

# In Defense of Immodesty

Ryan Simonelli

February 11, 2026

## 0 Introduction

Consider the following two questions:

1. What is the meaning of “square”?
2. What is the concept of being square?

Should an answer to the first question thereby be an answer to the second? One’s answer to this question will depend, in the terminology of Michael Dummett (1996), on whether one thinks a theory of meaning ought to be “full-blooded” or “modest.” A full-blooded theory of meaning is “one which seeks actually to explain the concepts expressed by primitive terms of the language” (Dummett 1996, 5). A modest theory of meaning, by contrast, is one “that gives no account of the concepts expressed by primitive terms of the language,” (McDowell 1998a). Throughout his career, John McDowell has argued that our semantic aspirations ought to be “modest” ones. McDowell’s earliest and most explicit expressions of this idea are to be found in his prolonged debate with Michael Dummett beginning in the early 80s and continuing into the 90s.<sup>1</sup> However, McDowell’s pleas for modesty are not limited to that debate. Indeed, McDowell’s continued insistence on modesty can be understood as perhaps the fundamental dispute separating him from the other two main members of the so-called “Pittsburgh School” of philosophy. Both Wilfrid Sellars and Robert

---

<sup>1</sup>See McDowell (1981, 1998a, 1998b).

Brandom are inferentialists, and inferentialism is clearly an immodest theory of meaning, aiming to account for the concepts expressed by the expressions belonging to the primitive vocabulary of a language in terms of the inferential rules governing their use. In the past few decades, there have been substantial efforts (of which I've been a part) to develop such an inferentialist theory with the promise of genuinely accounting for conceptual contents in the way that a representationalist theory of meaning cannot.<sup>2</sup> If there exist successful McDowellian arguments against immodest theories of meaning in general, then this project is doomed from the outset. In this paper, I argue that inferentialism, as developed by Sellars and Brandom and understood as an immodest theory of meaning in McDowell's sense, survives all such arguments.

Here's the plan for the paper. I first explain the basic motivation for developing a "full-blooded" theory of meaning, shared by Dummett, on the one hand, and Sellars and Brandom, on the other. After laying out this motivation, I consider McDowell's main charge against a full-blooded theory of meaning, according to which the aspiration for full-bloodedness is tantamount to a desire to account for conceptual contents "as from outside content and concepts," something McDowell takes to be an ultimately unintelligible aspiration. I argue that, while this charge may land against the sort of full-blooded theory of meaning envisioned by Dummett, the inferentialist accounts of conceptual content developed by Sellars and Brandom can be understood as articulating an account of contents from *within* the space of contents. Such inferentialist accounts of content, I claim, are immune to McDowell's main criticism of full-blooded theories while nevertheless still being full-blooded theories in the sense at issue in the debate, able to fulfill the core aim of such a theory. Finally, I consider McDowell's (2005) arguments against the specific version of inferentialism developed by Brandom (1994), arguing that they beg the question against the proponent of such a theory.

---

<sup>2</sup>For notable recent developments, see especially Incurvati and Schloder (2023), Hlobil and Brandom (2024), and Simonelli (forthcoming a).

# 1 The Program of Use-Based Semantics

Suppose children simply came into the process of learning a language already grasping what the various things in the world are and the various ways that they might be or be related to one another. In that case, the process of learning a language could be understood simply as the process of figuring out which linguistic expressions stand for which concepts. Since the child already grasps these concepts, knowing their correct application conditions, matching words to concepts would thereby suffice to know the conditions of the correct use of those words. Figuring out which words stand for which concepts would then enable the child to string those words together to *publicly express* the thoughts that they could previously only *privately have*, for instance, *saying* that they're hungry or that they want to eat carrots or peas, when, previously, they could only *think* these things. Dummett describes this basic conception of linguistic competence as follows:

[W]hat a speaker knows is a kind of code. Concepts are coded into words, and thoughts (which are compounded out of concepts) into sentences whose structure mirrors, by and large, the complexity of the thoughts. We need language, on this view, only because we happen to lack the faculty of telepathy, that is, of the direct transmission of thoughts. Communication is thus essentially like the use of a telephone: the speaker codes his thought in a transmissible medium, which is then decoded by the hearer, (1993a, 97).

Now, Dummett describes this conception as a “pre-Fregean” one, which he assumes had already been left long in the past by analytic philosophy at the time he was writing. Unfortunately, analytic philosophy in general never actually took that “post-Fregean” turn that Dummett assumes that it had already taken; the idea that language is a “code” for the contents of mental states remains the dominant view in contemporary linguistics and philosophy of language. Thus, for instance, Josh Dever begins his introductory article to formal semantics with the pronouncement that “Human languages are sophisticated tools for transferring mental states from one person to another” (2012, 47), describing precisely the “language as code” conception of linguistic competence before

going on to articulate representationalist semantics, done in a possible worlds framework, as a key component of the enterprise of rigorously spelling it out.

The conception of language “as code” is discussed by Wittgenstein (1953) under the heading of the “Augustinian” conception of language, and articulated by Sellars (1956) as involving one of the most widespread and basic forms of what he calls “the Myth of the Given.” As Sellars diagnoses it, this conception involves importing *our* conceptual grasp of the “logical space” of the world, which we have achieved through being brought into the linguistic practice, into our conception of the pre-linguistic awareness of the child, conceiving of “his state as though it were rather like our own when placed in a strange forest on a dark night,” (1956, §30).<sup>3</sup> The core issue, by Sellars’s lights, is that insofar as this is our conception of language acquisition, we preclude ourselves from ever getting an account of conceptual understanding. Thus, we are left conceiving of conceptual understanding as simply “given.” Sellars’s thought is that, to avoid the Myth of the Given here, we must invert the order of explanation, providing an account of concepts that *goes through* an account of linguistic meaning.<sup>4</sup> That is, it is *through* learning a language, mastering the rules governing the use of linguistic expressions, that one comes to acquire the sort of conceptual repertoire required for the world to show up as determinate at all. Dummett concurs, saying:

We have, therefore, to replace the conception of language as a code for thought by some account of the understanding of a language that makes no appeal to the prior grasp of the concepts that can be expressed in it, (1996b, 99).

Dummett’s basic thought is that by articulating a *use-based theory of meaning*, one that articulates the meanings of linguistic expressions in terms of the rules governing their use, we can explain speakers’ grasp of concepts in terms of the mastery of those rules.

This is the basic motivation for developing a “full-blooded” theory of meaning, shared among Dummett, Sellars, and Brandom. By giving an account of

---

<sup>3</sup>Sellars explicitly makes reference to Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* in this passage, speaking of a child “or a carrier of slabs.”

