

MOTIVATING INFERENTIALISM

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1. Introduction

My subject is an argument that Robert Brandom has given in support of inferentialism about semantic content. It's given as a motivational argument, not as a demonstration. So it would be unfair to criticize it by pointing out that it's invalid; that will not be my point. My point will be that it *doesn't even motivate* inferentialism about semantic content. It doesn't even point us in that direction. The problem with it is not that it's based on a false premise. Indeed, I'll be spending some time supporting its main premise, namely, the claim that it is a necessary condition on having a propositional attitude that one appreciate the inferential relations it stands in. The thing is, though, that when we see what considerations can be given in support of that claim, we see very clearly how it doesn't even motivate the conclusion that Brandom wants us to draw from it. The problem is that that claim about what it takes to have a propositional attitude does nothing to show that its inferential relations are a feature of its *content* rather than of the relation that the subject stands in to that content—that is, the *attitude*. A propositional attitude involves both an attitude and a proposition, and Brandom's argument gives us no reason to think of inferential role as having to do with the proposition rather than with the attitude.

Overall, then, the point is that when we see what can be said in support of the claim with which Brandom motivates his inferentialist semantics, we see that it doesn't motivate *any* claim about semantics, let alone the claim that content is a matter of inferential role.

2. The Motivating Claim

First I'll explain the plausible claim on which Brandom's argument rests. The claim is meant as an answer to the question that Brandom at one point poses as follows.

What are the salient differences between a measuring instrument, such as a thermometer or spectrophotometer, and an observer who noninferentially acquires beliefs or makes claims about environing temperatures and colors? [To illustrate,] suppose [a human] reporter's differential responsive dispositions to call things red are matched by those of a parrot trained to utter the same noises under the same stimulation. What practical capacities of the human distinguish the reporter from the instrument or the

parrot? What, besides exercise regular differential responsive dispositions, must one be able to do, in order to count as having or grasping concepts, and so as able to be able to perform not only classification but specifically *conceptual* classification? (1994, 88)

Brandom's answer is that the human reporter *understands* her reports in a way that shows itself in certain practical capacities:

the key element missing from the parrot is [its] mastery of the practices of giving and asking for *reasons*, in which their responses can play a role as *justifying* beliefs and claims. To grasp or understand a concept is to have practical mastery over the *inferences* it is involved in—to know, in the practical sense of being able to distinguish, what follows from the applicability of the concept, and what it follows from. The parrot does not treat “That’s red” as incompatible with “That’s green,” nor as following from “That’s scarlet” and entailing “That’s colored.” (1994, 89)

The claim, then, is that it is a necessary condition on being in a mental state, or performing a speech act, that one have “practical mastery” of its inferential relations to other such states and events. I’ll call this the *motivating claim*.

What claim is the motivating claim meant to motivate? It is that *what one believes*, when one believes that *A*, is something individuated in terms of its relations to what one believes when one believes that *B*, *C*, *D* and so on. Similarly for what one asserts, when one asserts that *A*. This is a claim about the *contents* of states and events such as beliefs and assertions—I’ll call it the *motivated claim*. It is the basic claim of inferentialist semantics, which Brandom pursues in the rest of his book.

2.1 What Items is the Motivating Claim About?

We’ll be in a better position to decide whether the motivating claim really does motivate the motivated claim once we’ve seen what can be said in favor of the motivating claim.

First we should get clear on which states and events the motivating claim concerns. It would be disappointing indeed if we could only pick them out as “those states and events of which the motivating claim is true”—we should want to do better than to make the motivating claim a tautology. It would also be disappointing, I think, if we could do no better than to pick them out as “beliefs, assertions and the like.” (Remember the Greeks’ “food, sex and the like”?) What *kind of thing* are we talking about?

The presupposition at work in the motivating claim is that there is a distinction *in kind* between beliefs, assertions and the like, on the one hand, and other states—even ones that are in some sense “representational,” such

as the reading on a thermometer, to use another of Brandom’s examples—on the other hand. This is the difference Brandom means to point to with the phrase “having or grasping concepts.” The motivating claim is meant to tell us what it is that makes for that difference. But what are the items being picked out as falling on the same side of it as beliefs and assertions?

