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Review Discussion

Normativity as the Key to Objectivity: An Exploration of Robert Brandom's *Articulating Reasons**

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I. Robert Brandom's Philosophers' Stone: Inferentialism

Articulating Reasons was published six years after Robert Brandom established his reputation among philosophers as one of the most innovative, powerful, and influential American philosophers of language of our time, with the publication of his huge, cohesive, solid, and ambitious book *Making it Explicit*. The aim of the present review is to explain why I prefer the following story about the relation between these two books (one that I think of as amounting to a major compliment to the philosophical brilliance and import of the later, much shorter book): while it doesn't make sense for developmental psychologists, educationalists, cognitive scientists, anthropologists, and anyone else interested in the nature and growth of human understanding to read *Making it Explicit*, it does make a lot of sense to recommend all of them to read *Articulating Reasons*. This is not to demean *Articulating Reasons* as merely a popular draft, a pale shadow of the real thing accessible only to the happy few: the incrowd of analytical philosophers of language. Nor is it to demean *Making it Explicit* as merely a toy for philosophical zealots. It is quite likely that Brandom needed the detailed and sophisticated arguments of the longer book to develop the suggestive catch-phrases, slogans, and labels that allow *Articulating Reasons* to present in such a delightful and crystal-clear way Brandom's new and powerful picture of meaning and human understanding.

I am not saying that *Articulating Reasons* is an easy book for those untrained in philosophy. It is not. It is, as the subtitle says, 'An

* Robert B. Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*, Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2000, ix + 230 pp., ISBN 0-674-00158-3, £23.95. Unprefixed page references in the text refer to this book.

Introduction to Inferentialism', but that is a position unknown to every well-educated philosopher who happens to be unacquainted with Brandom's work in the philosophy of language. 'Inferentialism' is Brandom's term of art for his account of the nature of the conceptual, the nature of meaning, content, and awareness, the nature of what makes us exemplars of *Homo sapiens*. And Brandom introduces the reader to this position from amidst a range of systematic, traditional positions in the philosophy of language, mind, and meaning. As such it is an introduction for philosophers, but I am quite confident that those untrained in philosophy who have mastered this book will be able to use it as a magnificent introduction to future conceptions of an issue that has always been centre stage in philosophy: human understanding.

Inferentialism is basically the claim that meaning (i.e. conceptual content) should not be analysed in terms of *reference* but in terms of *inference*. The fact that a statement means something, that it has intentional import, that it says something about something, that it employs conceptual content is a fact we should not try to understand in terms of referential relations between the statement and some state of affairs, but in terms of inferential relations between the statement and other statements. If a child says for example that the wind is angry, because she hears the wind rattling the shutters, the meaning of what she says should not be analysed in terms of the representational relation between the child's assertion and a particular state of affairs involving the wind and the temper associated with clattering sounds, but rather in terms of the role of her assertion in what Brandom calls the game of giving and asking for reasons, and this role should be analysed in terms of the inferential relations holding between her assertion and other assertions. Assertions bear inferential relations to one another in two directions: they are the consequents of certain antecedents, and are antecedents of certain consequents. In the example, the child's assertion is, for example, inferentially related to such antecedents as 'loud and rapidly repeated noises indicate anger' and 'the shutters rattle because of the wind's blowing', and to such consequents as 'you're better off staying out of the wind's way' and 'the wind is not happy'. I elaborate on the central idea of inferentialism below, but a couple of important implications follow immediately. First, Inferentialism is a resolutely holist semantics: 'one cannot have *any* concept unless one has *many* concepts' (p. 15). Secondly, inferentialism is an essentially normative theory: inferential relations are to be understood in terms of *endorsements*, *commitments*, and *entitlements*. These normative statuses, as Brandom calls them, are the building blocks of meaning. And thirdly, the context in which these inferential relations can exist as normative statuses is the essentially social game of asking and giving reasons: commitments, endorsements, and entitlements are *attributed*, *acknowledged*, and *undertaken*.

As I argue in the final section, inferentialism provides a conception of

human understanding that will be useful for people working in areas of research related to the broad issue of cognitive development. It will be useful for a number of reasons, only one of which I develop to an extent acceptable within the confines of what is primarily a book review. This reason concerns what I take to be inferentialism's promise to overcome the one-sidednesses of the empiricist, rationalist, and sociohistoric traditions by proposing to analyse the phrase *growth of understanding* in terms of becoming better in the game of asking and giving reasons. One can become better as a *Homo sapiens* at this game in a variety of ways, but it will always involve an improvement of one's grasp of the inferential relations that characterize the propositional contents one entertains. As we will see, however, this means very different things depending on whether one is a novice or an expert at this game.

But let me first provide a summary of the book and an exposition of the peculiar idiom Brandom develops to articulate the details of his sophisticated elaboration of Wittgenstein's popular hunch that 'meaning is use'.

II. Strategic and Historical Context

Brandom opens the book with a sketch of the philosophical landscape within which his position can be located by making explicit a series of orienting commitments. Brandom offers the reader many choices and explains, briefly but sufficiently, why he chooses certain options and not the available alternatives. Thus, he begins with some strategic choices: rather than focusing on the similarities between concept-users and non-concept-users, he will focus on their differences; rather than trying to explain the use of concepts in terms of their content, he will try to explain the content of concepts in terms of their use; rather than thinking of conceptual activity as basically a matter of representation, he will think of conceptual activity as basically a matter of expression; rather than assuming that what distinguishes the conceptual is a matter of a special sort of intensionality, he strives to understand the demarcation in terms of inferentialism; rather than thinking of meaning in a bottom-up way by starting with meaningful subsentential building-blocks such as terms, he prefers a top-down explanation that starts with the contents of propositions; and rather than thinking of expression along Romantic, traditional lines emphasizing creativity, depth, and spontaneity, he prefers to think of expression along a rationalist line: expression is articulation, is a process of making content inferentially significant, is first and foremost a contribution to the game of giving and asking for reasons.