<sup>4</sup>See especially Sellars 1963 on this point.

the concepts expressed by linguistic expressions in terms of the rules governing the use of those expressions, one can explain a speaker's coming to possess those concepts in terms of their coming to master those rules. Such a story of linguistic mastery, the thought is, needn't appeal to an antecedent grasp of the concepts conferred by mastery of the linguistic rules on the part of the incipient speaker, and thus, can actually provide an account of this grasp. My concern is whether this motivation is in the end so much as intelligible.

## 2 Clarifying the Requirement of Full-Bloodedness

In a number of papers, McDowell questions the intelligibility of full-blooded semantic aspirations. Now, though I have just articulated what I take the basic aspiration to be, Dummett himself is not always entirely clear on just what endorsing a "full-blooded" theory actually amounts to, often running together seemingly related but importantly different requirements. As I've just classified it, a full-blooded theory of meaning is a theory that articulates what meaning is in such a way that we can explain how a language learner acquires knowledge of meaning without presupposing that they antecedently grasp concepts. Only insofar as the theory of meaning meets this requirement does it serve, as Dummett requires, as "a theory of understanding," (1996, 2). However, Dummett sometimes seems to run this legitimate requirement together with the absurd requirement that a full-blooded theory of meaning be such that learning the *theory itself* could somehow confer conceptual understanding upon someone who possesses none at all. For instance, he contrasts a full-blooded theory of meaning with the sort of "theory of meaning" provided by a translation manual, knowledge of which "presupposes a mastery of some one other language" (1996a, 6), thereby suggesting that a full-blooded theory be such that one could grasp it without any prior grasp of concepts at all. This, as McDowell points out, is a clearly "incoherent picture of a full-blooded theory as something that, while counting as a theory, employs (and so presupposes) no concepts at all," (p. 88).

This incoherent picture of a theory of meaning through which one could acquire concepts without antecedently possessing them may seem so obvi-

ously incoherent as to not require discussion at all. Wittgenstein, however, in a number of places, makes remarks that seem to be targeted at just such a conception.<sup>5</sup> He says, for instance:

[A]ny kind of explanation of language presupposes a language already. And in a certain sense, the use of language is not something that can be taught, i.e. I cannot use language to teach it in the way language could be used to teach someone to play the piano. And that of course is just another way of saying: I cannot use language to get outside of language, (1975, §6, 54).

Though McDowell puts aside the obviously incoherent requirement just stated in criticizing Dummett, the Wittgensteinian idea that one cannot explain language, as a conceptually contentful practice, from “outside of language” so understood, nevertheless remains at the core of McDowell’s critique. McDowell highlights a remark of Dummett’s where he says that a deflationary theory of truth “is of no use in giving an account of the language as from the outside” (1991, 247). Emphasizing this phrasing of Dummett’s, McDowell claims that Dummett’s suggestion “that a proper account of a language must be ‘as from the outside’ [. . .] is the key to a correct interpretation of the supposed global requirement of fullbloodedness,” (1998a, 90). Attempting to interpret Dummett charitably so as to not attribute to him something obviously incoherent, McDowell takes it that Dummett’s full-blooded aspirations amount to the aspiration to give an account of the conceptual contents expressed by a language by characterizing the “practice of speaking a language [in such a way] that displays its character as linguistic, but *is given from outside the idea of giving linguistic expression to thoughts*,” (1998b, 111, my italics).

Though this requirement is surely less on the face of it absurd than the obviously incoherent requirement stated previously, even this requirement is not entirely clear. Consider, for instance, the following remark from Dummett:

If thought is not to be treated as prior to language, we must explain what it is for the words and sentences of a language to have the

---

<sup>5</sup>See Stroud (2012) and Child (2019) for a discussion of these sorts of passages in Wittgenstein.

meanings that they do without appeal to antecedent possession of concepts or capacity for having thoughts, (1987, 256).

It is easy to read this remark as expressing a commitment to the claim that linguistic practice as such can be articulated in a way that doesn't appeal to *anyone's* possessing concepts or being capable of having thoughts. Insofar as this is how it is to be read, McDowell once again doubts the intelligibility of the sort of theory of language Dummett seems to require. In particular, Dummett describes the activity of speaking a language as "*the rational activity, par excellence*" (1987, 256). However, it's hard to see how we could make sense of linguistic practice as rational without thinking of speakers of the language as possessing concepts and thinking thoughts, saying and doing things in virtue of taking such things to be correct to say or do. McDowell thus remarks:

An account given from outside is an account that denies itself the only descriptions under which we know that linguistic actions make rational sense, and we have been given no reason to suppose we can still see the activity of a speaker as hanging together rationally if we are required to describe it in other terms, (1998b, 113).

But must the full-blooded theorist really deny themselves such descriptions? It is not clear that they must. Insofar as a core aim of a full-blooded theory is to explain concept possession on the part of individuals through their being brought into a normative linguistic practice, we cannot appeal to antecedent concept possession *by incipient speakers* in explaining how they come to possess concepts through being brought into the linguistic practice. However, it is obviously compatible with *this* requirement that the mature speakers of the language *do* have a grasp of the concepts expressed by the words and, indeed, their grasp of these concepts explicitly guides them in training incipient speakers. Of course, the full-blooded theorist is committed to understanding these mature speakers as grasping the concepts that they do in virtue of having mastered the norms, but nothing about a full-blooded theory requires one to try to conceive of these speakers, having already mastered the norms, as somehow still devoid of concepts!

To further clarify the above point, let me distinguish between two distinct stories of how conceptual content is conferred by a linguistic practice that one

must be careful not to run together: the *ontogenetic* story and the *phylogenetic* story.<sup>6</sup> The ontogenetic story articulates how it is that an individual comes to acquire a grip on conceptual contents by being brought into a linguistic practice, being held to the norms, mastering them, and eventually holding others to them. The phylogenetic story articulates how it is that such a content-conferring linguistic practice as a whole comes to be in the first place. In order to account for the *ontogenetic* acquisition of conceptual content—that is, how conceptual understanding is achieved by an individual—it is not necessary to treat the linguistic practice in general as devoid of the expression of conceptual contents. On the contrary, it is crucial to the ontogenetic story that the practice into which one is inducted contains competent speakers who, in virtue of their explicit knowledge of meaning, are capable of self-consciously guiding the linguistic training of incipient speakers. Now, of course, there was a point in time—perhaps 100,000 years ago—at which there were no concept-conferring linguistic practices. There is a story to be told of how such practices emerged. *This* story, of course, must start with a conception of the proto-linguistic practice that does not presuppose concept possession on the part of any participant (though it may well be necessary to attribute “proto-concepts” to such participants).<sup>7</sup> But just because there must be a way of understanding *that* proto-linguistic practice without attributing concept possession to any of its members does not mean that there must be a way of understanding *our* full-fledged linguistic practice without attributing concept possession to any of its members. Though the phylogenetic story is, of course, important (and I do take it that a full-blooded account of meaning is, in fact, an essential element of a satisfactory telling of such a story), I will put such stories aside for my purpose here, thus conceding to McDowell the point that there is no way to comprehend our linguistic practice as the sort of practice that it is without comprehending it as a practice in which conceptually contentful assertions are

---

<sup>6</sup>My use of this terminology, in this context, is owed to Tomasello (2008).

