How to Be a Hyper-Inferentialist

Ryan Simonelli

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0   Introduction

An "inferentialist" semantic theory for some language L aims to account for the meanings of the sentences of L solely in terms of the inferential rules governing their use. A "hyper-inferentialist" theory admits into the semantics only "narrowly inferential" rules that normatively relate sentences of L to other sentences of L. A "strong inferentialist" theory also admits into the semantics "broadly inferential" rules that normatively relate perceptual states to sentences of L or sentences of L to intentional actions. Robert Brandom's (1994) semantic inferentialism is widely taken to be, according to these definitions, a strong inferentialist, rather than hyper-inferentialist theory. I argue here that this is not so. Made explicit, Brandom's theory is a hyper-inferentialist, rather than a strong inferentialist, theory. I argue further that this is a good thing, since strong inferentialism is viciously circular: including rules into the semantic theory that relate perceptual states to sentences of the language requires us to appeal, in individuating those perceptual states, to the very meanings for which we are supposed to be inferentially accounting. Hyper-inferentialism does not face this problem because it does not appeal to any non-linguistic states. Though hyper-inferentialism is widely thought to be a theoretical non-starter, I argue here that it is a genuine theoretical

possibility insofar as it essentially includes *cross-perspectival* inferences, inferences along the lines of the one from sentences "The ball is in front of *n*," "The ball is red," and "The lighting is good" to sentence "*n* sees that the ball is red." This inclusion of cross-perspectival inferences, I argue, enables hyper-inferentialism to not only be *a* genuine theoretical possibility for the inferentialist, but, indeed, the *only* theoretical possibility.

1 Brandom's Purported "Strong Inferentialism"

In *Making It Explicit*, Robert Brandom develops what he calls an "inferentialist" theory of meaning, a theory of meaning according to which the meaning of a sentence is understood not in terms of its representational adequacy conditions but in terms of the inferential relations that it bears to other sentences. Towards the end of Chapter Two, he distinguishes between three grades of inferentialism (1994, 131):

> **Weak Inferentialism:** Inferential articulation is *necessary* for specifically conceptual contentfulness.
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> **Strong Inferentialism:** *Broadly* inferential articulation is *sufficient* for specifically conceptual contentfulness—that is, that there is nothing more to conceptual content than its broadly inferential articulation.
>
> **Hyper-Inferentialism:** *Narrowly* inferential articulation is *sufficient* for conceptual contentfulness of all sorts.

Weak inferentialism, Brandom thinks, is a basically uncontroversial thesis that nearly everyone, with the exception of some hardcore representationalists like Fodor (1998), accepts. Given the way Brandom principally uses the term "inferentialism," according to which inferentialism is incompatible with representationalism, "weak inferentialism" is not actually a form of inferentialism, since it is compatible with thinking that inferential and representational adequacy conditions are equally explanatorily basic

or, indeed, even that representational adequacy conditions are basic and that inferential relations necessarily follow from these conditions.[1] So, the only grades of inferentialism that are aptly called "inferentialism" at all are strong inferentialism and hyper-inferentialism. According to these three definitions, the distinction between *strong* inferentialism and *hyper*-inferentialism amounts to whether the "inferences" invoked in the semantic theory are "inferences" in the *broad* sense of the term or "inferences" in the *narrow* sense of the term. Brandom then claims to be defending *strong* rather than *hyper*-inferentialism (1994, 132).

For the moment, I will leave aside what Brandom actually says in drawing the distinction between the broad and narrow sense of "inference," and consider only what commentators generally take this distinction to be. Here is the standard way in which the distinction is drawn, from Jeremy Wanderer and Bernhard Weis's (2010) introduction to the definitive anthology of critical essays on Brandom's work:

> Both hyper- and strong-inferentialist agree that spelling out both inferentially sufficient conditions for, and inferentially necessary consequences of, asserting a claim, together with the propriety of an inference from one to the other, are sufficient for determining the claim's content. They differ in how they conceive the inferential articulation, with the strong-inferentialist allowing for a more relaxed conception of the relevant notion of inferential here.
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> One difference concerns the possible inclusion of non-inferential

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[1]As Brandom principally uses the term, and as I will use it following this principle usage, an "inferentialist" semantic theory for some language *L* aims to account for the meaning of the sentences of that language in terms of the inferential rules governing their use and not, for instance, in terms of their representational adequacy conditions. According to this usage of the term, it is a minimal condition of a position's being aptly called "inferentialism" that it is incompatible with "representationalism" in virtue of taking opposite order of explanation. Whereas a representationalist approach aims to account for the meaning of a sentence in terms of its representational adequacy conditions, understanding its inferential relations as derivative, an inferentialist approach to meaning aims to account for the meaning of a sentence in terms of its inferential relations, understanding its representational adequacy conditions as derivative.

> circumstances and consequences as part of the claim's infer-
> ential articulation. By way of illustration, consider the claim
> 'this traffic light is red'. The appropriate circumstances of
> application of this claim include the visible presence of a red-
> coloured traffic light. This circumstance is non-inferential, in
> the sense that the circumstance is not itself an act of claiming.
> The connection between such non-inferential circumstances
> of application and the inferential consequences is, according
> to the strong-inferentialist but not the hyper-inferentialist, an
> inferential connection, (9).

According to Wanderer and Weiss, inferential relations, on the broad or "relaxed" conception, can include "inferential" relations that relate non-linguistic perceptual circumstances—for instance, a red-colored traffic light's being visibly present to a speaker—to linguistic circumstances—for instance, that speaker's making the claim "This traffic light is red." On this way of distinguishing between "strong" and "hyper-" inferentialism, whereas the hyper-inferentialist includes in their semantic theory only properly inferential relations between claims, the strong inferentialist can include in their semantic theory "inferential" relations between claims and non-claims.[2] Almost everyone who talks about Brandom's "inferentialism," sympathizers and critics alike, takes it to fall on the "strong" side of this demarcation.[3]

A sampling of all the commentaries on Brandom's "strong inferentialism" reveals a common thread: strong inferentialism is inferentialism improperly so-called. Because there are, as an essential element of the theory, rules governing entry-moves that are not rules of *inference*, properly so-called, "inferentialism" or "inferential role semantics" is a

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[2]I leave the term "claim" here ambiguous between, in Brandom's vocabulary, "claimable" and "claiming." Wanderer and Weiss speak of inferential relations obtaining between acts of claiming, but Brandom often speaks of inferential relations obtaining between claimables.

