

Brandom's Pragmatist Inferentialism and the Problem of Objectivity

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Abstract

Brandom's philosophical programme can be seen as a reversion of the traditional order of explanation in semantics. Whereas traditional semantic theories start with a grip on a notion like truth or reference, Brandom argues that it is also possible to begin with an analysis of the speech acts of what one is doing by making a claim in order to explain representational notions like truth and objectivity. Evaluating the explanatory values of Brandom's theory, it therefore is necessary to ask to what extent Brandom's analysis of our linguistic practices is able to explain what other theories start with. That is, can linguistic practices in Brandom's sense give an account of why we are capable of referring to language-external objects? And can they make evident why we take truth and falsity not to depend upon our beliefs or claims but upon an extra-linguistic reality? After a short discussion of Brandom's answer to the first question, I argue that Brandom's answer to the second is not sufficient and that it does not seem to be possible to give a sufficient answer within his theory.

Introduction

Brandom argues that it is possible to explain the notions of truth and objectivity with the help of an analysis of our linguistic praxis. At the beginning of *Articulating Reasons*, he writes that in a traditional Fregean theory, 'some grip on the concept of *truth* [...] is assumed, and an account of the pragmatic force or speech act of assertion is elaborated based on this connection'. (Brandom 2003, pp. 11-12) Conversely, Brandom's theory 'reverses the platonist order of explanation. Starting with an account of what one is *doing* in making a claim, it seeks to elaborate from it an account of what is *said*, the content or proposition – something that can be thought of in terms of truth conditions – to which one commits oneself by such a speech act.' (Brandom 2003, p. 12) Brandom, therefore, has to show that, indeed, his analysis of our linguistic practices is able to explain what other theories start with; that is, he has to show how it is possible that we are able to refer to the world with the help of linguistic expressions and why claims in general are made in the knowledge that their truth is independent of our asserting them. Even though these are clearly distinct notions, Brandom calls both phenomena 'objectivity of propositional content'. Following Knell

(2004, p. 170), I shall refer to the former as 'referential objectivity' and to the latter as 'veridic objectivity'. Brandom claims: 'The point of all this is that the *objectivity* of propositional content [...] is a feature we can make intelligible as a structure of the commitments and entitlements that articulate the use of sentences' (Brandom 2003, p. 203). There are, thus, two questions to be answered: 1. Presupposing only social linguistic inferential practices – the structure of commitments and entitlements –, how is it possible to explain that we in fact can talk about things in the world? That is, how is it possible to explain reference to extra linguistic objects without presupposing them? 2. How can it be made intelligible within Brandom's theory that these extra linguistic objects constitute the standard of the truth of a sentence, rather than any intra-linguistic entity? After a short discussion of Brandom's answer to the first question, I argue that Brandom's answer to the second is not sufficient and that it does not seem to be possible to give a sufficient answer within his theory.

1. The normative fine structure of rationality

Brandom argues that there are two phenomena characteristic of linguistic practices which are relevant for answering the above questions. The first one is what he calls 'the normative fine structure of rationality' and the second one is his interpretation of the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* ascriptions of propositional attitudes.

He maintains that the meaning of linguistic expressions should not primarily be specified in terms of truth conditions but in terms of their entailments. That is, the propositional content of linguistic expressions is determined by what they materially entail. Logical rules are explained as generalizations of good material inferences which are presupposed as primitives of the system (Brandom 1994: Ch. 6), a point I shall not discuss here. Due to the inferential character of assertions, if someone asserts something, she is not only committed to the assertion she just asserted, but also to every assertion which is materially entailed by it. And vice versa, the only way of licensing an assertion is a commitment to assertions which entail the assertion in question. For this reason, Brandom describes our linguistic practice as 'the game of giving and asking for reasons': I'm responsible for every statement I assert. Responsibility is understood as an obligation to justify my assertion by giving reasons for it. In giving reasons for an assertion, one makes explicit the inferential relations which are already implicit in the propositional content of the original assertion. In order to avoid

circularity of this proposal, it is essential to distinguish ‘between assertional commitments to which one is entitled and those to which one is not entitled’ (Brandom 2003, p. 193). Brandom defines entitlement in completely linguistic terms: one is not entitled to any assertion which is incompatible with one’s commitments, that is, assertions already made or their entailments. In principle, one is entitled to every assertion which is not incompatible with one’s commitments. The normative fine structure of rationality consists in the distinction of commitment and entitlement in this sense.

