Pragmatism and Inferentialism[*]

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One of the central themes of Brandom's work is that we should construct our sematic theories around material validity and incompatibility, rather than reference, truth, and satisfaction. This approach to semantics is motivated in part by Brandom's *pragmatism* about the relation between semantics and the more general study of language use—what he calls "pragmatics":

> Inferring is a kind of doing. ... The status of inference as something that can be *done* accordingly holds out the promise of securing an appropriate relation between pragmatics, the study of the practices, and semantics, the study of the corresponding contents. (MIE, 91)[1]

Although Brandom does not go so far as to say that a pragmatist attitude to the relation between semantics and pragmatics *requires* an inferentialist semantics, his motivating arguments strongly suggest that a pragmatist *ought* to be an inferentialist.

In what follows, I discuss the connections between Brandom's pragmatism and his inferentialism. I'll argue that pragmatism, as Brandom initially describes it—the view that "semantics must answer to pragmatics"—does not favor an inferentialist approach to semantics over a truth-conditional one. I'll then consider whether inferentialism might be

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[1]Throughout this paper, I'll cite Brandom 1994 as "MIE" and Brandom 2000 as "AR."

motivated by a stronger kind of pragmatism, one that requires semantic concepts to be definable in terms of independently intelligible pragmatic concepts. Although this more stringent requirement does exclude truth-conditional approaches to semantics, it is not clear that Brandom's own approach meets it. Moreover, if Brandom's inferentialism is pragmatist in this stronger sense, it is not because "inferring is a kind of doing," but because *scorekeeping* is a kind of doing.

1 Pragmatism

Brandom describes his pragmatism as follows:

> One of the fundamental methodological commitments governing the account presented here is *pragmatism* about the relations between semantics and pragmatics. Pragmatism in this sense is the view that what attributions of semantic contentfulness are *for* is explaining the normative significance of intentional states such as beliefs and of speech acts such as assertions. Thus the criteria of adequacy to which semantic theory's concept of content must answer are to be set by the pragmatic theory, which deals with contentful intentional states and the sentences used to express them in speech acts. (MIE, 143)

This is not just the view that semantics is useful for explaining the normative significance of speech acts and mental states. Even staunch antipragmatists would concede that. Pragmatism is the idea that there is *nothing more* to semantic concepts than their role in this enterprise. The "theoretical point" of semantics, as pragmatists conceive of it, is that of "settling how linguistic expressions of those contents are properly or correctly used, under what circumstances it is appropriate to acquire states and attitudes with those contents, and how one then ought or is obliged to go on to behave" (MIE, 83). Since semantics does not

answer to anything other than pragmatics,

> ...it is pointless to attribute semantic structure or content that does no prag-
> matic explanatory work. It is only insofar as it is appealed to in explaining the
> circumstances under which judgments and inferences are properly made and
> the proper consequences of doing so that something associated by the theorist
> with interpreted states or expressions qualifies as a *semantic* interpretant, or
> deserves to be called a theoretical concept of *content*. (MIE, 144)

The essence of pragmatism, then, is the denial that semantics is *conceptually autonomous* from pragmatics.

The contrasting position (antipragmatism) is the view that the basic concepts of seman-
tics can be understood in abstraction from proprieties of thought and language use. This is
not to say that they need no explaining at all. In "informational semantics," for example,
semantic concepts are explained in terms of lawlike correlations between external things
(or property instantiations) and mental items, plus counterfactuals or evolutionary histories
(see Fodor 1990, Dretske 2000). These views take semantic concepts to be conceptually de-
pendent on the causal, counterfactual, and explanatory resources of the "special sciences."[2]
Antipragmatists need not deny that semantics has a role to play in the explanation of lan-
guage use (or proprieties of use). They need only deny any *essential* or *conceptual* connec-
tion between semantics and use. Fodor's claim that in principle a creature could have just
one concept (which would *a fortiori* lack any "inferential role") is a way of making this
point vivid.

