

Brandom and the Pragmatist Quest for Semantic Objectivity

JAAKKO REINIKAINEN

1 Introduction

Ever since their contemporary origins in the writings of C.S. Peirce and William James, pragmatist approaches to language have had problems (at least according to the critics) with objectivity. The basic problem of the pragmatist, who eschews commitments to substantial metaphysics such as the correspondence theory of truth, is to show how our epistemic, linguistic practices can be suitably *constrained* by how the world actually is in order for the practices to successfully, at least some of the time, *represent* the world, as opposed to merely “frictionlessly spinning in the void,” to borrow John McDowell’s famous phrase. The reason why spinning is generally considered to be a bad thing is that it leaves the door open for foundational skepticism regarding the veracity of our assertions and beliefs, with the close alternatives falling on the spectrum of anti-realism, deflationism, and quietism.

The aim of this paper is to critically examine the concept of semantic objectivity inherent in Robert Brandom’s works, most importantly (1994/MIE). The reason for focusing on Brandom is that his ambitious aim is to combine the pragmatist preoccupation with our epistemic, justificational, linguistic practices with a robust enough account of objectivity to meet at least some desiderata of traditional realist intuitions. His “deontic scorekeeping model” therefore offers a particularly fruitful theoretical crossroads where the more abstract ideas above can break lances.

The main interest of this paper is exegetical, namely to clarify the aims, arguments, and problems of the account of semantic objectivity that Brandom presents in MIE. Concern-

ing Brandom's theoretical aims, I shall argue that there is some discrepancy between his formal and informal characterizations of the criteria by which his account is to be judged as adequate. In particular, it is not clear whether Brandom's idea of semantic objectivity as a "structural feature" of the scorekeeping practice suffices to cash out his claim that what determines semantic contents in a practice are the objects that claims made in the practice purport to represent.

After expounding on the discrepancy, I shall propose to reconstruct a mostly implicit line of argument in MIE, highlighted by the more recent developments of Brandom's work, which I think suffices to smooth it over. The missing piece for Brandom's pragmatist quest for semantic objectivity is *conceptual realism*, or the idea that both subjects and objects can be understood as conceptually structured. While conceptual realism only comes into explicit focus in Brandom's later works, I shall show that the essential idea is already operative in MIE.

Lastly, I shall note that although including conceptual realism in the theory is arguably the best way to fix its internal discrepancies, the inclusion is problematic insofar as conceptual realism as a metaphysical thesis is in no way motivated independently in MIE. While I remain neutral in this paper as to the independent plausibility of conceptual realism, I will argue that it represents an important watershed between MIE and Brandom's later works.

The paper's order of presentation starts with an outline of Brandom's pragmatist project in the philosophy of language, with a focus on the problem of semantic objectivity and the internal discrepancy mentioned above (2). In section 3, I shall further specify the discrepancy and what it would take to overcome it. Section 4 will argue that the task is best left for the conceptual realism that Brandom further develops in his later works. Finally, in section 5, I will argue against certain alternative ways to secure semantic objectivity and representational purport in the scorekeeping practice that do not appeal to conceptual realism.

2 The Core Architecture

The most important technical and philosophical contribution of MIE is what Brandom calls “the deontic scorekeeping practice.” There are several ways one might approach the apparatus, and the secondary literature already offers several thorough presentations (Wanderer 2008; Loeffler 2017). For the purposes of this paper, two of Brandom’s key claims are worth noting. The first is that assertions are primarily knowledge claims (MIE, 201). The second is that all three traditional main ingredients of knowledge—justification, propositional content, and truth—can be understood in terms of the deontic scorekeeping practice.

The natural place to start is with propositional contents, “of the sort that we express by the use of declarative sentences and ascribe by the use of ‘that’ clauses” (MIE, 5). Brandom contrasts two major contemporary strategies of coming to grips with such contents, namely by their truth conditions or by their inferential roles, and opts squarely for the latter. Thus conceptual contents at large, including subsentential and unrepeatable token expressions, are to be explained in terms of their contribution to inferential relations, which are divided into three classes: *commitment-preserving*, *entitlement-preserving*, and *material incompatibility* relations.

These semantic relations are in turn offered a pragmatic explanation in terms of what it is for an interpreter (a “scorekeeper”) to take or treat herself and other subjects to be doing in drawing the aforementioned inferences expressed in assertions, where the appropriate doings are rendered in a normative, deontic idiom of sanctions. Intertwined in his strategy are what Brandom has later distinguished as the doctrines of *semantic* and *methodological pragmatism* (2011, 58, 61). Briefly, the claim of methodological pragmatism is that the theoretical point or purpose of postulating “meanings” (i.e., propositional, conceptual contents) is to explain proprieties of use, or why is it that certain uses of a word are correct while others are incorrect.¹ The main claim of semantic pragmatism in turn

¹ For Brandom, “proprieties of use” primarily concerns the business of drawing material inferences, not applications, e.g., in an ostensive setting. Nonetheless, to simplify the terminology, for the purposes of this paper I shall use “application,” “use,” and “drawing inferences” as synonyms.

is the foundationalist one that what conjoins a token expression with its meaning is the use which the speaker (and her community) makes of the expression.²