Besides this strategic context, Brandom offers the reader also a historical context. Summarizing his short (nine-page) historical exposition, he adopts his teacher Richard Rorty's characterization of his (Brandom's) enterprise as an extension of Sellars's enterprise: whereas Sellars tried to move analytic

philosophy from its Humean phase into a Kantian phase, Brandom suggests a further transition from a Kantian to a Hegelian approach. This implies a view that is opposed to many of ‘the large theoretical, explanatory, and strategic commitments that have shaped and motivated Anglo-American philosophy of the twentieth century: empiricism, naturalism, representationalism, semantic atomism, formalism about logic, and instrumentalism about the norms of practical rationality’ (p. 31). Brandom hastens to add, however, that in his style of doing philosophy he resolutely follows the Anglo-American tradition, ‘pursuing a recognisable successor project’ of what traditionally was thought of as an ‘analysis of meanings’.

I consider this 44-page introduction (to a 6-chapter, 160-page book), in all its slogan-style character, a most valuable sketch of the landscape within which theoretical philosophers find themselves today. It undoubtedly gives the reader a picture that is particularly well-suited to locate Brandom, but it allows readers coming from a variety of angles an entry into Brandom’s approach, and those that feel uncomfortable with Brandom’s inferentialism a variety of directions in which to depart.

Of course, using labels the way Brandom does is suggestive and unlikely to survive scholarly scrutiny. But in calling his approach Hegelian, Brandom does not address historians of philosophy interested in Hegel, Kant, or Hume, nor philosophers of language waiting for the arguments. Brandom’s introduction to *Articulating Reasons* is intended to give the reader a ‘feel of the land’ – it is meant to arouse a sensibility to his assessment of which philosophical problems to side-step and ignore and which to address and solve.

III. Endorsement

Making it Explicit is a contribution to the philosophy of language. Its subject-matter is language, and although language is characterized by Brandom as ‘the social practices that distinguish us as rational, indeed logical, concept-mongering creatures’¹ (thus giving priority to pragmatics rather than semantics or syntax), it comes as no surprise that also in *Articulating Reasons* Brandom discusses a number of typically linguistic (primarily semantic or syntactic) issues. Since I recommend thinking of *Articulating Reasons* as a contribution to philosophy in general, i.e. philosophy conceived of as the attempt to make systematic sense of ourselves as *Homo sapiens* – I discuss Brandom’s endeavours to reach conclusions about linguistic issues merely as though they were contributions to a new interpretation of ourselves. That is, I present Brandom’s views as though their object were not language itself, but us, language-using creatures.²

Endorsements are a natural starting-point for Brandom’s picture of *Homo*

sapiens, accommodating his thesis that it is normativity ‘all the way down’.³ Brandom thinks of language as a tool that permits us ‘to endorse in what we say what before we could endorse only in what we did’ (p. 153). The general idea here is that as exemplars of *Homo sapiens* we are agents taking our environment in our actions to be a certain way. Leaving a room by the door, for example, and not by the window (or as a kind of Robocop through the walls) is an action in which we endorse our understanding of the way the world is (i.e. that the proper way to leave a room is by the door). Taking for granted in what we do that our environment is a certain way is what we share with animals, *sentient* creatures like us. A stickleback chasing a trespasser out of his territory might in a relaxed way be said to take a certain space to be his territory and another animal to be a trespasser. And his behaviour, which implies awareness of his environment as being a certain way, might be reinforced by the success of his unfolding life. But reinforcement is not the same as endorsement.

There is, according to Brandom, a crucial difference between sapient and merely sentient agents. Sentient creatures are aware in the sense of being awake, and are capable of responding in a reliable, differential way to relevant inputs. The reliable pattern of the behaviour of merely sentient agents is not normative, however; it is merely regular, not rule-governed. We, exemplars of *Homo sapiens*, respond differently. We live in an essentially social world; we face an environment populated by similar creatures who are in the habit of holding one another responsible for the way they take their environment to be. Responsibility is the key here, as we could have learned, according to Brandom, from one of Kant’s fundamental insights (p. 163). Our responses display understanding; they display our appreciation of the distinction between correct and incorrect ways we take our environment to be, between ways of acting that can and that cannot be endorsed. In learning a language, children from the very start participate in the responsibility-involving game of giving and asking for reasons. By pronouncing for example ‘car’ or ‘dog’ in the way they do, children invite adults to confirm that they are right in taking this to be a car or a dog. In learning a language children learn, in Brandom’s idiom, to appreciate their endorsements in what they do as commitments they undertake.

Before discussing the key concept commitment, I should like to say a few words about Brandom’s relational linguistic approach to intentionality. In early modern philosophy the mind was conceived of as the native and original locus of intentionality. The idea was that in our minds we can entertain intelligible and fully-formed thoughts, quite independent of whether or not we are able to say what we think. Language was not considered to be all that important; it had merely an instrumental role in communication. But the twentieth century, Brandom notes, ‘has been the century of language in philosophical thought, accelerating into something like a reversal of the

traditional order of explanation' (p. 5). Many philosophers now tend to think that language is the fundamental locus of intentionality, and that thinking comes in late as a kind of inner saying.