Pragmatists characteristically deny that there can be semantic differences that are not
publicly accessible, since these would be semantic differences without pragmatic differ-
ences. We have already seen Brandom saying that "...it is pointless to attribute semantic

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[2]Occasionally Brandom uses the term "Platonism" to describe the antipragmatist position (e.g., at AR, 4).
But certainly Fodor's and Dretske's positions are not "Platonist" in any normal sense of that term.

structure or content that does no pragmatic explanatory work" (MIE, 144). More vivid manifestations of this view include Dummett's denial that we can grasp contents that go beyond what could, in principle, be verified, Quine's denial that there is any objective basis for choosing between competing translation manuals that predict the same patterns of use, and Davidson's more limited embrace of the indeterminacy of meaning and reference. All of these counterintuitive consequences are supposed to follow from the requirement that facts about meaning or content not extend beyond what is, in principle, publicly accessible. Though this requirement is sometimes dismissed as crypto-positivist verificationism, what really motivates it is the pragmatist view about the point and purpose of semantic concepts. I assume that most philosophers would be willing to grant an analogue of the publicity requirement for the concept expressed by "*chic*." Given the *point* of characterizing someone as *chic*, the idea that something could count as *chic* by all publicly accessible criteria without *being chic* is absurd. One need not be a crypto-positivist to accept this; one need only have reasonable views about what the concept *chic* is *for*. Pragmatists hold that semantic concepts have no role beyond their role in predicting proprieties of use. The rest follows from this.

Antipragmatists, by contrast, characteristically allow for the possibility of semantic "facts of the matter" that could remain hidden even if all the pragmatic facts were known: facts we could discover only by cutting open a speaker's brain, or finding out about a creature's early evolutionary history, or discerning patterns of lawlike covariation between brain states and external objects. Their rejection of a publicity requirement is a corollary of their rejection of the idea that semantics answers only to pragmatics.

This, then, is a huge divide in the theory of meaning: perhaps the most significant divide of all. As Brandom notes, the existence of the thriving discipline of formal semantics does not settle anything in this debate (MIE, 143). The fact that a genealogist may employ concepts like *uncle*, *cousin*, and *ancestor* without saying anything about their biological

significance does not show that these genealogical concepts are conceptually independent of biological ones. Similarly, the fact that a formal semanticist may employ the concepts of *reference* and *truth* without saying anything about their relation to the *use* of language does not show that these concepts are intelligible apart from pragmatics. If formal semantics is to have anything to do with *meaning* (as opposed to being a rather ugly branch of algebra), its basic concepts must have significance beyond their structural role in the formal theory. This is the point Dummett is making when he argues that "it is part of the concept of truth that we aim at making true statements" (1959, in 1978, 2). It is the point David Lewis is making when he appeals to "a convention of *truthfulness* and *trust*" to connect formal-semantic descriptions of language with language use (1983, 167). Of course, one need not appeal to the use of language in explicating the concept of truth. One could appeal instead to indication relations, counterfactuals, and causal histories. Formal semantics is compatible with a variety of different views about the relation of semantics to pragmatics.

2 Inferentialism vs. Representationalism

Let us now ask how this great divide relates to another: the divide between truth-conditional and inferential-role approaches to semantics.

Clearly, there are truth-conditional semanticists on both sides of the aisle separating pragmatists and antipragmatists. Indeed, one of the most prominent truth-conditional semanticists—Donald Davidson—is also a prominent pragmatist. Reference and satisfaction, he says, "we must treat as theoretical constructs whose function is exhausted in stating the truth conditions for sentences" (1984, 223). If two assignments of reference and satisfaction to the basic expressions of a language yield the same overall pattern of truth conditions for sentences, they are empirically equivalent (1984, 224 and Essay 16). Thus, subsentential semantics answers to sentential semantics. What, then, of the basic concept

of sentential semantics—truth? Davidson does not think that we grasp the concept of truth by grasping a definition or analysis of it. It is, in that sense, primitive. We grasp it by understanding its role in a larger theory that combines psychology, semantics, and decision theory, and that is tested ultimately by its capacity to make sense of others as rational agents (1984, 239 and Essay 10; 2005, Essay 2). When there are multiple assignments of truth conditions, beliefs, and preferences that do equally well in making sense of others, both theories are acceptable, even if they disagree about whose utterances and beliefs are true (1984, Essay 16). Thus, semantics answers to pragmatics. There is nothing else it *could* answer to, since in embracing the anomalousness of the mental (1980, Essay 11), Davidson has ruled out understanding representational content in natural-scientific terms.

