Meaning and Normativity in Brandom's Inferentialism

Chris Fraser

Department of Philosophy
Chinese University of Hong Kong

Abstract

Robert Brandom contends that meaning is a normative concept, in that the role of the notion of meaning or conceptual content is to determine the correct use of words or application of concepts. Hence he proposes that an adequate account of intentional content can be given solely in terms of normative or deontic concepts, without appeal to semantic notions such as truth or reference. Yet meaning clearly is not overtly normative, in the way that concepts such as 'good' or 'just' are, and statements about meaning or belief are not obviously evaluations, prescriptions, or expressions of rules. So in what sense is meaning normative? And given that sense, can intentional content indeed be explained by appeal to deontic notions alone? I argue that meaning is normative only in the weak, instrumental sense that it provides norms to guide speakers in making true assertions. The claim that meaning is normative is thus tenable only if supplemented by an independent account of the concept of assertion. I then argue that Brandom's attempt to provide such an account using only normative concepts is unsuccessful, because it is unable to distinguish the norms that institute assertions from other, broader norms that apply to speech acts generally. This conclusion

suggests that one of the fundamental tenets of Brandom's inferentialism is mistaken: A purely normative metalanguage is not sufficient to explain meaning.

Keywords: meaning, normativity, inferentialism, Brandom, philosophy of language

I. Introduction: Meaning as a normative concept

A fundamental premise of Robert Brandom's philosophy of language and mind is that "the concept of meaning is a normative concept."[1] For Brandom, the theoretical role of the concept of meaning or conceptual content is to determine what the *correct* use of words or application of concepts is. Meanings determine how words *ought* to be used; conceptual content determines how, given that we use certain concepts, we are *committed* to apply them. Indeed, for Brandom, "attributing an intentional state is attributing a normative status" (1994: 16–17). Beliefs and other intentional states bring with them commitments and entitlements: Holding a certain belief makes it right or wrong, in some sense, to say or do certain things.

Brandom takes the normativity of intentional content to be a fundamental datum, an aspect of intentionality that any adequate theory of mind and meaning must explain. Yet to many philosophers, Brandom's starting premise is not at all self-evident. At the very least, statements about meaning or belief are not overtly normative. Suppose I say that "food" means "materials consumed for nourishment," or that "food" refers to things people eat, or that Bob believes that some Chinese food is spicy. None of these statements is obviously an evaluation, a prescription, or an expression of a rule. Rather, they seem to be descriptive facts about English and about Bob. It is obvious that intentional content has a representational dimension — a property of directedness or aboutness — but not nearly so obvious that it has a normative one.

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[1] Brandom (1997: 193). See also Brandom (2001: 589) and (1994: 16–18).

Brandom would agree. He is not contending that meaning is explicitly normative, nor that statements about meaning, such as "*Shí wù* means 'food' in Chinese", are covert prescriptions or expressions of rules about how to use language. Rather, his point is that the role in our conceptual economy of the notion of the meaning of a linguistic expression or speech act or the intentional content of a state is to determine the normative, pragmatic significance of that expression, act, or state: to determine when it is appropriate or correct to utter that expression, perform that act, or enter that state and what the consequences of doing so are (1994:18). Meaning, or more broadly, intentional content, determines proprieties of use — when it is correct to apply a concept and what correctly follows from applying it (1994:18).

No one disputes that language use and belief are governed by norms — that there are such things as correct and incorrect utterances and beliefs, and that, for example, it is an error to assert that it's raining when there isn't a cloud in the sky or to believe that a color patch is both completely red and completely green. Brandom's thesis, however, is not merely that utterances and beliefs are governed by norms, and thus subject to assessment as to their correctness or rationality. It is that intentional content is *essentially* normative. The central, driving idea of his philosophical project is that if content is normative in this way, then it should be possible to explicate intentionality, and with it the concepts of meaning, reference, truth, belief, and intention, by appeal exclusively to antecedently identifiable normative or deontic concepts — specifically, in his model, the concepts of commitment (a form of obligation), entitlement (permission), and propriety (correctness). Brandom proposes that these concepts enable us to describe the pattern of proper use of linguistic expressions. This pattern then provides a way

of characterizing the expressions' meaning and, accordingly, the content of the intentional states they express (see, e.g., 1994: 160).

