
Semantic contents and pragmatic perspectives: the idea of objectivity in Robert Brandom's normative pragmatism

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Abstract

Abstract:

Brandom's approach to normativity as it is initially presented in his 1994 *Making It Explicit* consists of two parts: inferentialist semantics and normative pragmatism. According to the former, the contents of what we say are defined in terms of the inferential roles our judgments play in discursive practices. According to the latter, meaning something inevitably involves us in what Brandom calls a "scorekeeping game" in which every judgment we make presupposes a set of interrelated pragmatic commitments. Making a judgment is making a move in this game, i.e. *doing* something in a social environment and, in virtue of this, *changing* the environment – which allows us to treat communication as a socially grounded production and consumption of reasons. The linchpin that holds together Brandom's inferentialist semantics and his normative pragmatism is the idea of norms that are implicit in discourse, but that can be inferentially articulated in a judgment. In order to justify the relationship between semantic inferentialism and normative pragmatism, Brandom needs to prove that his twofold – semantic and pragmatic – interpretation of norms provides grounds for their *objectivity*.

All this being said, the present paper has a twofold objective. First, it aims to place Brandom's notion of the objectivity of discursive norms in the framework of Kantian constructivism as it figures in Kant's first two *Critiques*. Second, it aims to show that, although Brandom's reading of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (and "The Analytic of Principles" in particular) is fully compatible with his inferentialist semantics, his approach to Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* results in a claim that might be difficult to justify. Namely, Kant's moral constructivism, which finds its expression in the idea of autonomy, leads Brandom to adopting a phenomenalist approach to discursive practices. My principal claim in this paper is that, given the presuppositions of Brandom's normative pragmatism, the difficulties that he encounters in reconciling his phenomenism about discursive practices with his realist intuitions about norms, cannot be resolved.

Outline of the argument:

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The background thesis of Kant's "The Analytic of Principles" tells us that whatever there is to know originates, in part, from a set of a priori concepts that secure the unity of experience. In Kant's own terms, part of what is given in experience owes its objectivity to constructive efforts of the transcendently interpreted subjectivity. According to Brandom's interpretation of this thesis, the cognizing subject *makes* certain things objective by *taking* them to be such. Likewise, in the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant tells us that the principles of practical reason also have its origins in the transcendental subject who must be able to will these principles as objective moral laws (i.e., again, according to Brandom, must be able to *make* them objective by *taking* them to be such). Thus, Brandom reinterprets the two Kant's constructivist theses as an intervening attitude of "taking something as something else". Semantically speaking, understanding the meaning of a claim in terms of meanings of the claims it entails is to take the latter as an expression of the former. Likewise, pragmatically speaking, what makes us act is not a commitment or entitlement *per se*, but our practical stance towards it: what matters is how we take it to be.

However, whereas the semantic interpretation of the attitude of taking something as something else seems to be non-problematic, the pragmatic one reveals a problem. According to Brandom, practical attitudes of scorekeepers generate norms, but, at the same time, are only assessments that we take as conforming to norms and proprieties of practice. The fact that something, *x*, is normative supervenes on the fact that we have reasons to consider *x* as normative. Accordingly, a practice is normative just in case it is properly taken to be such. Given this, the question Brandom has to answer is: How do we pass from individual practical attitudes to objective normative statuses?

Brandom's short answer to this question is that the distinction between claims that are objectively correct and those that are only taken to be correct is *perspectival*. Individual perspectives are coordinated in a way that excludes a unique irreducible community perspective above and beyond the aggregated actual perspectives of all participants. We are capable of making the distinction between correct and incorrect applications not because discourse has an omniscient Master, but because objectivity of norms we apply is a *structural feature* common to each individual practitioner's perspective captured by the non-coercive authority of reasons interlocked by our mutual accountability to each other.

My objection to this conclusion is twofold. Firstly, Brandom's theory connects individuals through inferential ties subject to the all-pervasive perspectival *form* of communication which constraints everybody and says nothing about the *meaning* of any particular act of communication. Meanwhile, to say that our communication is perspectival in its form is simply to say that our rationality is inherently such that it organizes our reasons in an autonomous space within which we can understand others and hold each other responsible for what we say and do. Given this, it remains unclear how calling the rational constraint which the space of our inferentially articulated practical commitments imposes on our judgments "objective" amounts to anything more than saying that an intersubjective agreement between sapient creatures is not only the best evidence for accessibility of valid judgments, but is also constitutive of their validity. Secondly, one might suggest that the self-regulating free market of ideas implied by Brandom's idea of a scorekeeping game as our common, essentially human project, itself cannot but represent a certain particular institutional culture, a "We" which all our individual statements refer to. And if this "We" is neither the Orwellian Big Brother, completely separated from each and every one of us, nor a sheer sum of all self-interested individuals, it stands in need of justification as to why exactly the scorekeeping game should be considered as capable of providing the ultimate universal form for any other communicative culture.

Keywords: Kant, Robert Brandom, constructivism, scorekeeping game, inferentialist semantics, normative pragmatism