[3]As far as I'm aware, the only place in which Brandom's view is *not* misrepresented this way, is Jeremy Wanderer's book (2008, 189-190). Wanderer is also the only person who, by my test specified below, does not take Brandom to be a strong inferentialist. It is therefore surprising to me that the view is characterized as it is in the quote above.

somewhat misleading name for the theory. Here's just a small sampling of this common thread. Chauncy Maher (2012), who claims that the "big idea" of Brandom's account of the content of assertions is to "expand our conception of the rational or inferential role of assertion beyond its relation to other linguistic acts," thereby suggests that we may speak of the "rational role" of an assertion, rather than its "inferential role," (29). Jaroslav Peregrin (2014), who tells us that, in addition to knowing how sentences "can be correctly played within the game of giving or asking for reasons in response to utterances," speakers must also know how "they are correctly used also vis-à-vis nonlinguistic circumstances," thus adds that, while he follows Brandom in using the name "inferentialism," he isn't fully satisfied with the word "inferentialism," since it essentially includes "inferences" that are "not really inferential in any straightforward sense of the word," (37). Timothy Williamson (2009), who says that an inferentialist who appealed only to narrowly inferential roles "could not hope to explain how many words refer to extra-linguistic objects, or how language is used in interaction with the extra-linguistic environment" (137) says that, by the inclusion of " 'language-entry' rules that connect perceptual states to moves in the language game," inferential roles are "generalized as conceptual roles" (138). Gary Kemp (2010), in giving as an example of a "language-entry rule," one's " 'inferring' (in a certain extended sense) the propriety of 'It's red' from a certain perceptual situation," puts "inferring" in scare quotes and noting parenthetically that the term is being used "in a certain extended sense." Making this shared sentiment explicit, Mark Lance (1997) writes,

> I think Brandom at times misrepresents his own position a bit by calling it inferentialist. . . . [F]ollowing Sellars, Brandom allows for language entrance and language exit moves in his account of content and these are no less basic than are inferences proper, (182 n2).

We may thus use the following test for distinguishing whether a view

is an instance of strong inferentialism or hyper-inferentialism: if one is a strong inferentialist, one's position is not very well-represented by the term "inferentialism." If one is a hyper-inferentialist, on the other hand, one's position is well-represented by the term "inferentialism."[4] Now, I have picked out a few representative examples, but I could have picked out several more; nearly everyone who discusses Brandom's view takes it to be a "strong inferentialist" rather than "hyper-inferentialist" view according to the test I have just laid out.

2   The Shape of a "Strong Inferentialist" Theory

Let me now lay out the basic shape of this "strong inferentialist" view widely attributed to Brandom. On an inferentialist picture, strong or hyper, the meaning of a declarative sentence of a given language is to be understood in terms of the rules governing its assertoric use, where particular acts of assertorically uttering it are thought of as "moves" in what Brandom calls "the game of giving and asking for reasons," (1994, xviii). The basic move in the game, made by assertorically uttering a declarative sentence, is the making of an assertion, or, in Brandom's preferred terminology, the making of a claim. The meaning of an empirically significant sentence, for instance, the sentence "The ball is red," is understood, on the strong inferentialist picture, in terms of the rules governing three basic categories of moves that can be made in a linguistic practice:[5]

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[4]It is worth noting that the appeal to "language-entry" and "language-exit" rules, though the most common reason, is not the only reason why the term "inferentialism" is often taken to be a misreprepresentative label for Brandom's semantic theory. As Lance (1997) also points out and MacFarlane (2010) elaborates, the basic rules that figure into Brandom's semantic theory are rules for *scorekeeping* rather than rules for *inferring*. Whether or not one thinks that "inferentialism" is a misleading name for the semantic theory in virtue of this feature of it, the important point is that this is not the feature along which the "strong-" vs. "hyper-" distinction is drawn.

[5]I am following Brandom (1994, 234-235) and diverging from Sellars in speaking of language-entry and language-exit "moves" here. Sellars (1954) speaks of language-entry, language-language, and language-exit *transitions*, and he is clear that he only considers the middle category as a category of *moves*. The reason is that he regards a

1. language-entry moves

2. language-language moves

3. language-exit moves

Members of the middle category, language-language moves, are the simplest to understand, and are usually the go-to examples when starting to explicate strong inferentialism. For a given claim, the language-language moves are the narrowly *inferential* moves between this claim and the other claims. The goodness of such moves are articulated in terms of *downstream* and *upstream* inferential relations. Downstream, making the claim "The ball is red" *commits one* to the claim "The ball is colored," *precludes one from being entitled* to the claim "The ball is geen," *commits one* who is also committed to claim "The cube is pink" to the claim "The ball is darker than the cube," and so on.[6] Upstream, making the claim "The ball is scarlet" *commits one* to the claim "The ball is red," making the claim "The ball is green" *precludes one from being entitled* to the claim "The ball is red," and so on. These normative relations articulate the significance of the claim "The ball is red" insofar as it is normatively related to other claims that can be made with the assertoric use of other sentences of the same language, such as "The ball is colored" and "The ball is green." If this were all there was to it, however, then we would not account for

move as a transition from *one* position in the game to *another* position the game. He takes it, however, that transition from, say, having a red sensation to uttering "This is red," though it *terminates* in one's occupying a position in the game, does not *start* with a position in the game. This may seem to be a minor terminological difference between Brandom and Sellars, but I think it actually goes quite deep and in fact underlies much of the confusion diagnosed here. Sellars maintains that it is *solely* language-language moves that can be said to be *rule-governed*, and so it is only the rules governing such moves that account for what he speaks of as the "conceptual status" (1963d) of linguistic expressions. Nevertheless, he maintains that all three sorts of transitions play a role in determining (what he calls) an expression's "meaning," (1963d, 316). Though there is not space to develop this exegetical claim here, I take it that this terminology is a bit misleading, and the distinction he is drawing here corresponds to the distinction I draw in section 6 between "semantic" and "metasemantics."

[6]When I speak of commitment to a sentence here, this is shorthand for speaking of commitment to the claim that one mains in assertorically uttering that sentence.

the fact that "red" expresses an *empirical concept*—a concept that is essentially such that it can be non-inferentially deployed in perception. The strong inferentialist thought is that, in order to accommodate this aspect of the meaning of "red," there must be, in addition to language-language moves, language-*entry* moves.

Language-entry moves connect moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons, assertions, with perceptual circumstances that are not themselves moves in the game. For instance, take a look at the following red ball:

Seeing this red ball is a perceptual circumstance such that, when you're in this circumstance, you're entitled to the claim "The ball is red." The move from your being in this perceptual circumstance to your making the claim "The ball is red" is not an *inference*, since your being in this perceptual circumstance is not a claim. Nevertheless, according to the strong inferentialist, it is still, in an important sense, *rule-governed*. Specifically, it is governed by (something like) the following rule:[7]

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[7]I am following the simple suggestion of Wanderer and Wiess quoted above, but various other formulations of language-entry rules have been made. For a particularly developed account of language-entry rules, see Kukla and Lance (2009), in which they articulate language-entries in terms of special sorts of speech acts—"Lo!" acts, such as "Lo! A red ball!"—to which one comes to be entitled in virtue of first-personally recognizing such things as red balls. Though this account would be subject to the criticism in the following section in just the same way as the simple suggestion of Wanderer and Weiss, it's worth noting that Kukla and Lance do not actually take themselves to be engaging in the inferentialist project of giving a semantic theory for sentences in terms of rules governing their use. Their explicitly stated project is just giving a pragmatics—an account of use—without the inferentialist ambition of accounting for meaning in terms of rules governing use. The distinction between semantics and epistemology articulated in Section 6 may make it possible to reconcile Kukla and Lance's key claims with those put forward here, but this task is not undertaken here.

> **Language-Entry Rule:** If α is in the perceptual circumstance of seeing a red ball, then α is entitled to the claim "The ball is red"

Strong inferentialism permits such rules into the semantic theory. On a strong inferentialist theory, we have language-entry rules like the one above in addition to language-language rules such as the following:

> **Language-Language Rule:** If α is committed and entitled to "The ball is red" and α is committed and entitled to "The cube is pink," then α is entitled to "The ball is darker than the cube."