The paradigmatic move within the scorekeeping practice is to *attribute* a commitment to a claim (proposition) *p*. When attributing commitment *p* to a subject, the scorekeeper treats the subject not only as disposed to assert expressions of *p*, but also as obliged to uphold the claim in circumstances where *p*'s *truth* or the subject's *entitlement* to it comes into question. Furthermore, along with *p* itself, the scorekeeper also attributes to the subject commitment to all the claims that he takes to be the *material inferential* entailments.³ These commitments are said to be *undertaken* by the subject, which is to say the subject herself may not *acknowledge* commitment to the same claims or their material entailments as her scorekeeper does. So, if the scorekeeper attributes to the subject commitment to the claim that "grass is green," and if the scorekeeper treats "grass is green" as materially entailing the claim "grass is colored," she will also treat the subject as committed to the claim that "grass is colored" whether the subject herself acknowledges commitment to either claim or not.⁴

To be committed to a claim is one thing, and to be entitled (i.e., justified) to it is another. Two facets of entitlement are worth noting here: on the one hand, *the default and challenge structure*, and on the other, the two mechanisms by which one may become justified to a commitment. First, one may become entitled (in the eyes of a scorekeeper) to a commitment by the *intercontent* mechanism of showing the committed claim as a material inferential consequence of commitments one already enjoys entitlement to. Second, one may become entitled to a commitment by the way of an *interpersonal* mechanism of deferring to another scorekeeper's commit-

² Though Brandom does not distinguish between methodological and semantic pragmatism in MIE, the claims are independent of each other, yet clearly fit well in the same picture.

³ The concept of material inference that Brandom inherits from Sellars means "the kind of inference whose correctness essentially involves the conceptual contents of its premises and conclusions" (MIE, 97).

⁴ This is a simplified example due to the fact that material inferences are non-monotonous, or sensitive to the context of the background claims available.

ment to a claim as a justification for endorsing it oneself (MIE, 175). In both cases, the status of being entitled to a commitment is social and normative in nature, i.e., relative to a scorekeeper, whose attributions of entitlements themselves are similarly open to evaluation by other scorekeepers.

The default and challenge structure's primary purpose is to stave off the justificatory regress that threatens both of these mechanisms. Since only tautological claims can justify themselves, any non-trivial claim must appeal to other claims for justificatory support, which then leads to the familiar dilemma where either appeal is made to premises that have already been used, or the chain of justification becomes infinite, with analogical worries facing the interpersonal mechanism. Brandom's solution is to admit that although every claim is in principle subject to a potential epistemic challenge, as a matter of social fact, some claims in the practice are treated as being such that everyone is by default entitled to make them, and that challenging them requires justification in order to be legitimate (MIE, 177).

The defining idea of MIE is to explain how a community of scorekeepers operating on these (simplified) principles can come to *institute* discursive, pragmatic norms sufficient for *conferring* propositional, conceptual, objective semantic contents on their token expressions. My focus here will be on the conferral half of the project, and more particularly on the semantically objective status of conceptual contents. Assuming that there are discursive norms governing what inferences it would be correct and incorrect for the scorekeepers to undertake and to attribute to each other, what guarantees that these norms deserve a specifically semantic interpretation, i.e., that it is *meaning* that these norms confer? In particular, why should we think that the norms are in any way related to the world of objects which the practice supposedly purports to represent, as opposed to being set by a malicious Cartesian demon, say?

A common way to explain how propositional contents come to represent the world is by allusion to truth in some way, e.g. by the correspondence theory. However, as already mentioned, Brandom opts out of a mixed ("two-factor") approach to propositional contents, which means he cannot appeal to truth as an explanans anywhere in his project. In fact,

he is a deflationist about truth, and sees the primary task as explaining what it is that we *do* in applying the truth locution to sentences rather than as giving a substantial semantic account about the truth predicate itself (MIE, 325-326).

Another initially promising candidate for explaining semantic objectivity that Brandom rejects is dubbed by him as the “I-we” sociality account. According to the I-we account, which bears some resemblance to Peirce’s thinking on the end of inquiry as pointed out by Vitaly Kiryushchenko (2021), the epistemic subject proper is the whole community of rational interlocutors understood as a regulative ideal. The ideal community sets a kind of epistemic standard on truth in the sense that what would be held true by the ideal community (or some part of the community in epistemically ideal circumstances) would coincide with truth, or with what is correct according to the discursive norms. Brandom however famously denies that such a perspective exists:

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. (MIE, 600)

So, whence comes semantic objectivity and the anchoring of language in objects if not from truth or from an epistemically privileged collective perspective? I believe that here Brandom’s answer – the structure, not the content – does not quite line up with the more informal phrasings of the criteria by which he thinks the project should be judged. But before contrasting those criteria, we must briefly clarify what semantic objectivity as a “structural feature” of scorekeeping amounts to.

Above I mentioned that the fundamental move within the scorekeeping practice is that of attributing a commitment (together with its material inferential entailments) to a claim. The set of claims which the scorekeeper treats the subject as having thus undertaken is contrasted with the set which the subject, both according to herself and according to the scorekeeper, acknowledges. So, in effect every scorekeeper keeps two sets of “books” on every other subject/scorekeeper: the set of commitments that the subject is disposed to assert (i.e.,

which she acknowledges) and the set that it would be correct for her to assert (i.e., which she has undertaken).

