Brandom Beleaguered

1. Preliminaries

Brandom begins by distinguishing between two 'explanatory strategies' one might pursue in attempting to understand the metaphysics of Intentionality:

Either one proceeds 'bottom up', beginning with an account of 'what it is for something to represent something else: paradigmatically what it is for a singular term to pick out an object [in effect, with a theory of word reference] and then proceeds to an account of the propositional content expressed by sententially shaped or labeled representations [in effect, a compositional theory of the content of sentences];

Or one proceeds `top down', adopting 'a semantically and categorically converse strategy [which]…starts with a notion of the propositions expressed by whole sentences…[and then] seeks to understand the contributions made to the specification of such [sentential] contents by the subsentential expressions deployed in the sentences that express them' (2005, p. XXX).

We take it that Brandom's sense of the geography is that our way of proceeding is more less the first and his is more or less the second. But we think this way of describing the situation is both unclear and misleading, and we want to have this out right at the start.

Our problem is that we don't know what `you start with' means either in formulations like `you start with the content of words and proceed to the content of sentences' or in formulations like `you start with the content of sentences and you proceed to the content of words.' Brandom's official view seems to be that he's talking about *explanatory* priorities (see the preceding quote); but we think that can't really be what he has in mind, and we can't find any alternative interpretation that seems plausible.

Speaking just for ourselves, we're inclined towards a relatively pragmatic view of explanation; what explanation we should `start with' depends, inter alia, on what it's an explanation *of* and whom it's an explanation *for.* But, in any case, we would have thought that explanatory priority is of more than heuristic interest only if it reflects a priority *of some other kind*: ontological, semantical, psychological or whatever. In talking about what one `starts with', Brandom *must* be claiming more than that exposition is facilitated by prioritizing

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word meaning over sentence meaning or vice versa. The question is: *what does the more amount to?*

Qua `bottom up` theorists, we think something like this: for non-idiomatic expressions in productive languages, the meaning of a sentence is *ontologically dependent* on the meaning of its subsentential constituents. This is to say, at the very least, that in such languages the sentences have the contents that they do because their constituent expressions have the contents *they* do, and not vice versa. In fact, we hold this principle in a very strong form; on the one hand, the meaning of a sentence S in a language L must be *computable by algorithm* from the meanings of its constituents on pain of L being unproductive or S being idiomatic.[1] On the other hand, we know of no reason why it should be possible (algorithmically or otherwise) to recover the meanings of the constituents of S from the meaning of S.[2] (Mutatis mutandis, we think that there could be minds that are able to `think of' but aren't able to `think that'; concepts are prior to judgments in much the same way as word content is prior to sentence content.)

There actually is a reason why we're fussing about this. Namely, that sentence meaning might be *ontologically* dependent on word meaning even if the order of explanatory priority is the other way around when what is to be explained is (for example) language learning, or translation, or comprehension. In fact, we think that the (radical) interpretation/translation of languages (assuming that there is any sense to such notions; see our `Is Radical Interpretation Possible?') probably *is* sentence-first; that language learning may be; and that understanding sentences is probably a complex mixture of both.) But, in our view, *none of this bears at all* on the direction of the ontological dependency between sentence meanings and constituent meanings.[3] It is a bad idea to confuse semantics with the

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[1] Requiring that there be an *algorithmic* procedure that computes sentence meanings from word meanings (plus syntax) is requiring quite a lot. But we see no other way of ensuring that (under appropriate idealization) a speaker/hearer of L is ipso facto able to understand any sentence of L.

[2] If, for example, you agree with paradigm top/down theorists like Quine and/or Davidson that there is some sense in which sentences are the smallest semantically evaluable linguistic expressions, then it follows that there is no function from the meaning of sentences to the meanings of their constituents. And, even if (like us) you don't agree with Quine and Davidson, it's very plausible that there are always lots of ways in which the meaning of a sentence could be, as it were, distributed over the meaning of its constituents. Consider `John loves Mary' under the interpretation where `John' refers to Mary, `Mary; refers to John, and `loves' expresses the relation *x is loved by y.* The moral is that (assuming the usual arguments that connect productivity with compositionality) the semantics of a sentence must be determined by the semantics of its constituents, *but the converse doesn't follow.*

[3] We're much attracted by conceptual atomism, according to which `tree' could mean what it does even if there were no sentences (a fortiori, no sentence meanings). But the sentence

epistemology of interpretation/translation; and it is a bad idea to confuse semantics with the psychology of learning, and it is a bad idea to confuse semantics with the psychology of language production/comprehension. All that being so, it's important to get clear on which of these it is that is being explained *before* one decides whether the explanation should start from the top or from the bottom.