The example of Davidson shows that truth-conditional semantics is perfectly compatible with a pragmatist view of the relation between semantics and pragmatics. And, to my knowledge, Brandom never denies this. However, his motivating arguments for inferentialism tend to consider only positions that combine representationalist strategies in semantics with antipragmatist views about the relation between semantics and pragmatics. Here's an example from early in Chapter 2. Brandom has acknowledged that to understand intentionality, one must understand representation. He then says:

> A common response to this insight is to envisage an explanatory strategy that starts with an understanding of representation and on that basis explains the practical proprieties that govern language use and rational action. It is not clear, however, that a suitable notion of representation can be made available in advance of thinking about the correct use of linguistic expressions and the role of intentional states in making behavior intelligible. (MIE, 69)

But why should a representationalist have to deploy a notion of representation that "can be made available in advance of thinking about the correct use of linguistic expressions

and the role of intentional states in making behavior intelligible"? That is, why shouldn't a representationalist be a pragmatist too, on the model of Davidson? As far as I can see, all of the worries about representationalism raised in Chapter 2 are worries about the *combination* of representationalism with antipragmatism, not about representationalism itself.

Brandom seems to acknowledge this:

> It should be clear that the remarks in this section are not meant to have the force
> of arguments against treating representation as a central semantic category.
> Rather, they present some general criteria of adequacy for an account of this
> important semantic notion. By doing so, however, they do offer reasons not to
> treat representation as a semantic *primitive*, as an unexplained explainer. (MIE,
> 79)

But this much is common ground to all parties to the contemporary debate, pragmatists and antipragmatists alike. Far from taking representational notions as unexplained explainers, Dretske and Fodor attempt to explain them in nonsemantic terms. And, while Davidson takes the concept of truth to be primitive, in the sense that it has no illuminating definition or analysis in terms of simpler notions, he would resist the charge that this makes it an "unexplained explainer." For we can say quite a bit about truth, by "[tracing] the connections between the concept of truth and the human attitudes and acts that give it body" (Davidson 2005, 35):

> We should think of a theory of truth for a speaker in the same way we think
> of a theory of rational decision: both describe structures we can find, with
> an allowable degree of fitting and fudging, in the behavior of more or less
> rational creatures gifted with speech. It is in the fitting and fudging that we
> give content to the undefined concepts of subjective probability and subjective
> values—belief and desire, as we briefly call them; and, by way of theories like

Tarski's, to the undefined concept of truth. (2005, 37)

Thus Brandom's exhortations against taking representational concepts as unexplained explainers does very little to motivate inferentialism. The most prominent antipragmatist representationalists offer naturalistic accounts of representation, while the most prominent pragmatist representationalists are at pains to emphasize the conceptual connections between their undefined semantic primitives and "use."

3 "Inferring Is a Kind of Doing"

Still, isn't there something to the idea that a semantic theory centered around *inference* is more directly connected to proprieties of language use than one centered around truth and representation? Brandom repeatedly emphasizes that the inferentialist's fundamental semantic concepts can be explicated in terms of proprieties for performing a certain kind of action—the action of inferring, of drawing a conclusion from premises:

> Inferring is a kind of doing. …The status of inference as something that can be *done* accordingly holds out the promise of securing an appropriate relation between pragmatics, the study of the practices, and semantics, the study of the corresponding contents. (MIE, 91)

> Content is understood in terms of proprieties of inference, and those are understood in terms of the norm-instituting attitudes of taking or treating moves as appropriate or inappropriate in practice. A theoretical route is accordingly made available from what people *do* to what they *mean*, from their *practice* to the *contents* of their states and expressions. In this way a suitable pragmatic theory can ground an inferentialist semantic theory; its explanations of what it is in practice to treat inferences as correct are what ultimately license ap-

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peal to material proprieties of inference, which can then function as semantic

primitives. (MIE, 134)

The implied contrast is clear. Representing is not an action (although it may be involved in many actions). So any connection between representational concepts and practice is bound to be more tenuous.