2. *De re and de dicto*

Following Quine’s (1953) semantic holism, Brandom thinks of languages as radically perspectival (Brandom 1994, p. 594). What something means is thus determined by one’s doxastic system. As we have seen, the normative fine structure of rationality is a purely language internal phenomenon; *prima facie*, commitment and entitlement seem to depend upon one’s perspective. However, Brandom does not want to defend an account of entitlement which is completely based on coherence, as is evident from the following quote:

[...] it is a critical criterion of adequacy on any account of concepts that it make sense of a distinction between how they *are* applied in fact, by anyone or everyone, and how they *ought* to be applied – how it would be *correct* to apply them. [...] an essential part of the representational dimension of our concepts [...] is that they answer for the ultimate correctness of their application not to what you or I or all of us *take* to be the case but to what actually *is* the case. Part of what it is for our concepts to be *about* an objective world is that there is an *objective* sense of correctness that governs their application. (Brandom 1994, pp. 593-94)

Therefore, he needs some linguistic phenomenon which hooks up linguistic expressions with extra-linguistic things. And in fact, he argues that *de re* ascriptions of propositional attitudes allow us to overcome the perspectivity of language by conjoining two different perspectives in one assertion. Consider (1):

- (1) Henry Adams believes the inventor of the lightning rod did not invent the lightning rod. (Brandom 2003, p. 171)

A *de dicto* reading of this sentence entails that Henry Adams believes *of* whoever invented the lightning rod that this person did not invent the lightning rod; it would thus mean to attribute Adams a significant lack of logic in his reasoning. However, the *de re* reading of (1) does not impute Adams to hold contradictory beliefs. Rather, it attributes to Adams the belief that the person who in fact has invented the lightning rod – let's call him Franklin – has not invented it. That is, if I assert (1), I attribute to Adams the belief that Franklin has not invented the lightning rod. That is in Brandom's terminology, I attribute to Adams the *responsibility* for the claim that Franklin did not invent the lightning rod. However, I take the responsibility for the claim that Franklin is correctly described as 'the inventor of the lightning rod'. This phenomenon enables communication in that it allows to substitute expressions which are motivated by someone else's doxastic system by expressions which are adequate from one's own point of view:¹ 'Identifying what is being talked about permits me to extract information across a doxastic gap.' (Brandom 2003, p. 181)

Brandom concludes from this that *de re* readings of ascribing propositional attitudes presuppose that the objects which are talked about are in fact transcendent in regard to the doxastic linguistic systems involved. Arguably, this answers the first question from the beginning: our linguistic praxis of ascribing other people's beliefs *about* certain things explains that in giving and asking for reasons, we can and often have to talk about extra-linguistic objects. Linguistic practices can thus be objective in the sense that they are *about* extra-linguistic things – or at least things which are not bound to one's own doxastic system.

3. Objectivity as the form of asserting

The remaining question thus is how it can be made intelligible that it is these extra-linguistic objects which are responsible for the truth and falsity of the propositional content of our assertions. In this respect, Brandom's interpretation of entitlement in completely linguistic terms seems to be problematic: what entitles someone to a certain claim is that this assertion is not incompatible with the set of assertions she has already made. Given Brandom's interpretation of *de re* talk, it might be possible to overcome a single perspective. The standard of truth could be

¹ The distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* ascriptions of propositional attitudes can thus be seen as Brandom's solution to the problem of 'radical interpretation', which led to Quine's 'principle of charity' and Davidson's notion of 'triangulation'. The latter are evidently not compatible with Brandom's views.

seen in the discourse, for example. However, it does not seem to be possible to ever pin truth to any extra-linguistic phenomenon, since only linguistic commitments and nothing else can entitle assertions.

