminated from a sentence containing it. Take this as an illustration of the idea that the meaning of “&”, called “conjunction”, consists in its inferential role: conjunction is whatever plays the inferential role specified by this pair of rules.²

The program of making explicit what is already given implicitly, as such, is a conservative one. This is true in the same sense in which Hegel’s philosophy might be called ‘conservative’. While there is nothing thereby wrong with any of these approaches, we shall now see that in Brandom’s case this conservatism has nonetheless a dimension that is seriously problematic.

Once we stipulate, in the above way, that meaning is determined relative to a specific set of rules (not by virtue of properties of reference, for example), the question of the *stability* of meaning arises. The same expressions may belong to different fragments of a language – when does it preserve the meaning that it has in one of them, if we turn to another? Take two systems of expressions, S and S' such that $S \subset S'$ and such that both contain the logical sign “&”. Is an expression containing “&”, that plays the inferential role of conjunction in S necessarily also playing the same role in S' ? It is, if there are no expressions containing “&”, which stand in inferential relations in one of the systems in which they do not stand in the other. If this is the case for all expressions in S , we say S' is a *conservative extension* of S . This means that when going from S to S' , inferences that you used to draw in S remain valid, and no inferences involving only vocabulary of S which were not valid in S become valid in S' .

If you now want to provide a meaning theory for all the items in *S*, by depicting their inferential roles, you will have to make explicit the inferential commitments implicit in uses of the expressions of *S*. Whatever is not implicit in the contents of the items in *S*, cannot be of your concern. A necessary condition for this enterprise to succeed is thus either that you consider the system *S* only statically (you ignore extensions), or, if you consider it dynamically, you will only consider *conservative* extensions of it. Not to secure this is to risk meaning change, hence the impossibility of ever stating the meaning of an expression. To be conservative is all-important for you, if you want to be sure that in going to the extension *S'* of *S* you do not, when using vocabulary from *S*, incur any commitments different from those you have already implicitly undertaken in *S*.

The point I wish to make in this paper is that you can only be sure of this if the inferences you draw in *S* are of a deductive kind. Note that drawing this consequence is not necessarily problematic. But it is disastrous for Brandom's purposes, for the inferential roles which his theory of content will come up with, would be restricted to the deductive inferential properties of expressions. Deductive inferences are *explicative* in that they merely explicate what is given in the premises of an inference already. *Inductive* inferences, by contrast, are defined by the fact that they do not merely explicate a content already given, but go beyond it. By jumping to the conclusion of an inductive inference, you incur a commitment which is not a commitment implicitly given in the premises. Precisely for this reason, different agents may come to very different conclusions as to which inductive inferences should be drawn. *I* might want to infer from the fact that Gustav is a dog that he is four-legged, but *you* might be more cautious: the four-leggedness *is* not "implicit" in the doghood.

If this is true, the inferentialist theory is either condemned to a conservatism in the sense of allowing only deductive inferences to determine content, or, if it allows inductive inferences to confer content too, it must impose conservatism as a constraint on extensions. With regard to the second option, we shall later see that conservatism in the case of inductive inferences is irrelevant as a requirement on extensions.

In sum, my claim will be that you *cannot* 'make explicit' the inferential roles of the contents of premises of inductive inferences. The contents of their conclusions *are not implicit in those of the premises*; any two agents may, in principle, disagree as to whether an inductive conclusion should be drawn or not. But then there is no way to make good the claim that contents are inferential roles, or that contents *consist* in inferences we may draw from them. This could be true, only if the thesis were restricted to the contents of expressions figuring in deductive inferences. But since in

natural languages expressions figuring in the premises of deductive inferences, figure in the premises of inductive inferences as well, the thesis that content is inferential role, cannot be upheld for natural languages.

2.

I shall start focussing on the nature of the task Brandom sets himself: to understand the notion of the semantic content of an expression. Initially I shall follow Brandom in using the distinction between force/significance and content. I also will apply it generally, that is, to public performances like promises and queries no less than to attitudes like beliefs and intentions. As will become clear, though, in my view the distinction itself is artificial and arises through practical needs, not conceptual ones. Indeed, what I wish to ask is how anything, given that it has the content it has, could ever come to determine a force in the way the above initial quotations suggest.

I want to claim that, in the order of explanation, the force, or the pragmatic significance, of a performance or an attitude, comes first. ‘Contents’ are a pale and remote abstraction from the practical field of play, where agents are cognitively engaged and linguistically purposeful in their own various ways. Contents arise as theoretical constructs, cut to their appropriate size with respect to defined (e.g., computational or logical) purposes. At times we find it useful to abstract from the vagaries (emotional, valuational, accidental etc.) which the practical dimension of language use involves. Thus in the first place there are believing, desiring, and intentful agents. Then, derivatively, there are ‘contents’ and ‘propositions’, because we may want to strip their beliefs, desires, and intentions bare of their force.

The structure of ‘content’ will then by consequence always be relative to a chosen level of abstraction, dictated by practical or specific computational concerns. But if this is so, contents *cannot*, as our initial quote suggests, have the theoretical job to determine the forces which are enacted in the practical field of play, or the pragmatic significance of the attitudes which players have in it. And they *do* presuppose an account of it rather than not. It is not attitudes that presuppose an idea of content; it is contents which owe their existence to the attitudes.

This would mean that we are lacking a motivation for embarking on Brandom’s project of ‘grounding’ a semantic theory, consisting in ascriptions of contents, in a normative pragmatics. Brandom’s theoretical ambition is to understand and explain what it is for an expression and attitude to have a content, and what it is for an expression or state to count as meaningful. A theory of necessary and sufficient conditions for

the existence of pragmatic significances, as arising in communication and social interaction, is developed to explain this. But, if what I said about the origin of content as a scientifically useful and well-defined theoretical abstraction is correct, what exactly is it we don't understand about the notion of semantic content?

There are general features to it, which are invoked by large words like 'intentionality', 'objectivity', and 'representation'. But all we can do by way of clarifying what we mean by them, is to speak about what the agents or devices to whose states we grant contentfulness do and why, that is, by appealing to their attitudes. No doubt, when looking at what they do and asking why, we ascribe contents to their states, at a chosen level of abstraction, and indeed we presuppose that there are those contents which can be ascribed to them, as well as that we know what it is to have a content. But what could be the result if one day we decided that we do not understand this idea of contentfulness any more? What could be the result if not this, that we look *again* at the social practices, from where we abstracted, as I claim, our notion of semantic content in the first place?

