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Philosophy and Phenomenological Research
Vol. LXVIII, No. 1, January 2004

Brandom on the Normativity of Meaning

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Brandom's "inferentialism"—his theory that an expression's or state's contentfulness consists in its use or occurrence being governed by inferential norms—proves dubiously compatible with his own deflationary approach to underwriting the objectivity of intentional content (an approach that is one of the theory's essential presuppositions). This is because a deflationist argument, adapted from the case of *truth* to that of *correct inference*, undermines the key criterion of adequacy Brandom employs in motivating inferentialism. Once that constraint is abandoned, furthermore, Brandom is left vulnerable to the charge that his inferential norms are unavailable to play the meaning-constituting role he claims for them. Yet Brandom's account of meaning tacitly intertwines inferentialism with a separate explanatory project, one that in explaining the pragmatic significance of meaning-attributions does yield a convincing construal of the claim that the concept of meaning is a normative one.

One of Robert Brandom's guiding principles in *Making it Explicit*¹ is that an adequate theory of intentionality must take account of its "normative character" (8, cf. 15). A distinctive feature of the theory presented there is supposed to be its explanation of "fact-stating talk," by which Brandom means all propositionally contentful discourse, by means of a "story...in which it is norms all the way down" (625-6). This phrase invites an orientational query: which way is *down*? Along what dimension of explanatory priority are we faced with an ineliminable appeal to the normative? My answer will be that *two* such dimensions are traced out in Brandom's book, but that by his own lights only one of them should be. The explanation I wish to endorse derives directly from his normative analysis of the practice of asserting. To arrive at his "inferentialist" theory of meaning, however, Brandom must embark on a second explanatory project. In questioning its motivation and coherence, I will be recommending a view of the place of normative pragmatism in the theory of meaning according to which what is correct in linguistic practice bears on meaning-ascriptions not in the guise of being constitutive of the

¹ Robert Brandom, *Making it Explicit* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1994), henceforth *MIE*. All parenthetical references in the text will be to this work.

facts such ascriptions state, but rather in the guise of what they can authorize us to do.²

Consider first one of Brandom's programmatic characterizations of his project: "Interpreting states, performances, and expressions as semantically or intentionally contentful [will be] understood as attributing to their occurrence an ineliminably normative pragmatic significance" (xiii, cf. 9, 16-7). Here Brandom promises an account of what we are *doing* when we *take something to have the content that p*, according to which we are adopting a certain normative stance or "attitude." Such an account exemplifies a general explanatory approach he labels "phenomenalist" and models after pragmatist approaches to truth: "Instead of asking what property it is that we are describing a belief or claim as having when we say that it is true, they ask about the *practical significance* of the *act* we are performing in attributing that property" (287-88, cf. 291). Since Brandom goes on to characterize a number of distinct doctrines as "phenomenalist,"³ I will instead refer to this explanatory approach as "attributorial pragmatism."⁴ In turn, now, Brandom will look to elucidate the *attitude of attributing* a normative significance by providing an account of what we are doing in *attributing this attitude* to someone, according to which such attribution will itself involve taking up a normative attitude toward that person.⁵ Thus the explanatory strategy of attributorial pragmatism provides for a sense in which it is normative *attitudes* all the way down.

But Brandom also claims that what *constitutes* something's having the content that *p* can and must be specified in normative terms. He promises to "explain what it is for a performance...to express an intentional content" (76, cf. 133, 623) by identifying "what proprieties of use having such a content consists in" (77, cf. 663n89).⁶ This represents Brandom's commitment to an

² A version of the constructive half of this conclusion is advocated by Mark Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne in their *The Grammar of Meaning: Normativity and Semantic Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1997), to which I am indebted. The contrasts we have in mind are distinct: Lance and O'Leary-Hawthorne oppose *non-normative* conceptions of the *function of meaning-ascriptions*, while the present paper will criticize Brandom's *normative* view of the *constitution of meaning-facts*.

³ Most prominent among these is a supervenience thesis (*MIE*, 292, 296); see also note 8.

⁴ Brandom notes a resemblance to the "expressivism" about norms articulated by Allan Gibbard, who concurs (*MIE*, 682n14; Gibbard, "Thought, Norms, and Discursive Practice: Commentary on Robert Brandom, *Making it Explicit*," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56 (1996), 699-717).

⁵ When an interpreter "takes the interlocutors being interpreted to be *committed*" to certain performances, the "interpreter thereby undertakes commitments to various sorts of assessments of propriety of performance of those interpreted" (638, cf. 186). So attributing to an interpreter the *attitude* of attributing a commitment to someone else will itself involve attributing commitments to the *interpreter*.

⁶ Brandom presents his theory as explaining what it is "in virtue of" which anything is conceptually contentful (*MIE*, xviii, 134, 402, 530, 593), what "make[s] noises and marks mean what they mean" (174), and what is "constitutive of their being contentful" (401).

explanatory approach in semantics that is pragmatist in a distinct sense, a species of the strategy he has called “semantic pragmatism.”⁷ Now the demand for a constitutive account can be brought to bear in turn on the practical proprieties that were said to constitute contentfulness: what does the obtaining of *these proprieties* consist in? Again Brandom has a pragmatist answer: they obtain in virtue of proprieties governing the social practice of *attributing* them, the practice of normative “scorekeeping” in which language-users essentially participate (648). Since being subject to a propriety is what Brandom calls a “normative status,” we have a complementary sense of the spatial metaphor (though one Brandom never explicitly discriminates) in which it can be said to be normative *statuses* all the way down.⁸

While both the attributional and the constitutive explanatory projects are in a broad sense pragmatist, they should be distinguished as aiming to afford the theorist of content different kinds of understanding.⁹ The question I wish

⁷ Brandom, “Pragmatics and Pragmatisms,” in *Hilary Putnam: Pragmatism and Realism*, ed. James Conant and Urszula Żegleń (London: Routledge, 2002), 43-4. See also his *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 2000), 4.