Here's what we take to be the ground-rule: Brandom has to show that (and how) word meanings might be ontologically dependent on sentence meanings (rather than vice versa) in a language that's productive and systematic. We don't think he can show that because we don't think it's true. In any case, we will argue that nothing in his `Inferentialism and Some of its Challenges' makes the contrary opinion plausible.

It goes without saying that nobody has a worked out semantics for any natural language or for any substantial fragment thereof. But, like many other philosophers for whom Sellars is a major influence, Brandom holds that a Gentzen-style semantics of the canonical `logical terms' is in some sense a model for lexical/conceptual analysis at large. The basic idea is that the logical terms are clear cases of expressions whose content can be specified by the rules of introduction and elimination that control their behavior in inferences. For example, the `introduction rule' for `&' is perhaps[4] `P, Q → P&Q'; the its elimination rule' is maybe `P&Q → P, Q'. The following passage is characteristic:

> A top down strategy can look to the contents of logical concepts as providing the key to understanding conceptual content generally. Here the idea is to generalize Gentzen-style specifications of the meanings of logical connectives by pairs of introduction and elimination rules to notions of the circumstances and consequences of application of an expression. (Brandom 2005, p. XXX)

There are, of course, well-known problems for this project. One is that it's thoroughly unclear how it is to be generalized to apply to non-logical terms (or, for the matter, even to quasi-logical terms like `most'). What, for example, is the `introduction rule' for `tree'? (We

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'trees pollute the atmosphere' couldn't mean what it does but that `tree' means *tree*. (There are caveats: it's assumed that English is productive and systematic and that `trees pollute the atmosphere' is not idiomatic.

[4] The caveat is because there are, obviously, indefinitely many equivalent principles of inference that could be used to introduce/eliminate `&', and it's unclear how one is supposed to choose among them; or what is supposed to be the consequence of one's doing so.

do hope it's not some procedure for identifying trees as such since we're that bit tired of verificationism.) Correspondingly, what is the 'elimination rule' for `tree'? (We do hope it's not something like a conceptually sufficient condition for being a tree since we doubt that there are any conceptually sufficient conditions for being a tree (except, of course, question-begging ones like `x is a tree iff x is a tree').) [5]

We're also not clear what Brandom thinks about the status of utterly contingent inferences like `if it's a plant in my backyard and it's taller than 6 ft., then it's a tree'. He does apparently endorse the idea that '[the concept constitutive inferences] must include…those that are *materially* [*sic*] correct'. But what he gives as examples are two he borrows from Sellars: 'a is to the east of b → b is to the west of a' and 'lightening is seen → thunder will be heard soon.' We find this puzzling since the first of these strikes us as arguably conceptually necessary (whatever that means) and the second strikes as arguably nomologically necessary (whatever *that* means). So even if we granted that both are concept constitutive, we would still want to know whether clear cases of purely contingent hypotheticals are too; and, if they aren't, how Brandom proposes to do without an analytic/synthetic distinction. [6]

At one point, Brandom (still following Sellars) suggests that the concept constitutive inferences are the ones that support counterfactuals. But this can't be right unless, at a minimum, the counterfactuals in question are themselves supported by nomological necessities; and the notion of nomological necessity is, of course, not available for use in reconstructing the notion of modality. (Cf. `The train is scheduled to arrive at 6.00' supports 'If the

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[5] Sometimes Brandom writes as though anything you believe about trees can appear as a clause in an entrance/exit rule for `tree'. But we think he can't mean that since, if he does, the distinction between the *constuitive* inferences and the others simply disappears. (And, of course, the holism problems come back with a rush). In fact, there's a special embarrassment for anyone who adheres to the Gentzen story about `and'; namely, if *every* `and'-involving inference is meaning constitutive, then what becomes of the privileged status of the Gentzen rules? What doesn't (eg.) `if there are trees and chairs, then there are chairs' also count as constitutive of `and'? (Brandom might say: `logical concepts are different;' except that it's precisely the logical concepts that he proposes to use as models for the others.)