Is there something theoretically unsatisfactory about assuming or presupposing the idea of content or meaning when doing one's inquiry? Not so for the pragmatist, with whom Brandom associates. As I understand the former, he would grant the idea of content, and ask: Given that this communication or experimental test has this content, how does it or ought it to change the current conversational situation or doctrine? Equally, there is nothing unsatisfactory about presupposing the idea for the linguist. The linguist asks: Given that this particular string of expressions has the content we (or the native speaker) ascribe to it, what features of this particular string of expressions make it have that content? Finally, there is nothing unsatisfactory about the presupposition for the formal semanticist either, whose formal apparatus allows to talk about *potential contents* that a string of signs has with respect to defined set-theoretical structures, but who cannot account for the question what it is for an expression in a natural language to have *the* content it has.

It is a *foundationalist's* interest that is not satisfied in assuming contentfulness, as all inquirers and sciences do, and requires to make this a topic for inquiry itself. On the theoretical agenda then are the conditions for the very possibility of content, and it is this foundationalist and transcendental (indeed Kantian) question which gives us a good feeling for what Brandom is concerned with. It is the transcendental philosopher, not the pragmatist with whom Brandom associates, who asks where the contents "come from" (as did Heidegger and Wittgenstein, who were convinced that not how the world is is the relevant issue, but *that* there is anything rather than not).

Against Brandom I shall argue that understanding basic laws and principles of human interaction doesn't require making a theory of content or meaning a task prior to it. This is to deny that an epistemological account of the dynamics of belief and other attitudes – how we change them in the light of rational principles of doing so – presupposes that we explain what it is for all of these to have a content; in other words, that semantics is something prior to the task of studying the attitudes. The order of priority is the reverse. We know what we mean by content because we know what we mean by attitudes; what can give substance to the notion of content is a principled analysis of how we alter our attitudes in the light of experience and evidence.³ In sum, a theory of content or meaning is no theoretical goal beyond the theory of attitudes. And a notion of 'content' can be a by-product of it if one or other notion of content or meaning is wanted.⁴

3.

In fact, there is a sense in which there is, on Brandom's own account, no theoretical use for abstractions like 'content' or 'propositions' to play the role of things which 'determine' the "behavioral significance" (133) of the states and performances which have those contents or express those propositions. For we read that this behavioral significance is nothing but "the difference those states make to what it is appropriate for the one to whom they are attributed to *do*" (p. 133). According to Brandom, the theory which accounts for this 'difference' is a pragmatic theory, and it is meant to give the contents and propositions which a *semantic* theory specifies a practical dimension and relevance. Now why *separate* the semantic study of 'contents' and 'propositions' from the study of those practical differences? Cannot the difference that an attitude or performance makes to inquiry and reasoning by itself serve as a notion, not just of practical significance (p. 166), but of semantic content, rather than grounding an independently given one?

If this were what Brandom asserted, what we did had important similarities with *dynamic semantics* as conceived in the early eighties.⁵ The idea there is that rather than defining meaning in terms of 'static' semantic values such as truth conditions, meaning now is defined in terms of 'dynamic' semantic values. These are functions which determine, given a context and a new sentence or discourse, what the new context is which arises from enriching the given context with the information carried by the sentence or discourse. Contexts might be thought of as sets of worlds or possibilities which are, as far as present information goes, compatible with what the agent or agents in those contexts believe. Meaning, understood as

a function from contexts to contexts, is then in principle a matter of belief modification and the alteration of our attitudes.⁶

Meaning may be a theoretical term which one can define as one wishes, but this seems true only to the extent that the definition doesn't lose completely its connection to human intuitions about meaning. In particular, I see no good way to claim that belief change or the alteration of our attitudes is a matter of meaning (alone). Evidently, how you change your mind is, in the general case, a cognitive decision problem constrained by principles of rationality. What you take the meaning of an input sentence to be, might be said to be part of the *evidence* which enters into your decision as to how to change your mind. But it doesn't determine it. In the general case, where your mental life consists in more than just the running of certain cognitive routines, you make a *decision*, given your exposure to some input sentence, whether you want to adopt a new belief, give up an old belief, do both or neither. The result in each case is a cognitive change from which we can read off in some sense what the 'meaning' (better: 'significance') of the input sentence in your situation was. But then it is the context change which explains the meaning and not the meaning which explains the context change. It is on these lines that one might come to the conclusion that both meaning and content can be theoretically understood as by-products of an account of the dynamics of epistemic states and the rational modification of attitudes in the course of communication and inquiry. But there would then be no 'genuinely semantic' notions of 'content' and 'proposition' besides genuinely pragmatic ones.

Brandom in effect gives us a version of the dynamic semantical picture of meaning, accompanied however by a richer idea of context. Following David Lewis,⁷ his idea is that at any point in discourse a 'deontic score' is kept for each conversational participant, specifying information as to what his current commitments and entitlements are, information which is kept track of as discourse proceeds. The meaning of an utterance consists in modifying this score, although Brandom says this without specifying, in a systematic way, general principles and rules of how this scoring in conversational games proceeds, or should rationally proceed. (Neither does dynamic semantics.)

Brandom explains what he calls his pragmatic theory of meaning as follows: "Specifying the pragmatic significance of a speech act kind such as assertion requires showing how the transformation of the [deontic] score from one conversational stage to the next effected by such a speech act systematically depends on the semantic content of the commitment undertaken thereby" (p. 186). Now that idea would make the dynamics dependent on a static theory of semantic content.⁸ This, I have claimed, can

only be reasonable if ‘dependent’ is read in the *weak* sense I mentioned. That is, a deontic state-change may in part be determined by the semantic content we may wish to ascribe to a speech act, just as how you change your mind in the light of some communication depends on what you take the sentence used in it to mean. But it is surely not determined by it, and thus it would seem that all the hard work lies in specifying systematically rules and principles for changing your deontic score. All of this would not be part of a theory of meaning but something independent and prior to it.

But then, indeed, just a sentence later Brandom affirms that “these scorekeeping attitudes and shifts of attitude [can] be used to *define* both contents and interlocutors” (p. 187, my emphasis). This now might be read to make the pragmatic theory of significances itself a dynamic semantic theory in the sense that you read off, from the alterations of an agent’s attitudes, what the contents (for him) were which a speech act carried. When Brandom finally writes that “the significance of an assertion of *p* can be thought of as a mapping that associates with one social deontic score (...) the set of scores for the conversational stage that results from the assertion” (p. 190), he is essentially defining functional semantic values in the sense of dynamic semantics. Content or meaning becomes a function which, given a speech act, determines for each score of a conversational participant the new deontic score which arises by virtue of the speech act’s taking place.