⁸ In the course of reiterating his slogan, Brandom specifies that “[i]t is normative *stances* all the way down” (*MIE*, 637-8, my emphasis). Here however (and at 648) I believe he is conflating the senses of ‘down’ just distinguished: his real point is that at each level of the *constitutive* account we encounter normative *statuses*, which in each case are *attributionally* explained in terms of normative *stances* (*attitudes*). As Gibbard recognizes, Brandom’s explanation of his distinction between “discursive” and “simple” intentionality (*MIE*, 629-31, 60-1) suffers from the same conflation of explanatory dimensions. For there is no one sense of ‘derives’ such that the latter kind of intentionality “derives” merely from the attitudes of an *interpreter* while the former kind “derives” from (proprieties governing) the attitudes of those who possess it (Gibbard, “Thought, Norms, and Discursive Practice,” 702-3, 707). The cause of the conflation, I suspect, is that Brandom’s “phenomenalism” undergoes a slide from (i) the strategy of explaining what one is doing in taking something to be F, *rather* than explaining what being F consists in, to (ii) the strategy of explaining that being F consists in being properly taken-F. Consider e.g. Brandom’s uncharacteristic endorsement of the (at best unhelpful) thought that once an account of taking-true is provided, “[b]eing true is then to be understood as being *properly* taken-true” (*MIE*, 291, cf. 25, 57-8, 627). The conflation of attributional and constitutive pragmatisms is more pronounced in an earlier paper. Here the very same “social practice approach” that counsels explaining “what it is to *take* a claim” for knowledge “instead of explaining what knowledge *is*” is also said to yield that “the appropriateness of an inference consists entirely in what the community...is willing to approve” (“Asserting,” *Noûs* 17 (1983): 637-50, at 647, 640).

⁹ A related distinction among explanatory strategies is drawn by Lance and O’Leary-Hawthorne (*Grammar of Meaning*, 10-12, 211-2). But there is a structural discrepancy in how they and Brandom deploy the attributional strategy. Following Kripke’s Wittgenstein, Lance and O’Leary-Hawthorne proceed directly to an account of the function in linguistic practice of *ascriptions of the form ‘S means that p’*. By contrast, Brandom starts by explaining the practical significance we attribute when we implicitly take someone’s performance to be an assertion with the content that *p*, and *only then* uses this to construct an account of the significance we attribute when we take someone’s performance to be an assertion with the content that *S* means that *p*. (While Lance and O’Leary-Hawthorne are right that Brandom “gives no explanation of the...practical significance of ‘means that’”

to pose concerns the role played by *normativity* in Brandom's pursuit of each of these projects. What benefits does he seek to derive by invoking norms of social practice in theorizing about meaning, and are the benefits forthcoming? At the end of this paper, I will briefly indicate why I think Brandom's normative version of *attributional* pragmatism is compelling and illuminating. The bulk of the paper will however be devoted to arguing that he fails to motivate his *constitutive* thesis that something's possession of a meaning consists in its use or occurrence being governed by certain norms. Indeed, I will advocate a stronger conclusion: the motivating considerations Brandom appeals to stand in tension with his own deflationary explanation of the "objectivity of conceptual norms" (54), an explanation that is essential to the constitutive theory's viability. And I will go on to suggest that once these considerations are rejected, there will no longer be any reason to believe that the theory of propositional contentfulness they are supposed to motivate is even available.¹⁰

I

Brandom presents his own theory of the "nature of contentfulness" (144, 330) as a way of satisfying a criterion of adequacy he imposes on all such theories, a criterion that stems from what he calls his "methodological pragmatism."¹¹ In the normative version he subscribes to, that doctrine holds that from the point of view of the semantic theorist, "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" (143). Any theory of what contentfulness consists in must therefore leave it intelligible that "semantically or intentionally contentful states and acts have, as such, pragmatic significances that should be specified in normative terms" (18). This leads Brandom to impose a constraint on such a theory: *there must be a derivation of a content-bearer's normative significance from whatever the theory says its contentfulness consists in*. Except for the explicit specification of the pragmatic features as normative (and my omission, as unnecessary for present purposes, of a uniformity requirement), this is the

(*ibid.*, 8n), we will see that something close to their own account can be extrapolated from the explanation he does give of 'says that'.) An interesting consequence of this difference is that Brandom's attributional explanations of meaning can't be interpreted even *prima facie* as yielding constitutive explanations of what something's *having the meaning of a meaning-ascription* consists in.

¹⁰ The problem I will point to is distinct from the conflict Gideon Rosen has alleged between the irreducible normativity of Brandom's constitutive account and his "antiplatonist" concern to demystify the place of norms in the natural world ("Who Makes the Rules Around Here?", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (1997): 163-71, at 163-4). Rosen may be overlooking the attributional pragmatist strand in *MIE*, arguably the chief ingredient in Brandom's attempt to render norms "less mysterious" (xiv).

¹¹ Brandom, "Pragmatics and Pragmatisms," 42-3.

constraint codified by Dummett in a pronouncement Brandom repeatedly cites with approval (187-90):

[T]he implicit assumption underlying the idea that there is some one key concept in terms of which we can give a general characterization of the meaning of a sentence is that there must be some uniform pattern of derivation of all the other features of the use of an arbitrary sentence, given its meaning as characterized in terms of the key concept.¹²

Though he will diverge from Dummett on the fundamental characterization of content, Brandom too is speaking of *derivation* when he asserts that the “theoretical task of the intentional content of a state or act is to determine, in context, the normative significance of acquiring that state or performing that act” (18, cf. 68, 83-4, 133, 144, 334, 339).

Two points concerning the status and nature of the required derivations remain to be made explicit. First, Brandom’s conception of semantic contentfulness is not *exhausted* by his claim that the semantic theorist is engaged in an “attempt to specify, systematically and explicitly” (133) the normative features of linguistic practice. Beyond this, he is committed to the intelligibility of describing intentional states, acts and expressions as having propositional contents “of the sort we... ascribe by the use of ‘that’ clauses” (5), contents that are possessed by expressions only contingently and are attributable meaningfully to expressions in languages other than the attributor’s own. (His position thus contrasts with that of semanticists in the Quinean tradition who advocate the elimination of propositional content thus conceived.) The semantic theorist’s task is supposed to be to explain what possession of such propositional contents *consists in*, and Brandom employs the derivability requirement as a criterion of adequacy on such an explanation. Second, this fact carries consequences regarding the nature of the required derivations. In general, advocates of the requirement need not stipulate that the derivations proceed without additional premises of a semantic character.¹³ (The more such a premise stands in need of justification, the less support the mere ability of a theory to meet the criterion of adequacy will afford that theory.) In order for the derivability of normative significance to *function as a constraint* on a constitutive theory of contentfulness, however,

¹² Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (London: Duckworth, 1973), 361. According to Dummett, we use this “key concept” to single out the feature of a sentence “in which its meaning consists” (*ibid.*, 457).

