

Class Fourteen: Brandom on Assertion

Doing Things with Words - Ryan Simonelli

February 27, 2022

1 Some Context and Stage-Setting

- **The Fregean Picture:** The fundamental type of sentence is the *declarative* whose use is to express a *thought*, something that is true or false and stands in inferential relations to other thoughts, necessitating their truth (precluding the possibility of their falsity) or precluding the possibility of their truth (necessitating their falsity).
- **The Wittgensteinian Critique:** Language cannot be understood in terms of a sole function of expressing thoughts. Rather, language is fundamentally a *practice*, in which words and sentences are used to do various different kinds of things. Meaning should be understood principally in terms of use.
- **Austin's Project:** Consider the various different types of things done with words that aren't simply saying something.
- **A Remaining Question:** But *what is it*, illocutionarily speaking, to say something? That is, what is one *doing* in saying something?
 - **Hornsby:** The account of saying we'll get, if we adopt the Austinian approach (on the way of approaching it that we've gotten in the feminist authors we've read) is going to differ quite radically from the mainstream. *Successfully saying something to somebody* will be a basic concept, not to be decomposed into the expression of thought on the part of a speaker and the interpretation of that thought on the part of a hearer. But still, *what is it* to successfully say something to someone?
- **Saying is Not Simply Uttering Words:** Suppose we train Polly to squawk out "I'm a parrot!" Is Polly *saying* that she's a parrot? Clearly not. She's make the very same sorts of noises that I would make if I were to say I'm a parrot, but her making these noises does not constitute her saying that she's a parrot. Why not?
 - **The "Mainstream" Answer:** Because it doesn't have the right states of mind (e.g. beliefs) and it's not intending to encode one of these states of mind in making these noises.
 - **The Sort of Answer We'd Be Looking For:** Because there's a particular kind of social act that we perform in making those noises, and, though Polly is making the noises, she's not performing this kind of act in making them.
- **A Hint from Austin** "[I]f I have stated something, then that commits me to other statements: other statements made by me will be in order or out of order. Also some statements or remarks made by you will be henceforward contradicting me or not contradicting me, rebutting me or not rebutting me, and so forth," (139).
- **Brandom's Basic Project:** Understand what it is to *say* something—uttering a sentence with a particular meaning—in terms of what it is that one *does* in saying something—making an assertion that constitutes a particular kind of act.
 - **Articulated In Austinian Terms:** Articulate what it is to perform a *locutionary* act (and, specifically, the *rhetic* act of uttering a sentence with a certain meaning) in terms of what it is to perform the *illocutionary* act of making a certain kind of assertion.
 - * **Note:** This is a complete inversion of the traditional paradigm.

2 Inferentialism: The Core Idea

- **Brandom's Basic Question:** What is it that we are *doing* when we assert, claim, or declare something?
- **Brandom's Basic Answer, drawn from (early) Frege:** Most fundamentally, we're *licenseing inferences*.
 - **Frege:** "[If] the consequences derivable from the first, when it is combined with certain other judgments always follow from the second when it is combined with these same judgments [. . .] [then] I call that part of the content that is the *same* in both the *conceptual content*."
- **Material vs. Formal Inference:** A key idea that Brandom draws from Wilfrid Sellars is to treat *material* inferences on par with *formal* inferences.
 - **Formal Inference:** Inferences that can be made in virtue of the *logical forms* of the sentences involved.
 - * If *p* and *q*, then *p*.
 - * If *p* or *q* and *not-p*, then *q*.
 - * If all *As* are *Bs*, and all *Bs* are *Cs*, then all *As* are *Cs*.
 - **Material Inference:** Inferences that can be made in virtue of the *material content* of the sentences involved.
 - * If the circle is scarlet, then the circle is red.
 - * If the circle is red and the square is pink, then the circle is darker than the square.
 - * If Rover is a dog, then Rover is an animal.
- **Representationalism vs. Inferentialism:** We can contrast the standard representationalist way of thinking about meaning with Brandom's inferentialist way of thinking about meaning as follows:
 - **Representationalism:** A sentence's meaning is the thought it expresses, which intrinsically has *truth-conditions*, and it is in virtue of expressing a thought with certain truth conditions that a sentence stands in inferential relations to other sentences (e.g. *p* entails *q* if every condition in which *p* is true is one in which *q* is true).
 - **Inferentialism:** A sentence's meaning is understood in terms of the inferences in which it figures, both as premise and conclusion. The truth-conditions of a sentence are simply ways of codifying these inferences.
 - * **The Idea:** Consider what we do when we actually informally specify truth-conditions—for instance, the truth-conditions for "Polly's a parrot." We might say "Polly might be a blue front amazon, she might be a macaw, she might be a big parrot or small parrot, she can't be a cardinal or a sparrow," and so on. This is just expressing claims *from which* we can infer "Polly's a parrot" and claims that "Polly's a parrot" *rules out*.