I want to make two points about this line of thought. First, the implied contrast with representationalism cannot be sustained. Even if representing is not (in the appropriate sense) an action, *asserting* certainly is. And truth is, in some sense, a standard of correctness for assertion. So truth conditions can be thought of as proprieties for assertion in much the same way that inferential roles can be thought of as proprieties for inference. In which case the representationalist's fundamental semantic primitives stand in precisely the same kind of relation to "use" as the inferentialist's.

It may be objected that the sense in which truth is a standard for assertion is rather elusive. There is certainly a sense in which it is *in*correct to assert a truth that is not supported by one's evidence, and *correct* to assert a falsehood that has overwhelming support. And even if we can find a sense of correctness in which only true assertions are "correct," further argument would be needed to show that truth is a normative concept, and not a descriptive one to which some extrinsic norm attaches. So it is not at all clear that we should think of truth as a kind of norm. But these considerations can provide little comfort to the line of thought under consideration, since similar concerns can be raised about the status of (formal or material) *validity* as a norm for inferring.

Which brings me to my second point: it is not clear what Brandom's *own* fundamental semantic notions have to do with "proprieties for inferring." The most central of these are the following three relations (MIE, 188):

- *Incompatibility: p* is *incompatible* with *q* if commitment to *p* precludes entitlement

to q.

- *Commitment-preservation:* The inference from premises Γ to p is *commitment-preserving* if commitment to Γ counts as commitment to p.

- *Entitlement-preservation:* The inference from premises Γ to p is *entitlement-preserving* if entitlement to Γ counts (defeasibly) as entitlement to p.

To see what these relations have to do with inferring, we need to look at the role they play in Brandom's normative pragmatics, his "game of giving and asking for reasons." This is a game in which every player keeps "score" on every other. In the simplest case, this score consists of a list of claims to which the player is committed, with some of these marked (say, with a star) as commitments to which the player is entitled. The fundamental moves in this game are those of making, challenging, and retracting assertions, and the primary role of the three relations described above is to determine how the score changes in response to these moves. Thus, if Jill takes there to be a relation of commitment preservation between "boysenberries are red" and "boysenberries are colored," and Tom asserts (avows commitment to) "boysenberries are red," Jill will also list "boysenberries are colored" as one of Tom's commitments. If she takes "boysenberries are red" to be incompatible with "boysenberries are blue," and she lists "boysenberries are blue" as another of Tom's commitments, she will make sure that neither "boysenberries are red" nor "boysenberries are blue" is marked with a star. And if she takes "boysenberries are red" to stand in a relation of entitlement preservation to "boysenberries are edible," then she will mark the latter with a star if she has marked the former (unless she takes Tom to be committed to something else incompatible with "boysenberries are edible"). This process is then iterated (in a fairly complex way, described in MIE 190–1).

In this way,

The significance of an assertion of p can be thought of as a mapping that associates with one social deontic score—characterizing the stage before that speech act is performed, according to some scorekeeper—the set of scores for the conversational stage that results from the assertion, according to the scorekeeper.

The "inferential role" a scorekeeper associates with p—the list of commitment-preserving, entitlement-preserving, and incompatibility relations it stands in to other claims—determines how that scorekeeper is to alter players' scores in response to an assertion that p.[3] But it is misleading to suggest, as Brandom does, that

Inferring is accordingly the key concept linking semantic content and pragmatic significance. For not only can propositional semantic contents be understood as inferential roles, but proprieties of inference can be made sense of pragmatically, and specifically assertional significance can be understood in terms of them. (MIE, 190)

That the move from p to q preserves commitment and entitlement does not imply that it would be correct to *infer q* from p. It may be, as Harman (1984, 1986) reminds us, that instead of acknowledging commitment to q one should disavow one's commitment to p. Brandom's "inferential relations" are proprieties for deontic scorekeeping. They should not be confused with proprieties for *inferring*—for drawing a conclusion on the basis of some premises.