¹³ One prominent advocate of the derivability constraint (in the context of theorizing about our grasp of concepts) holds that a concept’s normative significance can be derived from the facts about “primitively compelling” principles of inference that are said to be constitutive of someone’s possessing the concept, but only by invoking the additional premise that “the semantic value of the concept is whatever makes those principles always truth-preserving” (Christopher Peacocke, *A Study of Concepts* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1992), 137-40).

the derivations will not be permitted to appeal to the very constitutive theory that is in question.

Let us call the advocate of the criterion of adequacy just articulated a “derivabilist.” Now Brandom does *not* hold that derivabilism mandates a normative-pragmatic reduction of conceptual contentfulness. In fact, he sees the derivability requirement as providing the chief motivation for rival “representationalist” theories of content, which promise to yield derivations of correct use from assignments of denotations, extensions, and truth-values across possible worlds (xvi, 6, 94, 278). Such representationalist theories, Brandom however believes, face the task of explaining how the relations they appeal to are bestowed on performances, expressions, and states in their practical employment (xvi, 6-7, 93-4, 132).¹⁴

It is the promise of sidestepping this explanatory hurdle that is supposed to motivate Brandom’s inferentialism, which views possession of content as consisting not in representational features but rather in inferential role. In order to satisfy the derivability requirement, though, he proposes an inferential-role semantics that differs fundamentally from most implementations of that general approach. For Brandom’s is a specifically *normative* inferential-role semantics, a “rendering of propositional contentfulness in terms of *material proprieties of inference*”(137). The point of the normativity is to ensure that the inferential roles suffice to account for those proprieties of use to which meanings are directly relevant, to account for what Brandom calls the “norms incorporated in the content of a belief” or assertion (656n17-18). These norms are initially characterized as belonging to “two sorts” (ibid., cf. 18). On the one hand, there are “correctnesses of application,” which include truth for propositional content-bearers as well as referential correctness for sub-propositional ones (18, cf. 207).¹⁵ On the other hand, there are “correctnesses of inference” (18).¹⁶ I will examine each of the two sorts of norms in turn.

II

When we consider the *norms of application* to which bearers of conceptual content are subject, the derivabilist demand on the constitutive theorist of content takes the form of a challenge notoriously attributed to Wittgenstein

¹⁴ See also Brandom, “Pragmatics and Pragmatisms,” 44.

¹⁵ Brandom assumes from the very start that truth serves as a norm for concept-users. As we will see in Section V, this is a commitment he takes to be implicit in his account of the practice of asserting.

¹⁶ While Brandom introduces norms of application and inference as underwriting assessments, respectively, of “representation” and of “rationality” (*MIE*, 18), he later includes “*objective proprieties of inferring*” under the heading of “representational” correctnesses (136-7, 280). Rather than distinguishing between objective and less-than-objective inferential norms, I take it, he is saying that inferential norms count as objective in view of their dependence “on how the objects...represented actually are.”

by Kripke. Is Brandom trying to mount a response to Kripke's arguments against the possibility of deriving truth-conditions or extensions from putative meaning-constitutive facts?¹⁷ The candidate constitutive facts those arguments are used to rule out are non-normative, such as facts about concept-users' various dispositions. Given the motivating use Brandom makes of derivabilism, one might suspect that in exploiting *normative inferential roles* instead of dispositions, he is attempting to pull off the trick in question from a more promising starting point.

In practice, however, Brandom endorses a line of thought explicitly advocated by Harry Field and Paul Horwich, according to which it would be a mistake to require the inferential-role theorist to meet any such challenge. (In explaining this line of thought, and for the rest of the paper, I will focus on the contentfulness of linguistic expressions and performances, specifically sentence tokens and assertions, since Brandom regards the practice of asserting as fundamental to concept-use.) Consider one comment in *MIE* that could be read as announcing that the derivability constraint will indeed be satisfied in the case of truth. Referring to the "inferential roles" that are supposed to constitute possession of meanings, Brandom says that "the inferential contents associated with anyone's sentences, together with the facts, determine which of those sentences express truths" (357). Yet, crucially, he never maintains that a sentence's truth-conditions can be *derived from* its inferential role—unless the derivation is allowed to appeal to the very identification, supplied by his semantic theory, of that role as the feature in virtue of which the sentence possesses its content (in which case, as noted above, the derivability requirement wouldn't be functioning as a *constraint* on the theory). On Brandom's view, we will find, the *only* ground the inferentialist need have for holding that the sentence's truth-conditions are determined by its inferential role is that *as an inferentialist*, she recognizes that the sentence *expresses the claim it does in virtue of playing that role*. (Moreover, it is no part of Brandom's inferentialism to hold that the fact that the sentence expresses the claim it does must *itself* be derivable from its possession of the inferential role in virtue of which it does so.¹⁸)

¹⁷ Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1982).
¹⁸ The derivabilist about norms of application need not make *this* demand either. In particular, derivabilism doesn't involve commitment to the principle that something's possession of a property must be derivable from the underlying facts in virtue of which it possesses that property (Scott Soames alleges that Kripke's Wittgenstein is guilty of this assumption, in "Skepticism about Meaning: Indeterminacy, Normativity, and the Rule-Following Paradox," in *Meaning and Reference*, ed. Ali Kazmi, suppl. vol. 23 of the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (1998)). Rather, the derivabilist holds that in the case of an expression's possession of conceptual content it is a constraint on any constitutive account that the expression's *normative significance* be so derivable. Indeed, if a sentence's *meaning* had to be derivable from its meaning-constitutive property, derivabilism would no longer impose any constraint arising specifically from *normativity*.

The way to reject the derivabilist demand is to point to the availability of what I will call “straightforward” explanations of the relevance of content to truth.¹⁹ Here is an instance of such an explanation:

- (a) That the Czech sentence ‘Některá jablka jsou červivá’ is true follows from the fact that this sentence expresses the claim that some apples are wormy, together with the fact that some apples are wormy.