<sup>7</sup>Of course, to use such terms such as “proto-linguistic” and “proto-concepts” is to do nothing more than handwave at the relevant capacities that are suitably phylogenetically related to those that we call “linguistic” and “conceptual.” Actually telling the phylogenetic story will involve cashing out the relevant capacities in a non-handwaving fashion, but since telling that story is not the aim of this paper, I simply handwave at them here.

made.<sup>8</sup> I will shortly argue that this point can in fact be conceded to McDowell without giving up the whole debate.

Insofar as this point *is* conceded to McDowell, one might be left wondering wherein the disagreement still lies. The disagreement is just this: the full-blooded theorist is still committed to giving a constitutive account of the concepts and contents expressed by words and sentences in terms of the rules governing their use. For instance, the full-blooded theorist is committed to giving an account of the concept of being square in terms of the rules governing the use of “square.” Ultimately, what McDowell denies is that there could be a characterization of the rules governing such words that suffices to account for the concepts expressed by them that does not ultimately resort to such “rules” as that the word “square” is used to say of something that it’s square, the knowledge of which, of course, presupposes the concept of being square. Insofar as one’s characterization of the rules governing the use of “square” includes such “homophonic” statements, no non-circular account of the concept of being square in terms of the rules governing its use is given. The semantic theory thus fails to achieve the aim of full-bloodedness. McDowell maintains, however, that this failure is not a failure of the semantic theory, since there is no possible theory that *could* genuinely achieve the aim of full-bloodedness; this aim is ultimately unintelligible. I’ll now argue that there is a kind of semantic theory that can achieve the aim of full-bloodedness, though it is one quite different in form than what Dummett envisioned.

### **3 Two Approaches to Full-Bloodedness**

While Dummett, throughout his career, expresses the goal of a full-blooded theory of meaning, he never actually attempts to spell one out in formal detail. Nevertheless, he says a number of things that show the general shape that we would expect such a theory to take. One of the remarks picked up by McDowell is the following:

---

<sup>8</sup>To be clear about the bracketing of the phylogenetic motivation of the full-blooded story, note that everything I say here motivating a full-blooded theory of meaning would apply just as well if linguistic practices existed eternally, as Aristotle thought.

What is it to grasp the concept *square*, say? At the very least, it is to be able to discriminate between things that are square and those that are not. Such an ability can be ascribed only to one who will, on occasion, treat square things differently from things that are not square; one way, among many other possible ways, of doing this is to apply the word “square” to square things and not to others, (1996b, 98).

Now, in line with the (legitimate) ambition of full-bloodedness, Dummett maintains that “we cannot appeal to the speaker’s prior grasp of the concept in explaining what it is for him to associate that concept with that word,” (1996b, 99). It is hard to see, however, how the sort of account suggested here can meet this requirement. Perhaps the most basic issue McDowell points out (1998a, 95) is that insofar as learning a language is mastering the rules governing the use of expressions, appealing to a *rule* of the sort “The word ‘square’ is to be applied to square things” would obviously involve a circular explanation of the concept of being square. Dummett thus seems to be committed to characterizing speakers’ implicit knowledge of the rule “The word ‘square’ is to be applied to square things” in some way that does not help itself to knowledge the concept *square* on the part of speakers. Perhaps, for instance, speakers’ knowledge is to be understood in terms of the concrete manifestations of the linguistic behavior pertaining to the particulars to which the word is actually applied. McDowell notes (1998a, 96), however, that it is a familiar Wittgensteinian point that the actual manifestations of behavior are going to be compatible with an indefinite number of deviant interpretations. It seems, then, that rules of this sort simply cannot do the sort of work Dummett needs them to do in providing the sort of account of conceptual content he wants to provide. McDowell’s conclusion, once again, is that we should simply give up the aspiration for such an account. There is, however, another way to go here.

Already in 1953, Sellars was well aware of precisely this circularity in the context of a full-blooded account of content, explicitly rejecting “semantical rules” of this sort on just these grounds. Sellars writes:

Obeying a rule requires recognizing that a circumstance is one to which the rule applies. If there *were* such a thing as a semantical

rule by adoption of which a descriptive term acquires meaning, it would presumably be of the form ‘Red objects are to be designated by the word “red”.’ But to recognize the circumstances in which this rule has application, one must already have the concept of red! (1953a, 133).

Rather than simply accepting this circularity as inevitable and giving up the attempt for full-bloodedness, as McDowell does, Sellars adopts a radical alternative strategy to arrive at a full-blooded theory of conceptual content. Sellars’s version of a full-blooded theory of conceptual content does not appeal *at all* to rules involving the application of linguistic expressions to non-linguistic entities. Sellars maintains that:<sup>9</sup>

[A]ll conceptual meaning, the conceptual meaning of descriptive as well as logical symbols, is constituted, *completely* constituted, by syntactical [i.e. intra-linguistic] rules, (1953a, 136).

Surprising as this claim might be at first encounter, I take it that endorsing it is in fact the *only* way for an inferentialist to arrive at a non-circular account of conceptual content. That is, an inferentialist should maintain a view sometimes called “hyper-inferentialism,” according to which the only inferential rules that actually figure in the theory of conceptual content are inferential rules properly so-called, relating sentences to other sentences.<sup>10</sup>

The key to making a hyper-inferentialist view plausible is to distinguish between *semantics* and *metasemantics*. Insofar as one is an inferentialist, one takes the meaning of a sentence—the conceptual content expressed by that sentence—to be constituted by the inferential rules governing its use. The *constitutive* question of *what* the rules—and hence the meanings—are must be kept distinct from the *explanatory* question of *why* these meaning-constitutive

---

<sup>9</sup>In his response to Brandom, McDowell denies that Sellars maintains “with inferentialism, that an expression’s meaning what it does consists in the fact that certain material-inferential proprieties govern its correct use,” suggesting that Sellars believes that material inferences are only necessary aspects of an expression’s meaning (2005). It seems obvious that Sellars explicitly affirms the constitutive inferentialist claim here (at least for what Sellars speaks of as “conceptual meaning,” which is Brandom’s concern (and the concern of this paper)).