This solution, however, is explicitly denied by Brandom:

The identification of objectivity with intersubjectivity [...] is defective in that it cannot find room for the possibility of error regarding that privileged perspective. [...] The alternative is to reconstrue objectivity as consisting in a kind of perspectival *form*, rather than in a nonperspectival or cross-perspectival *content*. What is shared by all discursive perspectives is *that* there is a difference between what is objectively correct in the way of concept application and what is merely taken to be so, not *what* it is – the structure, not the content. (Brandom 1994, pp. 599-600)

Thus, in Brandom's theory, the objectivity of propositional content does not consist in the content's meeting some specific extra-linguistic standard. On the contrary, objectivity is an intra-doxastic property of assertions: asserting something means asserting that the asserted is true independently of the assertion and the doxastic framework within which the assertion is made. The standard for the truth or falsity of assertions could then be seen in their conforming to the extra-linguistic objects which are referred to by *de re* sentences – whatever they are. Veridic objectivity thus can be thought to consist in the intra-doxastic habit of tying the truth or falsity of assertions to the extra-linguistic objects which the assertion is about – which, due to the *de re-de dicto* distinction, can be understood entirely in terms of linguistic pragmatics.²

4. The main problem – perspectivity

However, explaining objectivity does not seem to be as straightforward as this, since, so far, it remains obscure how the habit of speakers to take the truth of assertions as depending upon something else than their own commitments can in fact be accounted for within Brandom's theory. The remaining question is thus: How does Brandom's formal picture of objectivity follow from the linguistic practice of giving and asking for

² The idea of a formal notion of objectivity is a point which Brandom seems to have taken from Hegel's conception of knowledge as it is introduced in the 'sentence of consciousness' in the introduction to the *Phenomenology* (Hegel 1980, p. 58), even though, to the best of my knowledge, Brandom does not make this connection explicit (cf. Reichard 2009). Hegel's notion in turn goes back to Fichte (1997; and especially 1984).

reasons on the background of *de re* ascriptions of propositional attitudes? That is, why should any participant of Brandom's language game tie the truth of her assertions to the extra-linguistic objects which feature in *de re* readings of sentences?

Recall that *de re* readings were introduced in order to explain how it is possible for speakers to communicate about something without sharing opinions (or commitments) about it. In Brandom's theory, *de re* ascriptions of propositional content thus allow to translate one idiolect into another idiolect via the assumption of objects which do not depend upon either doxastic system. At the same time, *de re* ascriptions also can help to evaluate the entitlements of someone's asserting something independently of her doxastic system. However, Brandom explicitly argues against any privileged perspective which sets the standard over truth and falsity. So, if someone asserts (1), she claims herself that the person in question can correctly be described as the inventor of the lightning rod and she further claims that Adams believes that this person did not invent the lightning rod. From this it is clear that they have to speak about one entity and that they hold different beliefs about it. But it does not follow that the person uttering (1) realizes that her opinion about the person in question is just an opinion like Adams' belief. She could simply take her own belief for granted:

From the point of view of each scorekeeper, there is for every other interlocutor a distinction between what commitments that individual *acknowledges* and what that individual is really committed to [...]. What appears to the scorekeeper as the distinction between what is objectively correct and what is merely taken to be or treated as correct appears to us as the distinction between what is acknowledged by the scorekeeper attributing a commitment and what is acknowledged by the one to whom it is attributed. (Brandom 1994, p. 597)

So, it seems that veridic objectivity cannot yet be justified in terms of Brandom's theory. Rather than every perspective taking the truth or falsity of what is asserted as independent of her point of view, every perspective treats her own viewpoint as the standard for truth and falsity of everyone else's. For this reason, Brandom has to explain how linguistic practice can in fact cause speakers to turn the distinction of commitment and entitlement which they make in respect of other person's assertions upon their own views. Since, as soon as every participant of Brandom's language game does this, they have to externalize the standard of the truth and falsity of their assertions. In

other words, Brandom yet has to explain why is it possible that every speaker has to realize that:

- (2) It is possible that (*I* believe that *p* and it is not true that *p*).
(Brandom 1994, p. 604)

5. A social proof of objectivity...

The aim is thus to explain that (3) and (4) are different from the speaker's own perspective:

- (3) I believe that *p*.
(4) *p*.