Brandom does not side with these philosophers, but agrees with Davidson who claims 'that neither language nor thinking can be explained in terms of the other, and neither has conceptual priority'.⁴ My emphasis on the role of endorsements can illustrate the point. The stickleback's treatment of the other animal as a trespasser and the person's treatment of the door as the proper way to leave the room can quite harmlessly be thought of as beliefs, albeit perhaps mindless beliefs.⁵ They are intentional, but not in a fully conceptual way. They are not yet endorsements, not takings for which the agent accepts responsibility (for example in the face of opposition). It is in this respect significant that a stickleback quite accidentally 'discovers' the boundary of his territory in virtue of a draw between his anger and his fear, a fear that grows in response to the growing anger of the animal he is chasing off.⁶ The stickleback doesn't endorse his anger or his fear, but is moved by them. This is unlike the person who notices, for example, that the door is locked, or that someone is in his way, or that he is directed to the window. The person will take semantic responsibility, will know 'how to situate that response in a network of inferential relations' (p. 162). Taking something to be a door is an endorsement, and not merely an event involving you, as soon as you understand its import inferentially, as soon as you understand it as 'a move in the game of giving and asking for reasons – a move that can justify other moves, and be justified by still other moves, and that closes off or precludes still further moves' (p. 162). It is in this sense that Brandom thinks of the conceptual as an essentially linguistic affair including intentional states, and of intentional content as a matter of inferences sapient creatures can handle, both mentally, in virtue of endorsements in what they do, and linguistically, in virtue of commitments entailed in what they say.

IV. Commitments

The game of giving and asking for reasons is, according to Brandom, not just one of the many games we play with language. Brandom is a rationalist who claims that the discursive practice of asserting, inferring, and justifying is fundamental to the very possibility of talking and therefore thinking. He builds upon a set of ideas he attributes to Sellars, primarily among them the idea that conceptual content just *is* inferential role. And inferential role, being essentially a normative matter, is cashed out in terms of commitments (and crucially, as we shall see below, entitlements). Saying or thinking that something is a door is fundamentally a matter of asserting that it is a door, and that means undertaking a number of inferential commitments,

commitments to say or think a lot of other things as well: that it can be open or closed, that it is a way to leave and enter rooms, that it is attached by hinges, etc.

Inferential relations form a pattern, revealing what follows from the applicability of a concept, and what it follows from. For example, saying that something is a door is giving a reason why you head for it in leaving the room, just as saying it is attached by hinges, for example, is giving a reason why you say it is a door. Inferential patterns, displayed most significantly by conditionals, provide traces in two directions. One can think 'downstream' from antecedents to consequents and 'upstream' from consequents to antecedents.

The discursive practice of giving and asking for reasons is analysed by Brandom in terms of his favourite idiom as 'deontic scorekeeping' (p. 81). A speech act means whatever it means in terms of its inferential role, i.e. in terms of how it changes the 'deontic score', how it changes the commitments (and entitlements) one undertakes, acknowledges, and attributes.

To be able to firmly embed this practice in our unfolding lives as embodied, sentient, and sapient agents, Brandom provides a story about material inferences and about perception and action as what he calls, respectively, discursive entry transitions and discursive exit transitions. These stories provide most of the ideas that highlight Brandom's opposition to some of the crucial presuppositions of mainstream Anglo-American philosophy.

Let me start with perception, and with Brandom's appropriation of Sellars's famous attack on the Myth of the Given. We might naively think of a perceptual state as primarily an awareness, a receptive state, a state of being affected in a certain way, a state with a certain qualitative 'feel'. But even if we were to concentrate on a perceptual state as merely an awareness, it would probably only academically speaking be possible to think of this affectedness as completely detached from another essential feature of perceptual states: that it is an observational report. *Qua* observational report the perceptual state will have a role to play in the internal functional architecture of the creature whose perceptual state it is. Perceptions are part of a creature's equipment allowing it to relate sensibly to its environment. This is true of all sentient creatures, including the stickleback and the child and person mentioned above. An observational report such as 'Trespasser over there' should not be thought of as a matter of mere awareness,⁷ nor should a report such as 'Sunset'. 'Trespasser over there' will definitely, if anything, be an observational report that arouses anger and fear, and motivates the stickleback to do whatever he does whenever his anger and fear are aroused by a trespasser over there. Likewise, 'Sunset' will be an observational report that arouses certain feelings that will play their role in the sentient agent's interactions with her environment, even if a trained lover of nature reacts to the sunset in a serene, contemplative mode. Doing nothing in such a situation

is clearly doing something (and is, as such, clearly a matter of endorsing inferential relations).

Sellars's central thought comes in right here, according to Brandom, by stressing that the role of an observational report *with conceptual content* is not a matter of arousing feelings or motivating the agent, but consists essentially in committing the agent to endorsing inferential relations.⁸ The perceptual state of a concept-using creature is essentially a normative state; it is a discursive entry transition. Observing a sunset, or a door, or a trespasser over there, in the conceptual mode, is a matter of being committed to certain discursive inferences. The fact that the perceptual state is a receptive, or affective, state just means that it is an *entry* transition: by being in this state one enters the game of giving and asking for reasons with a specific 'deontic score'.

Three consequences should be noted: (i) the meaning of the perceptual state is not one captured by its referring to its object; (ii) inferentialism does not mean that the conceptual content of the perceptual state is inferred from a preceding sensation; (iii) the distinction between the perceptual states of concept-users and non-concept-users is a matter of normativity, of the concept-user's responsibility to endorse the inferential relations he is committed to by being in the perceptual state he is in.