3 Brandom's Conception of Social Practice

- **The "Game of Giving and Asking for Reasons:** Brandom models discourse in terms of a game which he calls "the game of giving and asking for reasons." An assertion is a basic "move" one can make in the game, and so one can understand what it is to make an assertion by thinking about the role that making such a move plays in the game.
- **Two Basic Normative Statures:** The two basic normative statuses that Brandom uses to articulate the norms determining how the game goes are *entitlement* and *commitment*.
 - **Entitlement:** A kind of move-making license; a status that's acknowledged by the players as *enabling* a player to make a move.

- **Commitment:** A status that one takes on when one makes a move whereby one is *compelled* to defend that move in response to appropriate challenges.
- **The Attributional Perspective (Brandom’s “Normative Phenomenalism”):** What it is to *bear* a normative status of entitlement or commitment is understood in terms of what it is to *take* someone to bear that status.
- **The “Default and Challenge” Structure of Entitlement:** When someone makes some claim, they’re generally taken to be entitled to it by *default*—this entitlement is brought into question only if someone *challenges* the claim.
 - **Example:** If I say, for instance, “Alex G is playing at the Empty Bottle on Friday,” you’re generally going to respond with something like “Oh cool! Are there still tickets?” or “Eh, I’m not a big fan.” You’re going to believe what I say, taking me to be *entitled* to this claim by *default*. You’re not going to *challenge* my claim unless you have some definite reason to, for instance, you know that Alex G is touring in Europe right now.
- **Inheriting Entitlement and Differing Justificatory Responsibility:** If you make some claim to which I take you to be entitled, then I’ll take myself to be entitled to that claim myself, where my entitlement to it (my ability to respond to a challenge) is based on the fact that I can *defer back to you* if someone challenges it.
- **Inferential Relations, Understood Socially:** When one makes a move, one undertakes a commitment to that move, but, importantly, not *just* that move. One also undertakes commitment to its *consequences* (where the notion of “consequence” is understood attributionally, in terms of the moves that one is scored as consequentially being committed to).
 - **Example:** If I say “Polly’s a parrot,” I haven’t just committed myself to that claim, but I’ve also committed to myself to “Polly’s a bird.” What that means is that if someone challenges the claim that Polly’s a bird (saying, for instance “Polly’s a snake”), I’m also responsible for responding to that claim, even though it’s not the claim that I explicitly made.
- **Incompatibility Relations, Understood Socially:** A further crucial (broadly speaking) inferential relation is relations of *incompatibility*. Two moves *p* and *q* are incompatible just in case *commitment* to one *precludes entitlement* to the other.
 - **Example:** If I say “Polly’s a parrot,” committing myself to that claim, I’m going to be *precluded from being entitled* to “Polly’s a cardinal.”
- **Polly Revisited:** We can now revisit the following question:
 - **Question:** Why is it Polly doesn’t actually say that she’s a parrot when she squawks out “I’m a parrot”?
 - **Answer:** Because she isn’t taken to actually *commit herself* to that sentence, bearing the responsibility for challenges, undertaking consequential commitments, and so on. Her making these noises isn’t *treated as* and so *isn’t* the making of a move in the game of giving and asking for reasons.
- **Uttering a Sentence with a Particular Meaning:** The meaning of a sentence can be understood in terms of what one does in uttering it—what one commits oneself to, precludes oneself from being entitled to, entitles others to, and so on. Each sentence can be associated with a particular move characterized along these lines, and that move (what one does in assertorically uttering that sentence) can be understood as the meaning of that sentence.
 - **Formal Semantics, Brandom-Style:** It’s actually possible for formalize all of this, and have mathematical models of meaning from a Brandomian framework.