But note now that the problem I raised for dynamic semantics becomes even more troublesome. Nothing forbids defining meanings mathematically in the way the last quote suggests. But the result is a very abstract notion of content, perhaps so abstract as to be devoid of philosophical interest. What is the meaning-theoretical gain to look at a deontic-epistemic state change (itself determined by non-linguistic principles), subtract the posterior from the prior state, and define the difference to be the ‘meaning’ of the input motivating the change? The more contentful question is, what makes an agent choose *this* particular contextual change *in the light of this* input?

To my mind there is nothing wrong with a dynamic account of meaning. But it should be understood in the way that the dynamics are a topic for the theory of rationality and strategic interaction, quite independently of semantic concerns. This undertaking may give rise to some notion of content or other. But this will be a theoretical abstraction, which to explain we need not despair. And surely, its status will not be that of *determining*, for a speaker who grasps such a content, what pragmatic or context-changing significance a sentence expressing it has. Sentences are not the right kinds

of things to change deontic and epistemic contexts. Nor are linguistic meanings.

4.

I hasten to emphasise that the idea I have started with, that for Brandom semantic content *determines* pragmatic significance, indicates just one order of explanation for him. The other order is pursued when it is not that contents are presupposed in an account of what people do, but when instead it is what people do that gives the words they are using the contents they have (cf. pp. 133, 134). “[A]ttitudes have the contents they do in virtue of the role they play in the behavioral economy of those to whom they are attributed” (p. 134).

To illustrate how this is supposed to work, consider how Brandom’s theory of the “inferential commitments” which concepts involve, applies to pejorative terms like the French word ‘Boche’. Brandom says that to use the word ‘Boche’ involves to commit oneself to the consequences of applying it, which are, according to Brandom, that one thinks of the person one is applying it to as liable to things like cruelty and barbarism. He clearly assumes in developing this example that it is this inferential commitment which “gives [concepts like ‘Boche’] their content” (p. 127), rather than it being the content which determines the permissible or obligatory inferences, or what the commitments are. Commitments are also said to be “content-conferring” (pp. 116, 76), and thus, I take it, are not determined by contents. And the strategy is said to be that of pursuing an inferential account of semantic content “not in abstraction from pragmatism about the norms implicit in the practical application of concepts” (p. 132). Thus the road seems here to be clearly a road from practice to content and meaning, not vice versa. This second viewpoint of course seems considerably closer to the truth in my eyes, but Brandom clearly pursues both directions of explanation, and thinks there is a road back from meaning to use, besides the road from use to meaning.

In what way this is coherent escapes me, for it would seem that either content determines significance or significance determines content, but that you cannot have usefully both. In particular, even if one’s study of the pragmatics of communication provides a notion of content, I am not sure one can go on saying that once such a notion is in place it can determine, for a speaker who grasps it, how he should alter his or other’s deontic score. This notion of content is a hypostasis, based on the idea that the sentences of a language come with or are such public and shared instructions to change score.

There is a similar problem in Brandom's work with respect to the explanatory relation of the notions of semantic content and inference. Brandom explicitly denies that contents are merely *manifested* in reasoning, and affirms that they *consist* in it.⁹ As I argued in the beginning, here one must distinguish two cases, the deductive and the inductive one. The argument was that in the first case we may agree with Brandom, for then the content of the premises merely unfolds in the inference. So in this case we can say that the content consists in the conclusions we may draw from it. But each and every inductive inference involves a cognitive leap: we have to *justify* our going beyond the commitments we have incurred in endorsing the premises. We do this by assuming the premises, and by appealing to certain contextual factors by means of which the induction can be justified (such as our assessment of the probability of the conclusion given the premises, and its informational value for us at a given stage of inquiry). In no such case can we say that the contents of the premises *consist* in the inferences drawn. If they did, we could never justify the inference in a way such as the one I have sketched. Any justification of this kind requires the contents of the premises to be there to start with. On this *basis* we proceed to contemplate and evaluate various hypotheses, one of which may then be our inductively inferred conclusion.

It is thus absolutely crucial to separate the deductive and the inductive case in a way Brandom doesn't, and restrict the thesis that content is inferential role to the first. Of course this makes the notion of content, in the general case where inferences are inductive, prior to that of inference. This I think is just as it should be.

Like Frege, furthermore, I take it that from a sentence (of a natural or formal language) nothing is ever inferable. For Frege, from premises which are not known to be true (i.e., which do not correspond, in my jargon, to beliefs one holds) nothing ever follows.¹⁰ On the present picture, it is *agents* who draw conclusions on the basis of settled assumptions, or make judgements as to what follows from assumptions adopted for the sake of the argument. The first kind of behaviour I call inference, and I understand it in the way that an agent who draws the inference thereby explicitly incurs, if the inference is deductive, a commitment implicit in those already undertaken. But that a commitment to the truth of $A \& B$, e.g., induces a rational commitment to endorse the truth of A , is nothing that seems to have anything to do with language. Language as such entitles to nothing. We may *represent* an inference in terms of a sequence of sentences, each of which we will take to express a belief or rational commitment of thought. But both that a natural language *as such* 'allows inferences', or that a

sentence ‘follows from another’, under one interpretation or under any, are formulations which seem true at best in a derivative sense.

This view, for all its obviousness to me, is an important disagreement with Brandom who sees *languages* as systems which *as such* incorporate norms for altering one’s attitudes and states of doxastic commitments. It is true that there are certain routines for changing one’s mind in terms of new linguistic inputs – as when I start, without anything like a genuine decision, believing it is 5 PM when somebody tells me “It’s 5 PM”. But there is no question that such a routine *entitles* me to such an inference. Routines if they exist are useful, since otherwise we would give them up, but they are quite different from justifications based on non-linguistic deliberation.

To sum up what I said so far about the semantics-pragmatics interface, just as there are problems with the first above view on the nature of this interface, there are problems with the second. The first, I have already argued, demands the impossible. Abstractions like content cannot determine what they are abstracted from. But the second misses a direct path which there is from what people do to *what they (are committed to) believe*. Brandom on his map draws this path as leading from what people do to what their words mean (p. 134), and from there to what they believe. This is a detour in my eyes, since an account of what they believe is needed in any case, and on the direct path the account of meaning can be hoped to be a by-product of the account we give of belief.

5.