An important feature of Brandom's inferentialist picture of *Homo sapiens* is the analogy he seeks to exploit between perception as a discursive entry transition and action as a discursive exit transition. The resulting view is thoroughly anti-Humean, on both sides of the analogy: for Brandom, neither sensations nor desires have an important role to play as allegedly raw feels that mediate between mind and world (p. 31).⁹ Sensations, as we saw above, are mere abstractions; they are what academically speaking would remain of perceptual states if one were to succeed in thinking away their role as observational reports. But one cannot succeed in thinking this role away in case one thinks of the perceptual states of concept-users. And the same holds with respect to desires. On Brandom's view it is not desires but intentions that we basically need in order to explain actions. Desires are mere abstractions, they are what academically speaking would remain of intentions if one were to succeed in thinking away their role as practical commitments in inferentially structured action patterns. But one cannot succeed in thinking this role away in case one thinks of the intentions of concept-using agents. Desires do not function as premise in a practical reasoning, on Brandom's account, but rather make explicit the inferential commitment endorsed in the intention that produces the action (p. 89). Practical reasoning is an explicitly normative affair involving two types of discursive commitments – the cognitive (acknowledged in beliefs) and the practical (acknowledged in intentions). The full depth of the analogy between perception and action can best be elucidated by quoting Brandom:

Observation (a discursive *entry* transition) depends on reliable dispositions to respond differentially to states of affairs of various kinds by acknowledging certain sorts of commitments, that is, by adopting deontic attitudes and so changing the score.

Action (a discursive *exit* transition) depends on reliable dispositions to respond differentially to the acknowledging of certain sorts of commitments, the adoption of deontic attitudes and consequent change of score, by bringing about various kinds of states of affairs. (p. 83)

Practical reasoning takes these cognitive and practical commitments – beliefs (i.e. true-takings) and intentions (i.e. true-makings) – into account, and Brandom spends some time on the idea of material inferences to argue against Humean suspicions that inferences involving merely these two types of commitments are enthymemes (i.e. are inferences that make use of a hidden premise). Material inferences are valid not because of their logical form, but because of their contents. According to Brandom it is sound to infer ‘Thunder will be heard soon’ from ‘Lightning is seen now’, and ‘The streets will be wet’ and ‘I shall open my umbrella’ from ‘It is raining’. In these three cases a formalist approach to logic, according to which ‘good inference’ means ‘formally valid inference’, doesn’t work, because the form of the inferences is ‘A, therefore B’, and that is incomprehensible at best and invalid at worst. A common move among logicians, Brandom states, is to think of such inferences as enthymemes. These inferences, though formally unsound, tend to be sound because they are made in circumstances in which a missing premise is available and presupposed. Thus it is for instance true in our natural world that thunder always follows lightning, and rain always causes the streets to become wet. The formalist argues that this common knowledge should be explicitly brought into the inference as the missing premise ‘if A, then B’ to obtain the result that the inference is sound: ‘A (and if A, then B), therefore B.’ In the practical case, the formalist logician cannot easily fall back upon common knowledge about the natural world (or so we are inclined to think), and therefore the approach in the practical case is standardly Humean by presupposing a hidden desire (e.g. ‘I want to stay dry’) that should be cited as the missing premise. Only then will we get a formally sound practical inference: ‘It is raining’ (and ‘I want to stay dry’), therefore ‘I shall open my umbrella’.

One can find in *Articulating Reasons* three arguments against the formalist move to think of material inferences as enthymemes: (i) in Sellars’s footsteps, Brandom argues that generally speaking ‘the *formal* goodness of inferences derives from and is explained in terms of the *material* goodness of inferences’ (p. 55); (ii) against Dummett, Brandom argues that a theory of semantic or inferential harmony must take the form of an investigation of the ongoing elucidative process of making explicit material inferential commitments (pp. 63–76); and (iii) against the standard Humean (and Davidsonian) model of

practical reasoning, Brandom argues that the insertion of interfering desires (such as ‘I want to get wet’) to make the inference invalid, does not show that ‘the *denial* of that premise was already implicit’ (p. 89). That is, for Brandom ‘I want to stay dry’ is not a crucial premise needed to explain the act of opening my umbrella, but is merely making explicit as an avowal the commitment endorsed in the intention and already made explicit in the act.

The upshot of this story is that living the life of a *Homo sapiens*, i.e. having experiences with conceptual content, is a matter of being committed to playing the game of giving and asking for reasons. Commitments are normative statuses, attitudes to conceptual contents one acknowledges, attributes, and undertakes in an essentially social context.

V. Entitlements

Endorsements and commitments are matters of responsibility that imply a normative context of justification. Commitments imply norms, and one of the most important but easily underestimated consequences of there being norms is that some of one’s attitudes and actions deserve approval. Norms are of course binding, and as such they constrain one’s options. Commitments clearly carry this connotation of being constraints. But it is important to emphasize that this is the reverse side of a significant liberating effect of normativity: that one’s responses can be correct, that one can have entitlements. The game of giving and asking for reasons presupposes that there *are* reasons, and as much as one can be asked for reasons, one can *give* reasons: one can spread one’s entitlements.