It’s tempting just to use the usual label: “propositional attitudes.” That would be nice if it helped, but it doesn’t. Bertrand Russell introduced that term into philosophical discourse always by means of short lists of examples, never with anything worth calling a definition. There simply isn’t any received definition of the term. Following Russell, authors content themselves with short lists of examples. Here, to take just one case, is Mark Richard introducing the title notion in his book *Propositional Attitudes*: “This book is about propositional attitudes—believing, saying, desiring, knowing, and so on” (1990, 1). It would be good to know what work the “and so on” is doing.

What is it, then, that the usual examples are examples of? One idea to start with is that the states and events we’re concerned with are specifiable *de dicto*—using “that”-clauses. It does *seem* to be the job of “that”-clauses to specify “propositions,” so we have some connection with the idea the label is usually taken to express. Let’s see what we can do with that idea.

One problem is that there are many states specifiable *de dicto* that are neither mental states nor speech acts. Consider the *needs* that an organism has. An organism can need it to be the case that *A*. What this means, roughly, is that its being the case that *A* is necessary for the organism to live the kind of life proper to it. I might need it to be the case that there’s a roof over my head. That’s a *de dicto* specification of an organism’s need, but having a need is not something that requires the use of concepts. A slug can need it to be the case that the foot descending on it not complete its descent. Slugs have needs, but they don’t use concepts. So it isn’t just states specifiable *de dicto* that the motivating claim is about.

Could we say that they’re states whose *de dicto* specifications are nonextensional? This might appear to help, inasmuch as *de dicto* specifications of needs appear not to satisfy this condition; substitution of codenoting expressions inside the “that”-clause seems to preserve truth value. If I need it to be the case that there’s a roof over my head, and my head is the seventeenth-largest head in town, then I need it to be the case that there’s a roof over the seventeenth-largest head in town. Or again, if a slug needs it to be the case that the foot descending on it not complete its descent, and the foot descending on it is Tina Turner’s, then the slug needs it to be the case

that Tina Turner's foot not complete its descent. If we insist that the states be ones whose *de dicto* specifications are nonextensional, then we can exclude cases such as these.

But even that criterion doesn't seem to pick out just the things Brandom has in mind when making his motivational claim—the things we've usually called the propositional attitudes. Thermometer readings are not among the things Brandom wants to include as “concept-mongerings,” yet they do appear to be nonextensionally specifiable *de dicto*. I think that many speakers would be reluctant to infer, from the fact that the thermometer indicates that it is 32 degrees Fahrenheit, that it indicates that it is 0 degrees Celsius. (The thermometer could have only the Fahrenheit scale marked on it.) So there's at least one sense of “indicates that” on which that's not a necessarily truth-preserving inference. Since there are some nonextensional *de dicto* specifications of what the thermometer indicates, we cannot pick out the class of items that the motivating claim is about by saying that they're the ones whose *de dicto* specifications are nonextensional.

Beliefs are definitely among the items Brandom's motivational claim is about, and beliefs always appear on the shorts lists with which the term “propositional attitudes” is introduced, so perhaps we can take those as paradigmatic instances of the class we're trying to specify, and use them to specify the rest of the items in the class in terms of some *relation to* those paradigmatic instances. Then at least we'd have something better than a short list of examples to justify our proceeding as if there is a kind picked out by the term “propositional attitude.”

One good way to do this, I think, is by appealing to our purpose in specifying beliefs in the first place. The idea I'm going to work with is that we specify beliefs as part of a general project of trying to understand—to predict and explain—each other's behavior. Specifications from the physical sciences are very little help in this regard, as things now stand. We need folk-psychological explanations to explain things we cannot otherwise explain.

It is as part of that same general project that we specify assertions, for (as Davidson (1975, 163), for example, has emphasized) it is typically the case that the best evidence we have of a person's beliefs is the assertions they make. Let's say, then, that the items that the motivating claim is about are ones that are picked out either by *de dicto* specifications that occur in folk-psychological explanations or by *de dicto* specifications that are given in *support of* specifications that do occur in folk-psychological explanations. The former category includes at least beliefs, desires, and doubts; the latter category includes at least assertions and questions.

We needn't pretend here that there's a canonical form for folk-psychological explanations. Philosophers often talk of “belief-desire” psychology, but it's far from clear whether ordinary explanations of the things people do are always expressed, or even expressible, in that form, or whether the explanations of a mature psychology will be expressed or expressible in that form. (It's not clear where *moods* fit into the scheme, for example.) The claim I'm working with here doesn't require any commitment on this matter. The claim is not that there is a canonical form of psychological explanation, but that there is a class of items, *de dicto* specifications of which have their point in virtue of being suited to figure in psychological explanations—however exactly they may go. (Again, not all specifications so suited are *de dicto*—think of moods again; we are just choosing to apply the label “propositional attitude” to those of them that are.)