What *gives* us the distinction between the force and the content of an attitude in the first place? Perhaps grammar seduces us to take too seriously the fact that attitude verbs like believe and desire are transitive. If we believe something, there has got to be something that is believed, the ‘object’, as one says, of the belief, which then happily transforms into the ‘content’ towards which the belief is ‘directed’. Be that as it may, let us now consider more concretely the agent who wants to know an answer to an open theoretical question. He faces a cognitive decision problem in that he has a series of *options* (potential answers) in front of his mind. Among these he wants to determine the optimal one, optimal in that it satisfies his desire to acquire knowledge but respects his concern to avoid carrying something worthless since false into his current doctrine. Why not say, firstly (if a notion of content is wanted), that the content of what he believes is given by the *set of epistemic commitments* which to endorse, given his doctrine, he rationally has to be disposed to when prompted appropriately?

Secondly, why not say the ‘content’ of what he *wonders about* is the set of potential doctrines he would adopt were he to add one of the potential answers to his open question as a further commitment to his doctrine? We might say, furthermore, with Brandom, that the content of a hypothesis is the difference it would make to the current doctrine were the agent to add it to it. The question of what the contents of the hypotheses or potential answers are is then answered by reducing *their* content to that previously defined for his beliefs. These are what the difference is a difference of. The content of what the agent *values*, finally, might be given by the potential beliefs he may have concerning how good something would be. At no point would we have to speak of propositions or semantic contents proper. All the contents there are would reduce to the contents of beliefs. These would not be propositions or semantic contents, but be further understood in terms of rational commitments of thought, which are always relative to a given set of such commitments.

But wouldn’t that be cheating? Isn’t a rational commitment of thought something that itself *has* a content, and thus requires to inquire what those contents, given independently by a genuinely semantic theory, consist in?

It isn’t, because indeed I recommend that, at this point, we break up our chain of reductions. If I talk about commitments and I am asked, *which* commitments, with *what* contents, I answer by offering these commitments as primitives. So they are the commitments they are. But wait, if you wish to know more about what these contents qua commitments consist in, I’ll say that they consist in the set of whatever else is a commitment if they are. Beliefs, qua commitments, will thus be represented as their own consequence sets. Now these consequence sets we can again collect into a set, and we assume its elements are partially ordered according to whether they are stronger or weaker. Call that ordering an *implication relation* and the set, to adopt a term from Isaac Levi, the *algebra of potential states of full belief*. Note that the implication relation can be characterised in a purely structural way, that is, without assuming the meanings of any logical operators as given. The latter may be characterised structurally. For example, conjunctions are values of a function *C* applied to elements *A* and *B* of the algebra which have certain properties relative to the implication relation: *C*(*A*, *B*) implies both *A* and *B* and is the weakest element of the algebra with that property.¹¹

What we get then is a way of spelling out that ‘content consists in inferential role’, without having to appeal to anything like the internal structure of *sentences representing* potential states of full belief. Nor do we need introduction and elimination rules to determine the ‘meaning’ of logical signs occurring in such representations. It is perfectly clear on this picture,

though not on Brandom's, that each and every move from one consequence set to another is not a matter of content or 'meaning'. Rather, one is in a state of belief, whose content is given by its consequence set, and tries to justify a move to another. There is no way that the contents of those prior states *consist* in such cognitive moves. The only inferential moves in which a content (belief) may be said to 'consist', are those in which an agent stays *within* one consequence set.

Opinions differ as to precisely how much structure the algebra of states of full belief should have. Some have taken it to be a Heyting algebra, some require it to be Boolean, still others wish to remain uncommitted and simply assume a complete lattice.¹² In each case, the structure derives from requirements on the rationality and coherence of potential states of belief. Logic, when read off from the algebra, will thus derive from the theory of rationality and not be prior to it.

The above primitives, I claim, are qua primitives at most as reprehensible as 'semantic contents', 'propositions', or truth conditions, for all of the latter are much more remote from practice and thus more difficult to give a clear content by linking them to it. And they are at least as good since they do the job these things do, and more. For rather than having to link an attitude-neutral and force-neutral notion of proposition or 'content' to its occurrences in action and deliberation, where they always already have a force attached to it, we start where agents incur commitments of thought and action right away.

Finally, there is a sense in which they are just the primitives which Brandom employs, since although he claims that his "semantic primitives" are "proprieties of material inference" (p. 133), not commitments, they "can be explained in the pragmatic theory as implicit in discursive practice" (p. 133). But what is implicit here boils down to nothing but the commitments implicitly undertaken in reasoning and discourse. So inference is itself further explained in terms of commitment. Moreover, Brandom allows meaning determining but *non-inferential* language entry and exit moves, as deriving from direct perception and action. Despite this seeming agreement, the disagreement remains that for Brandom commitment is a pragmatic primitive, and that there is a semantic primitive in addition to it, which I claim is not needed. Another point I will insist on is that the study of commitment is not the study of some public conduct or the practice to "treat inferences as correct" (p. 134).

Still you may ask, what are the identity conditions of these commitments, and of the *kinds* of commitments? As regards the first question, the question must be made relative to the fineness of the grain with which you want to consider an attitudinal commitment. Given that you have one

such commitment, you can always differentiate it into infinitely more. For example, the belief of Inge that she visits her friend soon in Toulouse may split or be further determined as the belief that she visits her boyfriend in a village close to Toulouse on a putatively beautiful Monday towards the end of the month, and so on. Once you have chosen a certain fineness of grain, with due respect to your present interest and concerns regarding Inge, you can go on to make an inquiry whether some commitment or belief with that particular fineness of grain is indeed the one Inge really has. This question concerning the identity of a commitment can be settled as good or as bad as any other question we ask about the identity of something (for example about whether the house we saw yesterday is the house we see today, or whether your taste of this Minestrone is similar to mine).¹³

As regards the second question, concerning various kinds of commitments, there are, for example, commitments to be disposed to make probability judgements given that you make others. If you think rain is probable to a degree of at least 60%, you are committed to judge lack of rain to be probable to a degree of at most 40%. If you find chocolate is disgraceful you are committed to be disposed to stay away from it as long as you want to be coherently describable as having this view of chocolate. And if you rule out that Betty is the murderess as a serious possibility for your inquiry (say, because she was dead at the time), you are committed to accept it as a necessary truth that Betty is not the murderess.