There is a crucial difference between this language-language rule and the language-entry rule above it. This rule relates a player's *being committed and entitled to two claims* to their being entitled to another claim. The one above it relates a player's *being in a certain perceptual circumstance* to their being entitled to a claim. On strong inferentialism, this is precisely the sort of "broadly inferential" relation that we permit in our semantic theory. The thought motivating strong inferentialism is that we *must* permit such "broadly inferential" relations into our theory in order to explain how it is that words such as "red" are essentially such as to be used non-inferentially in perceptual responses such things as the above red ball. But there is a fundamental problem with any inferentialist theory that appeals to such rules.

3 The Problem

The strong inferentialist, qua inferentialist, is committed to the claim that the content of a predicate such as "red" is to be understood in terms of the (broadly) inferential rules governing its use.[8] We have now spelled out the strong inferentialist semantic theory in such a way that it includes the rule

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[8]In the discussion that follows, I keep the "(broadly) inferential" implicit in talking of "rules."

that if one is in the perceptual circumstance of seeing something red, then one is entitled to a claim of the form "x is red." Such language-entry rules, are, in the words of Lance (1997), "no less basic than are [rules governing] inferences proper" in accounting for content. What, however, are these "red things" of which we speak here? They are, of course, the things that are *red* rather than, say, blue or yellow. But *what is it* for something to be red rather than blue or yellow, or rectangular for that matter? I take it that anyone who possesses the concept of being red knows the answer to this question. After all, to possess the concept of being red just is to know what it is for something to be red. I take it, however, that one can have this knowledge and not be prepared to articulate it. That is indeed the case for most speakers of English for whom this knowledge is *implicit*, manifested in their competence in using the word "red," rather than *explicit*, articulated in a theoretical account of the concept expressed by that word. Such an account, however, is precisely what the inferentialist is committed to providing. The inferentialist project is to articulate the conceptual content of "red" in terms of the rules governing its use, for instance, in terms of the fact that making a claim of the form "x is red" commits one to "x is colored," precludes one from being entitled to "x is green," and so on. Once again, however, one of the rules appealed to in the strong inferentialist account as "no less basic" than these properly inferential rules is the language-entry rule that if one is in the perceptual circumstance of seeing something red, then one is entitled to a claim of the form "x is red." So, once again, what are the "red things" of which we speak here? It seems that, if we actually try to spell out the conceptual content of "red" in accordance with the strong inferentialist account, we end up simply going in circles. The problem, of course, is that insofar as the word "red" essentially occurs in the meta-language in which we articulate the inferential rules in terms of which the content of "red" is to be understood, we are appealing to the very content for which we are supposed to be inferentially accounting. So, the reason we end up going

in circles is that the account is circular![9]

In defending the claim that this really is a problem for strong inferentialism, it is important to be clear what the ambitions of inferentialism actually are. Inferentialism aspires to be what Michael Dummett (1993) speaks of as a "full-blooded" theory of meaning, a theory that provides an account of "the concepts expressed by the primitive terms of the language" (5), terms like "red" and "ball."[10] Very few semantic theories aspire to any such account. For instance, representationalist semantic theories of the sort that are widespread in philosophy and linguistics today have no such aspiration. On a representationalist semantic theory, predicates like "red" and "ball" are assigned properties such as *being red* and *being a ball*, and, though it's the business of the semantic theorist to make these assignments of properties to predicates, it's not the business of the semantic theorist to specify any further what these properties actually are.[11] Properties like *being red* or *being a ball* are appealed to in the semantic theory as the contents of predicates like "red" and "ball," but no

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[9]Though Sellars is widely taken to be the main proponent of strong inferentialism, I take it that he rejects strong inferentialism in virtue of recognizing this very problem with it. See especially Sellars (1953, 133). Moreover, I take it that Sellars's solution is the very same solution I will put forward shortly: Sellars is a hyper-inferentialist about conceptual content, maintaining that "the conceptual meaning of descriptive as well as logical symbols, is constituted, *completely* constituted, by syntactical rules," (136).

[10]There are other conditions that Dummett associates with "full-bloodedness" on which I wish to stay neutral on here. For instance, Dummett takes it that, if one has a full-blooded theory of meaning for some language, then learning that theory would suffice for an outsider to that language to acquire the concepts expressed by the expressions of that language. It's not clear to me that giving a full-blooded account of conceptual contents, in the sense of giving an account of the concepts expressed by the primitive terms of the language, commits one to the claim that one can acquire a whole network of concepts "as from outside" through learning a semantic theory. Drawing such distinctions may be the way to respond to McDowell's (1998) influential criticism of Dummett, though a full intervention into this debate (which concerns the viability of inferentialism in general, not hyper-inferentialism in particular) is beyond the scope of the current paper.

[11]See King (2019) for a clear expression of the way in which properties figure in contemporary semantic theories, and, for an explicit statement of the claim that it is not the job of the semantic theorist to specify what these properties are, see Yalcin (2018, 350).

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of account of them is given. Rather than account for these basic contents, a representationalist semantics simply specifies how such contents compose to form complex contents. The inferentialist, on the other hand, is committed to giving an account of even the basic contents expressed by simple predicates such as "red" and "ball." Clearly, then, insofar as the inferentialist is committed to giving an account of these contents, she is precluded from being able to appeal to these contents as primitive in her account. That, however, is precisely what the strong inferentialist does. In her account of the content of "red," the strong inferentialist invokes as basic language-entry rules of the sort just specified, deploying the very concept for which she's supposed to be giving an account in specifying the conditions under which it's correct to use the expression "red." As a result, insofar as strong inferentialism is a full-blooded theory of meaing that attempts to account for the conceptual content of expressions such as "red," it's circular. That's a problem.

What are the strong inferentialist's options in response to this problem? Insofar as she wishes to be a strong inferentialist, they are not good. The strong inferentialist must, on pain of circularity, reject one of the following two claims:

1. The conceptual content of the expression "red" is to be accounted for solely in terms of the rules governing its use.

2. The rules governing the use of the expression "red" essentially include the rule that the expression "red" is correctly applied in perceptual response to red things.

This leads to a dilemma for understanding the rules that are invoked in the "inferentialist" semantic theory. Opting for the first horn, rejecting (1), amounts to endorsing weak inferentialism. Opting for the second horn, rejecting (2), amounts to endorsing hyper-inferentialism. Let us consider each of these horns in turn.