[6] In a footnote, Brandom suggests that *we* think that the basic objection to abandoning the analytic/synthetic distinction is that doing so invites holism. But it's not. The basic objection is that there isn't any serious account of how there could be such a thing as purely conceptual or purely linguistic truth. Consider, to take one example among a multitude, the idea that linguistic truths are the ones that follow from the `criteria' for applying a term. One then wants to know what makes some principle of use `criterial' and the only we've heard is the circular suggestion that the truths criteria warrant are ipso facto linguistic. This is, of course, a classically Quinean style of argument; and, to our knowledge, nobody knows how to refute it.

train had been on time, it would have arrived by now.' But, surely, it's not concept constitutive for any of the concepts it deploys.) Also, and more important, it follows from this proposal that 'if we are wrong about the laws of nature, then not only have we got the facts wrong, we are using *incorrect* concepts…every new law…brings with it a change in our concepts' (Brandom 2005, p. XXX).

We don't know why Brandom says that; if it were true, it looks like discovering that law L holds for Xs changes the objects of investigation from Xs, which are not constituted by their falling under L, to Ys (which are). Now, maybe there are *some* such cases (we don't believe a word of that, but still….), maybe very theoretical concepts are sometimes defined by the laws that contain them. But, surely that can't be true in the general case? Surely discovering the specific gravity of water was discovering the specific gravity of *water* and not of some other thing*?* Anyhow, what use would such a radically relativized notion of content be in theorizing about languages or minds? And, if a notion of content isn't useful for theorizing about languages or minds, what makes it a notion of content at all?

The basic problem in this area isn't, however, the holism that Brandom's suggestions invite; it's rather that he seems to want to be on both sides of the analytic/synthetic distinction at the same time. On the one hand, he would like to agree with Quine that there's no principled difference between empirical and conceptual truth; but, on the other hand, he wants to endorse the idea that nomological necessities are concept constitutive. His problem is that the kind of necessities that a notion of conceptual content underwrites are, ipso facto, *conceptual* necessities; and nomological necessities aren't conceptual.

We've been wondering, so far, how the treatment of `and' and the like in `Gentzen style' inferential role theories of meaning might generalize from the logical vocabulary to the rest of the lexicon; for example to `tree'. As far as we can see, it simply doesn't; not, anyhow, lacking a viable analytic/synthetic distinction. (To be sure, having a viable analytic/synthetic distinction really would make everything different, so would having the philosopher's stone, but we aren't holding our breath.)

But there is a stronger point to make; namely that if, as we suppose, Brandom understands his Gentzen-style analysis of content as providing a *possession condition* for `and' (more generally, for the concept of conjunction), then the treatment would seem to be circular

on the face of it.[7] So, for example, we're told that 'to define the inferential role of an expression `&'…one specifies that anyone who is committed to P and committed to Q, is thereby to count also as committed as to P&Q, and that anyone who is committed to P&Q is thereby committed both to P and to Q' (*Art Reasons* (62)). But since expressions for conjunction (viz. `&` and `and`) appear on both sides of each equation, it couldn't be that Brandom's definition of `and' is what is known by someone who has the word (/concept) and in virtue of which he understands the word (/grasps the concept). Nor, for the same reason, could it be what is *learned* when someone learns the word (/concept).

Notice that the looming circularity can't be cured by switching from a `knowing that' view of concept possession to a `knowing how' view of concept possession, though precisely this tactic is very widely endorsed by philosophers who think of `definitions in use' as paradigms of inferential role accounts of content. Here, for example, is a quotation from a recent paper by Boghossian that gives the spirit of the thing:

> Surely, it isn't compulsory to think of someone's following a rule R with respect to an expression as consisting in his explicitly stating that rule in so many words….On the contrary, it seems far more plausible to construe x's following rule R with respect to e as consisting in some sort of fact about x's behavior with e.[8]

So it isn't, after all, that knowing `and' is knowing its entrance and exit rules; it will do for there to be 'some sort of fact' in virtue of which one's behavior (say, in drawing conjunction-involving inferences) *accords with* a Gentzen-style definition of `and'.

The virtue of this suggestion is that it avoids the circularity that such definitions in use court when they are co-opted for use as theories of concept possession; `and' doesn't come into the formulation of the rules for conjunction because having conjunction doesn't involve explicitly formulating any rules. We suspect that Brandom feels considerable sympathy with this sort of proposal; we'll see presently that he says much the same sort of thing in his discussion of linguistic communication. And his relentless emphasis on the important of *practice* in establishing content would certainly makes it natural for him to do so. Nor does Brandom appear to have any other alternative on offer with which to reply to the kind of worries about circularity that we've been raising.