Indeed, it is hard to see how there could *be* proprieties for inferring in Brandom's game of giving and asking for reasons. Proprieties for inferring would have to be backed up by

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[3] And similarly for challenges and disavowals. The significance of an appropriate challenge is to remove the default entitlement that one has to one's own avowed commitments (MIE, 178). Entitlement can be regained by deferring to others or by asserting something that stands in an entitlement-preserving relation to the claim challenged. The significance of a disavowal is to "un-undertake" a commitment (MIE, 192), removing it and any consequential commitments from one's list of commitments and potentially adjusting entitlements as well (since commitment to the claim may have blocked entitlement to incompatible claims).

sanctions that attach to *processes*. But sanctions in Brandom's game of giving and asking for reasons attach only to *states*. What gets you sanctioned is being committed to something you're not entitled to (MIE, 178–80). It makes no difference how you got into that state: whether you acquired the offending commitment consequentially or by explicitly avowing it, and (in the latter case) whether you avowed it on the basis of an earlier claim (*inferring*) or for some other reason, the sanction is the same.

At one point Brandom asks, "What makes something that is done according to a practice— for instance the production of a performance or the acquisition of a status—deserve to count as *inferring*?" He replies: "The answer developed here is that inferring is to be distinguished as a certain kind of move in the game of giving and asking for reasons" (MIE, 157). But as far as I can tell, the game as Brandom describes it makes no distinction between moves that would intuitively count as "inferrings" (assertions made on the basis of other commitments) and moves that would not. For there is nothing in the scorekeeping apparatus that tracks the *grounds* on which various players make other claims. Because it is the *scorekeeper's* inferential commitments that determine how she is to adjust the score, the scorekeeper can count an agent as entitled to a commitment to q in virtue of his entitlement to p even if the agent does not take the inference from p to q to be entitlement-preserving.[4] Thus, if Tom's commitment to "that apple is ripe" is challenged, he can successfully vindicate his entitlement to it by asserting "it's a Winesap and it's red," even if he does not in any sense *infer* the former claim from the latter or even take the former to be supported by the latter. As far as I can see, Brandom's scorekeeping dynamics are completely insensitive to

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[4]This has some bizarre consequences when conjoined with other Brandomian views. Suppose a scorekeeper endorses the identity "Hesperus = Phosphorus." On Brandom's account, this commitment makes explicit the scorekeeper's disposition to take "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus" to be intersubstitutable, preserving commitment, in non-opaque contexts (MIE, Ch. 6). But Brandom holds that all commitment-preserving inferences are also entitlement-preserving (AR, 195). So our scorekeeper should also be disposed to attribute *entitlement* to "Hesperus is bright" whenever she attributes entitlement to "Phosphorus is bright"—even if the attributee does not take Hesperus to be Phosphorus! This consequence puts great strain on the intuitive connection between entitlement and epistemic warrant.

whether *p* is asserted on the basis of *q*. Paradoxically, then, inferring has no official place in Brandom's "inferentialism."

4   Strong and Weak Pragmatism

Even if not much hay can be made of the idea that "inferring is a kind of doing," it may still seem that Brandom's fundamental semantic notions (commitment preservation, entitlement preservation, incompatibility) are much more directly tied to practice than, say, Davidson's notion of truth. Davidson's idea is that truth is one of a family of primitive notions that get their significance from their role in a grand theory of rational behavior. On this view, although the concept of truth cannot be understood apart from proprieties for action and belief, there is no *reducing* the former to the latter. Brandom, by contrast, seems to envision a *reduction* of semantic notions to antecedently intelligible pragmatic ones. For example, in the opening pages of *Articulating Reasons* he suggests that we might "[begin] with a story about the practice or activity of applying concepts, and [elaborate] on that basis an understanding of conceptual content" (AR, 4). Accordingly, we might distinguish weak and strong forms of pragmatism:

Weak Pragmatism: Semantics is not conceptually autonomous from pragmatics; seman-
tic concepts get their significance through their relation to pragmatic concepts.

Strong Pragmatism: The fundamental semantic concepts can be *defined* in purely prag-
matic terms.

Even if truth-conditional semantics is compatible with weak pragmatism, it may be that only inferentialism is compatible with strong pragmatism.