The first horn is to reject (1), saying the rules governing the use of the expression "red" essentially include the rule that the expression "red" is

correctly applied in perceptual response to red things, but the conceptual content of "red things" here is not to be accounted for solely in terms of the rules governing the use of the expression "red." To say this is to reject strong inferentialism for "weak inferentialism," a view which, as noted above, is not aptly called "inferentialism" at all. This is what Michael Kremer (2010) thinks we ought to do. On Kremer's account, understanding the conceptual content of the sentence "The ball is red" requires taking into account both the *inferential* dimension of its correct use—how the correct use of the sentence is connected to the correct use of other sentences such as "The ball is colored" and "The ball is green"—but also taking into account the *repesentational* dimension of its correct use—how the correct use of the sentence is connected to its application to particular objects in experience, such as the red ball above. The red ball above is something that can be *given to us in experience*, and given to us *as red*. This puts us in position to correctly say "The ball is red." On this picture, no attempt is made to explain, solely in terms of the rules governing the use of "red," what it is for something to be red. In addition to the specification of rules governing the use of "red," we must also refer to our *experience* of red things, and, specifically, our experience of them as *red*. Kremer's view is "weakly inferentialist," since he maintains that recognizing the ball in experience *as* red is recognizing it as exemplifying a *concept*, one that essentially stands in inferential relations to other concepts, such as *colored* and *green*. However, these inferential relations don't exhaust the content of the concept, on Kremer's account. Modifying Kant's (1998) dictum, Kremer tells us that, though representation without inference is blind, inference without representation is empty. Inferential and representational relations, according to Kremer, "are interdependent in the sense that only in concert do they give rise to cognition at all; yet they are independent in that neither can be reduced to the other," (230).[12]

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[12]Kremer says the following of concepts and intuitions, but he clearly implies that is also to be said of inference and representation.

Now, perhaps, at the end of the day, this Kantian picture of conceptual content is the one we ought to accept. My point here is not to say that it's wrong. My point is just that it is incompatible with inferentialism.[13] The aspiration of inferentialism is to account for the conceptual content of "red" in terms of the rules governing its use. If one of the rules that one must appeal to in order to give this account is that "red" is correctly applied to things that one sees to be red, any such account would be viciously circular. To accept the first horn is to acknowledge this, and, in response, think that we should give up the aspiration for such an account. On this way of thinking, the proper thing to do in response to the recognition of the failure of representationalism, which aims to account for the meaning of a sentence in terms of its representational adequacy conditions and understanding its inferential articulation as derivative, is not to "invert the order of explanation" and be an inferentialist, but to give up the attempt for a reductive explanation of either the representational or inferential dimension of conceptual content, in one direction or the other. Though I've referred to Kremer's development of this alternative, this is essentially the position of John McDowell as well, perhaps the most outspoken critic of Brandom's inferentialism.[14] McDowell acknowledges the aim of inferentialism, as I've articulated above, and explicitly rejects it as having overly ambitious aspirations.[15] According to McDowell (1998a), we should instead embrace a "modest" semantic theory, one that does not attempt to give an account of the concepts expressed by the primitive

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[13]It's worth noting that, in *Making It Explicit*, Brandom explicitly acknowledges this alternative to inferentialism, saying "[O]ne might eschew reductive explanations in semantics entirely and remain contented with describing the relations among a family of mutually presupposing concepts-a family that includes representation, inference, claiming, referring, and so on," (669n90). Here too, Brandom brings this position up not to say that it's *wrong* (Brandom doesn't take himself to be entitled to that claim), but just to say that it's incompatible with the inferentialist position advanced in the book.

[14]Indeed, Kremer's account can be seen as developing certain key thoughts in the work of McDowell, and I take it that Brandom has McDowell in mind in the quote in the above note.

[15]See especially McDowell 2009a.

terms of the language. Once again, perhaps, at the end the day, this is the way to go. But to go this route, opting for horn (1) and accepting "weak inferentialism," is to reject inferentialism.

The second horn is to reject (2), saying that the conceptual content of the expression "red" is to be accounted for solely in terms of the rules governing its use, and these rules *do not* include the rule that the expression "red" is correctly applied in perceptual response to red things. This, however, is precisely the sort of rule in virtue of which this view was a version of *strong* inferentialism rather than *hyper*-inferentialism. Thus, to say this is to abandon strong inferentialism for hyper-inferentialism, a view that is unanimously regarded as a theoretical non-starter. Peregrin (2014), for instance, says Brandom "rejects [hyper-inferentialism] as clearly untenable for a language containing empirical vocabulary," (7). Ironically, as I'll now show, this view that Peregrin claims Brandom "rejects as clearly untenable" is Brandom's own.

4   Brandom's Multi-Perspectival Hyper-Inferentialism

Let us now turn to the words that Brandom (1994) himself uses to characterize what he calls the "broad conception" of inference, in virtue of which he takes his theory to be "strong" rather than "hyper-" inferentialism:

> [T]he broad conception includes the possibility of noninferential circumstances and consequences of application. In this way [. . .] the specifically empirical conceptual content that concepts exhibit in virtue of their connection to language entries in perception [. . .] are incorporated into the inferentialist picture. The use of concepts with contents of these sorts can still be understood in terms of the material inferential commitment one who uses them undertakes: the commitment to the propriety or correctness of the inference from their circumstances to their consequences of application. Conceiving such inferences broadly means conceiving them as involving those circumstances and consequences, as well as the connection

between them, (131).

Brandom speaks here of an inference from the non-inferential circumstances of the application of the concept "red" to the consequence of application. He does not hedge or put "inference" in scarequotes as the authors discussed above do. On the strong inferentialist conception that we've been considering, he ought to, since the sort of "inference" he's talking about is the move from, say, having a visibly red thing in front of one to saying "This is red," and this is not an "inference" properly so-called. But I take it that this cannot be correct. Brandom doesn't just say "inference" here; he says *material inference,* and the "move" from having a visibly red thing in front of one to saying "This is red," while it might called an "inference" with some strain, surely can't be called a "material inference." That's a technical term, and it is something that obtains between *claims*, or conceptual contents more generally. What then, is Brandom talking about when he is speaking of the "broad conception" of inference here? Here is a hint:

> [W]hat an interpreter *takes* to be the circumstances under which an expression can appropriately be used in noninferential reports [. . .] is an important feature of the empirical content the interpreter associates with that expression [my italics], (213).

Now, officially, for an interpreter *take* a player to be in the circumstance under which an expression can be non-inferentially used is for that interpreter to be *committed to the claim* that the player is in such a circumstance. I take it, then, that the "broad conception" of inference, on Brandom's way of using the term (and no one else's), is a conception that includes *inferences* from *claims* that say that players are in non-inferential circumstances of application to *claims* that say that they bear the consequences of applying the concept. For instance, it includes the inference from the *claim* that someone has a visibly red ball directly in their field of view

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to the *claim* that they are committed or entitled to the claim "The ball is red." In the sense at issue here, this is regular old material inference, not categorically distinct from the inference from the claim that the ball is red to the claim that it is colored. It is, of course, distinct from that more standard case of a material inference—it is a material inference that involves the attribution of a normative status to another player. Still, it is an inference, properly so-called. Including such inferences in the semantic theory is compatible with hyperinferentialism, as I am using the term here.

On this reading, Brandom's semantic theory does *not* appeal to rules connecting perceptual states or circumstances to moves in the language game. What the theory appeals to in order to account for the fact that some contents are essentially such as to be deployed perceptually are *reliability inferences*, and reliability inferences are *inferences* in the proper sense of the term, inferences *from* claims *to* claims. If these inferences are *inferences*, in the proper sense of the term, why does Brandom call them "broadly" inferential? I take it because they are inferences *across* scorekeeping perspectives, such that the one *doing the inferring* is not the one *making the claim*. Here is what he says on why observation reports can be counted as "broadly inferential" on his theory:

> [T]he sort of authority that observation reports exhibit counts as broadly inferential because of the reliability inference it involves on the part of the attributor of such authority. Although it sounds paradoxical, for this reason the role of a sentence in noninferential reporting should also be understood as falling under the rubric "(broadly) inferential role," (188-189).