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[7] This is hardly news; see Quine (Two Dogmas).
[8] For more of much the same, see Dummett (19xx), Peacocke (19xx) etc.

In any case, theories of content elaborated in terms of definitions in use actually comport very badly with the sort of pragmatism that wants to identify concept possession with some species of know-how. The point is straightforward. 'Acts in accord with R' is transparent at the `R' position; if your behavior accords with rule R, it thereby accords with any rule equivalent to R. Indeed, your behavior can perfectly well accord with (conform to, etc.) rule R even though you aren't following any rule at all. By contrast, the definition in use treatment wants to *privilege* certain rules as the ones the grasp of which constitutes the possession of the connective.[9] Well, one can't have it both ways: `grasps R' is *opaque* to substitutivity of equivalents at the R position. ``x grasps R' and `R iff Q'' does *not* imply that grasping Q is sufficient for grasping R. To put the point less in the formal mode, `knowing how' theories have an awful time trying to cope with the Intentionality of the attitudes. That's not exactly news either.

Like other kinds of definition based semantics, the definition in use theory is intrinsically intellectualistic;[10] its natural interpretation is that to have the concept is to know its definition. But, alas, the exit and entrance rules for `and' make use of the concept of conjunction and so circularity transpires when they are considered as a semantic analysis of that concept. By contrast, the `knowing how' account of concept possession avoids the circularity but fails to distinguish any particular formulation of the rules as constituting the content of the concept. This is a dilemma, and we don't know of any way out of it. Nor, we suspect, does Brandom.

2. Which comes first, thought or language?

As far as we can tell, Brandom simply takes for granted that (what Searle calls) `original Intentionality` inheres in public languages, the intentionality of mental states being, in some sense, derived. This is an issue over which floods of tears have already been shed; we don't propose to revive it here except to stress one brief point: If original Intentionality inheres in public languages, it must be possible fully to describe the procedures by which a child obtains mastery of its first language *without invoking the child's intentional states* (including what he knows, believes, hypothesizes, observes, etc). Brandom doesn't anywhere rise to this challenge, as far as we know. Nor, for that matter, does any other philosopher we've come across. (Wittgenstein suggests that first language learning is somehow a matter of `training'; but he says nothing intelligible about how training

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[9] One way to think about this would be that the definition in use for term T constitutes a special subset of the necessary inferences in which T is implicated; namely, the one's that are both necessary *and analytic*.

[10] In the sense of that term that Ryle appeals to in *The Concept of Mind*

could lead to learning in a creature that doesn't already have a mind.) In fact, this sort of problem arises quite generally for Brandom. He is forever attributing to speaker/hearers commitment to norms, communicative intentions, interpretations and the like all of which are supposed to be constitutive of linguistic competence. But, according to his own view, these could only be properties of creatures that have *already* acquired a linguistic competence. So, a child can't undertake to learn the ambient language by inquiring into the norms to which the speech community is `committed' to: 'undertaking', `inquiring' and the like are intentional states; hence not ones that can mediate the acquisition of a child's first public language. This is, to be sure, a very old hat; but it's one thing to have grown bored with a problem, quite another to have solved it.

3. Communication and Psychology

As Brandom rightly remarks, a standard objection to inferentialist theories of content is that (lacking a motivated analytic/synthetic distinction; how *that* does keep coming up!) they lead to a kind of meaning holism that would presumably undermine the possibility of linguistic communication. How can we use the form of words `It's raining' to communicate to you our belief that it's raining unless the world `raining' means the same to all of us? And, how can it mean the same to all of us if, on the one hand, its meaning is determined by its inferential role and, on the other hand, no two people could conceivably agree on all the inferences in which `raining' occurs (to say nothing of all the `correct inferences` in which it occurs)? We do think that anyone who runs an `inferential role' semantics is in need of a serious answer to this question. Brandom floats two or three well-known possibilities, none of which strikes us as remotely tenable.