Brandom argues that this can be achieved in a social context. Given *de re* ascriptions, it is perfectly coherent to attribute both (5) and (6) to a speaker *S*; or, in other words, the commitment of (5) does not exclude the entitlement of (6) and vice versa:

- (5) *S* believes that *p*.
(6) *S* believes that I believe that not *p*.

That is, I can attribute both '*p*' and 'I believe that not *p*' to someone else without attributing contradictory beliefs to her. For this reason, (3) and (4) have to have different meanings from my own point of view and therefore 'I believe that *p*' and 'not *p*' are not incompatible. Hence, any speaker who is able to attribute *de re* ascriptions of propositional content to other speakers and can distinguish between commitments and entitlements in respect to other peoples points of view is also capable of realizing that (2) is valid. Brandom concludes:

Ascriptional locutions make explicit the possibility of taking up hypothetically a sort of third-person scorekeeping attitude toward my own present commitments and entitlements [...]. My denial that I claim that *p* collides with what I am *doing* (claiming that *p*), not with what I am *saying* (that *p*). To distinguish these, I must look at someone *else's* attitudes toward the *same* contents. (Brandom 1994, p. 605)

6. ...and why the proof doesn't work

The central feature of Brandom's proof is that sentences (3) and (4) occur as embedded constituents in (5) and (6). However, this feature is at the same time a reason for some caution, since an embedded clause which depends upon a verb like 'believe' undergoes the well known effects of intensionality. In order for Brandom's proof to work, the relations between the two pairs of sentences would have to be equivalent – but, evidently, they are not. There simply is no logical or rational connection between my differentiating between the belief of others and their ascribing the same belief to me on the one hand, and my realizing the difference between my believing something and the fact that this is a mere belief on the other hand. That is, due to intensionality, in (5), we don't get p as a fact – we only get it as a belief of S . But in order for the proof to work, p in (5) would have to be understood as a fact. In sum, Brandom's proof does not solve the problems discussed in section 4. A speaker can handle reciprocal *de re* ascriptions without recognizing that the truth of assertions does not depend upon her own beliefs. The only thing she has to do is relativizing every doxastic system to her own beliefs. If she does this, the truth or falsity of one's own beliefs does never come into question or sight. Therefore, from her point of view there is no difference between her beliefs and facts.³

One might respond that if I can attribute beliefs to someone else, I necessarily already have to have understood what beliefs are and that a belief is true not in virtue of my believing it. Hence, if I'm capable of asserting (5), I have to know the difference between (3) and (4). However, this point cannot rescue Brandom's theory. Brandom promises to explain truth and objectivity in terms of pragmatic practices. If it now turns out that we have to presuppose a grasp of objectivity in order to get

³ There seems to be another way of establishing Brandom's conclusion. Brandom writes: 'Ascriptional locutions make explicit the possibility of taking up hypothetically a sort of third-person scorekeeping attitude toward my own present commitments and entitlements (much as I have to do for my *past* commitments and entitlements in any case)' (Brandom 1994, p. 605). As is clear from the sentence in brackets, even if it turns out that it is not possible to explain formal veridic objectivity in terms of inter-subjective linguistic practises, it could be argued that, since we constantly change our commitments, the fact that language comprises *tense* explains our ability to discriminate between our beliefs and objective truth (many thanks to E. J. Lowe for bringing this point to my attention). However, this proposal seems to at least weaken Brandom's theory significantly. First, it seems that our ability to change our commitments depends upon our ability to distinguish between beliefs and facts and not vice versa. Therefore, it is not clear how this phenomenon could be taken to *explain* veridic objectivity. Second, we can imagine a person who is such a sophisticated interlocutor that he convinces everyone of his views and never has to change them. Such a person could then never become aware of the formal difference between his beliefs and facts. But does sophisticated sophism not presuppose this awareness?

the proof to work, this makes Brandom's theory superfluous. In that case, we simply could have started in the traditional way that any rational being has to draw a distinction between what it believes and what is the case. But this is exactly what Brandom's theory claims to explain.

In conclusion, Brandom's theory does not meet his own standard, namely that every theory has to account for the fact that in asserting something we take the truth or falsity of our assertion as independent of our asserting what we assert. Therefore, Brandom does not succeed in giving a coherent account in which the traditional order of explanation is reversed.⁴

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