Here, it is clear that what Brandom means in saying that we can understand a non-inferential reporting use of a sentence as "(broadly) inferential" is *not* that it involves, on the part of the reporter, an "inference," in some broad sense of the term, from a perceptual circumstance to its non-inferential use. Rather, Brandom means that it involves an *inference*, in the

proper sense of the term, just not one by the reporter. Tautologically, the person who *makes* the non-inferential report is not doing so inferentially. Still, Brandom says, the non-inferential *authority* that the report has, and thus, its status *as* a non-inferential report, *is* derived inferentially. It's not the *maker* of the report who makes the inference, but the *attributor*, who infers from the report's being made and the reporter's being a reliable maker of such reports that the report is *authoritative*. It is only in virtue of being underwritten by such inferences that the reports can be counted as having non-inferential authority. The stronger claim that Brandom makes is that *all there is* to a report's having non-inferential authority is its being underwritten by these cross-perspectival inferences.

5   A Hyper-Inferentialist Semantics

To make things more concrete, let me give a simple example of the sort of rules that I take it *would* belong to a semantic theory of the sort Brandom proposes.[16] Suppose we're trying to inferentially account for the mean-

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[16]Since the rules discussed are simply inferential rules between sentences, they can be integrated into many existing inferentialist formal semantic frameworks. Of particular note is the sequent-based formal framework developed by the ROLE working group led by Brandom and Hlobil which straightforwardly permits the inclusion of defeasible rules of the sort proposed here. See Brandom (2018), Kaplan (2022), and Brandom and Hlobil (forthcoming). See also Simonelli (2022, Chapter 4) for a formal framework, drawing on that of Kukla, Lance, and Restall (2009), more capable of directly integrating normative pragmatic inferential rules of the sort spelled out here, and Simonelli (2022, Appendix) for a schema for translating between this framework and that of Brandom, Hlobil, and Kaplan. It should also be noted that these rules are proposed only as an example of the sort of rules that would figure into a hyper-inferentialist theory, and not as a serious proposal for the rules that the final semantic theory would actually have. It seems to me that language-entry moves are essentially tied to the use of demonstrative expressions. Even if a given move does not actually involve the use of any demonstrative expression it is essentially that, whenever one makes such a move, one is *able* to use a demonstrative expression, tokening a "This" that picks out an object to which one is non-inferentially applying a concept. One of the unfortunate features of *Making It Explicit* is that the account of perception, offered in Chapter Four, is offered in Chapter Four. That is, the account we get of these reliability inferences that underwrite non-inferential authority doesn't incorporate the full semantic machinery developed in the second part of the book. As my main task here is a conceptual one, I leave the full

ings of set of sentences that contains, for instance, "The ball is red," "The cube is green," "The pyramid is scarlet," "The octahedreon is gray," and so on. We've gotten to the point in our theory where it seems that we need to consider the connection between, for instance, "The ball is red" and the circumstance in which one is able to non-inferentially deploy this sentence. There is no need to appeal to any relations between anything other than claims here. We just need to consider a wider class of claims than the ones with which we've concerned ourselves thus far.[17]

To spell this out, let X be a place holder for any of the common nouns belonging to these sentences, such as "ball," "cube," or "prism," let F be a placeholder for any of the color predicates belonging to these sentences, such as "red," "green," or "scarlet," and let n be a placeholder for any of the names of the speakers of the language who might use this vocabulary. Schematizing in this way, we can articulate rules such as the following:

> If α is committed and entitled to "The X is scarlet," then α is entitled to "The X is red."

We'll say that a player's "scorecard" *conforms* to a rule of this form just in case, if it contains an attribution of the statuses in the antecedent to some player, with any actual expressions of the right types substituted for the placeholders, then it contains an attribution of the status in the consequent to that player, with the same expressions substituted for those placeholders. This sort of scorekeeping framework can be laid out completely formally, and one can officially define discursive roles as determined by scorekeeping rules of this sort, but this informal characterization will be sufficient for our purposes.[18] I'll now show how we can articulate score-

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technical development of the theory to future projects.

[17]As Sellars (1956) says, "there is an important sense in which one has *no* concept pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects in Space and Time unless one has them all," (275). One might doubt whether a claim quite that radical is correct, but one certainly needs more than the set of concepts pertaining to color and shapes to have any of the concepts of color or shape.

[18]For such a formal framework, see Simonelli (2022, Chapter 4).

keeping rules relating nothing other than commitments and entitlements to *claims* that allow us to inferentially account for the fact that expressions like "red" are essentially such that they can be non-inferentially used in perceptual reports.

The first set of rules we consider are classic language-language moves, material scorekeeping principles of permissive and preclusive consequence, such as the following:

> If α is committed and entitled to "It is day," and "We are outside," then α is (defeasibly) entitled to "The lighting is good."
>
> If α is committed to "The lighting is good," then α is precluded from being entitled to "It is completely dark."
>
> If α is committed to "The X is in front of n," then α is precluded from being entitled to "The X is behind n."
>
> And so on . . .

Let us now conjunctively define a predicate "is positioned to see that" by way of the following inferential rules:

> If α is committed to "The X is F," α is committed to "The lighting is good," and α is committed to "The X is in front of n," then α is committed to "n is positioned to see that the X is F"
>
> If α is committed to "n is positioned to see that the X is F," then α is committed to "The X is F," "The lighting is good," and "The X is in front of n."

Note that, given the way in which I have inferentially defined the predicate "positioned to see," one's being *positioned* to see that the ball is red does not mean that one is *able* to see that the ball is red. For instance, if n is completely color-blind, then n might be positioned to see that the ball is red—having the red ball in front of them in good lighting—and yet not be able to see that the ball is red because they are incapable of seeing

the colors of anything. In order to actually *see* that the ball is red, it is not enough that one be positioned to see that the ball is red. One must also be a "capable perceiver of the colors of things." This expression has material inferential content, as defined by rules like the following:

> If α is committed and entitled to "*n* is an adult human being," α is (defeasibly) entitled to "*n* is a capable perceiver of the colors of things"

> If α is committed to "*n* is color blind," α is precluded from being entitled to "*n* is a capable perciever of the colors of things ."

It is also, however, a *reliability operator* that functions in conjunction with a corresponding *circumstance for response predicate*, "is positioned to see that," in enabling the inferential attribution of non-inferential entitlement, given the following rule:

> **RI:** If α is committed to "*n* is a capable perceiver of the colors of things," and α is committed to "*n* is positioned to see that the X is F," α is entitled to "*n* sees that the X is F."

To return to our example now, and consider how it comes out on the hyperinferentialist picture just sketched, let us consider the following substitution instance of RI:

> **RI':** (X = the ball, F = red): If α is committed and entitled to "*n* is a capable perceiver of the colors of things," and α is committed and entitled to "*n* is positioned to see that the ball is red," then α is entitled to "*n* sees that the ball is red"

This rule is an *inferential* rule, properly so-called. It is a rule of permissive consequence, relating commitment and entitlement to two claims to entitlement to a third claim. As far as the discussion here is concerned, it belongs to the same basic category of rules as the following rule, which is a paradigm of a properly inferential rule:

> If α is committed and entitled to "The ball is red" and α is committed and entitled to "The cube is pink," then α is entitled to "The ball is darker than the cube."