<sup>10</sup>See Simonelli (2023) for an extended development and defense of this version of inferentialism.

inferential rules are what they are. Of course, part of the explanation of why the inferential rules governing the use of “square” are what they are has to do with the fact that the term is applied to *squares*, and squares have the properties that they do. But that doesn’t mean that the fact that the term “square” is applied to squares is to be regarded as one of the meaning-constitutive rules governing the use of “square.” While Dummett problematically blurs this important distinction, Sellars, once again already in 1953, expresses precisely this point. In general:

To say of a predicate  $\phi$  that it is an observation predicate entails that it is a learned response to extra-linguistic situations of a certain kind  $K$ , where  $K$  is the kind of which it is correct to say “ $\phi$ ,’ means  $K$ .’ But, clearly, one can grant that the successful use of language requires, for certain predicates “ $\phi$ ,” a coincidence of the kind of object evoking the verbal response “ $\phi$ ” with the kind of object which “ $\phi$ ” is (correctly) said to mean, without identifying “ ‘ $\phi$ ’ is evoked by  $K$ ” with “ ‘ $\phi$ ’ means  $K$ .” (1953b)

The thought, suggested by Sellars (1953a, 1953b, 1956) and later spelled out in detail by Brandom (1994), is that insofar as the fact that “ $\phi$ ” is used in perceptual response to  $K$ s figures in the semantic theory at all, it is only insofar as this fact is *internalized* in the inferential rules of the language, and it is mastering those inferential rules that constitutes a conceptual grasp of the fact that  $\phi$  can be deployed in perceptual responses to  $K$ ’s. In this way, this fact does, albeit indirectly through this inferential internalization, constitute an essential aspect of the meaning of  $\phi$ .

Let me spell out the basic idea in a bit more detail, giving an example of the sort of inferential rules that such an inferentialist theory might involve. Consider first familiar rules to inferentialist are rules like the following:

Commitment to “ $x$  is square” commits one to “ $x$  has four sides”

Commitment to “ $x$  is square” precludes one from being entitled to “ $x$  is circular”

While these familiar sorts of material rules of inference clearly seem to be *necessary* aspects of the meaning of “square,” they do not seem *sufficient*. In

particular, they do not suffice to capture the fact that squareness is a *perceptually discriminable* property: objects can be *seen* to be square, and this is a crucial aspect of the conceptual content of “square.” Rather than appealing to a fundamentally different kind of rule here, I’ve argued that inferentialists can simply appeal to inferential rules like the following (where *N* is a variable for subjects):

Commitment to “*N* is looking at *x*,” “*x* is square,” commits one to “*N* sees that *x* is square.”

This might not seem like a particularly informative inferential rule, but note that this is a *defeasible* inference, and part of what it is to grasp a defeasible inference is not just to grasp that it *is* good, but, moreover, to grasp under what conditions it *stays* good. That is, grasping a defeasible inference involves grasping its *range of subjunctive robustness*.<sup>11</sup> Thus, though the inference above is, by default, a good one, a grasp of this inferential rule involves a grasp of additional premises under which it is *defeated*, such as the following:

Commitment to “*N* is looking at *x*,” “*x* is square,” “*N* is blind” does not commit one “*N* sees that *x* is square.”

Commitment to “*N* is looking at *x*,” “*x* is square,” “*n* is microscopic” does not commit one to “*N* sees that *x* is square.”

Commitment to “*N* is looking at *x*,” “*x* is square,” “It is completely dark out” does not commit one to “*N* sees that *x* is square.”

Grasping the significance of “square” involves grasping inferences of this sort, and, it is in virtue of grasping these inferences that one grasps the aspect of the content of “square” pertaining to the fact that squares are the sorts of things that can be seen (and seen to be square) in the particular conditions in which our visual capacities can be successfully actualized. To grasp these rules is to grasp that if a capable perceiver of the shapes of things is looking at a normal-sized square thing in good lighting, they will see that it’s square. Insofar as such

---

<sup>11</sup>This is already suggested by Sellars (1953a), but see Kaplan (2022) and Hlobil and Brandom (2024) for recent formal developments of this point.

rules figure in the inferentialist articulation of the content of “square,” there is no barrier to concluding that inferential rules, properly so-called, completely articulate this content.

#### **4 Full-Bloodedness Achieved**

The inferentialist account I’ve just sketched is an articulation of conceptual contents “from within” conceptual content. It articulates what it is for an expression to have the conceptual content that it does by normatively relating it to other conceptually contentful linguistic expressions. In contrast to what McDowell takes to be Dummett’s requirement, it is not a requirement of comprehending this full-blooded account of the meaning of “square” that one conceive of all of these other linguistic expressions to which this expression is normatively related (such as “rectangular,” “circular” “sees,” and so on) as themselves entirely devoid of conceptual content. On the contrary, “square” only has the conceptual content that it does insofar as the expressions to which it is normatively related have conceptual contents, and, indeed, have the conceptual contents that they do. Of course, the conceptual contents expressed by each of these related expressions is also to be understood in the context of the inferentialist theory, but there is no reason to maintain that one could conceive of the whole content-conferring normative structure in such a way that strips all of its elements of content entirely. On the contrary, insofar as the expressions being normatively structured in this way *just is* for them to have the conceptual contents that they do, there is nothing that it could be to comprehend them as being normatively structured in the way that they are while not thereby comprehending them as having the conceptual contents that they do. That is to say, the fact that one cannot conceive of uses of expressions situated in this normative practice as completely devoid of conceptual content is not a sign of the *failure* of this constitutive account of conceptual content, but, rather, a criterion of its *success*.

To underscore the above point, consider an analogy that Peregrin (2008) brings up in a related context: a particular figurine’s being governed by a particular subset of the rules of chess constitutes its being a pawn. The idea

that one cannot conceive of a set of figurines (or, in Sellars's (1954) example, cars) as being governed by just the rules of chess without thereby conceiving of them as pawns, knights, bishops, and so on, does not mean that the constitutive account of what it is for something to be a pawn or knight in terms of that thing's being subject to a particular set of rules fails. On the contrary, it is a criterion of the constitutive account's success. Moreover, it is perfectly legitimate in articulating the rules of chess, where something's falling under a particular subset of these rules constitutes its being a particular chess piece, to refer to the things governed by these rules as the pieces that they are, saying such things as "If there are no pieces in between the king and the rook, the king can move two squares towards the rook and rook can be placed on the other side of the king." There is simply no demand, in articulating the rules that constitute the figurines being the chess pieces they are, that one try to refrain from thinking of the figurines, governed by the rules, as somehow *not* those chess pieces. I will return to this crucial point about constitutive accounts of this sort below in responding to McDowell's criticisms launched specifically at Brandom. First, however, let me say, concretely, how this theory, though it does not attempt to account for conceptual contents "as from outside" concepts and content altogether, nevertheless meets all of the desiderata of a full-blooded theory.