   To see whether Brandom's theory counts as "strongly" pragmatist, we need to look more closely at the notions of commitment and entitlement in terms of which his seman-

tic primitives (commitment preservation, entitlement preservation, incompatibility) are defined. Brandom calls these "deontic statuses" and says that they "correspond to the traditional deontic primitives of obligation and permission" (MIE, 160). (His only reason for eschewing the traditional terms is that they evoke a picture on which permission and obligation originates "exclusively from the commands or edicts of a superior.") At this stage, he uses "commitment" and "entitlement" with infinitival complements, talking of commitment and entitlement to perform certain actions:

> Coordinate with the notion of *commitment* is that of *entitlement*. Doing what one is committed to is appropriate in one sense, while doing what one is entitled to do is appropriate in another. (MIE, 159)

This is just what one would expect, since permission and obligation attach primarily to *actions*, and secondarily to states of affairs over which one has some control. (One can be permitted to be in a certain room, for example, even though being in the room is not an action.) Soon, however, Brandom replaces this straightforwardly deontic language with talk of commitment to (the contents of) *claims* and entitlements to such commitments:

> Two claims are incompatible with each other if commitment to one precludes entitlement to the other. (MIE, 160)

> Anyone committed to the premises of such inferences is committed thereby to the conclusions. (MIE, 168)

There is no explicit indication that "commitment" and "entitlement" are being used in a different way here; indeed, "commitment to do" uses are interspersed with "commitment to a claim" uses, sometimes even on the same page.[5] Yet the relation between them is by

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[5]For example: "It does make sense to think of being committed to do something as not being entitled not to do it, but within the order of explanation pursued here it would be a fundamental mistake to try to exploit this relation to define one doxastic status in terms of the other" (MIE, 160). And then, a few lines down: "Two claims are incompatible with each other if commitment to one precludes entitlement to the other."

no means clear. I know what it means to be obliged to pay my taxes or permitted to vote. I have no idea what it means to be obliged to the claim that frogs are amphibians or permitted to my obligation to the premise of an argument. If, as Brandom says, commitment and entitlement are genuinely *deontic* notions, corresponding to obligation and permission, then I should find talk of "commitment to the claim that frogs are amphibians" or "entitlement to my commitment to the premise of an argument" equally mysterious.

I should, but I don't. Why not? No doubt because I am familiar with the forms "commitment to [noun phrase]" and "entitlement to [noun phrase]" from other contexts:

(1)   He is deeply committed to the Democratic party.

(2)   Bob and Sarah are committed to each other.

(3)   You're entitled to a free dessert.

(4)   They are committed to the proposition that all human beings are created equal.

(5)   Are you entitled to that conclusion, given your evidence?

I am tempted to call these *non-deontic* uses of "committed" and "entitled," on the grounds that "obligated" and "permitted" could not be substituted for them here. It may be, however, that they are deontic in a derivative sense. To be committed to another person or to a political party is, plausibly, to have obligations to act in certain ways. To be entitled to a free dessert is to be permitted to eat a dessert without paying for it. The question is whether talk of "commitment to a proposition" can be analyzed in this way, in terms of obligations *to do* things or to be in a certain condition. If it can, then Brandom can be counted a strong pragmatist, as his basic semantic notions will be definable in purely deontic terms. If it can't, then Brandom's view is not a form of strong pragmatism: although its basic semantic notions get their significance from their relation to proprieties of use, they cannot

be *defined* or reductively explained in terms of such proprieties, and it is not clear that they are more directly connected to such proprieties than truth and reference are on an account like Davidson's.

5   "Commitment to p"

A few passages suggest that "commitment to p" is, in fact, a commitment to *do* something. For example, Brandom says that attributors of commitments and entitlements "may punish those who act in ways they are not (taken to be) entitled to act, and those who do not act in ways they are (taken to be) committed to act" (MIE, 166). Here he is clearly talking about commitments and entitlements *to act* in certain ways. Since this passage occurs in a discussion of the genus of normative social practices of which linguistic practice is a species, it is natural to suppose that "commitment to p" is a commitment to act in certain ways, and that "entitlement to (a commitment to) p" is an entitlement to act in certain ways. The question then is: what ways?