The fascinating implication of this side of the irreducible normativity of human understanding can be brought out into the open as follows: saying for example that something is a door is undertaking the commitment to endorse certain inferential relations, and is as such opening up a space of reasons in which entitlements *can* be one’s share – and this means *that there are doors!* Now this may sound like a fallacious ontological argument, and in the way I’ve put it, it is. But the idealism of Brandom’s Hegelian approach is just a matter of recognizing that there cannot be normativity without entitlements. One might be wrong about the door, one might even always be wrong about every door (as one would be were one to talk about the present king of France), but one cannot be in the space of reasons, one cannot endorse inferential relations one is committed to, without any entitlements at all. That is, without any entitlements at all, normativity wouldn’t be normativity, commitments wouldn’t be commitments and endorsements wouldn’t be endorsements. But this means, to put it in these terms, that any assertion one is

entitled to is the crucial premise of an ontological argument. That is, if one is entitled to assert ‘Thunder will be heard soon’ or ‘The streets will be wet’ or ‘That is a door’, then this means, truly and objectively, that there is thunder and that it will be heard soon, that there are streets, that they will be wet, and that there is a door.

Of course this just means that Brandom puts a very high stake on the availability of a convincing account of the conditions of entitlement. As I see it, the second half of *Articulating Reasons* provides along four different lines the promising resources of such an account. I shall briefly sketch these lines.

The first line is a distinctively epistemological one discussed in the excellent third chapter, ‘Insights and Blindspots of Reliabilism’. Brandom defends reliabilism and argues for the existence of entitlements in particular, essentially social circumstances. He claims that the fact of a person P’s reliability consists in the goodness of another person Q’s inference from Q’s attribution to P of a propositionally contentful commitment B under certain circumstances to Q’s endorsement or undertaking of the same commitment B. Given the goodness of such an inference, P is entitled to endorse B. Here is an example: suppose I cannot read Greek, but my son can. Suppose he reads a signpost and tells me that we should turn left for Thessaloniki. Suppose, because of what he tells me, I attribute to my son the belief that we should turn left for Thessaloniki, and infer, from this attribution, my own belief that we should turn left for Thessaloniki. I now believe this myself in virtue of attributing the belief to my son. Because of my inference (i.e. because of my drawing the conclusion that we should turn left *from my attributing* this particular to my son) my son is entitled to the belief, at least granted the assumption that my inference is a good one.

This is a very useful account, elucidating both the strengths and the weaknesses of reliabilism. The obvious strength is that reliabilism on this account offers a clear understanding of entitlements as features of a social environment. Entitlements are created within the social context by inferences from attributions to endorsements. Entitlements are in a way by-products; they befall the reliable knower who might be unable to justify his commitments otherwise, but who receives the trust of his companions because of their inclinations to infer their own beliefs from their attributions of similar, original beliefs to the reliable knower. And this, obviously, also reveals the weakness of reliabilism, or, rather, its pushing the important question another step back. That is, reliabilism gives us the opportunity to replace the question of justification by the question of reliable processes of belief formation, but it answers this latter question by introducing yet another question: what makes an inclination to infer endorsements from attributions appropriate? Or, put differently, if entitlements are basically a matter of the trust of others, doesn’t this presuppose that those others should trust their own inferences? This question, which echoes Hegel’s master–slave dialectic, is

not recognized as such by Brandom,¹⁰ but he does address the problem in some of his other explorations of the conditions of entitlements.

A second line along which Brandom investigates the conditions of entitlement is a distinctively linguistic one discussed in a long chapter that illustrates Brandom's being well up in the philosophy of language. In this fourth chapter, Brandom tries to answer the question of its title: 'What are singular terms, and why are there any?' The thrust of his argument is that although sentences are the proper units of meaning, their functioning in the discursive practice of asserting, inferring and justifying requires the existence of subsentential expressions: singular terms and predicates. This linguistic investigation gives us, according to Brandom, the 'odd and marvellous' answer 'Because it is so important to have something that means what *conditionals* mean!' to the title's twin question, 'Why are there objects?' (p. 155).

This second line of reasoning contributes to Brandom's account of the conditions of entitlements in virtue of introducing objects as the necessary ontological complement of a linguistic community. For once we have objects – and we have them as soon as we have a language – we have the resources for a genuine distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* propositional attitude-ascribing locutions.

Before discussing the, for Brandom's view, crucial issue of the *de re/de dicto* distinction, I will say a few words about a third line of investigating the conditions of entitlements. This line is sketched in the final chapter of the book, 'Objectivity and the Normative Fine Structure of Rationality'. Here Brandom seeks to explain what makes a move in the game of giving and asking for reasons a good move without recurring to the answer that such a move would be a matter of asserting a truth. Without addressing the issue in precisely these terms, what Brandom is actually doing is exploring the constitutive rules of what would make the most fundamental language game possible and significant. A good move in any game is always more than an allowable move; a good move contributes to the game being worth playing. But the distinction between an allowable move and a good move is intriguingly enough a matter of the quality of the constitutive rules. Some games are just more fun, or more rewarding, because of the way in which the constitutive rules create room for good moves. And Brandom argues that the rules of the game of giving and asking for reasons precisely make the game the fascinating game it is, a game that turns us into concept-using exemplars of *Homo sapiens*, because the rules of inference that define it create two distinct kinds of normative statuses: commitments *and* entitlements. This is a consequence of the possibility of looking at inferences both 'upstream' and 'downstream' (pp. 193–4). Downstream an antecedent leads to a consequent, and this means that the move of asserting the antecedent commits us to asserting the consequence. Asserting that Kwibus is a dog commits us to

asserting it is an animal, if we look downstream at the implication that if something is a dog then it is an animal. But upstream, a consequent leads to an antecedent, and this means that asserting the antecedent entitles us to asserting the consequent. Thus, if we look upstream at the implication that something is an animal if it is a dog, we are entitled to assert that Kwibus is an animal if we assert it is a dog. The rules of the game explain the various ways in which a move in the game commits the players to certain other moves, but they also explain the various ways in which a move in the game entitles the players to certain other moves. Entitlements are, therefore, part and parcel of the game just as much as commitments are. And it is in terms of attitude-transcending entitlements, Brandom argues, that our assertions might express the objective conceptual content that make them genuinely *de re*.