Brandom's theory of meaning couples an inferentialist semantics with a normative pragmatics. On his view, which he calls "strong inferentialism," the meaning of a linguistic expression (and, analogously, the content of an intentional state) is constituted by the place of the expression (or state) in a network of relations representing the circumstances and consequences of its application. These relations are of two types, inferential and noninferential. Inferential relations link the expression to other expressions for which its application can be a reason or whose application can be reasons for applying it. Noninferential relations link the expression to the physical circumstances that, through perception, prompt agents to apply it (as when the sight of a coffee shop prompts a speaker to say "There's a coffee shop!") and the actions that follow from its application (as when the agent says "I want a cup of coffee" and then goes into the shop to buy one).[2] Brandom refers to the relations between expressions, states, and actions standing in such a network as their "inferential articulation."

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[2] More precisely, Brandom defines strong inferentialism as the view that an account of the inferential articulation of linguistic expressions "broadly construed" is sufficient to explain conceptual content. Strong inferentialism contrasts with "weak" inferentialism, the view that inferential articulation is merely necessary, not sufficient, for conceptual content, and "hyperinferentialism," the view (which he rejects) that inferential articulation narrowly construed is sufficient to yield conceptual content. A "narrow" construal of inferential articulation is one that includes only the inferential circumstances and consequences of application of expressions used to make claims. A "broad" construal, on the other hand, expands the notion of inferential relatedness to comprise noninferential circumstances and consequences of application, incompatibility relations between claims, and substitutional and anaphoric relations between subsentential expressions, such as terms, predicates, demonstratives, indexicals, and pronouns (1994: 131–132).

Expressions (and intentional states) may of course be related to each other by logical, or formally valid, inferences. But on Brandom's account, formally valid inferential relations are not the primary or fundamental kind of relation that ties expressions to each other. The basic relation is what, following Sellars, he calls "material inference." Material inferences are inferences that are good because of the content of the concepts involved in them, rather than only because of the form of the claims involved. Examples include the inference from "Tiger is a cat" to "Tiger is an animal" and that from "It is raining" to "The streets will be wet soon". Material inferential relations are in effect aspects of the patterns by which we use concepts, which give concepts their content. As Brandom says, they are "the kind of inference whose correctnesses determine the conceptual contents of its premises and conclusions" (2000: 52). Endorsing the relevant material inferences is part of grasping a concept; to understand the concepts of 'cat' and 'rain', for instance, one must know that cats are animals and that rain causes wet streets.

What ties expressions (and intentional states) together into material inferential relations — and relates them noninferentially to the physical environment — are the norms implicit in discursive practices, which govern the use of sentences and subsentential expressions and the relations between them. This is where normative pragmatics enters the picture. Brandom proposes that these norms can be described in terms of relations of commitment and entitlement between particular speech acts or linguistic performances, the physical environment, and actions. The commitment and entitlement relations are in turn instituted by the practical deontic attitudes of participants in discursive practices, who attribute commitments and entitlements to each other and acknowledge their own commitments and entitlements. (In the most primitive

or fundamental cases, Brandom suggests, such attitudes can be identified behaviorally by observing dispositions to punish incorrect performances or accept correct ones.)

Brandom calls this institution of normative statuses by normative attitudes a kind of 'phenomenalism' about norms. By this he means that what it is to be committed or entitled to various performances can be explained by how participants in discursive practices *take* each other to be committed or entitled. The norms established by such takings are 'socially articulated', in that the attitudes that institute the norms are not those of the agent carrying out the norm-governed performance, but those of an observer or interlocutor, who holds the agent committed to following various norms, as fixed by the observer's lights. Brandom calls this observer a 'scorekeeper' and the practice of keeping track of one's own and others' commitments and entitlements to various performances "deontic scorekeeping." Discursive deontic scorekeeping, for Brandom, is an explicit, idealized model of the implicit processes we all carry out every day in following conversations, keeping track of what we and others have claimed, and evaluating whether their claims and our own are justified.

Brandom's normative pragmatics raises many interesting questions. We might ask, for instance, whether his normative primitives are indeed conceptually prior to, or independent of, intentional concepts, so that his normative pragmatics can explain the institution of norms without appeal to intentional notions. We might also ask whether his normative phenomenalism can indeed explain the institution of at least some objective norms. I think the answer to both of these questions is probably affirmative, though I take issue with aspects of Brandom's account. Unlike Brandom, I suspect that social articulation does *not* play a central part in the story. I suspect that the leading role should go instead to a more detailed account of the constitution of what Brandom calls "reliable

differential responsive dispositions" (1994: 33, 156) and their interrelations with objects. (Brandom discusses these latter issues only briefly (1994: 331, 631), but what he has to say is so intriguing and theoretically promising that I wish he had elaborated this aspect of his position in more detail.)