Now, as Horwich points out, a reductive theorist of what the sentence’s contentfulness consists in *would* have reason to dispute the sufficiency of this explanation *if she at the same time proposed a reductive theory of what the sentence’s being true consists in*. For then the connection between the facts constitutive of the sentence’s contentfulness and those constitutive of its truth would cry out for explanation.²⁰ But like Horwich and Field, Brandom himself espouses a deflationary understanding of truth according to which no such reductive theory is to be had.²¹ When asked to account for the relevance of the sentence’s propositional content to its truth, according to these theorists of meaning, all we can and need do is supply explanation (a). As Horwich summarizes the matter, deflationism about truth “enables us to resist” the view that “one must be able to infer or explain—hence, in a strong sense, to ‘determine’—a [sentence’s truth-condition] on the basis of its meaning-constituting property.”²² Field draws the same conclusion: “there need be no

¹⁹ The term ‘straightforward explanation’ is used by Dummett in a loosely related sense, for the conveying of an expression’s meaning through a statement of truth-conditions that captures the expression’s effect on the truth of sentences either disquotationally or by appeal to translation (*The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1991), 25ff, 107). The general strategy to be described in this paragraph—rejecting derivabilism by embracing a deflationary understanding of truth—is contemplated by Dummett (*ibid.*, 163, cf. 67-72), who however concludes that any constitutive theory of contentfulness will require recourse to a notion of truth for which the derivability requirement holds (*ibid.*, 159-60).

²⁰ See Horwich, *Meaning* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 70-1, 109-11 (my assessment of Brandom’s inferentialism is substantially indebted to Horwich’s argument). Here the relevant sense of ‘consist in’ must be one in which the truth of the Czech sentence can’t be said to consist in some apples being wormy, or even in the conjunction of this fact with the Czech sentence’s having the meaning it does. For neither of these two claims of “constitution” would furnish an *objection* to the sufficiency of the straightforward explanation.

²¹ Fortunately, present purposes won’t require a characterization of deflationism about truth any more determinate than the claim that on such a view (i) there can be no reductive account of what a sentence’s truth consists in, and (ii) the expressive function of truth-talk, in conjunction with that of meaning-talk, is such as to account for the cogency of the straightforward explanation. For Brandom’s attributional version of deflationism about truth, see Chapter 5 of *MIE*.

²² Horwich, *Meaning*, 7-8, also 27-30, 68-71, and 107-114. Because he rejects the “priority of the propositional” stressed by Brandom (*MIE*, 79-85), Horwich actually addresses the

‘natural connection’ between the ‘meanings’ [a non-representationalist theory] assigns and truth-conditions: the connection between the meanings it invokes and truth is supplied entirely by the disquotation schema for sentences we understand.” Applying this schema to the premise ‘Some apples are wormy’, for example, I may derive an ascription of truth to that very sentence, as well as to any other sentence (including, as above, our Czech one) about whose underlying meaning-constituting property I need *only* assume that it suffices for the two sentences to express the same claim (namely, that some apples are wormy).²³

Regardless of how the deflationist construes the cogency of explanation (a), what is important for present purposes is that when we offer this explanation, we don’t *advert* to the Czech sentence’s inferential role. Instead, the inferential-role theorist will maintain, we *use* a sentence with a suitably related role.²⁴ (According to Brandom, for instance, in adducing the claim that some apples are wormy I undertake *myself* certain further commitments the undertaking of which by *asserters* of the sentence ‘Některá jablka jsou červivá’ constitutes part of the inferential role that makes that sentence have the content that some apples are wormy.) To see that Brandom accepts straightforward explanation as sufficient, therefore, we need only note that meaning-constituting inferential roles figure in his account of how propositional content incorporates norms of application as roles that are *played*, not as roles that are *described*. Brandom repeatedly promises that the “objective representational dimension of conceptual content,” paradigmatically the fact that someone’s commitment to a propositional content brings with it assessability with respect to *truth*, will be made intelligible by “[f]ocusing on the distinction of social perspective between *acknowledging* (and thereby undertaking) a commitment oneself and *attributing* a commitment to another” (54-5, cf. 676-7n11, 529, 599-601). If what I have been suggesting is right, *the essential point of focusing on this distinction is to reject the derivabilist demand*. According to the line of thought Brandom endorses in practice,

determination of a predicate’s extension rather than the determination of a sentence’s truth-condition.

²³ Hartry Field, “Deflationist Views of Meaning and Content,” *Mind* 103 (1994): 249-85, at 275-6. Field is discussing the consequences of views he calls “quasi-disquotational,” which allow sentences’ truth-conditions to depend on contingent semantic facts, as the “purely disquotational” approach Field himself prefers does not. In this respect, Field’s “quasi-disquotationalist” resembles Horwich. Both authors, incidentally, are primarily concerned to show that there needn’t be a *uniform pattern* (recall Dummett) across sentences/predicates for deriving truth-conditions/extensions from meaning-constitutive facts. But their arguments, if successful, show that there needn’t be *any* such derivations.

²⁴ Compare Field, “Deflationist Views,” §3, esp. 259-60; Horwich, *Meaning*, 66. Field restricts himself to the case of homophonic explanations of truth-conditions, the only ones a “purely disquotational” theorist is prepared to find intelligible.

then, straightforward explanations say all that needs to be said about how conceptual content incorporates norms of application.

Brandom remarks that the “biggest challenge” for a non-representationalist semantic theory is “to show how the conceptual raw materials this approach allows itself could be deployed so as to underwrite attributions of propositional content for which this sort of *objective* normative assessment [viz. assessment as to *truth*] is intelligible.” On his own view, I have now argued, this task of making room for an assertion’s assessability with regard to whether it is “*true*, in the sense that things are as it claims they are,”²⁵ consists in articulating a deflationary understanding of truth that underwrites the straightforward explanation, in addition to showing how the theory’s “raw materials” can account for the possession of contents “of the sort we... ascribe by the use of ‘that’ clauses” (5). According to the deflationist, the “challenge” in question can furnish no *constraint* on such constitutive theorizing: truth-assessability is assured via the straightforward explanation, one that is available to *any* theorist of contentfulness.²⁶

III

Let us turn now from norms of application to norms of inference, and specifically to one of Brandom’s own examples of the latter. Brandom holds that the semantic theorist is obliged to account for the relevance of meanings to the goodness, in the appropriate context of utterance, of the inference from ‘The apple in the box is a ripe Winesap’ to ‘The apple in the box is red’ (634-5). This is an example of what Brandom calls a “materially good” inference, since the entailment being asserted isn’t formal logical validity.²⁷ Call the premise of this inference *A* and its conclusion *B* (I will refer to these as “sentences,” suppressing indexicality considerations). Given what I have just said about Brandom’s handling of norms of application, one might expect the same approach in this case. Here too a straightforward explanation is readily available:

²⁵ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 187.