I answer that indeed we have to take one kind of commitment as central, and from my exposition it is clear that this will be the commitment of the last specified kind. These are commitments that something is certainly and absolutely true, in other words, that its falsehood is not a serious possibility. So it is such commitments which will be the elements of the above algebra. The other commitments do not span separate algebras consisting of other kinds of creatures, but are modelled by distributing values (values of probability, values of utility, various other values) over the one and only algebra of potential states of belief or epistemic commitment.¹⁴

6.

The last section has led us in the middle of what is in effect one of Brandom's own most central concerns: "that belief can be modeled on the kind of inferentially articulated *commitment* that is undertaken or acknowledged by making an assertion" (p. 157). The first half of this claim I have already endorsed. But I object to the second half, since it is not public assertions that induce commitments. This is immediately clear in the deductive case.

And in the inductive case I shall now point out that justifications are, ultimately, *intrapersonal* ones.

Our abolishment of Brandom's duality of commitments and entitlements means to rule out inferences which Brandom claims are 'primitively good in virtue of the contents of the concepts involved in them' (Brandom's "material inference"). Examples are "There is lightning, so thunder will be heard", or "Gustav is a dog, so Gustav has four legs". As I pointed out before, in such inferences the truth of the premises doesn't guarantee that of the conclusions. These are *consistent* with the premises, but there is no question that the premises *entitle* to them: to infer them requires some courage and boldness on the side of the agent (however little), and there is no authority somewhere 'outside' agents which permits or entitles to them. The inferences are not *safe*, and this brings about a need to tell when one can or should draw such inferences.¹⁵

That inductive inferences involve a *risk of error*, as seen in the facts that in the above inferences for some reason thunder may not be heard, and Gustav may turn out to have three legs, does not mean that one should not draw these inferences. But one should know what one is doing: one should *weigh* the risk. Consequently the agents for which I make a case here are audacious agents who put the boldness of their quest to rid themselves of their ignorance against their calculated risks of coming to believe the false. They go beyond the commitments they have incurred to incur new ones. Striving for being faithful to the harmonious interplay of the 'conditions of application' and 'permissible consequences' of the concepts and words which already have acquired the authority of public usage is not central for those agents. Brandom's agents, by contrast, explore the 'real' contents of concepts by *making explicit* their putative grounds for applying a concept or word and for inferring its material content. To see whether they fulfil the public standards for applying these concepts they put them "into the open as liable to challenges and demands for justification" (p. 127).

But there is something rationally *incoherent* about an agent who, if s/he rules out the possibility of Betty's being the murderess, sees Betty's not having murdered the victim as still being open to doubt or liable to challenge. It is simply not the case that s/he is under some kind of obligation to get involved in the "game of giving and asking for reasons", as Brandom calls it, since s/he can only rationally be expected to doubt and justify assuming things whose falsehood *is* a serious possibility for him/her. Neither would disagreement by itself be a good reason to change the commitments s/he has incurred, and it doesn't factually seem to be taken to be one either. It is true that disagreement may eventually of course belong to the evidence which may lead the agent to make a suppositional belief revision of

the following kind: “I believe A. But what if I were wrong in the end? Then perhaps I could explain something I couldn’t explain before”. But *at this point*, where I make a belief revision for the sake of the argument to explore possible consequences, none of my convictions is yet given up (so this is not what the disagreement has led to). And indeed I shouldn’t do this without good grounds. Now my supposition may eventually lead me to change my mind (I give up my belief and/or adopt a new one). The decision to take this step is a decision in need of justification, namely to count something as dubious or false which was reckoned to be absolutely and certainly true. If I make the decision, my change of mind is not something the disagreement will have caused. For it will be a decision I have to justify not in front of the linguistic community I happen to be involved with, but to myself.¹⁶

Note that this change of judgement would have its status and could be theoretically studied as such in complete independence of public or ‘external’ acts of assertion.¹⁷ There is good reason not to focus on public acts when studying rational commitments of thought. I happen to fully believe that Schröder has been elected as the last German Chancellor. I wouldn’t think of providing a justification for this, unless someone gave me reason to doubt it, which nobody has. If I went on the street, though, today on 31 January in Berlin, and declared that Schröder had been elected as chancellor, people might actually ask me to justify my *claim*, given that it presumably would not address any real issue either for them or for me. All the same, what people would not ask me to do in this situation is to justify my *belief* that Schröder has been elected chancellor. And if I believed and claimed that Rudy is a crook, and did so publicly and loudly at a ceremony celebrating Mayor Rudolph Guiliani’s 60th birthday, people may approach me with looks clearly indicating that I was not supposed to or had no right to make this *claim*. But even then I do not have to, and would not be asked to, justify my *belief* that Mayor Rudolph Guiliani is a crook.

In sum, not only do not all beliefs seem to require justification, but the general justificatory situation for individually held beliefs on the one hand, and for public pronouncements on the other, seems quite distinct. Brandom claims that “[T]he use of *any* concept or expression involves commitment to an inference from its grounds to its consequences of application” (p. 126). But let us take it that most of us are agents who have, in the course of their inquiries, ruled out certain logical possibilities as serious ones. These are the things we assume for sure and which form the unquestioned basis for all *further* question-asking. For this to be a permissible practice, the grounds on the basis of which one of these certainties was or is assertible, are irrelevant. Whether I recall them or not does not matter. I am

neither committed to know them nor to infer consequences of application from them. That is so precisely as long as I am not conducting an inquiry into their grounds or justifications (which, by our assumptions, I am not). In sum, I do not have to justify what I *assume* in my efforts to acquire knowledge – my beliefs –, but the *decisions* I make about which one of the hypotheses I have selected as potential answers to my problem is the correct one – my *changes* of belief.

The above viewpoint requires me to assert, relative to my present full beliefs, that the truth of a belief which were to contradict one of them is not a serious possibility. But it is perfectly consistent with this viewpoint that I can judge, relative to a potential *future* set of full beliefs, that the falsehood of one of my present beliefs is absolutely certain. For example, relative to the potential future set of beliefs according to which Schroeder was an actor set on the scene by some superpower, I do believe that my present belief in Schroeder's election has turned out false.¹⁸

These claims have the important consequence that there are no publicly given 'concepts' or 'inferential norms' which, as far as some public or official standard goes, "ought to be endorsed" (p. 127), or "govern the use of expressions" (p. 134). It is an *agent* who makes, on the basis of what he has found is true, a decision as to whether *s/he* ought to endorse – or can justify to him/herself – an inference, considered as a non-linguistic thing. You may use the expression 'dinner table' where I would use the word 'tiger', not to your advantage presumably, but there would be nothing thereby rationally incoherent about you. You may or may not infer danger or food where I do, but there is no point requiring that you infer food where I infer danger.