2.2 Supporting the Motivating Claim

Remarkably, our specification of the class of items that the motivating claim is *about* points towards an argument for that very claim. On the conception of propositional attitudes just sketched, something qualifies as a “propositional attitude” by being specifiable *de dicto* as part of a folk-psychological explanation. That's a commitment about what propositional attitudes are, not a commitment about what folk-psychological explanations are. I will commit myself to one claim about folk-psychological explanations, which Davidson has expressed by saying that folk-psychological explanations of actions

appeal...to the concept of *reason*. The belief and desire that explain an action must be such that anyone who had that belief and desire would have a reason to act in that way. What's more, the descriptions we provide of desire and belief must...exhibit the rationality of the action in the light of the content of the belief and the object of the desire. (1975, 159)

Psychological explanations work by identifying an agent's *reason* for performing some action.

We have here a direct connection with the notion of inference that Brandom puts at the center of his inferentialist semantics. As is apparent in the passage I quoted above, the inferential relations Brandom is interested in—the ones he thinks we can do semantics entirely in terms of—are ones that obtain between propositional attitudes in virtue of some of them amounting to *reasons* to be in, or to perform, others of them.¹

So the feature that makes something a propositional attitude in the first place—its suitability to be specified *de dicto* in a psychological explanation—also explains its standing in inferential relations as Brandom con-

ceives of them. Thus, this understanding of what propositional attitudes *are* gives us reason to agree with Brandom's motivating claim, namely, that propositional attitudes are distinguished by the fact that an agent's *having* a propositional attitude requires his *practical mastery*, his recognition in the actions he performs, of its inferential relations.

3. From the Motivating Claim to the Motivated Claim

Suppose we find all this convincing. That is, we agree with Brandom that it's a necessary condition on having a propositional attitude that one have "practical mastery" of its inferential relations. Does this commit us to inferentialism about semantic content? Brandom seems to think so: although he doesn't explicitly lay out an inference from the motivating claim to the motivated claim, very shortly after presenting the motivating claim he is talking about "the inferential notion of semantic content" (1994, 90).

But the motivating claim in fact does nothing to support the motivated claim—that is, the claim that inferential roles are features of *contents*. This is because many relations that are "inferential" in Brandom's sense turn on facts about the various *relations* that subjects can stand in *towards* contents.

To see this, consider the difference in action-rationalizing potential between a belief that *A* and a doubt that *A*. That there is a difference is obvious. That it deserves to be called a difference in "inferential role" is not obvious, but that is because that is an almost empty technical term, needing filling-in with some explanation. The explanation that Brandom supplies, in terms of the relation of *being a reason for*, is one that is sensitive to just the sort of difference that there is between a belief that *A* and a doubt whether it is the case that *A*: a belief that it's about to rain makes getting inside rational; a doubt that it's going to rain does not. Sometimes, differences in attitude-type *on their own* make for differences in what Brandom thinks of as "inferential role." So we can't infer, from the fact that ϕ -ing that *p* requires practical mastery of some inferential relation, that that mastery is due to that state's involving the proposition that *p* rather than to its involving the relation of ϕ -ing.

One might try to dismiss that kind of example on the following grounds. One could argue that as the difference between believing that *A* and doubting whether it is the case that *A* is not intuitively one worth calling a difference in one's *understanding* of the proposition that *A*. Making this objection obliges one to say *why* that doesn't deserve to be called a difference in understanding; to my mind it is far from clear why *on the conception of "understanding" that Brandom works with*, namely, "practical mastery" of

inferential relations, this kind of difference fails to count as a difference in understanding. But let us suppose that that is not a problem.