As already mentioned, according to the “official” answer of MIE, semantic objectivity is a “structural feature” of the scorekeeping practice. This means that the distinction between what is held correct by someone or everyone and what in fact is correct (even according to the scorekeeper herself) is made from within every individual perspective. But precisely because every perspective not only makes this distinction but is also subject to it, objectivity cannot be *defined* in terms of any single, epistemically privileged perspective.

Brandom supports this somewhat surprising claim by delivering objectivity proofs, the purpose of which is to ward off two threatening inferences:

No First-Person Ignorance (p) [$p \rightarrow (\text{I claim that } p)$]

No First-Person Error (p) [$(\text{I claim that } p) \rightarrow p$]

These inferences are threatening because, if true in the scorekeeping practice, they would make every scorekeeper take herself to be omniscient and incorrigible (MIE, 605). According to Brandom’s proofs, which I won’t be reviewing in depth here, semantic correctness does not collapse to the scorekeeper’s perspective or to what she takes to be correct. In both cases, the pivot of the proofs is to show that the antecedents and the consequents of the threatening inferences are not incompatibility-equivalent, i.e., everything that is incompatible with the first is not incompatible with the second, and vice versa. The material incompatibility relation is defined in terms of commitment and entitlement: two claims are incompatible when commitment to one precludes entitlement to the other and vice versa (MIE, 160). Here, the distinction between being committed and entitled to a claim plays a major role, for although both threatening inferences are commitment-preserving, they are not entitlement-preserving (MIE, 606).

Brandom admits that passing the objectivity proofs is a “fairly weak” merit (MIE, 606). Nonetheless, he also claims that it is objectivity enough to meet the requirement for “a kind of correctness that answers to how things actually are, rather than to how they are *taken* to be, by anyone (including

oneself) or everyone” (MIE, 607). The kernel of Brandom’s structural account of semantic objectivity is that it is not the semantic theorist’s burden to formulate a set of criteria or a method by which we could find the claims that are correctly held to be correct within the practice – held correct in an ultimate sense, as it were. That matter is left solely to the practice itself, the “messy retail business of assessing the comparative authority of competing evidential and inferential claims” (MIE, 601).

My purpose now is to question whether the structural account of semantic objectivity and passing of the objectivity proofs suffices to fulfill Brandom’s more informal characterizations of the criteria he sets for himself in MIE. To begin with, what Brandom thinks is important for semantic objectivity is the *source* of correctness for evaluating applications of conceptual norms, as he clearly states early on:

The objectivity of conceptual norms requires that any attitude of taking, treating, or assessing as correct an application of a concept in forming a belief or making a claim be coherently conceivable as mistaken, *because of how things are with the objects the belief or claim is about.* (MIE, 63, my italics)

The *objectivity* of representational content is a feature of the practices of assessing the correctness of representations. The status of representings as correct or incorrect, successful or unsuccessful, depends on how things are with what is represented, rather than on the attitudes of representers. What is distinctive of specifically *representational* correctness is this objectivity – the way in which assessments of representational correctness take representings to answer to what is represented, rather than to how what is represented is *taken* to be. It is the way in which the status being assessed outruns any particular attitude toward it. Understanding the objectivity of representational content requires understanding this particular structure of its authority and acknowledgement – what it is for those assessing the correctness of representings to cede authority over them to what is represented, to treat their correctness in practice as determined by those represented. (MIE, 78)

In the next section, I shall argue that passing the objectivity proofs is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition to

meet the criterion that the source of semantic correctness is (at least partially) in the objects which claims made within the practice purport to represent. Moreover, in the next section I shall argue that MIE already contains the ingredients, if not the full argument, for a sufficient condition.

3 Three Levels of Semantic Objectivity

Above I noted a discrepancy between how Brandom characterizes the criteria of adequacy by which his account for semantic objectivity is to be judged and the objectivity proofs he delivers. As I initially pointed out, what Brandom aims for is an account where the source of correctness for evaluating representings (paradigmatically assertions and inferences, or more generally applications of norms) within the scorekeeping practice is at least partially in the objects that the claim-making practices purport to represent. What the objectivity proofs essentially achieve, however, is the merely negative point that claims about what is correct (in the sense of being true) do not collapse to (are not incompatibility equivalent with) claims about who is committed and entitled to what – not even in the case of the scorekeeper and her whole community. This is what Brandom wins by showing that the threatening inferences *No First-Person Ignorance* and *No First-Person Error* do not hold in the scorekeeping system. The problem is that this merely negative claim by itself leaves entirely open what, if anything, *does* determine which representings are correct and which are incorrect; in other words, it leaves entirely open the crucial question of the source of semantic correctness.

In order to make this distinction clearer, it is useful to distinguish between three levels of semantic objectivity that can be uncovered in MIE:

(AI) A norm n is attitude-immanent for community C iff it is not possible for everyone in C to be mistaken about the correct applications of n .