On the entitlement side, this question has a straightforward and plausible answer: "entitlement to (a commitment to) p" is just entitlement to *undertake* a commitment to p. To undertake a commitment is to do something that entitles others to attribute that commitment to you (MIE, 162–3). Ordinarily, one undertakes commitment to p by asserting p or some other proposition that committive-entails p.

It is more difficult to say what kind of action commitment to p could be a commitment to perform. One might take commitment to p to be commitment to *assert p*. Asserting is certainly a kind of performance, and Brandom gives an illuminating account of it. However, any proposition will have infinitely many committive consequences. To assert all of them would be impossible (not to mention pointless), and to commit oneself to asserting all of them would be foolish. Indeed, as Grice (1989) emphasized, being a good player of the

assertion game often requires that one *refrain* from asserting obvious consequences of what one has already asserted.

More plausibly, one might take commitment to *p* to be the "conditional task-responsibility" one takes on in asserting *p*: a commitment to demonstrate one's entitlement to the commitment to *p* in the face of appropriate challenges (MIE, 173). But this analysis of "commitment to *p*" is circular: we can't understand what it would be to demonstrate entitlement to a commitment to *p* unless we already understand what kind of commitment that is. The circularity could perhaps be exchanged for reflexivity, by taking a commitment to *p* to be commitment to demonstrate entitlement to *this very commitment* in the face of a challenge. But there is no hint of this in Brandom's writing, and it borders on the unintelligible. (What could it be to demonstrate entitlement to this very commitment, if this very commitment is the commitment to demonstrate entitlement to . . . this very commitment?)

We could go on in this vein, trying to cash out "commitment to *p*" as a commitment to do something (or to be in a certain condition). However, Brandom's considered view appears to be that "commitment to *p*" and "entitlement to a commitment to *p*" are not proprieties for action at all:

> Deontic statuses are just something to keep score with, as balls and strikes are just statuses that performances can be treated as having for scorekeeping purposes. To understand them, one must look at actual practices of keeping score, that is, at deontic attitudes and changes of attitude. (MIE, 194; cf. 183)

No one would suggest that a strike is *itself* a propriety for action (a permission or obligation). Of course, a strike carries with it certain permissions and obligations, but it is not itself a permission or obligation (or combination of the two). It is just a component of a baseball score. We understand its significance by understanding

(a) what sorts of actions in the game count as "strikes,"

(b) how the strike count affects how the score is to be updated in response to actions in the game, and

(c) how the strike count affects what the players are permitted and obligated to do.

To understand (a), one must know, for example, that a pitch that is swung at and missed is a strike, and that a pitch not swung at is a strike if it passes through the strike zone. To understand (b), one must know that a foul counts as a strike if the batter has fewer than two strikes. To understand (c), one must know that a batter who has accumulated three strikes is obligated to relinquish his turn at bat.

If "commitment to p" or "entitlement to (a commitment to) p" are really just score-keeping statuses, like "strike," we shouldn't expect them to be analyzable as commitment to *do* something, or to be in a certain condition. This is not to say that we can understand them without understanding how they are connected to permissions and obligations. For we understand them by seeing what role they play in the "game of giving and asking for reasons":

(a) what sorts of actions in the game require changes in the "commitment" and "entitle-ment" columns of a player's score,

(b) how these aspects of score affect how the score is to be updated in response to further actions, and

(c) how these aspects of score affect what the players are permitted and obligated to do.

To understand (a), we have to know, for example, that in asserting that p one comes to be committed to p and its (committive) consequences. To understand (b), we must know that a player who is committed to p cannot be entitled to any commitment to a content incompatible with p. To understand (c), we must know that one is permitted to sanction players who have commitments to which they are not entitled.

