

BOOK REVIEWS

the fundamental philosophical lessons of EPM. Brandom's study guide and deVries and Triplett's commentary are complementary rather than competing accounts of Sellars's essay.

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Robert B. Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000. Pp. 230.

Here we have Brandom's *prolegomenon* to any future attempt to make it through his massive *Making It Explicit*.

There is nothing in [the six chapters that make up the body of *Articulating Reasons*] that will come as a surprise to anyone who has mastered [*Making It Explicit*]. ... I had in mind audiences that had perhaps not so much as dipped into the big book but were curious about its themes and philosophical consequences. (35–36)

Though most of the technical bits remain on the cutting room floor, *Articulating Reasons* is not *much* more introductory than *Making It Explicit* in its philosophical sophistication. Indeed, a not insignificant amount of difficult material appears *verbatim*. It is rather "An Introduction to Inferentialism" primarily in the lesser demands it makes of its readers' philosophical stamina and thus, for instance, of their ability to keep a sense of the whole while assimilating its parts. (For the record, it contains roughly one-fifth as many words.) Both readers seeking a view of Brandom's ambitious synoptic vision and those working on the specific topics discussed will be richly rewarded. But, understandably, they will also be left with quite a few unanswered questions. Many will be sufficiently intrigued to turn to the "big book" for some further answers.

In addition to its six more or less self-contained, but mutually reinforcing chapters, *Articulating Reasons* contains a substantial introduction that locates Brandom's project philosophically and historically: Brandom holds *inter alia* that the use of concepts is explanatorily prior to their contents; that concept use is essentially linguistic; that the sentential is theoretically more basic than the sub-sentential; that concept use is best viewed as a species of expression, rather than representation; and that the point of logical vocabulary, in particular, is not to enable epistemic access to a special kind of truth, but rather to express explicitly the inferential relations constitutive of conceptual content. Chapter 1 lays out both this inferential conception of conceptual content and the expressive conception of logical vocabulary. Chapter 2 applies this conception to normative vocabulary, which (it's argued) enables the explicit expression of commitment to practical inferences. Chapter 3 takes on perceptual reports, defending a form of reliabilism that retains a central role for reasoning: to take a reporter to be reliable is to endorse an inference from her reporting to what she reports. Chapter 4 extends Brandom's inferentialism to

the sub-sentential and provides an “expressive transcendental deduction of the necessity of objects” (41). Chapter 5 attempts to recover the representational aspect of concepts from their more fundamental inferential nature through an account of the expressive and inferential role distinctive of *de re* attitude ascriptions. Chapter 6 outlines an inferentialist account of objectivity, arguing that the norms governing inferential practices constitutive of concept use must be such as to underwrite a distinction between agents’ attitudes and things being so. Among the larger topics of *Making It Explicit* that *Articulating Reasons* omits or slights are the former’s account of how conceptual norms are grounded in social practices, its use of the prosentential theory of truth to capture the expressive role of semantic vocabulary, and its discussion of anaphora more generally.

Views that individuate content in terms of inferential role face a variety of well-known *prima facie* problems, perhaps the three most often mentioned being their apparent violation of compositionality, their difficulty accommodating semantic externalism, and the overly fine conception of content to which their holism commits them. Since these objections are fairly standard, many readers will open *Articulating Reasons* with them in mind. Brandom does not here bring up the first problem—arguably the most theory-laden of the three. For remarks relevant to compositionality, one should consult the appendix to chapter 8 of *Making It Explicit*.<sup>1</sup> The second problem is also not mentioned explicitly in *Articulating Reasons*, but Brandom’s response is implicitly supplied: he includes among the inferences constitutive of content both language-entrance transitions (although he sometimes labels these “*non*inferential reports”—see, for example, 47) and language-exit transitions. As is made explicit in the big book, it follows that the appropriate circumstances differ both for applying ‘water’ and ‘twater’ and for acting on intentions specified using those terms, and thus that their contents differ. It has been suggested that such “long-armed” inferential conceptions of content are essentially equivalent to those that include a referential component.<sup>2</sup> So, it is crucial to Brandom’s project, given its proposed order of explanation, that he be able to cash out the dependence of inferential correctness on how things are without adverting to representational concepts not themselves explicated inferentially. *Articulating Reasons*’ final three chapters contain “some essential raw materials” (27) that indicate how this is attempted in the big book.