(AT) A norm n is attitude-transcendent for community C iff it is possible for everyone in C to be mistaken about the correct applications of n .

(PO) A norm n is properly objective for community C iff the world of objects partially determines the correct applications of n .⁵

At the lowest tier of objectivity for norms, we find so-called *attitude-immanent* norms, prime examples of which are social norms such as greeting gestures and marriage institutions. In the case of these non-discursive norms, “it makes no sense to suppose that [the community] could be wrong about this sort of thing” (MIE, 53). A few specificational remarks should follow the biconditional definition. First of all, the principle is bound to incorporate an ineliminable measure of vagueness in regard to how finely the norm’s content should be individuated, for it is typically the case that the community members do not have robust evaluative intuitions about all possible circumstances in which the given norm could be applied. So, I take it to be compatible with the (AI) status that a norm’s content is not wholly transparent to the community in the positive sense that they could not find genuinely novel, as of yet unthought-of circumstances of application for the norm, although they could not then all be incorrect about how to apply it. Second, the collective judgment can be represented either by all the mature members separately or by some select, deferrable group of experts among them.

The class of norms the objectivity of which (AI) grading most readily befits is often called “social norms”; a slightly misleading term since all norms have a social character in some sense, at least for Brandom. While much more could (and should) be said about attitude-immanent social norms, e.g., how to distinguish them from mere conventions,⁶ the

⁵ As a reviewer pointed out, for Brandom the authority of objects to determine correctness of applications of norms can only ever be partial, not complete. The nominal reason for this is explained by his acceptance of phenomenalism about norms (see below), though in this instance I cannot go into the reasons that drive Brandom to endorse phenomenalism to begin with. I agree with the reviewer though that working in the background here is Kant’s influence and also Sellar’s (1956) criticism of the Myth of the Given, which broadly denies the possibility of non-conceptual epistemic access to objects.

⁶ I refer the reader to Brennan et al. (2013) for a thorough conceptual study on social norms.

important point here is to contrast them with attitude-transcendent norms. In contrast to (AI), a norm that is (AT) has applications which are not necessarily and sufficiently determined as correct by the community's collective judgment. In particular, Brandom argues that we must understand conceptual norms as distinct from merely social ones precisely in that only conceptual norms are rightly called attitude-transcendent (MIE, 53-54).

The important point to realize now is that passing the objectivity proofs only amounts to semantic objectivity in the (AT) sense. The fact that everyone in a community may intelligibly (take themselves to) be mistaken about the correct application of a norm does not entail that it is the world of objects which determines what the correct applications—if any—are. This seminal point has already been appreciated at least by Bernd Prien (2010, 454). Importantly, Prien also proposes an interpretation of MIE according to which it does ultimately secure semantic objectivity, although as we shall see later, I think his argument does not work.

It may not be so intuitive to think of the difference between (AT) and (PO) as a question of *levels*, which implies a continuum, because they appear to answer different questions. As a helpful reviewer put the point to me, whereas (AI) and (AT) only concern the criteria for the *application* of norms, (PO) concerns the more fundamental issue of what source determines the very *content* of norms; a distinction the reviewer proposed to capture in “semantic” and “metasemantic” terms respectively. The metasemantic question is about the metaphysical issue of the source of semantic correctness, of which the semantic question about the criteria of application remains neutral.

There are indeed two distinct senses of “semantic objectivity” at play here, one concerning the criteria for applicability, the other criteria for determination of content. However, my purpose in squeezing the two onto one continuum is to clarify Brandom's claim about the *conferral* of objective semantic contents by discursive norms instituted by the attitudes mentioned above. The way I'm inclined to understand his thinking here is that the *original* source in the metasemantic or metaphysical issue—what determines the contents of norms—is solely with normative attitudes. This is a thesis

that he undertakes under the name *phenomenalism about norms* (MIE, 25).⁷ Once the attitudes have “instituted” norms that fulfil the (AI) criteria of applicability, it becomes possible for them to fulfil the more demanding (AT) criteria as well. However, at this juncture, what is also supposed to change is the metasemantic or metaphysical issue concerning the source for determining the contents of norms. In effect, the source of authority is in a way extended from the attitudes to the objects such that the latter come to be “incorporated” in the practice, to exercise “mediated” authority of their own over the attitudes. This latter thesis goes by the name *normative phenomenalism* (MIE, 627).

The reason why I take it to be justified to situate (AI), (AT), and (PO) on a continuum of levels rests with my reading of Brandom’s larger project in MIE that seeks to explain the conferral of semantically objective contents by discursive norms implicit in practices. The shift from institution to conferral is supposed to be a continuous process, which I take means that the criteria by which the shift itself is judged as successful should be the same as what are used to evaluate institution and conferral separately, even if the shift contains an implicit, important distinction. There is indeed a kind of a “jump” from (AT) to (PO), but one that purports to reflect the qualitative shift which Brandom pursues under the conferral thesis. What changes during the conferral is the metasemantic or metaphysical source of content, the discursive authority that is no longer solely with the attitudes but becomes shared with or passed on to the objects. While Brandom appears to think that passing the objectivity proofs suffices to cover the shift from (AT) to (PO), I side with Prien in that something else is required to turn the merely negative claim about the applicability of norms to the positive claim about the determination of content. To repeat, the reason why (AT) norms arguably do not suffice for representational purport is that, as was seen above, a norm being (AT) does not foreclose the possibility