7.

Brandom himself takes up at one point (p. 127) what I have been calling the inductive case. The issue Brandom raises is conceptual progress in science and the introduction of new concepts into a language. Both Dummett's and Brandom's question at this point is this: the introduction of the concept, for example the above concept "Boche", will come with an 'inference license' which will make permissible inferences which have not been permissible in the language before (such as that a German is cruel and barbarous). The result of this addition is, in this sense, a *nonconservative* extension of the language, and the conditions of application of the concept (German nationality) are not in "harmony" with its consequences of application (that Germans are cruel).

Let me now argue that it is not clear what should be wrong with this situation, and why harmony should be described as a *value* in human inquiry, as Brandom does (e.g., pp. 127–30). The central question according to Brandom with respect to a new concept added to a language is whether the new inferences should be endorsed or not, given a present set of inferences ‘licensed by the language’. Brandom’s formulation of the problem presupposes that language is the sort of thing which makes certain things permissible or not, or entitles one to an inference or not. Again, it seems that *agents* have such powers, but, in addition to that, it also seems that it is not language that one worries about when one wonders whether to make a certain inference. What is worrisome is whether one particular *belief* should be held given that others are. One *can* wonder: should I believe, given what else I believe, that Germans are barbarous? But this is not a question as to whether to use a word or not, although it is a *practical consequence* of its answer that I may not find it useful to publicly use the word Boche to express the beliefs I have about Germans. Note that even if I used it, there would be no sense in claiming that I am thereby committed to believe that Germans are cruel and barbarous. True, my language use is one of the guides for my listeners for ascribing beliefs to me. Using the word Boche may be found misleading, reproachable in some other way, or indeed very wise depending on whom I am addressing. But it does not *commit me to believe*, or to *take as evidence*, that Germans are cruel and barbarous.¹⁹ There is nothing incoherent in the situation in which I simply decide not to draw such consequences, even though I continue to use the word “Boche” in talking about Germans. I may then have a different concept of “Boche” than others, but so what? Words do not encode inferential commitments.

Brandom doesn’t investigate general principles and parameters that could help an agent in making a cognitive decision about whether some new inference should be drawn or not. But suppose I don’t believe Germans are cruel and barbarous, and I hear an assertion of “Freddy est Boche”. If I know Freddy is German and that the word Boche suggests certain inferences about properties that Germans have, what should I do? Change my mind about Germans? Try to change speaker’s mind about Germans? Something else? Indeed, no matter how close one looks at *language*, no answer will fall out of this. But if content is to derive from change of deontic score, and deontic score is changed by linguistic performances, one should have an answer to that question.

Whatever the right general principles for deontic state changes are, neither conservatism nor harmony are the values for inquiry that Brandom claims they are. In the present framework, extensions of a current state

of linguistic usage or commitment are candidates for potential inductive expansions we may find useful to perform on our current doctrine. In the context of an open question, there will always be many of them, and thus an evaluation of them is needed. Such an evaluation serves to justify adopting a new belief, or to use an old word in a new way. As Brandom rightly notes (p. 127), one always needs to take a background of harmonious practices or commitments for granted as a basis for such evaluations. According to Brandom, these are norms of the language as existing at present, according to me the settled questions or full beliefs at this time including their deductive consequences. If we now suppose that the new belief is inconsistent or incoherent with the current norms or present beliefs, the agent has to make a decision as to whether to give up his commitments to one of these norms or beliefs. But even if his decision is to reject the information that would have led to the new belief, and to stay with the old norms or doctrine, the reason that these *are the old* norms or doctrine is not a good reason for not changing them. Hence conservatism is ruled out as a value for deontic state change.

More relevantly, harmony – that the introduction rules of a concept (the rules telling when to apply it) are not in conflict with their elimination rules (the rules telling which consequences to draw from an application of a concept) – is no such value either. Harmony, in the present context, translates into the requirement that a state of full belief should be in a reflective equilibrium under rational criteria of self-criticism. For example, I am not in such an equilibrium if I think that not all Germans are barbarous, but are Boche, and think that people who are Boche are barbarous. This inconsistency, in which I may find myself, would rationally require me to move into another state, again in equilibrium, in which the inconsistency is removed. Again I will typically have many options for removing the inconsistency and to adopt a new doctrine. *All* of these will be coherent or in equilibrium, hence that they *are* in equilibrium is not a good reason for endorsing them, for otherwise the agent would have a good reason for adopting just about any of them.²⁰

8.

I have asserted that inductive inferences may be *legitimate* or *justified* relative to a number of decision-relevant parameters. These parameters serve to evaluate potential changes in the current doctrine or view, and thus to evaluate aspects of the content of an input (such as its probability, relevance, or feasibility). We cannot expect, however, that if we are dealing with a group of agents, the evaluations that the members of this group attach to a hypo-

thesis conform to one objective standard for evaluating hypotheses. Agents who share some piece of evidence, or witness the same performance, need not reach the same conclusions concerning the relevance that this piece of evidence has relative to their common or individual inquiry and/or deontic status. But then, since the ‘difference’ the evidence makes with respect to the inquiry or deontic score is what Brandom takes to be the measure of its content, it follows that the ‘content’ of the piece of evidence loses its unity. It can be very different for each of the group members. Hence there is no clear theoretical point in the assumption that a ‘language’ is a treasure house of public and essentially shared meanings and norms that are what induces the changes in deontic statuses. It is the deontic and epistemic dynamics we must *start* with.

Brandom might evoke at this point his functional construal of meaning, according to which what a speaker grasps when he is exposed to a grammatical sentence is a *rule* which, when applied to an epistemic-deontic state, returns a new epistemic-deontic state. So a language *would* in the end be a treasure house of shared meanings, namely, in the sense of such functions. Again, I point out that there is nothing wrong with this meaning-theoretic idea mathematically, but I doubt what its philosophical interest can be. The output of the function for a given argument is not intuitively determined by this argument (alone). It is thus not a good notion of sentence meaning. What an agent who grasps such a function grasps is the result of a cognitive decision which, when exposed to the input, he would yet, as it would seem, have to make. All the meaning-theoretic interest would lie in how an agent’s given state interacts with a new input to produce such a function.