Here, however, I will pass over these issues. Instead, I will focus on two aspects of the relation between Brandom's normative pragmatics and his semantic theory. I want to examine his claim that meaning is a normative concept and his contention that a normative pragmatics allows us to give an account of social practices sufficient to institute linguistic meaning and conceptual content. Specifically, I will discuss two questions:

> A. In what sense, if any, is meaning normative? Clearly meaning isn't normative in the same way that concepts such as 'good', 'just', or 'evil' are. So what exactly is the normativity of meaning?

> B. Are the normative concepts of commitment and entitlement, as instituted by the deontic attitudes of performers of discursive scorekeeping practices, indeed sufficient to explain intentionality?

The first of these is a crucial question for Brandom's approach to semantics. For as I will explain further below, only if meaning is normative in a very strong sense — not merely subject to norms, but *essentially* normative, in the sense that the facts about meaning are partly constituted by normative facts — do we have a reason to think that the normative pragmatic significance of linguistic expressions will correspond to their meaning, and thus that Brandom's deontic scorekeeping model indeed captures meaning or intentional content. The answer to this question, I think — and here I am merely rehearsing what I

take to be a widespread view — is that meaning is normative only in a weak, instrumental sense: Meaning is normative *relative to the practice of making assertions*. So the claim that meaning is normative is tenable only in light of an antecedently intelligible account of the concept of assertion. Accordingly, Brandom's project of explaining intentionality by appeal to normative concepts can succeed only if his deontic scorekeeping model has the resources to articulate a recognizable concept of assertion. To avoid circularity, this account cannot presuppose any semantic concepts, but must be grounded exclusively in deontic notions.

The conclusion for which I will argue is that Brandom's normative pragmatics fails to establish a credible concept of assertion. Consequently, the answer to my second question is negative: The concepts of commitment and entitlement do *not* seem sufficient to explain intentionality. This conclusion is tentative, for *Making It Explicit* is such a brilliant, ambitious, complex work that it would be reckless to claim outright that Brandom's inferentialism lacks the resources to resolve the concerns identified below. Nevertheless, as Brandom presents his system, I don't see that it succeeds in, as he puts it, baking an intentional cake out of purely normative ingredients. Normative attitudes are indeed *part* of the recipe for constituting intentional content, I think. But I don't see how they alone can do the job.

II. In what way is meaning normative?

Brandom holds that meaning is normative because it settles when the use of an expression is correct. As he states the point, "Using a term with a determinate meaning (using it so as to express a particular concept) is binding oneself to a norm that

determines the correctness or incorrectness of that use (along with that of many other possible uses)" (2001: 590). The theoretical explanatory job of the concept of meaning is "to settle how it would be *correct* to use words or to apply concepts" (1997: 193). Notice that Brandom does not say specifically that meanings are norms, nor that meaning is intrinsically normative. Rather, his claim is that to use a term with a certain meaning is to put oneself under the authority of a norm. He expresses this point by saying that "the consequences of attributing intentionally contentful states must be specified in normative terms" (1994: 16). Hence, he thinks, "assessments of truth…are normative assessments" (1994: 17).

Clearly, Brandom is not contending that statements about meaning or belief are explicitly normative, in the way that statements involving paradigmatically normative notions such as good, bad, right, wrong, moral, and immoral are. This leaves open several ways in which statements about meaning or intentional content might have a normative character.

(A) First, claims about meaning or belief might be implicitly intrinsically normative, in the sense that their truth is partly constituted by the truth of paradigmatic, explicitly normative claims. [3] Examples of implicitly intrinsically normative concepts include *murder, stealing,* and *valor*. We can contrast these implicitly normative concepts with the non-normative concepts of *killing, taking,* and *daring*. Murder is immoral killing; stealing is dishonest taking; valor is bravery or daring applied to a good end. Hence the facts about murder, stealing, and valor are partly constituted by the facts about what

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[3] I am adopting this rough idea of implicitly normative claims that are partly constituted by explicitly normative claims from Gideon Rosen (2001: 617).

is immoral, dishonest, or good. By contrast, the facts about killing, taking, and daring do not incorporate this sort of normative component. If intentional content is indeed partly constituted by normative facts in this way, then Brandom's normative pragmatics might be a promising way to reconstruct it.