⁷ I won’t seek to give a strict definition for phenomenalism here, for I believe its spirit in Brandom’s works is primarily programmatic and thus strategically malleable according to the context. However, it is also true that the fact exposes Brandom’s key claims to hindering polysemy, as noted, e.g., by Jeremy Wanderer (2008, 74, fn.).

that its content is indeterminate (i.e., determined by nothing) or then it is determined by a Cartesian demon. Were that the case, it becomes hard to argue that the norm purported to represent *anything*, much less the world, which is why the claim to (PO) status for conceptual norms is crucial for Brandom to achieve.

4 The Pragmatist Route to Semantic Objectivity of Contents Goes Via Conceptual Realism

Above I argued that Brandom's official account of semantic objectivity, which rests on the objectivity proofs, does not suffice to meet the informal yet clear criteria that he sets for himself elsewhere in MIE. What remains unclear with regard to the semi-metaphorical conferral claim is how norms that are (AT) by their objectivity level may explain the rise of semantic contents robust enough to meet the (PO) standard. In this section, I shall argue that the missing piece is already inherent in MIE, although Brandom started developing the details of the answer only in his later works.

As I already explained, the shape of the problem of semantic objectivity for Brandom is to explain how the objects of the world can come to be incorporated in or mediated by our discursive attitudes in the sense that the original authority of the attitudes is in a way extended to the worldly objects. The sense in which the world is "incorporated" into practices should be initially differentiated from the way in which sounds and marks merely *convey* intentionality. This text conveys the intentionality of my assertions to you, but in no way do the pixels (or the ink of the printer) exercise authority over the correctness of what I say, which is only to point out the familiar idea of the sign's arbitrariness. Brandom's idea of "lumpy practices" seeks to capture a more robust sense in which the world partakes in discursive practices, somewhat like bats and balls "partake" in baseball, where their purely material aspects, while in a sense contingent, are not *as* arbitrary as those of the signs we use in making assertions (MIE, 632).

How this works in practice can be appreciated by the (in Brandomian circles) hackneyed example of the litmus paper test. Consider the following causal chain of events:

1. The subject has a discursive attitude describable as a disposition to draw the inference “If some substance tastes sour, it will turn litmus paper red.”
2. The subject has a perceptual experience of a substance that tastes sour.
3. The subject has a consequent perceptual experience of the substance turning litmus paper blue.
4. The subject loses her attitude-disposition to infer “If some substance tastes sour, it will turn litmus paper red.”

In this example, we can see the causal entanglement of practices and the world. On the side of the practices, we have events (or states) (1.) and (4.), and on the side of the world, we have events (2.) and (3.). (Alternatively we could replace, in this instance, the term “practices” with that of “abilities,” for although in MIE Brandom’s official stance is that the relevant dispositions can only emerge in the context of intersubjective practices, elsewhere he is less committal about this point.) Of course, the whole chain of events is part of the same world, i.e., the distinction between discursive practices/abilities and the world is drawn from within the world when viewed in purely causal terms. A similar story on the side of action could be told where the subject’s attitudes are the cause of changes in the world rather than themselves causally changed by how the world is (Brandom 2008a, 178; MIE, 332-333).

The chain of events (1.)-(4.) above gives us a rudimentary grasp of how the world *causally* constricts the practices/abilities paradigmatically by affecting our dispositions to draw inferences.⁸ Of course, not all such causal effects should be counted as having anything to do with how the facts of the

⁸ The relevant practices or abilities are algorithmic in kind, the core of which Brandom identifies as a four-step feedback loop of action and perception. In *Between Saying and Doing* (esp. Ch. 1-2) he develops a new type of regimented logical vocabulary to discuss how such relatively simple systems, which arguably can be taken to exhibit primitive forms of a practical, know-how type of intentionality, can give rise to the theoretical, know-that type of intentionality. I cannot here discuss the details of the project.

world *justify* moves in discursive practices.⁹ How is it then that the world *normatively* constrains our practices/abilities? The key idea here is Brandom's commitment to *conceptual realism*, encapsulated by the notion inherited from Frege that facts just are true claims (i.e., what is *claimed* and not the *claiming* of it) (MIE, 327). Seen from the subject's own perspective, the claim to which she acknowledges commitment at (1.) turns out to be false in the transition from (2.) to (3.), i.e., in the face of the perceived fact that there is a sour-tasting substance that turns litmus paper blue instead of red. Here, the crucial difference between a claim merely *taken* as true and a claim that *is* true is made from within the practices/abilities as opposed to within the world: it is the difference between the subject attributing commitments (either to others or to her past self) and undertaking them herself (in the present). Since the subject-relative normative status of a claim as a fact depends on whether it is *only* attributed or *also* undertaken, and since the attitudes are already something involved in the causal realm of facts, the mechanism by which facts come to exercise authority over attitudes is given by the scorekeeping apparatus considered as causally integrated with the world in complex ways.