It appears that a consequence of adopting a principled normative approach to the alteration of our attitudes on the lines sketched is that it makes language idiolectal. This is not necessarily a bad result, though.²¹ An advantage of such a view is that it seems to allow Brandom’s interesting account of coreference as commitment-preserving substitutability to work better than I think it can otherwise. What is to be a commitment, given that something else is one, is a question that is to be decided with reference to the commitments already incurred by the agent to whom the question is addressed. The question whether some substitution of a subsentential constituent for another is commitment preserving, or otherwise involves an unwarranted commitment-change, has then a precise sense. If language, by contrast, is by its essence social, and the notion of a community is vague, the question when substitution preserves commitment and entitled inference doesn’t seem to have a clear sense.²²

9.

Commitments, I have argued, don't have to be carried into the open to play an accountable theoretical role. So why "make it explicit"? Let us, finally, ask how large the scope of the enterprise of making implicit commitments explicit can actually be. One general problem that limits this scope is that so many connections between concepts and beliefs are probabilistic in nature, in which case they would not *be* inferential in a strict sense. Probability assignments for example are arguably not even propositional in nature, that is, carry truth-values.²³ But then they cannot figure in inferences, in fact on Brandom's own view of inference, where inferences involve only propositions as premises and conclusions (cf. p. 83). Moreover, many performances, such as imperatives, are meaningful although they do not figure in inferences at all.²⁴

But also, so much that is decisive for decision-making and understanding cannot be made explicit at all. The project presupposes that everything which can interest us can be carried into the open by being made explicitly the part of a propositional (assertible, knowable) content.²⁵ But if, for example, probability assignments are not propositional, being implicitly committed to a probability assignment cannot be explicitated in a full sense by describing this fact through a sentence like "the agent's probability for ... is ..." since this is a proposition, and the assignment is not. This point extends beyond probability assignments. A command I make is *expressed* in an imperatival utterance, but is not 'made explicit' by or can be understood in terms of the meaning of the sentence "I command you to ...". The study of this meaning doesn't illuminate the nature of imperatival performances; it presupposes an account of them. And the sentence "I believe that *p*" is regarded by Brandom as an explicitation of my belief that *p*. But if explicitation is to serve the goal of examining the "consequences and possible justifications" (p. 128) of given implicit commitments, explicitations such as the one Brandom offers here are not the right kind of things to study. To study the practical significance of an *attitude* is not to study the *meaning* of a sentence which expresses (belief in) the fact that the attitude is held, a different matter entirely. The attitude has to be treated *directly* for what it is, and the study of an explicit attitude attribution is not necessarily the right path to the attitude that is attributed.

In an attitude report, Brandom writes, the "force becomes part of the content" (pp. 121, 116). But I wonder whether this is not to propose precisely what Brandom says we should not do, namely to assimilate judgement to predication.²⁶ For having a belief means to make a judgement that something is true. But making a judgement that a proposition is true

is not to classify a proposition as true in the sense of predicating, of it, that it is true, or that one believes it. The sentences “I believe that *A*” or “*A* is true”, when understood as having a predication structure, express propositions, and thus are true or false, whereas my judgement that *A* is true is a judgement that *A* is a consequence or an element of my doctrine or view. This judgement is not again something whose truth or falsity I can wonder about: *if* I commit myself to the truth of *A*, there is no question for me whether my judgement that *A* is true is really true. If it were, I would not have judged it true but still be in suspense. Frege conceived the judgement stroke in the way he did because he insisted on the fact that the force *cannot* be part of the content. Frege’s force indicator is not a meaningful part of an interpreted language, which is why the complex of the proposition and the judgement stroke attached to it does not again determine a proposition.

The general point is that a judgement is an act. As such it has a performative aspect which, as an object of study for decision theory, can be *represented* but not *studied in terms of* a sentence with a propositional content that describes it. Of course we will have to formulate a sentence about what we want to talk about, but I take it this trivial fact is not the one Brandom has in mind. A sentence can be *used to represent the fact* that an act or decision has been made. One can say, of a performance, that it is one, but if we do so, it is out of a practical, not a theoretical need.

10.

To conclude, it may be worth noting that Frege resisted the idea of explicitation in a crucial point. Frege thought that *truth* cannot be elucidated, and that the notion of the act of judging a proposition true is a primitive that cannot be made the object of theoretical study at all. It is precisely here where Dummett took objection with Frege, and Brandom follows suit. Dummett’s objection was that if we take the notion of truth for granted, we cannot hope to do any explanatory work in associating contents with sentences and explaining these in terms of conditions for truth. The task we settle on then is “to *win through*” to a notion of truth²⁷, to gain the right to use it within semantic theory. As Brandom might read this, semantics then becomes a preface to normative pragmatics (in Dummett’s case in the shape of proof theory, in Brandom’s in the shape of a vast generalisation of this, the theory of commitments and entitlements).

It is of some importance to note, though, as I pointed out before, that a structural account of the attitudes in terms of commitments does not in any way depend on the idea of a ‘truth condition’ of a sentence, or that of

a ‘propositional content’. Truth enters in quite another way, as a parameter that is to be taken into account in justifying changes of commitments. In the context of an agent’s efforts to justify such changes, truth is both a value and at risk. No matter how valuable an answer to an open question may be, it may, for all we know, always be a false answer. Truth plays an equally important role in assessing the communicative moves of one’s fellow speakers. But to tell some such story about the role that truth plays in communication and inquiry is not to ‘elucidate’ in any way ‘what truth is’. It is if we become too attached to a theoretical construct, be it ‘propositional content’ or ‘meaning’, that we think there is such a theoretical need.

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NOTES

¹ Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit – Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, Harvard University Press 1994. (Cited henceforth with page references only.)

² Michael Dummett too has considered the idea extending this simple meaning-theoretic account of logical expressions to any kind of expressions of natural language. This aspect of Dummett’s work is one important origin of Brandom’s enterprise. It should be noted, though, that Dummett emphasizes his scepticism about the extent to which this alternative meaning-theoretic project can succeed – a scepticism that I do not find in Brandom’s work. We should note that in Dummett’s case the scepticism doesn’t merely extend to the idea that any kind of expression comes with meaning-determining introduction and elimination rules. It extends also to the idea that the meaning explanations for conjunction and disjunction can be assumed to work properly as meaning explanations for the inferential use even of expressions like “and” and “or” in *natural* languages. See e.g. the discussion of the “Fundamental Assumption” in Chap. 12 of M. Dummett, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*, HUP 1991.

³ I believe that it is here as well where substance can be given to the ideas of ‘intentionality’ or ‘objectivity’, although I won’t be able to say much about this with the exception of note 23.