The key difference between this rule and the rule above it is that the first rule is one that normatively relates claims involving the attribution of reliability and the attribution of normative statuses to another player. Still, *both* of these rules normatively relate nothing other than *claims*. *Neither* of these rules normatively relates non-linguistic circumstances to a claim. Of course, the *claims* that are related are *about* non-linguistic circumstances. But, once again, that's true of *both* of these rules. The circumstance consisting in n's being positioned to see that the ball is red *is* a non-linguistic circumstance, but *so is the circumstance consisting in the ball's being red*. Just as having the second rule in our semantics does not require that the non-linguistic circumstance consisting in the ball's being red figure directly into our semantic theory (in the way that such a circumstance would figure in, say, a truth-maker semantics), having the first rule in our semantics does not require that the non-linguistic circumstance consisting in n's being positioned to see that the ball is red figure directly into our semantic theory. If the only sort of rules that figure into our semantics are rules like these, our theory is, in the sense of the term under discussion here, a form of hyper-inferentialism.

One final step is needed in order for this account to be complete. Note that the discursive significance of commitment to a claim of the form "n sees that p" must be understood in the context of the fact that seeing is a way of knowing. To see that p is to know, through visual perception, that p. So, we have the following inferential rule:

> If α is committed to "n sees that p," then α is committed to "n knows that p"

Finally, now, note Brandom's (1994, 201-204) account of what a knowledge attribution actually amounts to. To take someone to have knowledge that

p, on Brandom's account, is to take them to be *committed* to p, to take them to be *entitled* to p, and to undertake commitment to p oneself. Putting this in terms of scorekeeing rules, we have the following:

> If α is committed to "n knows that p," then α scores n as *committed* to p, α scores n as *entitled* to p, and α is committed to p.

So, by giving inferential rules through which a player can commit herself to a claim of the form "n sees that p" we have, in so doing, given rules through which a player can score another player n as entitled to p. In this way, RI inferentially underwrites the attribution of non-inferential entitlement.

Anything that was good in what we said earlier, on the strong inferentialist model, we can now translate into properly inferential terms on the hyper-inferentialist model. The content of the phrase "in the perceptual circumstance of seeing something red," deployed in the specification of the language-entry move, can now be inferentially spelled out in terms of the above inferences. What it is to be in the perceptual circumstance of seeing something red is to be a capable perceiver of the color of things (as adult human beings who aren't color blind generally are), to be in a position to actualize that capacity (so, looking at something that is red in good lighting), and to actually actualize it (seeing, and thereby knowing, that something is red). We can have all of this in the theory, appealing to nothing other than inference rules, properly so-called, rules that normatively relate nothing other than claims. Though we can say everything that was good in what we said earlier on the strong inferentialist model, we do not have the same problem that we had there. Crucially, in the *meta-language* in which we officially articulate the semantic theory, there is *no mention* of red things or perceptual responses to them.[19] The only mention of such

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[19]The metalanguage deployed here contains nothing but the vocabulary required to specify the scorekeeping consequences (the attribution of normative statuses towards claims) of taking a player as bearing certain normative statuses towards claims. Thus,

things is in *claims* in the *object language*, claims whose significance is understood *inferentially*, in terms of their normative relations to *other claims* in the object language.[20] The key move that makes hyper-inferentialism a genuine theoretical possibility here is that the object language essentially, and not accidentally, includes vocabulary for *attributing* commitments and entitlements to claims to other players. The hyper-inferentialism here is thus an essentially *multi-perspectival* hyper-inferentialism.[21]

6 Appreciating the Scope of Inferentialist Semantics

I have laid out, in broad outline, a hyper-inferentialist theory of meaning. In conclusion, it is worth briefly providing a diagnosis for why a hyper-inferentialist theory has seemed so implausible to commenta-

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the meta-language might be formally rendered in a signed-sequent notation of the sort that figures in bilateral logic (e.g. Francez 2014), with the signs expressing different normative statuses (See Simonelli 2022, 91-106). This purely formal character of the meta-language can be seen as a definitive feature of a hyper-inferentialist theory.

[20]In this way, the hyper-inferentialist strategy, though a "full-blooded" theory of meaning in Dummett's (1993) sense in attempting to account for "the concepts expressed by [a language's] primitive expressions," deploys the *exact opposite* strategy to Dummett himself. Dummet's strategy is influentially characterized (and then criticized) by McDowell (1998) as requiring that the words for which we aim to be semantically accounting are used "only in first intention—that is, never inside a content-specifying 'that' clause" (91). By contrast, the hyper-inferentialist strategy pursued here requires that the words we accounted for be used *never* in first intention—that is, *only* inside a content-specifying "that" clause.

[21]This, I take it, is the crucial advance of Brandom's hyper-inferentialism over what I take to be Sellars's version of hyper-inferentialism. For Sellars, the "inferential articulation" of perceptual knowledge involves a reliability inference (of some sort) on the part of the *agent* of perceptual knowledge (1956, §36-37; 1963, 88), rather than the *attributor*. Thus, though Sellars clearly wants to maintain that perceptual knowings are non-inferential, we lose are clear grip on the sense in which it really is so that someone's seeing something, in and of itself, suffices for their knowing. This inferential articulation of perceptual knowledge on the part of the agent leads McDowell (2016) to criticize Sellars's conception of perceptual knowledge as putting "in doubt the very possibility of perceptual knowledge," (105). As I'll explain in the next section, it is precisely the multi-perspectival character of Brandom's hyper-inferentialism that enables us to maintain a McDowellian conception of perceptual knowledge while nevertheless endorsing a hyper-inferentialist account of perceptual content.

tors who've considered it.[22] Of course, one reason is that no one has seriously tried to work it out in the detail that I have here. Perhaps once one sees an actual hyper-inferentialist semantic proposal worked out in some detail, one will no longer dismiss such theories as untenable. Though some might be swayed in this way, I suspect that many of the above quoted commentators will still look at the sort of semantics I've presented with serious suspicion. The general sense of suspicion, I take it, will be that on the hyper-inferentialist conception of content, we lose touch with the world; we are left, to use a widely-quoted phrase of John McDowell (1994), frictionlessly "spinning in the void," (11). Accordingly, to proactively respond to the sorts of criticisms this proposal is likely to get, let me conclude by diagnosing the deeper reason that commentators have dismissed hyper-inferentialism out of hand on the basis of such worries of spinning in the void: they have, I take it, systematically mis-understood the scope of inferentialist semantics. In particular, there are two important distinctions that commentators have consistently failed to properly draw: the distinction between semantics and epistemology, on the one hand, and the distinction between semantics and metasemantics, on the other. Once these two distinctions are drawn, hyper-inferentialist semantics no longer has any intuitive implausibility.