(B) Another way in which statements about meaning or content might invoke normative standards and assessments is in the general, almost trivial sense that, like almost all activities, the use of terms in speech acts and the acquisition of beliefs are governed by norms. The idea here is that the performance of such acts or the acquisition of such states, though not intrinsically normative, is subject to evaluation according to moral, prudential, rational, or other standards. Unlike stealing, taking is not an implicitly moral concept. The facts about how I take something are not partly constituted by moral facts. But the way I take something may entail certain moral facts, such as that I have done something wrong, or I am now obliged to pay money to someone. Similarly, if I believe that this sheet of paper is white, I may be rationally obliged not to believe it is black. But the fact that belief is governed by norms does not automatically entail that the facts about meaning or belief are partly constituted by facts about norms. Just as the facts about taking are constituted entirely by non-normative ingredients, the facts about meaning and belief could be.

So a problem arises here concerning the normativity of meaning and belief. All sides will agree that the use of words and acquisition of beliefs are *governed by* norms, but not all will agree that they are partly *constituted by* norms. Clearly, if uses of terms with determinate meanings and acquisitions of belief are merely governed by norms in the way I've described, there is no reason to favor an explication of meaning in terms of a normative metalanguage. Brandom's normative approach to semantics will be *prima facie* compelling only if it can be shown

that meaning is essentially normative or that it plays an inherently normative role in either fact-stating discourse or conversation generally. That is, we need to see that part of what it is for a performance or state to have meaning or content is to be *correct* in certain circumstances, where the notion of correctness in question is clearly a normative concept (unlike the concept of truth, which is not obviously or explicitly normative).

(C) A third way to explicate the normativity of intentional content is by appeal to functional role. This seems to be the alternative that Brandom favors, for he suggests that "talk of functional roles is itself already normative talk" (1994: 16).

Truth is the *proper goal* of assertion and belief….[T]he language game of assertion and belief implicitly but essentially involves the injunction that one *ought* to speak and believe the truth. That is what one is supposed to be trying to do. (1994: 17; italics Brandom's)

Or again:

Anything recognizable as an intentional state…must underwrite normative assessments as to whether…the state is correct or successful according to the standards determined by its content…. Beliefs are essentially, and not just accidentally, things appropriate assessed as to their correctness in the sense of their truth. (2001: 589–590)

Here Brandom seems to be claiming that the facts about what expressions mean and about the content of intentional states — about what states the states are — are partly constituted by normative facts, namely under what circumstances it is *correct* to use the expressions or acquire the states. Murder is *wrong killing;* meaning is in effect *correct use.* On the surface, then, it looks as if this sort of functional

characterization of the normativity of meaning yields the kind of implicit, intrinsic normativity I described under alternative (A) above.

The idea that meaning and belief are partly constituted by truth as a standard of correctness is highly plausible. Indeed, it is probably part of the motivation for truth-conditional semantics. What it is for an assertion to mean *that p* or for a belief to be the belief *that p* is for the assertion or belief to be correct just when *p*. In the present context, however, this proposal is less helpful than it may appear, for the normativity of meaning and belief has been secured only by appealing to a *semantic* concept, truth, as the proper end or function of discourse. The official resources of Brandom's inferentialist approach do not permit him to appeal to the concept of truth in this way. The aim is to appeal to normativity to explain semantic concepts, so we cannot start off by appealing to a semantic concept to explain the normativity of meaning. Brandom can apply this sort of characterization of normativity only if he first provides an independent account of truth, or at least of assertion.

Two further issues arise here. First, very briefly, we should note that any philosopher committed to a reductive, naturalistic account of intentionality will reject as question-begging this move of Brandom's from the function of assertion and belief to the normativity of meaning and content and then to the need for a normative explanatory metalanguage. The reductive naturalist will hold that beliefs are functional states defined by their causal-functional relations to sensory inputs from the environment, to other functional states, and to behavioral outputs. Beliefs can indeed be assessed as true or false, but these are semantic, not normative notions. If we insist that false beliefs are incorrect, the naturalist will say that this notion of incorrectness alludes to norms that *govern* belief, not norms *constitutive* of belief. What *constitutes* beliefs is

their functional role. As far as I can see, Brandom doesn't attempt to offer an argument against this sort of naturalist or functionalist response.