The distinction between the attribution of *de dicto* and *de re* beliefs is discussed in the fifth chapter of the book, 'A Social Route from Reasoning to Representing'. The distinction plays a crucial role in Brandom's account of the conditions of entitlement that he needs to defend his reliabilism as indeed a robust enough source of objective knowledge. That is, the kind of entitlement that Brandom needs is an entitlement to endorse objective conceptual content, not an entitlement to an insignificant and arbitrary move within some local and other-worldly language game granted him by some of his incapable and biased friends. But how to get from within the horizon of the essentially social normativity to real and robust objectivity? How could an entitlement that is essentially social be equivalent to an entitlement granted by real objectivity?¹¹

Brandom proposes a most interesting analysis that might – if my optimism proves to be appropriate – close the gap between those who for some reason consider it important to call themselves realists and those who for some reason consider it important to call themselves anti-realists.¹² The analysis builds upon the picture of discursive practices as a matter of the adoption of practical attitudes by which interlocutors keep score on one another's commitments, and explores, in terms of this deontic scorekeeping idiom, the distinction between the following two ascriptions:

S believes that ϕ (*t*)

S believes *of t* that ϕ (*it*).

The first ascription is a *de dicto* ascription, the second a *de re* one. In the first, one cites a specific conceptual content and ascribes to the other a commitment to this content. In the second, however, one refers to a specific object *t* and ascribes to the other a commitment to apply a particular conceptual content to this object. The difference between these two types of ascription is important because in ascribing propositional attitudes to an interlocutor one is,

according to Brandom, doing two things at once. The first is an attribution: one attributes to the other a doxastic commitment, a belief. The second is an undertaking: one endorses a commitment to the ascription. In this undertaking one is committed to an ascription that contains as a dictum what is believed by the other. That is, in the ascription one needs to make explicit the conceptual content of the commitment attributed to the other. This raises a crucial question about the responsibility for the articulation of the content used in the ascription. Here is Brandom's example that illustrates the point. Suppose a prosecutor utters in court the following ascription:

The defence attorney believes a pathological liar is a trustworthy witness. (p. 176)

It is quite likely that the prosecutor's opponent will object. After all, he obviously would not want to undertake a commitment to the conceptual content 'a pathological liar is a trustworthy witness'. But what he might want to claim, and what might therefore be attributed to him, is the belief that a particular person *P*, believed by the prosecutor to be a pathological liar, is, according to the defence attorney, a trustworthy witness. This belief is a *de re* belief: the defence attorney believes *of P* that he is a trustworthy witness. And in attributing this belief to his opponent the prosecutor might undertake a commitment not merely to this attribution, but also to an endorsement of his belief *of P* that he is a pathological liar – as follows:

The defence attorney claims *of* a pathological liar that he is a trustworthy witness. (p. 177)

Using the distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* ascriptions makes explicit the division of responsibilities involved. That is, we need the distinction between these two kinds of ascription in order to be able to understand one another's commitments. We need for our game of giving and asking for reasons the capacity to extract *de re* information from *de dicto* commitments. This is an extension of the point about the availability of singular terms for subsentential substitutions. We need to know what we are talking about if we are to be able to use one another's commitments in our own inferences. That is, we need to be able to relate the inferential relations that characterize particular conceptual contents from our own perspective to the inferential relations that characterize these same conceptual contents from other perspectives. And we can only succeed in relating to one another in this way – and that means we can only succeed in playing the essentially social game of giving and asking for reasons – if we have the capacity to individuate conceptual contents that are *de re*, that are 'objective in the sense of transcending the attitudes of practitioners' (p. 198).

VI. Growth of Understanding: Learning to Play the Game of Giving and Asking for Reasons Well

After this extensive survey of the main themes of Brandom's inferentialist picture of human understanding, I should like to address the issue of why people working in areas of research related to the broad issue of cognitive development should do well to read *Articulating Reasons* and take notice of Brandom's inferentialism. My main suggestion here, though I should emphasize that it cannot be more than a suggestion in the present context, is that the idea of becoming better at the game of giving and asking for reasons provides an extremely useful focal point for future research in an area that used to be characterized by profoundly influential different theoretical traditions but that is showing now a trend towards convergence.¹³ The rationale behind the suggestion is that research on cognitive development cannot be executed unless one presupposes some view about the nature of concepts, and more generally, the nature of human understanding, and Brandom's inferentialism is not merely a new, surprising, and promising view, but also a view that seems to provide the resources to overcome the one-sidednesses of the empiricist, rationalist, and socio-historic traditions.