We can put the objection to the side nevertheless. For there are other differences between attitudes that are, indisputably, worth calling differences in understanding. Frege, for example, excoriated Weierstrass for not having a "clear grasp" of the concept of number: he "had a notion of what number is, but a very hazy one" (1914, 221). Now Weierstrass certainly had *beliefs* about numbers; he was a great mathematician. Nevertheless Frege was invoking some standard that Weierstrass *failed* to meet; his understanding of the concept of number was not "clear," and clarity, for Frege, certainly did require recognition of the inferential relations that a concept *actually does* stand in to other concepts. It is a standard concerning inferential relations, but it is a standard that attaches to an attitude-type rather than to a content, because one way to put Frege's point would be by saying that he thought that Weierstrass didn't *clearly believe* anything about numbers. Think also of Descartes' appeal to a difference between merely believing that *A*, and *clearly and distinctly* believing that *A*. Descartes, like Frege, took there to be attitudes that require more understanding—more "clarity"—than mere belief requires. Differences such as these, which are differences among *attitude types* not among *contents*, are indisputably ones that deserve to be called differences in understanding, and they have to do (largely) with recognition of inferential relations. So one can't appeal to the idea that the *sorts* of inferential relations at issue must be ones recognition of which makes a difference to what we'd intuitively call "understanding," in order to reject my claim that differences in attitude-type make for differences in inferential role.

In general terms, then, ϕ -ing that *p* might require one to take that to be (*ceteris paribus*) a reason to ϕ that *q*; but this could be a feature of ϕ -ing rather than a feature of the proposition that *p* taken on its own. This would be the case if Ψ -ing that *p*, for example, did *not* require Ψ -ing that *q*. There are very often differences of this sort between attitude-types—for whatever each of us believes, he or she usually believes rather less than "clearly."

4. Conclusion

The point I've made is that when we see what support there is for the claim that having a propositional attitude requires "practical mastery" of its inferential relations to other propositional attitudes, we see that that claim does not at all support the claim that those inferential relations are features of the *contents* of propositional attitudes. For it is just as plausible to take

them to be features of the *relations* that subjects stand in to propositions. There is good reason for us to be inferentialists about what it takes to have propositional attitudes—namely, “understanding”—but Brandom has not presented us with a good reason to be inferentialists about propositional content.

Works Cited

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Notes

¹ This mightn't seem to be what is illustrated by psychological explanation, as in such explanations it is typical that an *action* is being explained, and actions are typically not specified *de dicto*, hence are not propositional attitudes on the conception we are working with. In that case the “is a reason for” relation would seem to be obtaining between propositional attitudes on the one hand (namely, the ones cited in the explanation) and items that are not propositional attitudes (namely, the actions being explained), on the other. But we can discern in this a relation among propositional attitudes as we're conceiving of them, as follows. Where some attitudes make it rational to perform an action, they also make it rational to form an intention to perform that action; and *intending it to be the case that* is a propositional attitude. Intentions are rational in virtue of relations among the propositional attitudes cited in folk-psychological explanations of actions that those intentions would, if formed, be intentions to perform. Psychological explanations do, then, either directly (as when they are explanations of intentions) or indirectly (as when they are explanations of actions) illustrate the “is a reason for” relation among propositional attitudes.

ON ASSERTION AND ROBUSTNESS: SECOND THOUGHTS ON JACKSON'S WAY OUT

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Introduction

Suppose I assert, “If this paper is accepted, tenure is assured.” By what right is this utterance acceptable? Considered materially and in conjunction with an assertion rule to assert only what is true, acceptability is secured. Article acceptance rates being what they are, the antecedent is frightfully unlikely. Material conditionals are true when their antecedents are false. However, this simple and straightforward account faces well-known and serious problems. Frank Jackson has proposed a way to keep the simple account of truth associated with material conditionals, while at the same time avoiding the difficulties associated with the simple theory of assertion. Although there is much to applaud in Jackson's account, I argue that it is incomplete, as it cannot account for a common usage of indicative conditionals. Put roughly, I propose the addition of a single criterion that would allow Jackson's theory to account for conditionals initially thought beyond the scope of a simple account of conditional assertion. In this paper, I rehearse Jackson's account of assertion to show its superiority to the simple account that identifies assertion conditions with truth conditions. Next, I raise an objection to Jackson's account. Finally, I revise Jackson's theory to account for the objection. The revision I propose is consistent with Jackson's original theory. Indeed, given the way I explain Jackson's theory, the revision is a natural extension.

Jackson and a Simple Theory of Assertion

Here's a simple theory of assertion: assert only what is true. If indicative conditionals are true only when the associated material conditionals are true, then indicative conditionals are true when either their antecedents are false, or their consequents are true. Consider the following sentences:

(1) If Marx is alive, Paris is the capital of England.

(2) If Bush earned As at Yale, Kerry is our president-elect.

Since the antecedents of both (1) and (2) are false, the conditionals are true. Because the conditionals are true, one could justifiably assert either. Yet, who wouldn't balk at such assertions? The problem isn't that these conditionals are really false and shouldn't, therefore, be asserted. Rather,