First, it *does* give an account of the concepts expressed by the primitive expressions of the language. An inferentialist account of this sort provides a substantive answer to a question such as "What is a square?" Of course, speakers of a language have *implicit* knowledge of the answer to this question, manifested in their usage of the term. However, to have knowledge of an inferentialist theory of meaning for a language that includes the word "square" is to be able to *explicitly* answer this question with a response of the following sort:

A square is a shape with four equal sides, it is a way for something to be shaped such that, if something is shaped this way, it can't be circular or pentagonal, things can be seen to be this way or felt to be this way (but not smelled to be this way), and so on.

Such an answer articulates the content of "square"—the concept of *squareness*—

in inferential terms by relating it to other contents expressed by expressions belonging to the same language. In this way, inferentialism gives an account of this “primitive” concept. Of course, there is a sense in which no expression, on this account, is, properly speaking, “primitive.” As a resolutely holist theory of content, rather than “bottoming out” in some set of primitive concepts that are given no account, all concepts are given an account by being related to all of the others.<sup>12</sup> Still, insofar as we can distinguish relatively “primitive” expressions such as “square” from clearly “derivative” expressions such as “square or round,” an inferentialist theory of this sort *does* give an account of the concepts expressed by these primitive expressions, enabling us to articulate what these concepts are in terms of their place in an inferential structure.

The inferentialist account of concept expression just stated is precisely the “non-relational” account of intentionality promised by Sellars (1968, ix), according to which we understand the intentional content of an expression such as “square”—what the expression represents, stands for, or signifies—not, at least in the first instance, in terms of the expression’s relation to some extra-linguistic entity but in terms of the role it plays within an inferential structure.<sup>13</sup> As Brandom (2019) develops this inferentialist account of intentionality, we are to understand the crucial distinction between the linguistic acts that are do-

---

<sup>12</sup>As Sellars (1956) says, “There is an important sense in which one has no concept pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects in Space and Time unless one has them all,” (§19).

<sup>13</sup>McDowell (2009a) notably critiques Sellars’s aspiration for such an account in his third Woodbridge lecture, “Intentionality as a Relation.” Opposing what he takes to be Sellars’s view, McDowell suggests that we ought to “embrace relatedness to the real order within the conceptual order” (63). However, I take it that *this* sort of intentional relatedness is acknowledged by Sellars (see especially 1950, 1-3; 1953, 333-334; 1968, 60-90), and this is precisely what is established through the inferentialist account of intentionality endorsed here. When Sellars speaks of “the real order,” he means something quite different than what McDowell means when he uses this term: Sellars’s intended referent is a kind of non-conceptual material reality, devoid of general entities such as properties or propositions. This is a notion of non-conceptual reality eschewed by both McDowell and Brandom (for an account of the core metaphysical difference between Sellars, on the one hand, and Brandom and McDowell, on the other, see Simonelli (2025)). Thus, while I take myself to have gone some way here to responding to McDowell’s essay on Sellars’s behalf, a proper adjudication of this debate between McDowell and Sellars would involve getting into controversial aspects of Sellars’s metaphysics that would distract from the main aim of this essay, which is to defend the full-blooded account of content shared between Sellars and Brandom against McDowell’s criticisms.

ing the representing and the objects that are being linguistically represented in terms of the distinctive modal flavors in which these two poles of the intentional nexus are respectively inferentially articulated.<sup>14</sup> The linguistic acts that confer conceptual contents are to be inferentially articulated in *normative* vocabulary. For instance, one articulates what it is to say that something's a square in terms of what saying that such a thing *commits* one to saying or *precludes one from being entitled* to say. The conceptual contents conferred by the linguistic acts governed by these norms, by contrast, are to be inferentially articulated in *alethic modal* vocabulary. For instance, as I have just done in the paragraph above, one articulates what it is for something to be a square in terms of what something's being this way *necessitates* its being or *precludes it from possibly* being. In this way, we can understand conceptual content expressed by "square," which is conferred upon this expression by the inferential rules governing its use, as an objective property: a way for things in the world to be and the way that things in the world are represented as being when the expression is used.

So, an inferentialist account of conceptual content provides an account of the concepts expressed by linguistic expressions such as "square" in terms of the inferential rules governing their use. As a result, an inferential account of conceptual content can provide an account of conceptual understanding possessed by speakers in terms of their mastery of these rules, and, moreover, an account of incipient speakers' acquisition of conceptual understanding in terms of their coming to master these rules. Although, as McDowell points out, Wittgenstein himself would not be inclined to endorse a full-blooded theory of meaning along these lines, the story of concept acquisition here is nevertheless a recognizably Wittgensteinian one. One starts following the rules "blindly," having one's linguistic habits brought into conformity with the rules through linguistic training by those who are already masters of the rules. Eventually, one starts holding others to the rules to which one is being held,

---

<sup>14</sup>Though Brandom develops this account in detail, there are already hints of this "bi-modal hylomorphic conceptual realism" (2019, 84) in Sellars. See especially the unpublished manuscript "Outlines of a Philosophy of Language" (Sellars 1950, 2-3). For my own articulation of this distinction between linguistic acts, articulated in normative vocabulary, and linguistic contents, articulated in alethic modal vocabulary, see Simonelli (forthcoming b).

and, ultimately, starts holding oneself to them, monitoring one's own linguistic activity in light of the rules. It is through this process of mastering the rules of the language and eventually holding oneself to them that, as Wittgenstein (1969) says, "light dawns gradually on the whole," (§141, 21). It is from within the conceptual space illuminated by mastery of the rules that we theorists, self-conscious language speakers ourselves, articulate an inferentialist theory of content, making our conceptual understanding, which is implicit in our practice of using the language, explicit.

## 5 In Defense of Normative Constitutivism

I have spoken thus far of McDowell's criticisms of Dummett, arguing that they are not applicable to the sort of full-blooded theory developed by Sellars and Brandom. Let me now turn to the specific criticisms that McDowell launches against Brandom's inferentialism, which are recognizably versions of the criticism launched against Dummett. Though Dummett and Brandom share the aspiration of a full-blooded theory of meaning (and, indeed, Brandom describes his work as "Standing on the shoulders of the giant, Michael Dummett" (2010, 360)) their philosophical focus is somewhat different. Brandom systematically operates at a level of abstraction to which Dummett rarely ascends. Insofar as what it is for an assertion to have the particular content that it does is for it to play a particular role in a linguistic practice, as a full-blooded theory maintains, something's being a contentful assertion *at all* must just be its playing a general sort of role in a linguistic practice. Brandom's basic project in *Making It Explicit* is to give such a general characterization of the normative structure of a linguistic practice such that the "moves" in that practice can rightly be said to be conceptually contentful assertions. I'll refer to the position that there is such a characterization of conceptual contentfulness as "normative constitutivism." Some version of normative constitutivism is, I take it, a presupposition of a full-blooded theory of meaning of the sort laid out above. Thus, it is worth addressing in this context McDowell's criticism of Brandom's *Making It Explicit*, which is, by far and away, the most well-developed normative constitutivist account of content.