The third *prima facie* problem is explicitly addressed in *Articulating Reasons*—albeit in two seemingly distinct ways. Brandom notes “problems concerning both the *stability* of conceptual contents under change of belief and commitment to the propriety of various inferences, and the possibility of *communication* between individuals who endorse different claims and inferences” (29, original emphasis). One familiar sort of response to such worries is to distinguish a special class of inferences as those constitutive of content, allowing others to alter without affecting content. Thus, Sellars (1948), for example, singles out counterfactually robust material inferences. In a sense, one can see

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Brandom's *first* response (found in the introduction) as also distinguishing a special class of inferences—but not in a way that supports an (interesting) analytic/synthetic distinction. For Brandom restricts the relevant inferences to those to which someone deploying a concept is thereby *committed*. Such inferences are not necessarily coextensive with either those the person is disposed to draw or those she explicitly endorses. Adapting the usage of Hart (1961, 155–599), *conceptions*—such dispositions and endorsements—can change over time and vary across individuals without any change or variation in conceptual content. Thus, Brandom writes that these “concerns are rendered much less urgent ... if one thinks of concepts as *norms* determining the *correctness* of various moves” (29).<sup>3</sup>

It's doubtful, however, that this first response alone will render the concerns of those skeptical of inferentialism much less urgent. First, they will want to know what, if not the actual dispositions and attitudes of concept users, determines these inferential commitments—and determines them, moreover, in a manner whose explication requires no reliance on representational properties considered antecedently intelligible. Brandom, in fact, does see conceptual normativity as instituted by attitudes of concept users, albeit in such a manner that concept users can be thereby bound in ways that transcend those attitudes. Working this out is among the major projects of *Making It Explicit*. Aspects of it appear in *Articulating Reasons*—most explicitly in the final section of the book's final chapter.

Second, they will point out that problems concerning cross-temporal and cross-personal communication seem to survive the move to *normative* inferentialism. One way this might be pushed is via cases where one person (or, person-slice, in intrapersonal, cross-temporal cases) *lacks* a concept another possesses, the idea being that grasping a new concept can expand the inferences to which one is committed. Simplifying, we might imagine that X and Y agree completely about water, except in respects following from the fact that X, lacking the concept of H<sub>2</sub>O, cannot even formulate the H<sub>2</sub>O-claims that Y infers from her water-beliefs. It can seem nevertheless that X and Y can communicate, as well as agree or disagree, about a wide variety of claims involving one and the same water-concept, such as that water quenches thirst. Brandom, however, might reject the implicit premise that X cannot be committed to inferences involving concepts he does not possess. Whether it's plausible to hold, say, that pre-1750 'water'-users shared my concept, though not my conception, depends on the details of the story, referred to above, about how their attitudes institute norms that outrun them.

Another way this might be pushed is via the holistic, perspectival nature of much reasoning, something Brandom emphasizes himself. What a claim containing some concept commits one to depends on one's other commitments, on what collateral information can serve as auxiliary hypotheses. Mere differences in perceptual circumstances, for instance, can thus leave X and Y with dif-

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ferent inferential commitments and thus—even according to the *normative* inferentialist—different concepts. Here’s where it would seem that Brandom wants to offer a *second* response to the prima facie problem of overly fine content. In chapter 5, Brandom argues that an account of the inferential role of *de re* attitude ascriptions allows him to make explicit how language users deploying different concepts can nonetheless take themselves to be entering claims *about* the same thing. It seems the position is thus that we should *accept* these fine individuation conditions: the inferentialist explication of the representational aspect of concept use reveals a shared capacity to navigate *distinct* cognitive perspectives so as to identify agreement as to *reference*, and this provides sufficient stability for communication. Again, this is discussed at greater length in *Making It Explicit*.

I should close by dispelling the impression my brief comments might otherwise leave that *Articulating Reasons* frustrates, serving the bone without much meat. There is a tremendous amount to sink one’s teeth into. That it also whets the appetite for more just makes it a well-prepared first course.

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### References

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is meant as a service to those inclined to press the point, not as a criticism of an omission.

<sup>2</sup> See Block 1986, 636.

<sup>3</sup> This formulation is, I believe, a bit loose. There are, for example, concepts we ought to reject—Brandom discusses Dummett’s (1973) example ‘Boche’—precisely because the commitments that come in tow with their use are *incorrect*.