Second, let's grant, for the sake of discussion, that intentional content is partly constituted by "correctness" with respect to the end or function of making true assertions. Then we still need to ask whether the notion of correctness in question is in fact normative, as Brandom assumes. For in this context correctness seems to be just another word for truth, and many philosophers hold that truth is a semantic, non-normative concept.[4]

In fact, as Rosen points out (2001: 619-20), a distinction can indeed be drawn between correctness and truth, even in the specific context of assertion. Correctness is a more general concept than truth, with a much broader range of application. A person can whistle a tune or hold a golf club or tie her shoelaces correctly or incorrectly, whereas in these and countless other contexts, truth and falsity do not apply. The notion of correctness invokes context-relative standards of performance, and it applies to various types of activities in light of distinct, context-specific features, such as the order in which one whistles the notes, the position of one's hands, or the movements one makes. As such, correctness itself is not *identical* with any of these context-specific features; rather, it is the higher-order property of *possessing* the relevant correct-making feature. When the performance under consideration is an assertion, the feature that makes it correct happens to be truth. But correctness is not identical with truth,

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[4] For an example of this sort of response to the claim that meaning is normative, see Schiffer (2002: 191-92).

just as in the case of whistling a tune or holding a golf club, it is not identical with the order of the notes or the position of one's hands. As Rosen says, "To predicate correctness of an assertion is thus not to say that it is true. It is to say that it possesses the correct-making feature for assertions, whatever it may be" (2001: 620).

Correctness is thus not conceptually equivalent to truth, even when the correctness in question is that of assertions. But clarifying this point is still not sufficient to show that correctness is a normative feature. Nor, if we are to avoid circularity, can we just assume that correctness is normative and place it alongside 'good', 'right', 'just', and the other paradigmatically normative concepts. So to what criteria might we appeal to determine whether 'correct' is a normative concept?

One obvious possible criterion, mentioned by both Rosen (2001: 620) and Schiffer (2002: 192), is that paradigmatically normative concepts are often thought to be distinguished by their intrinsic connection with reasons for action. The proposal might be that a concept is normative if to apply that concept to something is to acknowledge a reason, obligation, or permission to perform some action involving that thing.[5] This proposal, if successful, would fit together well with Brandom's inferentialist program, since it is precisely the practical, rational relations among intentional states and between intentional states and actions that motivates his use of a normative metalanguage to capture conceptual content (1994: 17). Moreover, this proposal would help link the notion of

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[5] I am deliberately formulating this proposal as vaguely as possible to avoid the issue of specifying precisely what the relation between normative concepts and reasons for action might be. As will become obvious in the next paragraph, the exact nature of the relation is unimportant for my purposes here.

intentional content to that of reasons for action, thus offering a means by which to help tie pragmatics, the study of what we *do* with language and belief, to semantics, the study of the contents we manipulate (1994: 91).

The hitch is that in fact the concept of correctness does *not* automatically yield reasons for action or obligations to act one way rather than another. On the contrary, we frequently have good reasons for doing things *incorrectly,* as when we tell jokes, make ironic comments, play games, or intentionally perform some activity poorly because we dislike it or just feel lazy. Rosen gives the example of intentionally playing a piano sonata incorrectly to entertain his daughter (2001: 620). Indeed, often the "correct" assertion is precisely the one we have compelling reasons *not* to make, as when we tell the hostess her cooking is delicious even when it quite obviously isn't. So the general property of correctness in itself does not seem to provide reasons for action, apart from its role in guiding actions that spring from distinct moral, prudential, or other reasons. As Rosen concludes, "From the standpoint of practical reason, the judgment of correctness is like a 'factual' judgment: inert in itself, reason-giving only in conjunction with something else. If 'intrinsic practical valence' is the *sine qua non* of normativity, then it would appear that correctness is not a normative notion" (2001: 621).

On the other hand — and here I am again following Rosen's lead (2001: 621) — there is obviously a sense in which correctness *is* normative, if not in the unconditional way that 'good' and 'moral' are, then at least in the *prima facie,* contingent way that 'polite' and 'legal' are. Like laws or the rules of a game, correctness provides a kind of independent standard — a norm by which to guide and measure the performance of some activity — which holds whether or not we

ourselves have a reason to conform to it in a particular context. Beliefs and assertions are correct when they are true. If I am going to engage in the practice of making assertions and holding beliefs, then I need to understand that the point of this practice, the norm that defines what it is to be engaged in this practice and not some other, is truth. This is the idea Brandom articulates when he says that "truth is the *proper goal* of assertion and belief." In "the language game of assertion and belief," speaking and believing the truth is "what one is supposed to be trying to do" (1994: 17).