3.1 Maybe similarity of inferential role is sufficient for communication:

Consider (Brandom's example) the question: what do Brandom and Rutherford share when they share the words (/concepts) `lightning` and `electron`? Well, it's certainly not the precise inferential role of the concepts (see preceding); but also, arguably, it's not any *part* of their inferential roles. That's because, although Brandom and Rutherford may both go around saying things like `lightning is made of electrons and electrons are subatomic particles', it would beg the question to take for granted that when they do so, they mean the same thing by 'electron', `subatomic` or `particle': Presumably they don't entirely share the entire inferential roles of these words either. Brandom is quite aware that this sort of argument iterates; so what has he got left? What does the putative similarity between the

meanings of Brandom's and Rutherford's terms `lightning' and `electron' consist in?

3.2 *Maybe just sharing the* sounds *helps*

> .…we do share the words, at least in the sense of noise- or sign-design types. When Rutherford sees lightning, he, like me, is committed to the correctness of applying 'electron' … (Brandom 2005, XXX)

True enough, but does it really help? First, it's no use if Rutherford happens to be talking Latin. Second, it implies (quite incorrectly) that the notion of *same word* can be cashed without taking out loans on semantics (what if it happens that `lightning' or `electron' is ambiguous in English)? Third, it seems to beg the question of what counts as *applying* a word. Just *saying* `lightening' when there's a flash in the sky doesn't constitute an application of the word to the flash.[11] In fact, Brandom sums up such points correctly:

> although some kind of similarity metric is induced by counting the noises that express the conclusions two interlocutors would draw from, or the promissory claims they would count as evidence for, claims expressed using 'electron', still that is only because we have restricted ourselves exclusively to nonsemantic properties of their utterances. So nothing like shared meaning is thereby underwritten (Brandom 2005, XXX).

Quite so, and one might have thought that observation would end the discussion; but no:

> Here one might think of Davidson's account of communication as interpretation. Davidsonian interpretation is explicitly

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[11] In fact Brandom owes an account of `applying a concept' that doesn't itself rest on a prior notion of reference. Sometimes he comes perilously close to circularity in this respect too. 'a[ ] semantic theory that begins with 'that' intentionality must eventually explain its relation to 'of' intentionality in any case—must proceed from an account of *senses expressed* to one of *objects* (and sets of objects) *denoted*. So it is open to any theory that adopts this order of semantic explanation to adopt Quine's strategy of appealing to what is talked or thought about to secure an account of the nature of communication' (Brandom 2005, XXX). But this really is question-begging. Any theory that has an account of communication *that doesn't rely on* notions like applying a concept, reference, coreference and the like is of course free to use the notion of reference in its account of communication. But it's part of the present issue whether Brandom does have such an independent account. For example, it's not clear that the cash value of the idea that Rutherford and I both `apply' `lightning' to lightning isn't just that we both use the one to refer to the other. If so, then a 'top down theory' mustn't appeal to our consensus about what we apply the word to in explaining what it is that makes my use of `lightning' relevantly similar to his.

understood as consisting in mapping the noises made by the interpretive target onto the noises made by the interpreter (Brandom 2005, XXX).[11]

But, first, this strikes us as an extraordinary misreading of Davidson who, by our lights, takes himself to be answering some such question as: `how could you get from observations of speakers' behaviors to a semantics for their language?' An answer to that question is *not* in any interesting respect, an account of *communication* between speakers. An account of communication takes for granted a speaker and hearer who *share* a language; the issue is how they can use the shared language to exchange information between them. Since the notion of communication (in a language) presupposes a notion of same/similar language, you can't equate theories of interpretation with theories of communication. Any attempt to do so is doomed to circularity.

Also, by the way: Does anybody *still* think that there is any such thing as a theory of (radical) translation/interpretation? Or that if there were, it would illuminate questions in semantics or in the metaphysics of meaning? Interpretation and translation, as Davidson and Quine understood them, are to be construed in *epistemological* terms (Davidson is explicitly trying to answer questions like what *evidence* about the sayings of L-speakers is available to a radical interpreter/translator of L.) What has the epistemology of interpretation got to do with the metaphysic of content?[12]

3.3 Maybe similarity of application helps.

Here's a third way that Brandom hopes to flesh out the notion of content similarity. It's how Brandom sums up his `similar but not identical' reply to the stand off between the theory of communication and holism about meaning.