The key claim of conceptual realism is that both facts and attitudes are conceptually structured according to two different readings of the generic material incompatibility relation. On the side of the world, the concept of the object can be understood as "repelling" incompatible properties under an *alethic* sense of necessity. On the side of the practices, subjects can be understood as "repelling" incompatible commitments under a *deontic* sense of necessity. In Brandom's words:

It is *impossible* for one and the same *object* to have incompatible *properties* at the same time. But it is merely *impermissible* for one and the same *subject* to have incompatible *commitments* at the same time. (2008a, 191)

⁹ Brandom (2001, 107) is strongly critical of reliabilist theories of justification that take causal, probabilistically reliable processes as at least in some cases sufficient to justify beliefs and assertions. I cannot enter this debate here, but the important point is that for Brandom, purely causal relations are not sufficient to account for the justification of beliefs or assertions: the normative element is also required.

We can now better appreciate in what sense the world becomes “incorporated” in or “mediated” by discursive practices, following the litmus paper example above. Brandom’s idea is that the succession of events (1.)-(4.) can be understood from two different *modal* perspectives, depending on whether it is described objectively as what does happen or subjectively as what ought to or may happen. The world and the practices are ontologically speaking two halves of the same event or process, structured in the generic modal sense of a material incompatibility relation, which Brandom takes to be the key conceptual notion.

However, at this point it seems that it would be equally correct to say that the practices are incorporated in or mediated by the world rather than the other way around. To make an already impressive amalgamation of theses more complicated, Brandom also pursues an explanatory order he attributes to Hegel, according to which the objective side of alethic modal incompatibility *relations* must be understood and explained in terms of the subjective side of deontic modal incompatibility *processes* (2002, Ch.6).

It is noteworthy that the term “conceptual realism” appears nowhere in MIE, and thus it is appropriate to wonder whether the idea really is relevant for the issue of semantic objectivity as opposed to a late-coming, separate topic. The impression is reinforced by the fact that MIE’s primary pragmatist strategy centers its explanatory force on the score-keeping practice, which assumedly is supposed to be independent of ontological issues concerning the constitution of the world. Furthermore, there is an active reason for Brandom to avoid undertaking any unnecessary ontological commitments as a consequence of his semantic theorizing, namely his fundamental opposition to the truth conditional strategy and the correspondence theory of truth that goes with it. Brandom accuses the correspondence theorist of confusing acts of claiming that something is true with the content of what is thereby said in the sense that what is true – i.e., the facts – is supposed to explain what it is for a claim to be true, i.e., its content understood as truth conditions (MIE, 330).

That being said, when Brandom echoes Frege in claiming that “Facts just are true claims,” a careful reading shows that he is not by that token merely making the deflationist nega-

tive claim that truth is not a semantically explanatory relation between language and world. Instead, towards the end of MIE he proposes an alternative way to construe that relation:

Concepts conceived as inferential roles of expressions do not serve as epistemological intermediaries, standing between us and what is conceptualized by them. This is not because there is no causal order consisting of particulars, interaction with which supplies the material for thought. *It is rather because all of these elements are themselves conceived as thoroughly conceptual, not as contrasting with the conceptual.* (MIE, 622, my italics)

The conception of concepts as inferentially articulated permits a picture of thought and of the world that thought is about as *equally*, and in the favored cases *identically*, conceptually articulated. (Ibid.)

Condensed here is the main thesis of what Brandom later on has dubbed conceptual realism, or the idea that the world as such is conceptually structured. There is no *ontological* category distinction between predicates and properties: instead there is *identity*. The nature of the identity is modal, split between the alethic and deontic sides (2019, 54). *How* exactly the sides are supposed to be combined is of course a massive question, one that Brandom does not tackle in MIE and which thus falls outside the scope of this paper.

But if Brandom does indeed espouse conceptual realism already in MIE as the key to the conferral thesis that is to patch over the jump from (AT) to (PO) objectivity, why does he not explicitly say so? One reason I can think of is that at the time he did not have a well-thought-out idea of how to connect conceptual realism as an independent metaphysical stance with the scorekeeping practice, or to give an encompassing enough of account of it. Yet the idea that the world and discursive practices are causally integrated with each other is clearly stated and important for securing the condition, which Brandom sees as central, that the world serves as a dual constraint (normative and causal) on practices, even if the point is never brought into detailed discussion (MIE, 331, 332, fn.).

5 Why Conceptual Realism Is Essential for Proper Objectivity

To conclude this paper, I shall argue against certain alternative ways to understand Brandom's claim that the scorekeeping practice is able to confer objective semantic contents on token expressions.