²⁶ This is not to deny that some constitutive accounts of content-possession might be criticized for failing to underwrite liability to truth-assessment that is “objective” in a second sense. Such accounts, in particular ones that appeal to assertibility-conditions, may not fund a distinction between the claim that some apples are wormy and some claim about speakers’ attitudes. As Brandom explains, his *own* account doesn’t face this difficulty (*Articulating Reasons*, 198-204). A *third* “challenge” of securing “objectivity” (in yet another sense) will be discussed in Section IV.

²⁷ For ease of exposition, I will focus on one of the inferences Brandom appears to explicate as “commitment-preserving” rather than “entitlement-preserving” (*MIE*, 189), since there may be no pretheoretical equivalent of Brandom’s broad notion of entitlement. By contrast, “committive-inferential” consequence is supposed to be an inferential propriety ordinary speakers make explicit using a conditional. Brandom emphasizes that this conditional isn’t the so-called “material” one (112-3), and we also learn that it isn’t used to endorse inferences as carrying modal or nomological force (634, cf. 690n36, 132).

- (b) That *A* entails *B* follows from the fact that *A* means that the apple in the box is a ripe Winesap, the fact that *B* means that the apple in the box is red, and the following pomological fact: that the apple in the box is a ripe Winesap entails that it is red.

In proposing this as a satisfactory explanation of how propositional contents incorporate norms of inference, a constitutive theorist of contentfulness would be rejecting derivabilism regarding inferential norms. For the possibility remains that what makes sentences *A* and *B* mean what they do is some set of facts from which the goodness of the inference between them *couldn't* be derived, even in conjunction with the relevant facts about apples.

We will soon see that Brandom *isn't* satisfied with this straightforward explanation as an account of how propositional contents incorporate inferential norms;²⁸ it is here (rather than in the case of norms of application) that he brings the derivability constraint to bear. Before showing that he does so, and asking what his reasons might be, we should take a closer look at explanation (b). Consider the role of the pomological entailment. Brandom offers an *attributional* account of what one is doing in *taking* this entailment to hold. In taking it that the apple's being a ripe Winesap entails its being red, I am endorsing the goodness of an inference. The canonical way for me to make my endorsement of this inference explicit, Brandom says, would be to use a conditional: 'If the apple in the box is a ripe Winesap, then it is red' (xix, 247, 530).²⁹ On Brandom's account of entailment claims, then, inferential roles once again figure *first-personally* in the straightforward explanation. For when I appeal to the entailment from the apple's being a ripe Winesap to its being red, I am not appealing to commitments I *attribute* to anyone, but am rather *myself acknowledging* an inferential commitment. (According to Brandom, endorsing the inference *does* in fact involve attributing commitment to its conclusion to anyone already committed to its premise.³⁰

²⁸ Of course, he doesn't *deny the entailment stated* by (b)—indeed, he appeals to such entailments in another context. Given that “it is also true that ‘*p*’ means that *p*, and ‘*q*’ means that *q*,” he explains, “the truth of the normative claim [‘It is (would be) correct to infer ‘*q*’ from ‘*p*’] follows from the truth of the conditional claim [‘If *p* then *q*’]” (“Facts, Norms, and Normative Facts: A Reply to Habermas,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 8 (2000): 356-74, at 368-9 [quotation marks and italics altered for uniformity]).

²⁹ In the language whose semantics Brandom is examining in *MIE*, the conditional ‘if *p* then *q*’ serves as the canonical non-metalinguistic locution for making explicit the endorsement of inferences. Speaking as theorist, however, Brandom deploys both conditionals and consequence locutions to equivalent effect. For example, he remarks that conditionals enable speakers to “claim explicitly that one claim follows from another—to *say that* if *p* then *q*” (530). The passage cited in my previous note likewise speaks of “*conditional facts*: facts about what claimables follow from what others.”

³⁰ In fact, *implicitly* acknowledging the goodness of the inference simply “consists in...being disposed to keep score in this way” (*MIE*, 186, cf. 247-8).

The essential point is that explanation (b) doesn't proceed *by appeal to* any such constellation of attributed commitments.)

Instead of resting content with straightforward explanations in the case of norms of inference, Brandom in fact enunciates an *ultra-derivabilism* that imposes a requirement much stronger than Dummett's. The inferential role constituting an expression's possessing a particular content must now provide for the derivation of the expression's full "inferential significance" in the context of given "auxiliary hypotheses," *without appeal to any other facts about the world* such as our pomological one (635, cf. 188-9). For example, the respective inferential roles alone must explain why 'The apple in the box is ripe' and 'The apple in the box is a Winesap' materially entail 'The apple in the box is red'. (By contrast, *representationalist* theories of content may appeal to non-semantic facts in deriving inferential proprieties from, say, the conditions under which predicates apply in possible worlds.)

Brandom's embrace of ultra-derivabilism emerges most vividly in an argument he mounts against non-holistic inferential-role theories on which a sentence's contentfulness consists in its use being governed by some "privileged subclass of concept-constitutive inferences" (635). Take for instance an explanation of the contentfulness of 'The apple in the box is ripe' in terms of a set of inferential proprieties that *doesn't itself contain* the two-premise inference just mentioned. According to Brandom, such a theory is unsatisfactory unless it is also assumed that the repertoire of auxiliary hypotheses available to speakers "contains conditionals corresponding to all the other materially good inferences (for example from the ripeness of Winesap apples to their redness)." This is because in the absence of that assumption, "[t]he effect that various auxiliary hypotheses have on the inferential significance of a claim...cannot be determined just from the privileged inferences it is involved in." For this reason, Brandom concludes, any less than fully holistic inferential-role theory would "have the consequence that communities that do not yet have the expressive resources of logical vocabulary such as the conditional were precluded for that reason from counting as employing nonlogical concepts" such as the concept *ripe*.³¹ The point I wish to make is that this purported refutation of non-holistic inferential-role theories explicitly presupposes ultra-derivabilism. Now it may indeed be the case that the only way an *inferential-role theory* of content could satisfy the *derivabilist* demand (as applied to inferential proprieties) would be by satisfying the *ultra-derivabilist* one. But there remains the option of rejecting derivabilism altogether.