> …Rutherford and I are both disposed to respond to a bolt of lightning by applying the term 'electron', and to respond to [CHECK THIS QUOTE] applying the expression 'high voltage, high amperage electron flow' to a bare piece of metal by avoiding contact with it. These language entry and language exit moves, no less than the language-language ones, also give us something important in common, even when described at a so-far-subsemantic level, that is, in a nonsemantic vocabulary. I do not see why the structures so-

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[12] There is, in any case, considerable irony in the spectacle of Brandom, the arch inferentialist, appealing to Davidson, the arch Tarskian, in hopes of saving his bacon. Brandom's appeal to Davidson here sounds to us a lot like panic.

described do not underwrite a perfectly intelligible notion of partially shared, or merely similar inferential roles' (Brandom 2005, XXX).

That is: what Brandom and Rutherford have in common is: (1) the sounds they make when they say `electron'; (2) overlapping conditions of application; and (3) shared behavioral responses. Maybe, if one were to grant all of these one might manage to convince oneself that some useful semantic concept can be reconstructed in terms of them. But the issue is moot since, notice, concepts like `apply' `avoid' and of course, `respond' and `behavior' are themselves all dripping with intentionality; as far as anybody knows, they simply *can't* be reconstructed in a 'sub-semantic' vocabulary . You do not apply a word to a thing by making a sound in the presence of the thing (see above); and not to touch a hot stove is not thereby to *avoid* touching it. These anti-behaviorist chestnuts were, we thought, kinds of points that became common ground in consequence of Chomsky's remarks about Skinner. Why does Brandom feel free to ignore them?[13]

It seems to us that lurking behaviorism is pervasive in Brandom's text; frankly, we are appalled. At one point, Brandom says (speaking of linguistic communication rather than concept possession) 'the capacity to understand each other is the practical ability to navigate across the gulf between doxastic perspectives created by the effect of differing collateral commitments on the inferential significance of one noise in the mouth that utters it and the ear that hears it' (Brandom 2005, XXX). No it's not. The capacity for (linguistic) understanding consists in your being able to tell me (e.g. in English) what you have in mind, and and my being able to understand what you tell me. We take this to be simply a truism. Does Brandom really propose to flout it?

The long and short of all this is: Brandom, like so many others, thinks that maybe he can do without a notion of analytic equivalence –in fact, without *any* notion of identity of meaning – because some notion of similarity of meaning will do instead. But the notion of similarity of meaning is *utterly* without explication; and it is no less in need of explication than the notion of identity of meaning which it is supposed to replace. Nobody has such a notion, and nobody has any idea where to get one. The prevailing proposals (including

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[13] Likewise, whether one avoids charged wires depends (not just on your linguistic competences but) on your intentions with respect to the wires (perhaps one has it in mind to turn off the current.) Must we really go through all that again? Why does philosophy perseverate so?

Brandom's) suffer from vacuity, or circularity, or begging of the question, or all of these at once. It is very naughty to pay your debts by writing checks that you know perfectly well that you can't cash.

4. Compositionality

It's important – we think it's *centrally* important – whether an Inferentialist can tell a convincing story about the compositionality of natural languages. One reason it matters so much is that the idea of combining some variety of an inferential role theory of meaning with a use-theory of concept possession is by no means proprietary to semantics in the Gentzen tradition. In fact, it's a large part of the mainstream of 20th century philosophy of language/mind. Try to imagine Ryle, or Wittgenstein, or Sellars without it. But it turns out that, prima facie at least, `knowing how' doesn't compose.

You can know how to recognize good examples of pets (in favorable circumstances) and how to recognize good examples of fish (in favorable circumstances) without having a clue how to recognize good examples of pet fish in *any* circumstances (for example, because the conditions that are favorable for recognizing fish may screen the conditions that are favorable for recognizing pets; or vice versa). We think, and we have said loudly, frequently, but to little avail, that this line of argument generalizes to the conclusion that there can be *no* epistemic conditions on concept possession. If that's right, the question how an Inferentialist can account for compositionality is seen to be *the* crux that he must resolve. But nothing Brandom says inclines us to think that he is able to do so.

Brandom's discussion of compositionality starts by quoting a remark of ours: We say that 'productivity demands compositionality, and compositionality implies the priority of subsentential semantics to sentential semantics.'[14] To which Brandom offers the following reply 'The first of these claims ought to be granted (at least for a suitably broad understanding of 'compositionality'). But the second is surely too strong. Compositionality does not imply semantic atomism, but at most what Dummett calls 'molecularism'. A molecularist order of semantic explanation starts with sentences, and so contrasts both with fully holist theories, which start with whole idioms or theories, from above, on the one hand, and atomist theories, which start with subsentential expressions such as singular terms and predicates, from below'.