To sum up, then, in what way can meaning be said to be a normative concept? It is normative in that if we are sincerely engaged in the practice of making assertions, the purpose of which is to assert true claims, then meaning provides an implicit normative standard to guide us in making correct, and thus true, assertions.[6] So meaning can indeed be understood as having a normative pragmatic significance, but only *given* the context of the practice of making assertions. A normative conception of meaning thus presupposes the practice of assertion, which in turn is inseparably linked, or has at least traditionally been understood as inseparably linked, to the concept of truth — a semantic, not normative notion.

III. Deontic scorekeeping and assertion

Meaning can be regarded as normative only relative to the practice of making assertions. So to succeed in his project of

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[6] Compare the similar views articulated by Byrne (2002: 207) and Schiffer (2002: 192).

explicating intentionality by working only from normative primitives, Brandom needs to find a way to fund at least an implicit concept of assertion without appealing to semantic notions such as truth. One aim of the deontic scorekeeping model of discursive practice is to do just this. Brandom's model attempts to provide a detailed characterization of social deontic scorekeeping practices that qualify as treating certain speech acts as having the pragmatic significance of assertions (1994: 167).

The core idea behind Brandom's approach is bold and ingenious. He holds that the fundamental pragmatic significance of assertions is as *reasons* — potential premises for use in inferences (1994: 168). For Brandom, the speech act of making an assertion is to be understood primarily not as the act of stating a truth about the world, but as the act of offering a reason.[7] The reasons offered can then be used by oneself or by others to support further inferences or to guide practical reasoning and action. Now if assertions are essentially reasons, as Brandom proposes, then to qualify as an assertion, a speech act must stand in the kinds of inferential relations that an assertion does. It must play "the dual role of justifier and subject of demand for justification" (1994: 167) — that is, it must be able to serve as a premise or conclusion in inferences. In the discursive scorekeeping model, the pattern of normative commitments and

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[7] Brandom explains truth by giving an account of the expressive role of the concept of truth within the social, discursive practice of exchanging assertions, or reasons. Specifically, he endorses a version of the prosentential theory of truth, on which the expression 'is true' is treated as a prosentence-forming operator. This operator can be applied to any term that is a sentence nominalization or picks out a sentence token to produce a prosentence with that sentence token as its anaphoric antecedent, whose content it inherits (1994: 305).

entitlements associated with a speech act is intended to correspond to the pattern of material inferential relations associated with the intentional content of that act. Hence Brandom proposes that these two patterns can be identified. Assertions can then be distinguished from other speech acts by the pattern of commitment and entitlement relations in which they stand.

Other things besides assertional commitments involve liability to demands for justification or other demonstration of entitlement — for instance, the practical commitments involved in *actions*. Other things besides assertional commitments can entitle interlocutors to assertional commitments — for instance *reliability* in the responsive acquisition of assertional commitments of a certain kind.… But only assertional commitments stand in *both* these relations. (1994: 167; italics Brandom's)

Brandom holds, correctly I think, that a necessary condition for a linguistic performance to be an assertion is that it fill this dual role of potential justifier and potential object of justification. But within his model, this dual function is also employed as a *sufficient* condition for demarcating assertions from other kinds of speech acts (1994: 168). So far as I can see, Brandom gives no argument for this condition, except to explain that it is part of "an idealized artificial practice constructed to model this central aspect [that is, assertion] of the use of natural language" (1994: 168). His line of thought here looks suspiciously circular to me. If we had already established that the normative statuses Brandom refers to as "assertional commitments"[8] indeed correspond to the content of assertions,

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[8] This phrasing is potentially misleading, since at this stage in the development of his model Brandom is not yet entitled to apply the concept of assertion. In this passage, he is still in the process of establishing that the commitments in question can indeed be identified as assertions, as opposed to some other kind of performance.

then this way of formally distinguishing assertions from other kinds of speech acts might be legitimate. But in fact we have not yet established that these normative statuses correspond to propositional contents, and I think there are strong grounds to suspect they do not. Perhaps Brandom has a more detailed justification of this point which I have overlooked. But from his discussion, it's not clear that other types of speech acts could not also stand in normative relations isomorphic to the relation between justifier and justified. These would be speech acts that fall into a pattern of relations formally similar to the kind of pattern that obtains among assertions, but entitlement to which depends on factors other than truth. Absent further explanation, I don't see that the scorekeeping model has the resources to distinguish material inferential relations between assertions, which hold because of relations between their intentional contents, from more general normative relations between assertions or other speech acts that hold because of etiquette, social customs, moral norms, conversational implicature, or other factors. The notions of commitment and entitlement alone seem insufficient to distinguish truth from other possible ends of conversation, and thus to delimit a concept of assertion distinct from other types of speech acts.