So why *does* Brandom impose the derivability constraint in the case of norms of inference? Just as in the parallel case of truth, he might have reason

³¹ See also Brandom's "Replies" to critics in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (1997): 189-204, at 191.

to dispute the sufficiency of the straightforward explanation if he had independent grounds for advocating a reductive theory of what it consists in for one sentence to entail another. We will soon see that he does in fact propose such a theory. But it is puzzling why he doesn't adopt the same deflationary attitude toward the relation of *material entailment* between sentences as he adopts toward the *truth* of sentences.³² Indeed, his deflationism about truth would appear to *debar* Brandom from any social-pragmatic reduction of material entailment. Consider his account of what I am doing when I attribute this relation. In asserting that *A* entails *B*, Brandom holds, I make explicit my endorsement of a material inference (cf. 667n58). Another locution I could use for the very same purpose would be the conditional 'If *A* is true, then *B* is true'. Since according to the deflationist about truth neither the antecedent nor the consequent of this conditional is amenable to social-pragmatic reduction, it is hard to see how the conditional itself could be so amenable—unless *all* conditional facts were social-pragmatic in nature (a view Brandom is unwilling to tolerate³³). Brandom's reductive account of entailment thus conflicts with the very deflationism that allowed him to *avoid* derivabilism in the case of norms of application. It follows that this reductive account can supply no reason for imposing the derivability constraint in the case of *norms of inference* that is compatible with his reason for repudiating the same constraint in the case of norms of application.

IV

It isn't only the *motivation* of Brandom's account of propositional contentfulness that I wish to challenge, however, but also its very *availability*. To appreciate why, we first need to look at Brandom's own explanation of how contents incorporate norms of inference, the one intended to meet the derivability constraint (188-91). As already indicated, this explanation involves a reductive account of material entailment facts in pragmatic terms, a "*pragmatic* rendering of...inferential proprieties" (137, cf. xvi, 190, 472, 623). In the case of our above example, that account will link up with Brandom's "*inferential* conception of [propositional] contents" (188) roughly as follows:

³² The absence of this option is particularly striking in Brandom's "Asserting," where two answers to the question "What is it that makes an inference appropriate or not?" are contemplated: a robustly representationalist theory and a communal acceptance theory (640).

³³ After all, "the pre-practical world did include *conditional* facts" (Brandom, "Facts, Norms, and Normative Facts," 368).

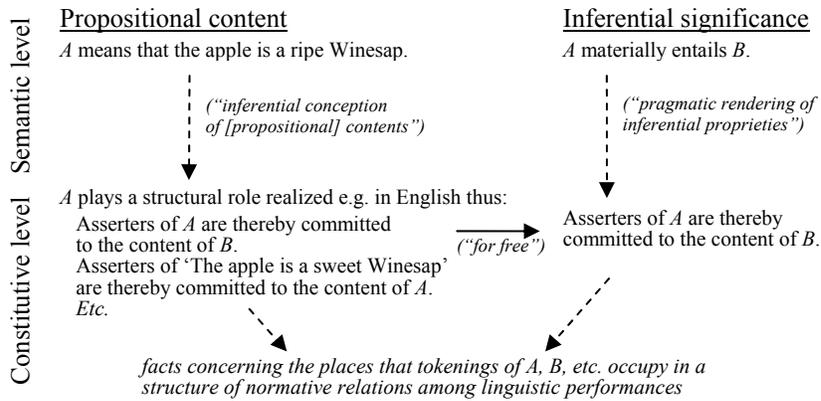


Figure 1. Brandom's inferentialism (solid arrow indicates derivability, dotted arrows constitutive reduction, sentences *A* and *B* as in text)

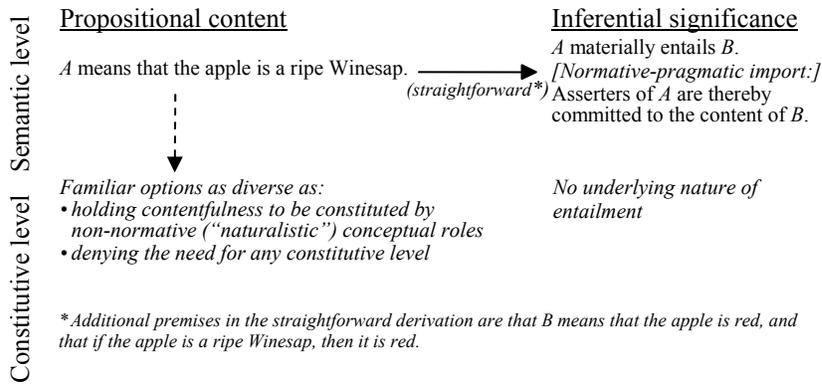


Figure 2. Deflationary view of how content incorporates inferential norms (solid arrow indicates derivability, dotted arrow constitutive reduction, sentences *A* and *B* as in text)

- (c) The fact that *A* entails *B* consists in the fact that (according to norms governing socio-linguistic practice) an asserter of *A* is committed to the content of *B*. And the *latter* fact (itself ultimately explicable in non-intentional terms as a matter of the places tokenings of *A* and *B* occupy in a structure of normative relations among linguistic performances) at the same time *partly realizes the structural roles that are constitutive of each sentence's possession of its respective content*.

This view belongs to the genus concerning which Brandom says that “the requirements of methodological pragmatism will automatically be met.” The derivation of inferential goodnesses from meaning-constitutive facts “comes for free.”³⁴ (Brandom’s inferentialist response to the derivabilist challenge is illustrated in Figure 1.)

But consider now the fact that in asserting the sentence ‘The apple in the box is a ripe Winesap’, a speaker is committing herself to the claim that the apple in the box is red. Wouldn’t the natural inclination be to say that this is *simply a reflection of the fact that the sentence means that the apple is a ripe Winesap, together with the relevant pomological fact?* (And wouldn’t that remain the case even if Brandom were to succeed in his envisaged unpacking of the set of such commitment-consequential facts as a matter of norms governing performances specifiable in non-intentional terms?) If we abandon the derivabilist demand, as I have argued Brandom should, we will no longer see any reason to resist this natural thought.³⁵ In embracing the thought, however, we are denying that the fact about speakers’ consequential commitments can legitimately be appealed to in a constitutive account of what makes *A* possess the content it does. (The conception of the relation between propositional content and inferential significance I am recommending to Brandom is illustrated in Figure 2.)

Let us review the alternatives. Brandom claims that *A* means what it does in virtue, among other things, of the fact that the asserter of *A* is thereby committed to the content of *B*. By contrast, I suggest that the asserter of *A* is committed to the content of *B* in virtue, among other things, of the fact that *A* means what it does. Definitive adjudication of this sort of Euthyphronic dispute is notoriously elusive, but we have already seen that Brandom

³⁴ Brandom, “Pragmatics and Pragmatism,” 45.