⁴ Of course there is an important *pragmatic* notion of content, as when we say about a talk that we heard on a conference, “it had absolutely no content”. Clearly the notion of content here is that of *relevance*, and we know perfectly well what we mean by using this notion. What we mean is that a particular performance makes no difference to our inquiry; we know as much before as we know after. I have no intuitions as clear as those as regards the semantic notion of content.

⁵ See J. Groenendijk and M. Stokhof, “Dynamic Predicate Logic”, *Ling. & Phil.* 14, 1991, or H. Kamp and U. Reyle, *From Discourse to Logic*, Kluwer, 1994. Dynamic semantics finds no mentioning in Brandom’s book.

⁶ Note in passing that this presupposes a rather direct connection between natural language semantics and human belief. Since languages literally interpreted incorporate, e.g., an animistic ontology (storms, waves and heavenly bodies are attributed intentions), the connection cannot be very direct.

⁷ “Scorekeeping in a Language Game”, reprinted as Chap. 13 of D. Lewis, *Philosophical Papers*, 233–49.

⁸ That the dynamics is ultimately derivative from a static account of meaning is also true of many versions of dynamic semantics such as Hans Kamp’s DRT, where for every dynamic semantic value there is a static semantic value, too, depending on the perspective you take. But other versions have sought to show that meaning is *essentially* dynamic, that is, irreducible to a static account (in my view without success).

⁹ E.g., “Semantic Inferentialism and Logical Expressivism”, Lecture read in Genoa, 26 January 1999, p. 3.

¹⁰ Letter to Jourdain, G. Gabriel et al. (eds.), *Wiss.Briefwechsel*, Meiner, Hamburg, 1976, p. 118. I owe my scholarly insights into Frege to Göran Sundholm.

¹¹ See e.g., A. Koslow, *A Structuralist Theory of Logic*, CUP 1992, Chaps. 2–3.

¹² See Peter Gärdenfors, *Knowledge in Flux*, MIT Press 1988, Chap. 6, Isaac Levi, *The Fixation of Belief and its Undoing*, CUP 1990, Chaps. 1–2, and Bas van Fraassen, “Identity in Intensional Logic: Subjective Semantics”, in Eco, Santambrogio (eds.), *Meaning and Mental Representation*, Indiana University Press, pp. 201–19.

¹³ This is also (my understanding of) Isaac Levi’s view on the individuation of attitudinal commitments.

¹⁴ For one possible development of this view see Isaac Levi, *The Fixation of Belief*, Chap. 2.

¹⁵ I take inductive inferences in the way they are understood here as what provides the intended applications for the more recent study of ‘non-monotonic reasoning’.

¹⁶ Just imagine the case where you draw an inductive inference in a linguistic community in which one half approves of your inference, and another half does not.

¹⁷ In other words, I see no reason to believe that “judgements are the interiorization of the external act of assertion”, as Brandom approvingly quotes Michael Dummett (p. 153).

¹⁸ This way of making absolute certainty compatible with a refusal of dogmatism is familiar from the writings of Isaac Levi, see his *The Enterprise of Knowledge*, MIT Press, 1980.

¹⁹ Cf. Brandom’s claim of the opposite: “Employing an expression with [a content] involves endorsing the inferential commitment from [its associated] circumstances of entitlement to [its] consequences of commitment (p. 335).

²⁰ Brandom writes “nonconservativeness just shows that it [i.e., the new concept] has a substantive content, in that it implicitly involves a material inference that is not already

implicit in the contents of other concepts being employed” (127). *That* seems to me exactly right, just as it would seem right to me to say that the conservative use of a word shows its *lack* of a substantive content: from the viewpoint of the present state of harmony, a commitment that is implicit in the commitments already undertaken is no news; it doesn’t encode any content beyond that which is given. One might even perceive in Brandom’s sentence the interesting idea that ‘substantive’ content derives from, and can be measured in terms of, the *degree of surprise*, or the degree of novelty which an agent attaches to a belief not entailed by what he believed before. I do *not* take objection with values of conservatism and harmony with respect to the introduction of new deductive-logical vocabulary into given deductive doctrines (which was Prior’s original application of the idea (see p. 125)).

²¹ Even disregarding strong arguments from within linguistic theory that an idiolectal notion of language is the only one to which we may gain scientific access. Cf. Noam Chomsky, “Explaining Language Use”, *Phil. Topics* 20 (1992), 205–31.

²² The communitarian conception of language may seem needed for the sake of securing objectivity for propositional contents, just as the idea of a shared reference of singular terms may seem needed to secure some idea of ‘representation’ and an ‘objective world’. Brandom himself feels pressures in Chap. 8 of his book to make sure that cognitive attitudes, understood as commitments, ultimately must “answer to attitude-transcendent facts” (p. 137). But objectivity may be understood as a cognitive value. The objectivity of our beliefs is a *commitment* we incur as long as we hold them. This notion of objectivity is arguably essential to inquiry, but creates no needs for an extended ontology such as one consisting of attitude-transcending facts. Ultimately, it seems that objectivity can be accounted for in terms of belief dynamics only: the notion of full belief accounts for the idea of objectivity, while the potential lack of objectivity is accounted for by the acknowledgement of the potential need to *change* one’s full beliefs.

²³ This view is held by writers in statistics (J. Savage, B. de Finetti), as well as philosophy (see Isaac Levi, *For the Sake of the Argument*, CUP 1996, Chap. 3, and Bas van Fraassen, “Belief and the Will”, *J. Phil.* 81, 1984, 235–56 for different defences of this view).

²⁴ This point confirms my claim that Brandom puts too much emphasis on his understanding of inferential propriety as a *semantic* primitive. If we take inference as a semantic primitive seriously, too much becomes meaningless.

²⁵ Explicit sayings, judgings etc., Brandom assumes, are *propositionally* explicit. Cf. e.g., pp. 135, 283.

²⁶ Judgements are generally assimilated to propositions within model-theoretical semantics, which doesn’t recognise judgements as a category distinct from propositions. One of the major motivations for adopting the one and only existing kind of ‘inferential semantics’, Per Martin-Löf’s *Intuitionistic Theory of Types* (Bibliopolis, Naples, 1984), may be that it keeps judgements and propositions apart. See Wolfram Hinzen, “Anti-Realist Semantics”, forthcoming in *Erkenntnis*.

²⁷ See “Realism and Anti-Realism”, in M. Dummett, *The Seas of Language*, Oxford, 1994, p. 474. See also “Truth and Meaning” (1985), *ibid.*, 157, 161.