Unsurprisingly, McDowell sees Brandom as, like Dummett, problematically aiming to account for the conceptual contentfulness of speech “as from outside” the idea of conceptually contentful speech. Now, Brandom is as explicit as can be that he does not attempt to give an account of conceptual content “as from outside” *normativity*. He says:

The structure of [our normative] practices can be elucidated, but always from within normative space, from within our normative practices of giving and asking for reasons. That is the project that has been pursued in this work. Its aim is not reductive but expressive: making explicit the implicit structure characteristic of discursive practice as such, (1994).

However, though normativity is never reduced, insofar as the work attempts to articulate a constitutive account of contentful assertions as “moves” in a normative practice, so described, it does aim to give a constitutive account, in terms of a specific normative structure of a practice, of what an act of making an assertion is. Now, it might seem that applying this account to a linguistic practice such as our own would require conceiving of our practice as a whole as devoid of the expression of conceptual content. Yet, here we need to reiterate the point stated above regarding the fact that this is a constitutive account of content expression. Insofar as a practice’s being normatively structured in this way *just is* its being such that the “moves” made in the context of it *are* acts of making contentful assertions, there can be no conceiving of a practice as so-structured which is not at once a conception of it as involving the making of conceptually contentful assertions. Thus the aim of *Making It Explicit* is to deploy normative vocabulary to describe a practice in such a way that reveals the practice, so-described, to be a practice of making assertions.

McDowell maintains that *Making It Explicit* does not achieve its aim. That is, he maintains that it is possible for there to be a normative practice of precisely the structure that Brandom describes in *Making It Explicit* which is not, as such, a practice of making assertions. He says:

As far as I can see, the deontic structure—involving commitments, entitlements, and rationally consequential relations between them—that Brandom puts in place [. . .] is consistent with the possibility

that a game describable in those terms is just a game, a behavioral repertoire whose moves do not have a significance that points outside the game, so that the moves are not assertions and the transitions are not inference, (127)

It is hard to know what to make of this “argument,” if it is in fact meant to be one at all. Insofar as it *is* meant to be an argument against Brandom’s view, it obviously begs the question against it. Brandom’s fundamental constitutive claim is that any practice describable in just the terms set out in *Making It Explicit* is a practice of making assertions and giving and asking for reasons for them. So to say that there could be a practice describable in just those terms and yet *not* a practice of making assertions is simply to deny Brandom’s claim rather than to make an argument against it. Let me give an analogy. Suppose one gives an account of what it is for a particular system to count as being *alive* in terms of a particular teleologically-characterized structure, say, autopoiesis, which involves the system’s active maintenance of itself. Whatever the merits of this account of life might be, it obviously begs the question against this account to simply say “As far as I can see, this teleological structure involving autopoiesis is consistent with the possibility that a system might be describable in precisely these terms but yet not be alive.” Saying *just* that, at least, is no argument at all. At the very least, what one must do is give an *example* system that is describable in precisely those terms yet not something that we would intuitively call “alive,” thereby showing that this account does not capture the content of our ordinary concept of being alive.<sup>15</sup> Though McDowell does not actually provide any example of this sort against Brandom’s constitutive account of content, he presumably does take it that such an example can be provided.

Now, McDowell attempts to make his claim against Brandom vivid through

---

<sup>15</sup>Of course, it is then in principle open to the proponent of the constitutive account to say that we ought to *revise* our ordinary concept of “life.” However, given that Brandom takes his account to be an articulation of our concept of making an assertion as a particular type of “move” in a normative practice, rather than a revision, this sort of response does not seem open to him. Sometimes, McDowell’s criticisms are phrased as claims that the notions defined in Brandom’s framework could only be revisions of our actual concepts. For instance, McDowell has suggested that the notion of “observation” defined in Brandom’s framework is not *observation*, but, *Bobservation* (Brandom goes by “Bob” in informal contexts).

a Dummett-inspired thought experiment involving Martians, who understand our practices in the normative terms that Brandom lays out, missing nothing about our practices so-described, and yet nevertheless fail to see these practices as ones that involve the making of assertions.<sup>16</sup> However, in the context of what McDowell needs for his argument against Brandom to be successful, a potentially stronger thought experiment of this sort is actually the inverse of the one he proposes. That is, suppose there are Martians who, just for fun (perhaps, as McDowell says, for “the intellectual challenge of keeping track of the positions of players”), play games with precisely the normative structure that Brandom describes in *Making It Explicit*, and yet do not see their makings of moves in these games as the making of assertions, and, indeed, are correct in that self-assessment. So, though they play Brandom’s “game of giving and asking for reasons,” this is, for them, just one among many games in their “rich repertoire of not necessarily competitive rule-governed behavior with no external point, behavior they engage in just for fun,” (127-128). In particular, their playing the “game of giving and asking for reasons” does not actually amount to their making assertions—something which constitutively involves “a concern to *inform* others of things” (128). Accordingly, their practice, though it satisfies Brandom’s description of being a “game of giving and asking for reasons,” is not really a practice of giving and asking for reasons at all. Let us try to imagine such Martians to see if we really can.

Let us suppose first that their practice is in line with Brandom’s minimal proposal of a discursive practice, which does not as such require that a discursive practice confers *empirical* content. That is, a Brandomian discursive practice might still qualify as a “game of giving and asking for reasons,” and yet not involve “language-entries,” wherein players are taken to be entitled to claims upon being taken to be in certain perceptual circumstances, and “language-exits,” wherein players are taken to be committed to performing non-linguistic actions upon being committed to certain claims. Now, as Kukla

---

<sup>16</sup>It’s worth noting how far McDowell’s example is from Dummett’s. Dummett’s example is in fact much closer to Dennett’s (1987, 25-28) (which he attributes to Nozick), where Martians predict what humans will do appealing to only physical regularities, without treating human behavior as intentional or norm-governed in any sense. McDowell’s Martians, by contrast, see human behavior as norm-governed, in Brandom’s sense, without seeing it as linguistic.