The first distinction that commentators have failed to properly draw is between the *semantic* theory for a language *L*, which articulates the conceptual contents expressed by the sentences and sub-sentential ex-pressions of *L*, including those that may function to express perceptual judgments, such as the sentence "The ball is red," and an *epistemological* theory pertaining to the speakers of *L*, which articulates how it is that a

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[22]The one exception in the literature of someone who has not dismissed hyper-inferentialism outright is Legg (2008, 2018). Legg argues that Peirce actually endorsed a form of hyper-inferentialism, aiming to account for the content of even sensory terms in entirely (narrowly) inferential terms. Legg doesn't say, however, exactly *which* infer-ences are supposed to go into the inferential articulation of this content, and so, after reading Legg's work, one is likely to still be left puzzling over how such a view could be made to work. I hope the present paper goes some way to resolving that puzzlement.

speaker comes to be entitled to make perceptual judgments that may be expressed by a certain subset of the sentences of *L*, such as that expressed by the sentence "The ball is red." Even given everything we've said here, there is nothing stopping us from saying, in the context of our *epistemological* theory, that the way one comes to be perceptually entitled to the claim that the ball is red is, in the paradigm case, by *seeing* that the ball is red.[23] The hyper-inferentialist view proposed here as a *semantic* theory only commits us to the claim that, if we want an account of the conceptual content expressed, for instance, by the sentence "The ball is red" or the sentence "*n* sees that the ball is red," the way we are to do this is by articulating the inferential relations that these sentences bear to other sentences of the language to which they belong. Insofar as these are sentences that can function to express perceptual entitlement, this involves prioritizing the *inferential attribution* of this perceptual entitlement rather than the *non-inferential possession* of such an entitlement. This prioritization of the perspective of the *attributor* in the *semantic* theory, however, is perfectly compatible with the prioritization of the perspective of the *agent* in the *epistemological* theory.[24]

On the epistemological theory that is the natural complement of the semantic theory put forth here, if one is a capable perceiver of the colors of things, then one can come to be perceptually entitled to the claim that the ball through the act of *seeing* that the ball is red. For such a subject, the right way to answer the question "How do you know that the ball is red?" is to say "I see that it is." This expresses the grounds that one has for the one's application of the concept expressed by "red" to the object picked out by "The ball," and so this is the right way to answer a question asking for these grounds. Crucially, however, to ask for the grounds one has for one's *application* of a certain concept in a particular case is distinct

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[23]See, for instance, McDowell (1998b) for a motivation for such an epistemological view, and McDowell (2009b, 238-239) for concise expression of it.

[24]For more on the philosophical significance of this perspectival distinction, see Simonelli (2020).

from asking for an account of the *content* of that concept in general. To say *why it is* that one thinks that something is red in a particular case is distinct from saying *what it is* to think that something is red in general. The epistemological theory that enables one to answer questions of the first sort may be distinct in form from the semantic theory that enables one to answer questions of the second sort. Of course, the two theories must be *compatible*, and there must be a way of articulating their *connection*, but they shouldn't be *conflated.* The compatibility of the two theories requires that the contents of the concepts one deploys in articulating the epistemological theory be accounted for through the deployment of the semantic theory. So, for instance, insofar as the concept of a capable perceiver of the colors of things figures in the epistemological theory, we must be able to deploy the semantic theory to give an account of that concept. I have sketched here how it is that an inferentialist, properly so-called, is able to do just that.

Drawing this distinction between epistemology and semantics enables us to respond to the first way of hearing the challenge that hyper-inferentialism leaves us "spinning in the void." In *Mind and World*, Mc-Dowell (1994) argues that in order for our actualizations of conceptual capacities to be rationally constrained by the world, it is insufficient for all of our actualizations of conceptual capacities to be acts of judgments. For thought to be rationally constrained by the world there must be, in addition to acts of judgment, perceptual acts—for instances, acts of seeing that such and such is the case, in which facts are made visibly manifest to subjects. It is widely thought that the hyper-inferentialist is committed to rejecting this thought, that they are committed to a kind of coherentist picture in which the only things that justify judgments are other judgments. But this is not so. It is, in fact, a crucial element of the hyper-inferentialist picture that I've spelled out here that one way in which a particular agent can come to be entitled to a claim with empirical content is perceptually—through a perceptual episode in which one one

sees, and therein knows, that such and such is the case. It's just that, when one wants to account for this aspect of the conceptual content of what one sees to be the case in such an episode, the way to do this is to think about the attribution of perceptual entitlement to this conceptual content, since this attribution of perceptual entitlement (unlike the perceptual entitlement itself) can be articulated inferentially. So, it is simply not the case, on a hyper-inferentialist account of content, that our acts of judgment "degenerate into moves in a self-contained game" (McDowell 1994, 5). Quite the contrary, the game is precisely *open* rather than *self-contained*, insofar as speakers come to be entitled to new claims—occupying new positions in the game—on the basis of seeing that things are so.[25]

The second distinction that commentators have failed to properly draw is between the *semantic* theory for a language *L* and various aspects of (what is nowadays referred to as) the *metasemantic* theory for *L*.[26] Now, one must be careful wielding this distinction here, because, as Murzi and Steinberger (2017) have made clear (and as Brandom himself proposes, though not quite in these terms), inferentialism can itself be put forward as a metasemantic theory, relative to traditional representationalist semantics. For instance, one can use an inferentialist semantics to explain how it is that standard representationalist semantic contents such as sets of possible worlds are really to be understood as codifying inferential roles.[27] In this way, a semantic theory of one sort may serve as a kind of metasemantic theory for a semantic theory of another sort. Nevertheless,

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[25]Importantly, one need not be *attributed* entitlement a claim in order to *be* entitled to a claim. As I look about the room now, seeing the various things around me and the ways they are, I am entitled to all sorts of claims, but, since there is no one else in the room, entitlement to these claims is not being attributed to me by any other agent (nor am I attributing entitlement to myself as if I were another agent). Rather, I'm simply entitled to them in virtue of seeing how things are. Brandom's (1995) own failure to register this distinction, I believe, is responsible his distortion of McDowell's (1998a) position (which McDowell 2009c brings out) when he tries to integrate it into his own.

[26]See Burgess and Sherman (2018) for a helpful discussion of this distinction and its applications in more mainstream semantic (and metasemantic) theories.

[27]For a detailed spelling-out of just how it is that an inferentialist semantics can do this, see Simonelli (2022, Chapter 5).

an inferentialist semantics, at least as I am understanding it here, is still a *semantic* theory in the sense of a theory of meanings.[28] To provide an inferentialist semantics for a language L is to provide a *constitutive* account of *what* the semantic contents of the expressions of L are rather than an *explanatory* account of *why* the semantic contents of the expressions of L are what they are or *how* they come to be what they are. In the context of an inferentialist semantics, the semantic content of an expression is understood in terms of the inferential rules governing that expression's use, and so one task of the metasemantic theory for an inferentialist semantics will be to explain why the rules have the structure that they do. Thus, for instance, the inferentialist semantic will account for the semantic content of "red" in terms of such inferential facts as that commitment to a claim of the form "x is red" precludes one from being entitled to a claim of the form "x is green," but explaining *why it is* that this fact obtains is simply not part of the task. Of course, endorsing an inferentialist semantics commits one to the claim that there is *some* such explanatory story to be told, but it's not the job of the inferentialist semanticist, qua semanticist, to tell it. Now, telling the *metasemantic* story that explains why it is that the inferential rules are structured as they are and how it is that they come to be structured that way will, of course, involve referring to things in the world other than claims—things like red and green balls, but also such things as light waves, brain states, and so on—but that doesn't mean that our inferentialist *semantics* must relate anything other than claims.