Andrea Clausen (2004) for one argues that conceptual realism is non-essential and in fact a distraction from Brandom's aim of accounting for objective contents in terms of discursive practices. The basic reason why she considers conceptual realism redundant is that she thinks Brandom's scorekeeping account alone can afford an explanation of how token expressions can come to exhibit representational purport. The problem, however, is that she does not adequately distinguish between attitude-transcendence and what I have called proper objectivity, namely between the negative claim that everyone could be incorrect in (some) of their assertions and inferences and the positive claim that it is the world that determines the semantic incorrectness of assertions and inferences. Again, the fundamental reason why attitude-transcendence does not amount to proper objectivity is that, even if every subject in practice necessarily *presumes* a difference between what is taken to be correct and what is correct, and that there is only one correct set of assertions and inferences everyone should acknowledge, it does not follow that it is the *world of objects* which determines the identity of the set, or even that there *is* such a set. Here's a telling excerpt of this *non-sequitur*:

What we claim to be correct can always turn out to be incorrect. Put alternatively, this means that we rub ourselves against a resistant reality. Second, what is correct is supposed to be independent of what anybody or all take to be correct. Put alternatively, this means that we refer to one and the same world. (Clausen 2004, 217)

In fact, the reason our claims can always turn out to be incorrect, as far as the scorekeeping practice is concerned, may be that the contents are actually indeterminate or then determined by a Cartesian demon. And even if everyone agrees that what is correct is independent of what everyone takes to

be correct, it remains possible that there is no reference to one and the same world.

Ronald Loeffler (2017) sees the problem between deriving (PO) from (AT) without further argument more clearly. Returning to the litmus paper parable, what Brandom wants to say is that *by* treating two of her commitments as materially incompatible with each other, the subject *takes* her commitments to be purporting to represent a singular object, namely the natural kind acid, for objects are (in part) defined as those entities which repel incompatible properties in the alethic modal sense. Loeffler raises the question, however, of why we should interpret the subject as purporting to represent an *object* by taking two of her commitments to be incompatible, for on the face of it we might equally well interpret her taking the incompatibility to amount to nothing more than a prohibition against endorsing two given assertion types (Loeffler 2017, 147). In other words, how does the intra-practice matter of which assertions are taken to be incompatible translate into the extra-practice matter of representational purport?

Loeffler's answer on behalf of Brandom is that, although from *our* point of view as external theorists the subject of the acid parable is not yet definitely purporting to represent anything beyond her practices or abilities, from the subject's *own* perspective it appears that the acid itself serves as the external standard of her commitments, which hence purport to represent how things really stand with acidic substances (2017, 148).¹⁰

The distinction between the native subject's own perspective and that of the external theorist's cannot, however, offer a sufficient reason to claim that the scorekeeping practice includes norms with representational purport or (PO) objectivity grading. The reason is, again, that each of the predicates

¹⁰ Note that saying this is compatible with Brandom's insistence that although the subject is from her own point of view purporting to represent objects, the purport may be completely *implicit* in her practices or abilities in that she may not be able to explicitly assert that her commitments represent something external (Loeffler 2017, 149). The distinction between an implicit ability to *do* something that is independent of the explicit ability to *say* what one is doing is as important to Brandom's pragmatist account of intentionality, though it is also largely orthogonal to the issues I'm addressing here.

“takes to purport to represent an object” and “purports to represent an object,” or alternatively “takes to be correct” and “is correct,” and the predicates have distinct extensions, and claiming one does not entail the other. In particular, since Brandom’s final major statement in MIE is that we are in fact engaged in the scorekeeping practice ourselves (the move he calls “the collapse of perspectives”), any difference to the extent which so starkly distinguishes between the native scorekeeper and her external interpreter cannot hope to be adequate as an account of actual representational purport, if by “actual” we mean whatever it is that we do in purporting to represent objects. Applying Loeffler’s response to our own case, even if it is true that it (necessarily) *appears* to us that we are responsive to objects of the world when encountering incompatible commitments, it does not follow that we *really* are purporting to represent such objects.¹¹

To end this section, I wish to reject one further argument which seeks to establish representational purport in the scorekeeping practice without resorting to conceptual realism as an independent metaphysical theory. Bernd Prien (2010) argues that what is needed to ensure proper objectivity is a special norm called the “principle of rational rectification” (PRR). The principle of rational rectification, which Brandom introduces in *Between Saying and Doing*, states that subjects are obliged to rectify the incompatible commitments they have committed themselves to. Indeed, as we already saw in this section, the principle in part defines the concept of the discursive subject for Brandom (2008a, 193). Prien claims that

[p]ractices that include such a norm of rational rectification warrant an interpretation according to which the conceptual norms and thus the deontic statuses of the speakers are not determined by the deontic attitudes present in a community, but rather by the way the world is. Whenever a speaker runs into incompatible commitments because of the way the world is (for example, because there are sour-tasting liquids that do not turn litmus paper red), she is obliged to modify some of the inferential relations she acknowledges. In order to make sense of this obligation, we have to assume that it is the world that determines

¹¹ Loeffler also sees conceptual realism as an important part of Brandom’s later attempts to account for semantic objectivity (2017, 178-179).

what follows from what, and not the individual subjects, the experts, or the community as a whole. For even inferential relations accepted by the community as a whole have to be modified if this is the best way to remove an incompatibility. (2010, 455)

Prien claims that the PRR is a sufficient condition to warrant the properly objective status to conceptual contents in the discursive practices, for it is the only way to make sense of this obligation. It is difficult to see how that follows however, for it is perfectly intelligible that everyone in the practice is obligated to rectify their incompatible commitments and that the world does not determine what commitments really are incompatible. Furthermore, it is not clear how precisely the world is supposed to *oblige* subjects to rectify their incompatible commitments other than in the metaphorical, causal sense of obligation (Brandom 2008b).