The crux of the problem is that the loose notion of a "good reason" — one that entitles a speaker to perform some speech act — that stands at the center of the deontic scorekeeping approach is unlikely to correspond to the concept of a true assertion exactly enough for deontic scorekeeping to succeed in elucidating intentional content. The two will surely overlap, but an exact match-up is unlikely. True assertions are true because of their content and the way the world is. By contrast, in the deontic scorekeeping model, speech acts are entitled not because of their content, but because of normative relations instituted by language users' normative attitudes. In themselves,

these normative relations may not distinguish propriety or correctness due to truth from that due to etiquette or other norms. So there is no reason to expect them to accurately map the pattern of inferential relations between intentional contents.

I am unconvinced, then, that Brandom's scorekeeping model can distinguish between speech acts to which we're committed or entitled because of their content and those to which we're committed or entitled because of other reasons, such as etiquette, social customs, or moral principles.[9] If this criticism is justified, then the model fails to spell out a coherent, "antecedently and independently intelligible [notion] of assertion," as Brandom contends it does (1997: 190), and thus fails to explain meaning or content adequately. To get a grip on

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[9] The problem of drawing this distinction is compounded because Brandom does not specify how material inferences are to be distinguished from other good, but not formally valid inferences. Material inferences are non-valid inferences that are good by virtue of the contents of their constituent concepts (Brandom, 1994: 98). In Brandom's inferential semantics, this conceptual priority of content to inference is reversed, and the content of concepts is taken to be determined by the material inferential proprieties to which language users commit themselves. A natural question to ask about this approach is: Which inferences are the material ones — which ones determine conceptual content? (See, e.g., Rumfitt (1997: 439) and Fodor and LePore (2002: 139).) If I understand Brandom right (1997: 190–91), he rejects any sort of analytic/synthetic distinction and seems to hold that the content of a concept should determine when it is correct to apply the concept in virtually any circumstance. Hence his answer seems to be that material inferences include *all* the non-formally-valid good inferences recognized by some scorekeeper — including perhaps even such inferences as "It's raining, so they will cancel the picnic and go to a movie" and "It's 10:30 a.m., so he's at work" — and that all of these inferences contribute to the content of the concepts involved in them. Thus the distinction between proprieties due to intentional content and those due to other factors is slippery indeed, if Brandom does in fact recognize such a distinction at all.

intentional content, we need some way to distinguish the propriety or impropriety of particular utterances in the sense of their being, for example, impolite or tactless from that due to failure to grasp their meaning — the difference between a speech act being unentitled because it's rude and a speech act being unentitled because it's false. But if the only resources we have to work with are the deontic statuses of commitment and entitlement to perform particular speech acts, we can easily imagine cases in which the overall pattern of norms governing our speech and other actions would lead our deontic commitments and entitlements to diverge from, rather than capture, the traditional intentional concepts of belief and intention. To expand on an example I used earlier, while seated at a friend's dining table, I could have good reason to believe that the lasagna is dry and tasteless, the vegetables are overcooked, and all this is because the hostess had a few too many glasses of wine earlier in the evening. Yet in this practical context I am *not* entitled to assert these things, and indeed I am probably committed to performing the speech act of saying that the food is delicious. In this case, I have good reasons to support the truth of my beliefs or assertions about the meal, while also having good reasons not to perform the act of insulting my hostess by making those assertions. The problem is that it is not clear that the deontic scorekeeping model has the means to explain this and related examples, because its official explanatory resources do not distinguish between reasons and norms specifically pertinent to the intentional content of states and performances and those relevant to action generally. To distinguish between the two, we may need to give up Brandom's project of characterizing intentionality by appeal to normative concepts alone and instead reintroduce intentional primitives, such as truth, reference, or representation, into our explanatory metalanguage.