We continue to reserve the right not to understand the talk about where one `starts'. But we quite agree that a tenable molecularism

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[14] 'Brandom's Burdens', *op. cit.* p. 80.

would solve all sorts of problems to which Inferentialism is otherwise prone. So, in particular, if molecularism is true, then the content of a concept would not be sensitive to *all* the inferences it's involved in, (or even to all the `correct` inferences it's involved in) but only to the ones that belong to the same `molecule' that the concept does. However, we know of no proposal for a molecularist inferentialism that doesn't presuppose a robust analytic/synthetic distinction (that again!); invariably the inferences that constitute a molecule are distinguished from the others by their analyticity. Even Dummett, with whom the talk of semantic molecules seems to have originated, acknowledges its dependence on a/s. So then, we are prepared to grant Brandom his holist/molecularist distinction, but only if he acknowledges that he's in debt for an a/s distinction. We take this part of the dialectic too to have been old hat for decades now.

There's a lot more, but we give up.[15] In fact, we sometimes rather doubt that Brandom means by `compositionality' anything like what we have in mind. For example: 'since what inferences are good—and so, on this line, what our words mean and what content our thoughts have—depends on how the world actually is (for instance, on what color ripe Macintosh apples are), we may have to go out into the world to find out what follows from or is evidence for or against novel claims.' Now we think it's right that it's not semantics but *how the world is* that determines what is evidence for what. (Indeed, we're surprised to find that Brandom agrees. He must find it tricky to square this sort of view with his idea that justification relations among sentences are constitutive of the *content* of their constituents. How do you find out that `apples are red' is justified unless you already know what `apples are red' means?') But, in any case, *the whole point* about compositionality –the very phenomenon that it was supposed to explain—is that (demonstratives and the like aside) fluent speaker/hearers *don't* have to go out into the world to find out what the sentences of their language mean; what they go out into the world for is to find out which of the sentences are *true.* That apples are red is something you determine by looking at apples; or by sending a friend out to look at them for you. But that 'apples are red'

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[15] In particular, we don't propose to work through the details of how substitution considerations are supposed to isolate singular terms. Brandom says he's been misinterpreted by his critics, and we're prepared to believe him. One point in passing, however. Brandom says 'Fodor and Lepore [p. 476],… object to the denial that there can be systematically asymmetric substitution relations among singular terms, as there can be among predicates, that 'Father was at Magdalen,' entails 'Father was at Oxford,', but not vice versa. But this looks like a counterexample only if one drops the crucial initial quantifier from the claim. For there to be an asymmetric relation of the kind asserted, it must be the case that the inference from P(Magdalen) to P(Oxford), but not the converse, hold for *every* predicate P, not just for some specific one.' But that can't be right. `every predicate [of English]' subtends an infinite set and, we suppose, Brandom intends that his procedure for isolating singular terms is to be finitely executable.

says that apples are red is the common knowledge of every speaker of English. Meaning is about not truth but truth *conditions*.

We're tempted beyond bearing to an ad hominem remark. We think that Brandom, like most of the philosophical community, simply takes it for granted that somebody (Sellars? Wittgenstein? Davidson? Quine? Putnam? Frege? Dummett? Rorty? Block? Harman? Boghosian? Heidegger(!))? has shown beyond reasonable cavil that there is no serious prospect for a theory of concepts that embraces an atomistic referentialism; and that the only serious alternative is some sort of Inferential Role Semantics. That being so, Brandom is (perfectly reasonably) prepared to go ahead with the project of constructing an Inferential Role Semantics without, at this stage, worrying a lot about the details; and to do so even it means flirting with the analytic/synthetic distinction. Well, it's hard not to be impressed by the extent to which Inferential Role Semantics is the consensus view, not just in philosophy but also in cognitive science. But we'd be a lot more impressed if all the attempts to construct an Inferential Role Semantics (over going on at least a hundred years now) hadn't been such abject and total failures. There isn't, so far, *any* known candidate for an inferential role analysis of *any* concept; not, anyhow, one that meets reasonable constraints on accounts of concept possession and individuation. It must be nice to have so many people on your side, but you don't win a war just by assembling an army; you also have to win a battle or two.

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