A similar point applies to another special norm also mentioned by Prien, which we might call the *intersubjective* principle of rational rectification as opposed to the *intrasubjective* PRR. The intersubjective PRR, first proposed by Loeffler (2005), states that different subjects A and B are obligated to rectify their commitments that are incompatible with some commitments of the other. For one, the intersubjective PRR seems to complicate Brandom's claim that we can define subjects as units of accountability *qua* subjects to intrasubjective PRR. If PRR is extended from intra- to intersubjective incompatibility relations, are we to conclude that two distinct subjects can form a singular unit of discursive accountability?

More acutely though, it remains unclear how PRR in either its intra- or intersubjective versions is supposed to entail that subjects really are responsible to the world in what concerns the correctness of their commitments. For the issue of *in virtue of what* commitments really are incompatible is orthogonal to whether and in what sense subjects are obligated to rectify their incompatible commitments. Even if it is the world that somehow non-metaphorically obliges the subjects to rectify their incompatible commitments, something which Brandom explicitly denies (2008b), it is a different matter to establish whether the world also determines (and does not merely appear to determine) which commitments are incompatible. So

PRR alone does not entail that the scorekeeping practice that includes it also includes norms with representational purport.

Conclusions

To summarize, the crucial problem for Brandom's pragmatist project in MIE is to explain how the norms instituted by attitudes can confer propositional contents robust enough to be *about* worldly objects. In order to achieve this, he argues that the practice incorporates or mediates objects, somewhat like games "incorporate" physical objects into their rules. However, a prerequisite for the incorporation is that Brandom must undertake ontological commitments regarding the nature of the objects as such, namely that they too are conceptually structured. The essential idea of conceptual realism already operative in MIE is that the subject/object divide can be explained in terms of the modal divide between alethic and deontic halves. This, I have argued, is Brandom's best strategy in MIE for explaining why the scorekeeping practice should be interpreted as including genuinely representational properties.

The cost of embracing conceptual realism, however, is that it ultimately means expanding the base explananda with which Brandom operates in MIE. The official strategy of the book is to explain how norms instituted by attitudes may confer propositional contents that are objective and representational in the sense that they normatively answer to the world of objects. The main explanatory primitive on the subjective side is the concept normative attitude. However, there are no corresponding primitives available on the objective side to argue for the truth of conceptual realism. It is as if in the course of the book Brandom is driven to embrace conceptual realism because of his starting point with normative attitudes, which alone cannot secure an objective enough relation to the world to establish representational purport. In an interesting narrative twist, this result is not too different from what Brandom considers to be a central mistake of early analytic philosophy:

Some previous varieties of logical atomism had distinguished themselves by their insistence that the only way any expression, sentential or not, could have content or contribute to the content

of an expression of which it is a part is by standing for or representing something. Thus, not only did these views grasp the nettle of commitment to negative and conditional facts, they also were committed to “not” and “if... then...” standing for some element in a complex state of affairs. The undertakers of such commitments are admirable more for their conceptual heroism than for their good sense. (MIE, 76)

The lesson here is that we should be mindful about the possible ontological implications our theorizing on language and meaning leaves us with, for otherwise we risk putting the cart before the horse. Brandom’s appeal to conceptual realism without sufficient argumentative support risks doing that, although as I have shown he has taken measures to rectify the matter later on. The final word on the matter belongs to further study, however.

University of Tampere

References

- Brandom, Robert (2019), *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.
- Brandom, Robert (2011), *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, and Contemporary*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.
- Brandom, Robert (2008a), *Between Saying and Doing*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- Brandom, Robert (2008b), “Reply to ‘Are Fundamental Discursive Norms Objective?’”, published in *Robert Brandom: Analytic Pragmatist*, Berlin, De Gruyter.
- Brandom, Robert (2001), *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.
- Brandom, Robert (1994/MIE), *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Practice*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.
- Brennan et al. (2013), *Explaining Norms*, Geoffrey Brennan, Lina Eriksson, Robert E. Goodin, and Nicholas Southwood Brennan, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Clausen, Andrea (2004), *How Can Conceptual Content be Social and Normative, And, at the Same Time, be Objective?* Frankfurt, Ontos. Web.
- Kiryushchenko, Vitaly (2021), “I, Thou, and We: Peirce and Brandom on the Objectivity of Norms”, published in *The Social Institution of Discurs-*

- sive Norms: Historical, Naturalistic, and Pragmatic Perspectives*, edited by Leo Townsend, et al. Taylor & Francis Group, ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Loeffler, Ronald (2017), *Brandom*, Polity Press. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Loeffler, Ronald (2005), "Normative Phenomenalism: On Robert Brandom's Practice-Based Explanation of Meaning", *European Journal of Philosophy*, 13:1, pp. 32–69.
- Prien, Bern (2010), "Robert Brandom on Communication, Reference, and Objectivity", *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 18:3, pp. 433–458.
- Sellars, Wilfrid (1956), *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, edited by Robert Brandom, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.
- Wanderer, Jeremy (2008), *Robert Brandom*, Trowbridge, Cromwell Press.