and Lance (2009) have argued (convincingly, to my mind), there could be no fully autonomous discursive practice that does not involve receptive encounters at all, since one of the things that practitioners must do is recognize each other. However, in the context of this thought experiment, we suppose that, though the Martians have discursive practices which they conceive as discursive and do involve “entries” and “exits,” they also play a game of the sort described in Chapter 3 of *Making It Explicit*, which is relatively autonomous, and does not involve such “entries” and “exits.” Though entries and exits are not strict requirements of the game, as described by Brandom, it is of course a requirement that there be an inferential structure, understood normatively in terms of the proprieties of commitment and entitlement inheritance acknowledged by the practitioners. Such inferential structures can be more or less complex. Consider, for instance, the extraordinarily simple inferential structure that in fact governs the predicates “white,” “gray,” “black,” “lighter than,” “darker than,” and “same shade as.”<sup>17</sup> Insofar as the language does not contain any perceptual predicates like “sees” so as to inferentially internalize language-entries, the inferential structure here is just that of the three-element chain  $\{0, 1, 2\}$ . Now, insofar as the game the Martians play is fun at all, and lasts more than a few minutes, the inferential structure of their practice is presumably going to be more complex than this one. Let us, suppose, then, that the norms delineate not just a single structure such as this one, but, rather, a structured family of structures of various different sorts (which may include this one). The normative structure that they take themselves to be bound by in playing the game does not really matter for the purpose of the thought experiment, but for the game to be played (in such a way that it is a challenge at all), it must be of such a complexity that the players can be *committed* or *entitled* to making moves, given their adherence to the norms, without *recognizing* that they are so committed or entitled.

Now, let me rehearse, very briefly, what it is for them to play what Brandom calls the “game of giving and asking for reasons.” The point of the game, which is fundamentally cooperative rather than competitive, is for the players

---

<sup>17</sup>This simple structure is appealed to by Rosenberg (1997) and a complete Brandomian inferentialist semantics for it is provided in Simonelli (2022, 83-111).

to collectively undertake as many entitled commitments as they possibly can.<sup>18</sup> It is in the context of this basic point of the game as a whole that the specific moves in the game have their point: the point of making a move is to entitle others to make that move themselves. In addition to moves made with the aim of entitling others to make them, players can also make counter-moves, with the aim of *challenging* a player's commitment to a move, calling the entitlement they have to that move into question. A challenge is appropriate if players have respectively undertaken *incompatible* commitments—commitments such that undertaking one of them precludes one from being entitled to undertake the other. Though they both *take* themselves to be entitled to their respective commitments, they cannot both *be* entitled to each of these commitments. Given that the point of the game is to collectively undertake only *entitled* commitments, the point of a challenge is to rectify this situation. In response to a challenge, a player can show how entitlement to the move is secured through the proprieties of consequential entitlement inheritance acknowledged by the player, or, if a player takes himself to have inherited entitlement to this move from another player, they can defer back to this player who then has one of these two options themselves. Through this process of making moves—which entitle others to make them, who can then deploy their understanding of the norms to make further moves from those moves—and challenging moves—which resolves incompatibilities in the practice—the participants make progress in the game, undertaking more and more entitled commitments.

Now, suppose we come upon these Martians and observe them to be engaging in a practice of just this sort. We are able to discern at least a portion of the structure of the principles of permissive and committive consequence by which they take themselves to be bound in playing the game, and we see that

---

<sup>18</sup>Brandom himself does not quite characterize the game in this way, but it seems to me the best way to abstractly characterize the point of the game of giving and asking for reasons, as described by Brandom. An anonymous referee suggests an alternative conception of the point of the game according to which it is simply to resolve incompatibilities. As I explain below, if the point of the game is to undertake entitled commitments, then, since undertaking incompatible commitments will preclude one from being entitled to both, playing the game in accordance with this aim will involve resolving incompatibilities. However, if the point of the game is *merely* to resolve incompatibilities, then it is hard to see what would be motivating the players to take on additional commitments, once all incompatibilities have been resolved.

they correspond to the mathematical structures articulated by lattice theory. That is, we are able to map the “counters” in their game—for instance, the emission of an electrical pulse of 140kHz from their tendrils, the emission of three rapid-fire pulses of 180kHz, and so on—to our symbols  $\leq$ ,  $\wedge$ , and so on, as governed by the rules of lattice theory. In this case, it seems completely apt to describe their practice as one of *doing pure mathematics*, specifically *lattice theory*, making mathematical assertions about lattices, giving and asking for reasons for those assertions, and thereby expanding knowledge of the properties of lattices. Why would this *not* be an apt description of their practice? McDowell says of Brandom’s normative articulation of discursive practice:

Nothing in the deontic-structural description ties this interest to a concern with how things are outside the game, except in so far as how things are outside the game affects a player’s deontic status, specifically her entitlements. A description of the practice in these terms does not reveal the kind of cooperativeness—sociality—that shows itself in a concern to inform others of things, (128).

It seems to me, on the contrary, that a description of the practice in these terms reveals making a move, with the aim of entitling others to make it themselves, as *precisely* an act that is concerned to inform others of things, enabling them to appeal to these facts in their own reasoning, thereby expanding their collective knowledge of the domain that they are collectively concerned to uncover. To say that Martians are “concerned” in this way, of course, is to say nothing about Martian phenomenology or their extrinsic motives. Perhaps, for them, “what it’s like,” phenomenologically speaking, to make an assertion, is rather different than what it’s generally like, for us, phenomenologically speaking, to make an assertion.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, perhaps, as McDowell suggests, they *do* engage in this practice “just for fun.” Even if this is so, this is, of course, perfectly compatible with the claim that the practice is nevertheless one of making mathematical assertions (after all, the same can perhaps be said of some professional mathematicians). What is it, then, that the Martians might be lacking so that their practice is not one of making assertions? I do not see that there is any such

---

<sup>19</sup>Though of course, there is almost certainly no one thing that is “what it’s like to make an assertion,” which is stable across people and contexts.

thing.<sup>20</sup>

It's worth being clear that nothing about the example hangs on the fact that I've supposed their inferential structure maps up to that of lattice theory in particular. Pick any structured set of inferential norms that you want; it's going to correspond to *some* set of mathematical structures, and their practice can thus be aptly described as one of engaging in the branch of mathematics pertaining to those structures. Nor does anything about the example hang on the fact that I have, for simplicity's sake, chosen to focus on a "minimal" discursive practice that does not involve perceptual responsiveness to features of the world, which would be internalized in inferences of the sort specified above. If we do consider that more robust sort of practice, the inferentially articulated contents conferred by the practice will not be purely formal contents of mathematics but, rather, material contents encompassing features of the world in which their practice takes place. I will leave it as an exercise for the reader to work through such an example on their own.