What then does it mean to become better at the game of giving and asking for reasons? To begin with, I should like to take the idea of a game as seriously, and as literally, as possible, which means, among other things, that in talking and thinking about human understanding we should talk about the rules of the game, the strategies, scores, players, and moves.¹⁴ There are basically three moves available to players in the field: undertakings, acknowledgements, and attributions. These moves involve three kinds of objects of which there are indefinitely many: endorsements, commitments, and entitlements. These objects are 'normative statuses', they are inferentially related to one another in ways that may be largely implicit and extremely difficult to make explicit. The game is open-ended (i.e. one always stops for reasons not defined by the rules of the game), but the purpose of the game is to gain entitlements, discern commitments, and make endorsements. The game is not competitive: entitlements gained by a player are not lost by another. Playing well is a matter of making good moves. To be good, a move must at least be allowable. Therefore, players need to keep score of one another's commitments. Moves that are good beyond being allowable, moves that contribute to the game being worth playing, are moves that prepare the ground for making endorsements, improve the chance of discerning commitments and allow players to gain entitlements. This makes playing well more than a matter of an individual player's competence: to play the game of giving and asking for reasons well, one needs a team.

The titles of Brandom's books – *Making it Explicit* and *Articulating Reasons* – emphasize that what I call discerning commitments is crucial to the

game. Discerning commitments is not the same as making them explicit, but in making commitments explicit one is likely to improve the chance of discerning commitments one is and is not endorsing, or is and is not entitled to. In preferring to speak of ‘discerning’ I aim to highlight the fact that understanding is a dynamic and relative capacity, always a matter of less or more, and therefore always a matter of growth (or decline). The idea is simple enough: a child who says for example the same things about the movements made by cars, rocks rolling down hills, pets, friends, and strangers walking down the street lacks the discriminative capacity to distinguish between, among many other things, animate and inanimate objects. Making explicit to the child what she is committing herself to could help the child in discerning the difference between the commitments that come along with the concept of the animate and the commitments that come along with the concept of the inanimate. Being able to discern these commitments – i.e. being able to make a longer list of separate commitments available in the game – makes one become better at playing the game. Thus, an important variety of growth of understanding consists in the improvement of one’s capacity to discern commitments.

Much more can be said along these lines, but the basic idea will be clear. Let me therefore conclude by briefly noting two implications of this inferentialist picture of human understanding that are not recognized as such by Brandom but that point towards ways in which his views could contribute to elucidating the differences and similarities between the expert’s and the novice’s growth of understanding.

The first implication concerns an important asymmetry between what Brandom calls in one place producers and consumers of reasons (p. 166). For Brandom, producers and consumers have different perspectives, and that is important with respect to what he calls elsewhere the negotiation and administration of conceptual norms.¹⁵ A most obvious and crucial difference between the perspectives of producers and consumers of reasons is the asymmetry it often marks between the expert and the novice, between experienced players such as parents and inexperienced players such as children. We’ve touched upon the issue in discussing reliabilism: children will definitely trust their parents as reliable knowers, but the entitlements parents gain from this trust are of course not equivalent to the entitlements they deserve in terms of the conceptual contents of the commitments they are likely to endorse. This asymmetry complicates the story of how to play the game of giving and asking for reasons well. As I said above, a good move is a move that helps oneself and/or other players to discern commitments. That requires, among other things, parents to be self-critical, to foster their children’s diverging inclinations, and to invest in their children’s self-confidence.¹⁶

The second implication concerns the different ways in which experts and

novices enjoy their own growth of understanding, i.e. their own way of becoming better at the game of giving and asking for reasons. This growth occurs in the same way, to be sure: whoever becomes better at the game becomes better at discerning commitments. The results, however, are very different dependent on how good you already are at this game. For the novice the game is very rewarding in terms of learning to cope with objectivity. For the novice an improvement of his capacity to discern commitments yields important increases in the amount of entitlements he gains. That is, a child who learns to distinguish animate from inanimate objects, and birds from mammals, and cats from dogs, learns about many inferential relations, and understanding these relations results in gaining more entitlements. And entitlements are, as I've put it, premises in ontological arguments. Whenever you are entitled to assertions such as 'Kwibus is a dog' or 'Thunder will be heard soon' you can think of yourself as being in touch with objective reality, or at least with a small part of it.

For the expert, the game is rewarding in very different ways, but not often, or hardly ever, in terms of an increasing number of entitlements. This is so on the one hand because compared to the novice the expert already has a large number of entitlements on his score, and on the other hand because the effect of an improved capacity to discern commitments often means for the expert that he becomes committed to question some of the entitlements he used to count on his score. For the expert, becoming better at the game of giving and asking for reasons often means getting a better idea of how few entitlements he really has. Given the open-ended nature of the game it need not come as a surprise that experts working in the philosophy of science or in the sociology of knowledge who tend to be a bit on the pessimistic side might feel themselves inclined to endorse the thesis that objectivity will simply be unavailable in the final analysis. They might join forces with cheerful constructivists who embrace the thought that entitlements have in the final analysis nothing to do with objective conceptual contents, but merely with social forces that could be systematically structured and that are hopefully on their side.

These not so sophisticated anti-realists won't find Robert Brandom on their side. The expert who becomes familiar with the deep problems about knowledge, reality, objectivity, and truth, and who accepts the inferentialist picture of his predicament will understand (i) that normativity cannot do without entitlements, (ii) that entitlements will always be premises in ontological arguments, (iii) that the open-endedness of the game provides a historical dimension to the intelligibility of the bindingness of conceptually contentful norms that will always create opportunities for the attitude-transcendence we need to talk about growth of understanding as a matter of gaining objectivity, and (iv) that appreciating these problems is a matter of playing the *same* game as the child whose cognitive development displays a

rapidly growing success in coping with objective reality, namely the game of human understanding, the game of giving and asking for reasons – a game in which it is possible to become better.