A defender of the deontic scorekeeping approach might respond that the line of argument developed here is beside the point, for it implicitly concedes that Brandom's account is in fact sufficient to explain intentional content. The response I have in mind would run like this. Speech acts that are not straightforward assertions — acts such as commands, questions, white lies, polite euphemisms, and ironic jokes — all employ expressions whose semantic content is instituted through the practice of exchanging sincere, largely true assertions. Such speech acts are thus parasitic on assertion, for they are possible only given the antecedently established practice of stating the truth about things. Hence if we agree that the deontic scorekeeping model successfully describes *some* form of norm-governed linguistic communication — a point I have not disputed — then we must agree that the normative practices characterized by the model are sufficient to bestow semantic content on linguistic expressions. Thus the model in some sense succeeds in capturing the practice of making and exchanging assertions, at least to the degree needed to explain the genesis of semantic content.

This response is largely correct, I think, but it provides only a very weak defense of Brandom's approach. We can concede that, using only normative concepts, his account succeeds in characterizing a kind of communicative practice that employs expressions bearing semantic content. Yet, if the concerns raised in this section are cogent, the model cannot explain wherein that content lies, nor can it specify what the content of any one expression is. In effect, the model yields a sufficient criterion for *contentfulness,* but not an explanation of *content.* So despite the tremendous insight Brandom's model throws on discursive practices, it can hardly be considered an adequate theory of meaning. In the end, the model remains unable to cross the divide between normative and semantic concepts, or between a general notion of normative correctness

or acceptability and truth. Brandom needs either a way of reducing the semantic to the normative — an approach he abjures — or a way of characterizing assertion in normative terms that successfully captures all and only assertions, and such a characterization seems unavailable.

IV. Concluding remarks

Brandom is surely correct in holding that an essential aspect of assertion, or of discursive practices generally, is to provide reasons that can be used in discursive or practical activity. Obviously, human communities developed language in order to communicate — in the earliest and simplest cases, probably to be able to share and use information as reasons to guide them in satisfying practical needs such as finding food and avoiding danger. Yet even if furnishing reasons is a, or the, fundamental purpose of discursive practices, that need not entail that the concrete character of such practices can be described entirely in terms of a "game of giving and asking for reasons," as Brandom's inferential semantics attempts to do. By analogy, the underlying motivation for playing a certain sport might be for amusement or fitness, but the concrete point of the sport could be to score goals, keep the ball in the air, get to the top of the mountain, or something else.

In this regard, Brandom is probably also right in saying that truth is the proper goal of assertion and belief (1994: 17). But to make sense of that insight, I suspect, we need to develop an account of intentionality that introduces truth at the ground level, rather than as a late-coming, high-level expressive device. A promising approach might be to build on Brandom's contributions to normative pragmatics — in particular, his thesis

that normative statuses are instituted by the normative attitudes of performers of various practices — to explore how intentional content is constituted when language users implicitly begin to draw a distinction between a semantic standard of correctness — truth — and other varieties. I suspect that this approach would require a more substantive conception of truth than that provided by a prosentential or redundancy theory, but that the basis for this conception is already implicit in our use of the concept of truth in everyday discursive practices.

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意義與規範性在布蘭登推論主義中的角色

方克濤

香港中文大學

摘　要

　　羅伯特・布蘭登(Robert Brandom)主張意義(meaning)是規範性的概念：語意或概念內容的理論角色在 於決定字詞或概念之正確用法。因此他建議， 關於意向內容的解說可以只應用規範性或義務性的概念，而毋須訴諸真理或指稱等語意概念。然而，「意義」表面上並不同於「善」或「正義」等一般規範性的概念；而關於意義或信念之陳述表面上亦不是評價、規範或規則的表述。若然則意義究竟在甚麼理解下是規範性的？而在此理解之下，義務性的概念是否真的足以說明意向內容？本文認爲，意義提供了規範指導說話者如何作出真實的斷言：僅在這薄弱的工具義上，意義才是規範性的。因此，「意義是規範性的」這主張要另行補上對斷言的解釋才能成立。然而，本文會論證，布蘭登對斷言的解釋是失敗的，因爲其理論並不能將制定斷言的規範與其他指導語言行爲的規範（例如禮節）區分開來。這是由於在他的理論架構之下，只能用規範性概

念來解釋斷言，而不能訴諸語意概念之故。這便意味著布蘭登的推論主義(inferentialism)的基本信條可能是錯誤的：純粹規範性的後設語言並不足以說明語言的意義。

關鍵詞：意義、規範性、推論主義、語言哲學、布蘭登