## 6 Conclusion

I have defended inferentialism as a full-blooded theory of meaning in Dummett's sense. While fulfilling the basic aspiration Dummett has for a full-blooded theory, inferentialism avoids the pitfalls McDowell highlights in the sort of full-blooded theory of meaning actually suggested by Dummett. Moreover, I have argued that a normative constitutivist account of conceptual content, of the sort developed by Brandom, is completely untouched by McDowell's arguments. Thus, despite the widespread impression that there are good McDowellian reasons to think that inferentialism cannot provide a full-blooded account of conceptual content, on inspection, these arguments either fail to apply to inferentialism or fall flat against it. Proponents of inferentialism need

---

<sup>20</sup>Now, I don't want to rule out the possibility that there may be crucial aspects of a content-conferring normative practice that have not been made explicit in Brandom's description and which are implicit in the description I have given. Indeed, many authors such as Kukla and Lance (2009), Wanderer (2010), and Milson (2014), have argued such a thing. Such debates, however, can be understood as *within* the context of the normative constitutive program. McDowell's argument, however, is meant to be an attack on the normative constitutivist program in general, and, I cannot see how it has any force against it.

not modestly cover up their bold semantic ambitions; they can parade their ambitions openly, barefaced and unashamed.<sup>21</sup>

## References

- [1] Brandom, Robert. 1994. *Making It Explicit*. Harvard University Press.
- [2] Brandom, Robert. 2010. "Response to Bob Hale and Crispin Wright." In *Reading Brandom*, ed. J. Wanderer and B. Weiss, 360-366.
- [3] Brandom, Robert. 2019. *A Spirit of Trust*. Harvard University Press.
- [4] Child, William. 2020. "We can go no further': Meaning, Use, and the Limits of Language'." In H. Appelqvist (ed.) *Wittgenstein and the Limits of Language*, 93-114. Routledge.
- [5] Dennett, Daniel. 1987 "True Believers: The Intentional Strategy and Why It Works," in *The Intentional Stance*, 13-36. MIT Press.
- [6] Dever, Josh. 2012. "Formal Semantics." In *The Continuum Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, 47-83. Continuum International.
- [7] Dummett, Michael. 1996a. "What Is a Theory of Meaning? (I)." In *The Seas of Language*, Oxford University Press.
- [8] Dummett, Michael. 1996b. "What Do I Know in Knowing a Language." In *The Seas of Language*, Oxford University Press.
- [9] Dummett, Michael. 1987. "Reply to John McDowell." In *Michael Dummett*, ed. C. Wright and B. Taylor, 253-268. Dordrecht: Springer.
- [10] Hlobil, Ulf and Robert Brandom. 2024. *Reasons for Logic, Logic for Reasons*. Routledge.
- [11] Incurvati, Luca and Julian J. Schlöder. 2023. *Reasoning with Attitude*. Oxford University Press.
- [12] Kaplan, Daniel. 2022. *Substructural Content*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh.

---

<sup>21</sup>For helpful comments and discussions on earlier drafts and ideas in this paper, many thanks Bob Brandom, Ulf Hlobil, Rea Golan, Shuhei Shimamura, Dax Hamouth, Shiwei Chen, Luca Incurvati, Mathias Haase, Malte Willer, audiences at Fudan University and University of Ottawa, and two anonymous referees of this journal.

- [13] Kukla, Rebecca and Mark Lance. 2009. *“Yo!” and “Lo!”: The Pragmatic Topography of the Space of Reasons*. Harvard University Press.
- [14] McDowell, John. 1981. “Anti-Realism and the Epistemology of Understanding.” In *Meaning and Understanding*, ed. H. Parret and J. Bouveresse, 225-248. New York: de Gruyter.
- [15] McDowell, John. 1987. “In Defense of Modesty” In *Michael Dummett*, ed. C. Wright and B. Taylor, 59-80. Springer. Reprinted in McDowell 1998, *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [16] McDowell, John. 1994. *Mind and World*. Harvard University Press.
- [17] McDowell, John. 1998b. “Another Plea for Modesty.” In *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [18] McDowell, John. 2005. “Motivating Inferentialism.” *Pragmatics and Cognition* 13 (1):121-140. In McDowell 2009, *Having the World In View*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [19] McDowell, John. 2009a. “Intentionality as a Relation.” In *Having the World in View*, 44-68. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [20] McDowell, John. 2009b. “The Constitutive Ideal of Rationality: Davidson and Sellars.” In *Having the World in View*, 207-220. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [21] Milson, Jared. 2014. “How to Ask a Question in the Space of Reasons: Assertions, Queries, and the Normative Structure of Minimally Discursive Practices.” PhD Dissertation. Emory University.
- [22] Peregin, Jaraslov. 2018. “Is Inferentialism Circular?” *Analysis* 78, no. 3: 450-454.
- [23] Rosenberg, Jay F. 1997. “Brandom’s *Making It Explicit*: A First Encounter.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57, no. 1: 179-187.
- [24] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1950. “Outline of a Philosophy of Language.” Presented in 1950 at the Rockefeller Conference on Semantics. Preserved at the Pittsburgh Sellars Archive: <https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt:31735060480203>.
- [25] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1953a. “Is there a Synthetic a Priori?” *Philosophy of Science*. Reprinted in *Science, Perception, and Reality*.

- [26] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1953b. "Inference and Meaning." *Mind* 62, no. 247: 313-338
- [27] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1954. "Some Reflections on Language Games." *Philosophy of Science* 21, no. 3: 204-228.
- [28] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1956. "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind." *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 1:253-329.
- [29] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1963b. "Empiricism and Abstract Entities." Reprinted in Sellars, 1974. *Essays in Philosophy and Its History*, 245-286.
- [30] Sellars, Wilfrid. 1968. *Science and Metaphysics*. Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing.
- [31] Simonelli, Ryan. 2022. *Meaning and the World*. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Chicago.
- [32] Simonelli, Ryan. 2023. "How to Be a Hyper-Inferentialist." *Synthese* 202, 163.
- [33] Simonelli, Ryan. 2025. "Sellars's Two Worlds." In *Reading Kant with Sellars*, 228-250. Routledge.
- [34] Simonelli, Ryan. Forthcoming a. "Bringing Bilateralisms Together: A Unified Framework for Inferentialists." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*.
- [35] Simonelli, Ryan. Forthcoming b. "An Act-Based Approach to Assertibles and Instantiables." *Ergo*.
- [36] Tomasello, Michael. 2008. *Origins of Human Communication*. MIT Press.
- [37] Stroud, Barry 2012. "Meaning and Understanding", in J. Ellis and D. Guevara eds., *Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Mind*. Oxford University Press, 19-36.
- [38] Wanderer, Jeremy. 2010. "Brandom's Challenges," in *Reading Brandom*, ed. J. Wanderer and B. Weiss.
- [39] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1953/1958. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- [40] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1969. *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe, G. H. von Wright & Mel Bochner. New York and London: Harper Torchbooks.
- [41] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1975. *Philosophical Remarks*, ed. R. Rhees. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.