³⁵ The explanatory priority of meaning-possession to commitment-consequential facts may appear less compelling in the case of those entailments traditionally held to be knowable *a priori*. Rather than address this issue, I merely note that Brandom doesn’t assume that any meaning-constitutive material entailments are knowable *a priori* (*MIE*, 634). Furthermore, we have seen him deny that a sentence’s meaningfulness consists exhaustively in its involvement in any privileged set of material entailments.

doesn't claim default entitlement to his theory. Rather, he insists that facts about the consequences obtaining between speakers' commitments must earn their theoretical pay by performing what he calls the "theoretical job" of a notion of content:

What gives semantic theory its philosophical point is the contribution that its investigation of the nature of contentfulness can make to the understanding of proprieties of practice, paradigmatically of judging and inferring...[This] means that it is pointless to attribute semantic structure or content that does no pragmatic explanatory work. (144)

In questioning Brandom's entitlement to derivabilism, however, I have been questioning his entitlement to the assumption that the kind of "explanatory work" his normative inferential roles are introduced to accomplish is work that needs to be done in the first place. Commitments incurred upon asserting a sentence may be accounted for in terms of the respective material entailments, and the relevance of contentfulness to these entailments may receive straightforward explanation. Once we recognize that Brandom is not entitled to assume that the "job" of non-straightforward explanation *must* be performed, furthermore, the very triviality of his non-straightforward explanations should render suspect the idea that the "work" they do provides any support for the availability of his constitutive account of contentfulness.

Might Brandom instead vindicate the status of commitment-consequential relations as "basic in the order of [constitutive] semantic explanation" (496) by claiming that they are *implicitly acknowledged in practice*, where the relevant practice is conceived as one that could itself enjoy constitutive priority over the practice of expressing propositional contents? A tendency toward this defense of inferentialism's availability—if not its motivation—would account for a peculiar feature of Brandom's book.³⁶ In several programmatic passages, we find him saying that his order of explanation starts with "inferences that are correct in the sense that they are accepted in the practice of a community," where communal acceptance is a matter of "actual practical attitudes" of assessment (137). The explanation is said to start with normative statuses "about which the community's all-inclusive practical assessment cannot be mistaken" (54). An ultimate reduction of inferential proprieties to patterns of assessment is also suggested by Brandom's claim that "intentional states and attitudes have the contents they do in virtue of the role they play in the behavioral economy of those to whom they are attributed" (134).³⁷

³⁶ The tendency corresponds to the position Brandom explicitly adopts in "Asserting" (640, 642, 644), a paper that predates his concern with the "ratification-independence" of inferential norms (see below).

³⁷ Brandom's language here matches that used by Wilfrid Sellars. When Sellars says that something's meaning what it does is constituted by the "role" it plays in a speaker's "behavioral economy," he conceives of this role in non-normative, "causal" terms

Yet among the commitments to whose relations meanings are (in part) reducible, Brandom says, will be ones that are only “consequentially” undertaken in virtue of acknowledgment of other commitments to claims that *in fact entail them* (194, 627). Someone’s consequentially undertaken commitment needn’t be, in Brandom’s sense, acknowledged by her either explicitly or implicitly (Brandom calls such a commitment “unacknowledged”). Nor need it be attributed to her by anyone at all: it may “outrun actual attitudes of taking or treating...as correct” (137). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Brandom never does take up his own “primary explanatory challenge” (54, cf. 137, 672n18) of showing how commitments that are “objective” in this sense—in language he borrows from Crispin Wright, “ratification-independent”—could be “instituted” by the “attitudes” of linguistic practitioners (see also 64, 134).³⁸ As we have seen, nevertheless, Brandom stipulates that all such consequentially undertaken commitments are *equally constitutive* of sentences’ possession of propositional content. It follows that he hasn’t entitled himself to appeal to implicit practical acknowledgment for the purpose of legitimating his use of commitment-consequential relations in theorizing about the “nature of contentfulness.” The easy, deflationary manner in which he ends up explaining how our concepts “incorporate *objective* commitments” (53) precludes any such defense of the constitutive-explanatory role these commitments play in his theory.³⁹

Let me summarize the line of argument I have directed against Brandom’s inferentialism. Given his concomitant deflationism about truth, I argued in

(“Intentionality and the Mental,” in Herbert Feigl et al., *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota, 1957), 528, 530, 536, 538n28). According to Sellars, the function of semantic statements is *not* however to describe such roles (ibid., 527, 532). This Sellarsian theme is overlooked by Lance and O’Leary-Hawthorne (*Grammar of Meaning*, 8-9, 61, 216-7). Contrary to their analogous complaint against Brandom (ibid., 189n, 220), the occasional tendency in *MIE* toward a “descriptive” view of inferential roles never leads him to regard the *function of meaning-ascriptions* as that of describing community attitudes.

³⁸ Instead, as explained in my introduction, he appeals to a distinct sense in which his account holds that speakers’ commitments are “implicit in discursive practice” (*MIE*, 133). What makes the commitment-consequential facts obtain, on this view, is a constellation of normative facts about *proprieties* of assessment. Brandom readily concedes that this is no reduction of normative statuses to attitudes (626-8, 648). In the end, normative statuses are said to be “instituted” by “proprieties of scorekeeping, rather than by actual scorekeeping” (627-8, cf. 638).

³⁹ By abandoning the view that the meaning-constitutive inferential commitments are those acknowledged in practice, Brandom undermines his claim that the introduction of a new concept generally involves the undertaking of new inferential commitments specifiable using only old vocabulary (*MIE*, 125-30). For it turns out that all *objectively good* inferences involving the old vocabulary are *already* reflected in the respective meaning-constitutive commitment- and entitlement-consequential relations. Moreover, when Brandom spells out his account of these relations in Chapter 3 of *MIE*, there is no more mention of propositional contents whose very deployment requires commitment to “materially bad inferences.”

Section III, Brandom ought to take a similarly deflationary view of material entailment. In that case, however, he has no reason to accept *as a substantial challenge* the task of explaining how propositionally contentful items can be subject to inferential norms. In short, he has offered no reason for imposing the derivabilist constraint he employs to motivate inferentialism. Next, in Section IV, I argued that the coherence of inferentialism enjoys no plausibility *apart from* the theory's promise of doing allegedly mandatory "pragmatic explanatory work" in meeting the derivability constraint. For the constitutive priority of the commitment-consequential relations Brandom appeals to in explaining contentfulness is suspect, and in the end nothing else has been done to vindicate it.