To clarify this distinction, note that it is perfectly possible to tell a metasemantic story in which the properties to which we're *actually responsive* in using some vocabulary (where this responsiveness partially explains why the norms structuring the use of that vocabulary are what they are) are very different than the properties to which we *take ourselves*

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[28]Given the way that I have spelled out inferentialism here, this is very clearly the case, though some proponents of inferentialism have explicitly denied this (hence the confusion surrounding the application of this distinction here). For interesting discussion see Stanley (2006), comments 19 (Block) and 21 (Stanley).

to be responsive in using that vocabulary. Indeed, I take it that, as a matter of fact, this is just what is the case with the vocabulary that has been our primary example here: color vocabulary. We take it that, when we look at a red ball and say of it that it's red, the property that we're responding to in saying this is the property of being red, a property that things visibly instantiate in certain lighting conditions and which is such that, if something instantiates it, it must be colored, it cannot be green (all over), and so on. Inferential semantics yields an account of this property in terms of the inferential norms governing the use of "red," "rot," "rojo," or any other predicate that plays the same functional role.[29] I take it, however, that, as a matter of fact, the property of being red is *uninstantiated*.[30] Things in the world like raspberries and stop signs don't actually instantiate the structure that we take them to when we ascribe to them the property of being red. Rather, there is a complex set of properties that they and we instantiate (none of which are the property of being red) that together partly explain why we have the inferential norms that we do which constitute the fact that the word "red," as we use it, expresses the property of being red. Now, you don't need to agree with me about the metaphysics of color to appreciate the general philosophical point here. The point is just that there can be a radical discontinuity between, on the one hand, the properties we appeal to in our metasemantic theory in order to explain the norms and, on the other hand, the properties we inferentially articulate in our semantic theory that are conferred as contents by those norms.[31] Thus, from the perspective developed here, to

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[29]It's worth noting that not all languages necessarily have a term that is governed by suitably similar norms such that we can say the term expresses the property of being red. Some languages carve up the color spectrum differently (Winawer et al. 2007), and, accordingly, will be taken to confer different basic color properties on this account.

[30]This claim has, to my mind, been argued most convincingly by Adam Pautz (2006a, 2006b), though see also Sellars (1962) for an influential argument.

[31]Now, if one is globally inferentialist (as one should be if one's an inferentialist at all), one should think that the scientific properties appealed to in the metasemantic theory—things like reflectance properties and brain states—must also be accounted for inferentially, and the metasemantic story that explains the norms of the scientific

think that one must refer to red things to which one stands in perceptual relations in the world in order to explain the conceptual content of "red" is to conflate two fundamentally distinct levels of explanation.

This distinction between semantics and metasemantics enables us to respond to the second way of hearing the challenge that hyper-inferentialism leaves us "spinning in the void." On this different way of hearing the phrase, the challenge is more metaphysical than epistemological; it concerns the causal or explanatory connection (or lack thereof) between language and the extra-linguistic reality to which language-users belong. According to this challenge, the hyper-inferentialist is committed to denying that anything from the outside the practice of using language constrains the linguistic practice.[32] This would, surely, be a kind of spinning in the void. But nothing about hyper-inferentialism, as a semantic theory, commits one to it. Indeed, it is perfectly compatible with hyper-inferentialism to explain the structure of the norms, mastery of which confers a grasp on a space of conceptual contents, in a way that involves appealing to things in the world instantiating the very conceptual contents on which speakers come to have a grip. I've just suggested that it is a mistake to try to do this in the specific case of colors that we've taken as our main example here. However, to switch up the example, it is plausibly part of the explanation of the fact that, in our practice, commitment to "x is ball" precludes entitlement to "x is a cube" that we're responsive to balls in our usage of "ball," we're responsive to cubes in our usage of "cube,"

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language that confer those properties as contents will be quite different than the meta-semantic theory of ordinary language, belonging to general philosophy of science rather than standard philosophy of language.

[32]It is this sort of concern, I take it, that leads Williamson (2009) to claim that, without including language-entries and language-exits in their semantic theory, an inferentialist "could not hope to explain how many words refer to extra-linguistic objects, or how language is used in interaction with the extra-linguistic environment." It's worth pointing out that no semantic theorist belonging to the representationalist paradigm—for instance, someone putting forward an extensionalist semantic theory of the sort sketched out in Heim and Kratzer's (1998) textbook—is taken to be tasked with attempting to answer these questions in the context of their semantic theory either. These are widely agreed to be metasemantic questions.

and something's being a ball rule's out its being a cube.[33] So, though inferentialism entitles us to say that some properties are "mere shadows" of norms (Sellars 1963b, Kraut 2010), it doesn't commit us to saying this about all properties. According to the inferentialist, if we want to articulate what it is that we're saying of the Sun when we say of it that it's a ball, the way to do this is to articulate the inferential norms governing the use of "ball." This is the account the inferentialist provides of the property of being a ball. But nothing about this account implies that the property of being a ball is not *instantiated* by the Sun, and, indeed, was instantiated by the Sun long before any human beings existed.[34] Moreover, it's perfectly compatible with inferentialism to tell a metasemantic story in which the objective modal relations between properties instantiated by objects with which speakers interact in part explains the structure of the norms through which speakers grasp those very properties. Hyper-inferentialism, as an account of the contents conferred by a linguistic practice, is simply neutral with respect to questions of the relations between the contents conferred by a linguistic practice and those instantiated by extra-linguistic reality. There are, of course, important questions here, but, for the inferentialist, they should be understood as metasemantic questions, not semantic ones.

7   Conclusion

Insofar as the scope of inferentialist semantics is properly understood— that is, once we have properly drawn the distinctions between semantics,

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[33]As with the case of colors, you don't need to agree with me about the metaphysics of shapes to appreciate the general philosophical point here.

[34]Brandom (2019) develops this point under the label of "conceptual realism." On this account, the Sun's instantiating the property of being a ball is its being such that, given how it actually is, it's necessarily round, can't possibly be square, and so on, where, following Sellars (1953b) "The language of modalities is interpreted as a 'transposed' language of norms" (332). This inferentialist account of what it is for the Sun to be a ball is perfectly compatible with saying that the Sun's being a ball depends in no way on us since the Sun is how it is, modally speaking, completely independent of us.

on the one hand, and epistemology and metasemantics, on the other—I see no reason for the inferentialist to rule out hyper-inferentialism as a genuine theoretical possibility. Indeed, to reiterate, given the fundamental problem with so-called "strong inferentialism" articulated above, it seems to me that hyper-inferentialism is really the *only* genuine candidate for an inferentialist theory of meaning. The only coherent way to be an inferentialist is to be a hyper-inferentialist. The question remains, of course, of whether one should be an inferentialist at all. For all that I've said in defending specifically *hyper*-inferentialism, I have not addressed all possible criticisms of *inferentialism*. The thesis that we can account for the meanings of the sentences of a language *L* solely in terms of the inferential rules governing their use remains a contentious one, and there are all sorts of technical and philosophical challenges that have been raised for any theory of this general sort to which I have not responded here. However, as I hope to have made clear, the inferentialist faces no particular problem accounting for the meaning of vocabulary that is essentially such as to be deployed perceptually. Nothing of this sort requires the inferentialist to break up her theory into two different kinds of "broadly inferential" rules. The only rules needed are inferential ones, properly so-called.[35]

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