NOTES

- 1 Robert B. Brandom, *Making it Explicit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. xi.
- 2 A consequence of my approach is that my exposition of Brandom's inferentialist picture of *Homo sapiens* in the sections to follow has its own structure, so that the exposition doesn't follow the structure of the book. However, given the fact that the chapters were 'originally written as lectures, each intended to be intelligible in its own right' (p. 36), the structure of the book is actually more accidental than my exposition.
- 3 Cf. *Making it Explicit*, op. cit., pp. 625 ff.
- 4 Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 156. Quoted from *Articulating Reasons*, p. 6.
- 5 The striking phrase 'mindless beliefs' is coined by Josefa Toribio, 'Semantic Responsibility', *Philosophical Explorations* 5 (2002), p. 49.
- 6 Being at a loss between these opposing emotions, the stickleback digs into the sand. Cf. R. J. Wootton, *A Functional Biology of Sticklebacks* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).
- 7 That is why we cannot really ascribe to the stickleback a belief that commits him to this conceptual content. Only we are responsible here for the ascription. The stickleback's awareness is, at best, a mindless belief with respect to which we are entitled to its attribution in order to improve our explanation of his behaviour.
- 8 For Brandom, an important aspect of Sellars's central thought is the radical way in which it frustrates attempts to discern similarities between the perceptual states of merely sentient and those of sapient creatures. All we can really say about both is that both kinds of creatures are capable of responding in a reliable differential way to relevant inputs. The rest – i.e. that we talk about perceptual states as receptive, affective states, as observational reports, and as motivating the agent's behaviour – is merely metaphorical anthropomorphizing. Brandom's insistence on the distinction between sentient and sapient creatures, and his claim that in human experience it is norms 'all the way down', uncover problems in the context of the cognitive development of children that deserve serious attention but cannot be discussed here. But see the beginnings of a discussion in Leslie Stevenson, 'Six Levels of Mentality', *Philosophical Explorations* 5 (2002), pp. 105–24.
- 9 This anti-Humeanism with respect to raw feels has an interesting drawback that should be discussed in depth, but not here. Brandom generally neglects emotions, whereas it is becoming quite clear that one needs specific emotional ties in order to be able to play the game of giving and asking for reasons at all. See on this Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (London: Picador, 1994).
- 10 Even in Brandom's 'Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism: Negotiation and Administration in Hegel's Account of the Structure and Content of Conceptual Norms', *European Journal of Philosophy* 7 (1999), pp. 164–89, in which he discusses this problem most explicitly, Brandom neglects the issue of the asymmetry of relations of power and trust. This is not to question Brandom's account of reliabilism, but merely to emphasize that the account offers opportunities for discussion not yet sufficiently explored. See for more on these themes Victoria McGeer, 'Developing Trust', *Philosophical Explorations* 5 (2002), pp. 21–38, and Axel Honneth's *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).
- 11 Or, in Brandom's words: 'So the challenge for assertibility theories is to start with a notion of propriety of assertion that is grounded in and intelligible in terms of the practice of speakers and audiences, and yet which is rich enough to fund normative assessments that are objective in the sense of transcending the attitudes of practitioners' (p. 198).
- 12 I use the laborious characterizations because of the peculiar nature of the debate between realists and anti-realists so nicely characterized by John Heil as a family quarrel in which

- outsiders are apt to find enthusiasm disproportionate to substance. John Heil, 'Recent Work in Realism and Anti-Realism', *Philosophical Books* (1989), pp. 65–73. The realism/anti-realism debate seems to be the recurring topic of most contributions to the book symposium on *Making it Explicit* in vol. 57 of *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1997), pp. 153–204. Needless to say that the contributors to that issue do not generally share my optimism.
- 13 Three main schools of thought have had, and continue to have, their influence on theoretical work on cognitive development: (1) the empiricist tradition (as for instance defended by Hayek, but also by behaviourists such as Watson) according to which growth of understanding is a matter of learning to cope with detectable experiential patterns; (2) the rationalist tradition (championed by Piaget) according to which growth of understanding is a matter of transforming an already existing conceptual structure in order to succeed in assimilating new experiences; and (3) a sociohistoric tradition (primarily associated with the work of Vygotsky) according to which growth of understanding is mainly the emergence of and training in the symbolic and instrumental capacities characteristic of the particular social group of which the individual is a member. Trends towards convergence show themselves in recent work on expert systems, on revolutions in theory-theories, and on initiation processes. Cf. Robbie Case, 'The Development of Conceptual Structures', in *Handbook of Child Psychology*, 5th ed., William Damon (editor-in-chief), vol. II, pp. 745–97.
 - 14 Growth of understanding is of course a vital matter, but beyond a certain level of competence acquiring more is definitely not always the most important thing to do. In that sense we could think of it as literally a game that is worthwhile playing – as academics know – but not always all that important
 - 15 Robert B. Brandom, 'Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism: Negotiation and Administration in Hegel's Account of the Structure and Content of Conceptual Norms', *European Journal of Philosophy* 7 (1999), pp. 164–89.
 - 16 The issue is in a way the reverse of the problem of power extensively discussed by Habermas along lines quite similar to Brandom's. See, e.g., Jürgen Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, ed. Maeve Cooke (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998). See also Jürgen Habermas, 'From Kant to Hegel: On Robert Brandom's Pragmatic Philosophy of Language', *European Journal of Philosophy* 8 (2000), pp. 322–55. I say more on this in the context of understanding moral development in Jan Bransen, 'On the Incompleteness of McDowell's Moral Realism', *Topoi* 21 (2002), pp. 187–98.

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