V

Having sought to cast doubt on Brandom's explanation of contentfulness as constituted by socio-linguistic norms, I turn at last to the second pragmatist approach noted in my introduction, the *attributional* approach to understanding propositional content. Instead of explaining what it consists in for a sentence *S* to mean that *p*, Brandom's attributional pragmatist explains that to *take S* to mean that *p* is to adopt a particular normative stance involving, among other things, holding anyone who asserts *S* to be thereby committed to any claim entailed by the claim that *p*. But if we propose this explanation *without* construing it in a constitutive vein, have we offered any real elucidation of meaning in terms of norms governing socio-linguistic practice? In what sense might one need a *normative pragmatist theory of meaning* in order to render intelligible our practice of taking an asserter to have, perhaps unwittingly, committed herself to a claim, i.e. to have assumed some sort of conditional responsibility to defend it?⁴⁰

To appreciate the substance and appeal of Brandom's attributional pragmatism about meaning, we first need to consider a second normative moment he holds to be essentially involved in the act of asserting. Besides the moment of "responsibility," though standing to it in a relation of mutual presupposition, there is the moment of "authority" (170-5). The asserting of a claim, if itself entitled, can serve to entitle others to the claim in question. Brandom's analysis of asserting in terms of a social practice displaying this normative structure of authority and responsibility enables him to defend something close to the traditional principle that asserting essentially aims at

⁴⁰ Brandom never specifies exactly what it is one is committed to *doing* in being committed to a claim one *hasn't* asserted. (By contrast, *asserting* a claim involves undertaking a commitment to "demonstrate one's entitlement to the claim, if that entitlement is brought into question," where being entitled to a claim is being "entitled to make it" (*MIE*, 171-2)). But he is clearly committed to the possibility of vindicating the pragmatic character of the standard philosopher's locution the present sentence exemplifies.

truth.⁴¹ On his accounts of truth and negation, taking someone's assertion to be false involves undertaking a commitment that precludes *one's own entitlement* to the claim she has asserted, thus defeating the *authority* implicitly claimed by her assertion. For this reason, taking someone to have asserted something false involves attributing a shortcoming (even when the asserter is taken, in some sense, to be rationally entitled to the claim in question).⁴²

We can now supplement our sketch, begun above, of Brandom's attributional account of contentfulness. To take an expression to mean that *p* is also to take it that its assertoric utterance, if itself entitled, would (in the absence of defeating conditions) entitle others to undertake commitment, *on the original asserter's authority*, to the claim that *p* as well as to any claims it, in conjunction with the attributor's other commitments, entails (190-1). This structure is then reflected in a higher-order attributional explanation of what we are doing when we take an expression to have the content of the explicit ascription '*S* means that *p*'. Such an explanation is implicit in Brandom's account of indirect discourse (534-9). Here the moment of authority will be manifested in the fact that the ascription '*S* means that *p*' can in appropriate circumstances be used to vindicate one's own entitlement and entitle one's audience to the claim that *p*, by explicitly deferring justificatory responsibility to an assertoric utterer of *S*.⁴³

⁴¹ Brandom thus supplies a response to the common view, advocated by Huw Price, that it counts as an objection to deflationism that "truth is normative, in a way not explained by the deflationary theory" ("Three Norms of Assertibility, or How the MOA Became Extinct," in *Philosophical Perspectives 12: Language, Mind, and Ontology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), 241). What explains the normativity of truth for Brandom is not his expressive account of *truth* but rather his account of *asserting*. Interestingly, Price's own purportedly anti-deflationary view of how our "use of the concept of truth" (*ibid.*, 242) is manifested in the role of *disagreement* in assertional practice turns out to be a corollary of Brandom's analysis of asserting.

⁴² Taking someone's assertion to be true, Brandom says, is a necessary condition for the "practical recognition of the authority implicitly claimed by the assertion." Hence "the aspiration...to *truth*...is built right into the normative structure of assertional practice" (*MIE*, 203-4).

⁴³ Drawing on Brandom's account of asserting, Lance and O'Leary-Hawthorne stress a related point: in saying that a sentence means that *p*, I am licensing the inference from that sentence to the claim that *p* and to any claim that follows from it (*Grammar of Meaning*, 58, 68-9, 203). To some extent, their normative account of the pragmatic role of meaning-ascriptions is prefigured in Sellars (though their reading leads them to think otherwise: see note 37). In asserting '*S* means Chicago is large', Sellars holds, we are conditionally licensing ourselves to assert the sentence 'Chicago is large'. For sentences such as this one "occur in meaning statements...as statements *to be made* (on a certain hypothesis)," presumably the hypothesis of the truth of *S* ("Truth and 'Correspondence'," in *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1963), 206, 224; compare Brandom, *MIE*, 218 on how this "hypothesis" can be viewed as *implicit* in a deferral). "And it is by virtue of the fact that we *draw* such inferences that meaning and truth talk gets its connection with the world. In this sense, the connection is *done* rather than *talked about*" ("Naming and Saying," *ibid.*, 246). The ascription '*S* means that *p*' is used not to talk about any

Brandom's attributional account of meaning, based on his seminal normative analysis of the practice of asserting within which alone meanings get expressed, thus does give rise to a social-pragmatist construal of the claim that "[t]he concept of meaning is a normative concept."⁴⁴ Note though that in explaining this strand of Brandom's conception of meaning I haven't appealed to any norms governing linguistic behavior specified in non-intentional terms. Rather than explaining meaningfulness as consisting in being subject to (non-intentionally specifiable) proprieties of practice, the attributional pragmatist I have been describing explains what it is we are holding each other committed and entitled to (specified in intentional terms) when we implicitly take each other to express meanings, and how explicit meaning-ascriptions can themselves be used to entitle others to claims and inferences.⁴⁵

language-world relation, Sellars is saying, but rather to license an inference to the worldly claim that *p*.

⁴⁴ Brandom, "Replies," 193.

⁴⁵ In writing this paper, I benefited greatly from discussion with and comments by Robert Brandom, John MacFarlane, John McDowell and Douglas Patterson. Thanks are due to Janice Dowell, Dominique Kuenzle and Susanna Schellenberg for comments on a final draft, as well as to participants of the colloquium in Prague on Pragmatism and Semantics at which a version of the paper was presented in June 2000.