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On this construal, "commitment to p" and "entitlement to (commitment to) p" are not really deontic notions at all, though they have conceptual connections with deontic notions. To make this vivid, imagine that each scorekeeper keeps a notebook with a page for every other player. Each page of the notebook has two columns, one red, the other yellow. Score-keepers update their notebooks in response to assertions, challenges, and disavowals by consulting a rule book. Everything happens just as Brandom describes, except that instead of talking about a player's "commitments," the scorekeepers talk about which sentences are in the *red* column of the notebook page with that player's name on it, and instead of talking about "entitlements," they talk about what sentences are in the *yellow* column. Having sentences in the red column that aren't in the yellow column is considered grounds for sanction. Clearly, the players are playing Brandom's game of giving and asking for reasons; the differences are merely terminological. But now there is little temptation to suppose that writing p in a player's red column amounts to taking the player to be committed or entitled to *doing* something. The connections between the statuses "red" and "yellow" and practical proprieties are more indirect than that.

Understanding Brandom's "deontic statuses" this way is perfectly compatible with weak pragmatism, the view that semantics must answer to pragmatics. But it does not vindicate strong pragmatism, the view that semantic notions must be definable in terms of pragmatic ones. Brandom's fundamental semantic concepts are defined in terms of his deontic statuses, but (on this construal) these are not practical proprieties, nor are they definable in terms of practical proprieties. It seems, then, that Brandom's semantic notions relate to practical proprieties in much the same way that Davidson says truth, reference, and satisfaction do: by their role in a larger theory from which consequences about practical proprieties can be derived.

6 Scorekeeping is a Kind of Doing

It would be misleading, however, to stop here. For Brandom emphasizes that the deontic statuses are to be understood in terms of the deontic attitudes. Perhaps, then, the key to understanding Brandom's explication of his basic inferential notions in pragmatic terms is to shift our gaze from the speaker to the scorekeeper—from the one who is undertaking commitments to the one who is attributing them.

Think of the primitive notions of inferentialist semantics from the scorekeeper's point of view. What does it mean, in practice, for p to committive-entail q? It means that when you take someone to be committed to p—when you assign this scorekeeping status—you *ought* to take that person to be committed to q as well. What does it mean for p to be incompatible with q? It means that when you take someone to be committed to p, you *ought not* take that person to be entitled to a commitment to q. Thus, we can explain inferentialism's basic semantic concepts as proprieties for *scorekeeping*. (As explained in section 3, above, they are not well understood as proprieties for inferring.)

However, this explanation presupposes that we understand what it is to *attribute* to someone a commitment to p, or entitlement to a commitment to p. One might suppose that understanding these attributions requires a prior understanding of the deontic statuses being attributed, and the discussion of the previous section has made it doubtful that we can define these directly in terms of practical proprieties. But Brandom asks us to turn the normal order of explanation on its head: first, explain the attitude of attributing commitment to p, then understand the attributed status as what is thereby attributed (MIE, 166). The question, then, is whether we can explain in terms of pragmatic proprieties what it is to *attribute* commitment to p or entitlement to such a commitment.

Here Brandom appeals to our entitlement to impose sanctions:

> ...*attributing* a commitment or entitlement ... can be explained, to begin with,

as consisting in the disposition or willingness to impose *sanctions*. (Later, in more sophisticated practices, *entitlement* to such a response, or its *propriety*, is at issue.) (MIE, 166)

To take a subject *A* to be committed to *p*, then, is to attribute to oneself entitlement to sanction *A* unless *A* is entitled to a commitment to *p*. The talk of "entitlement to sanction" here is deontic in the strict sense; it concerns permission to act in a certain way. However, "entitled to a commitment to *p*" in the *explanans* remains unexplained. What we need is an explanation of the attitude of attributing entitlement to a commitment to *p*—one that does not presuppose prior understanding of commitment to *p* or (on pain of circularity) the attribution of commitment to *p*.

This, I think, is the crux of the matter. If there is a way of explicating the attitudes of attributing commitment to *p* and entitlement to such a commitment by appealing only to clearly pragmatic notions—like commitment and entitlement to sanction someone—then Brandom's view can be counted pragmatist in the strong sense, and we can vindicate the idea that a certain kind of pragmatism about the relation between semantics and pragmatics motivates an inferentialist approach to the former (although it will be *scorekeeping*, not inferring, that connects the two). If not, then we are left without a compelling reason for a pragmatist to forsake the well-trodden terrain of truth-conditional semantics.

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