

Two Conceptions of Representation

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1 Background

- Quasi-realism: motivations and structural commitments
- The threat of globalisation
- Two expressivist programs: linking Blackburn & Brandom
- Two notions of 'representation'

2 Today's talk – on-screen 'handout'

Quasi-realism: the basics

- Begins with 'Humean' expressivism, e.g., about moral or modal claims.
- Emphasises this question:

'Why do some speech acts which are *not* genuine assertions nevertheless *behave* (pretty much) as if they were?'

- Ends up with 'loose' and 'strict' notions of assertion.

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Three kinds of speech acts

Quasi-realism's three-part taxonomy of speech acts

- 1 **Genuinely descriptive statements.** ('A whale is not a fish')
- 2 **Quasi-descriptive statements.** ('Dolphins deserve our respect')
- 3 **Non-declaratives.** ('Poach me a kipper')

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The (old) Bifurcation Thesis

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A structural instability?

The threat of 'globalisation'

- Quasi-realism involves *loose* and *strict* notions of assertion.
- **Challenge.** What if the loose notion is the only one we need?
- **Issue.** What does it take to *be* an assertion, in either sense – loose or strict?

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Assertion in inferentialism

Brandom's account of assertion:

- Assertions as 'moves in a game of giving and asking for reasons.'
- Explicitly *non-representational* in its starting point – so just what quasi-realism needs for an account of assertion *in the loose sense*, apparently.
- **Question.** Does Brandom's account of assertion leave room for the *pluralism* of quasi-realism – i.e., the view that different vocabularies (moral, modal, etc) 'do different jobs'?
- **Answer.** Yes! Brandom's view is compatible with the view that assertions have a variety of *expressive* functions – Brandom himself requires as much.
- Brandom, too, is a pragmatic pluralist.

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What happened to the loose/strict distinction?

Brandom and quasi-realism

If we characterise assertions as moves in a game of giving and asking for reasons, what happens to the quasi-realist's idea that some *apparent* assertions – e.g., moral claims – are not *genuine* assertions?

Two issues here:

- 1 Is the view that moral claims (say) are genuine assertions *in the inferentialist sense* in tension with what expressivists such as Blackburn had in mind, when they denied that such claims are assertions. (*Obviously not.*)
- 2 Does Brandom's view of assertion leave any room for a Bifurcation Thesis, of the kind (and in a place) that quasi-realism requires? Or does it necessarily recommend a more *global* version of expressivism? (*Probably the latter, but deferred the issue.*)

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Two notions of assertion

- At this stage, we have two notions of 'genuine' assertion in play:
 - From Brandom: assertions in the inferentialist sense.
 - From quasi-realism & 'local' expressivism: the (supposed) core of 'genuinely descriptive' declarative speech acts, after various cases (morals, modals, etc) are given an expressivist treatment.
- These notions are pulling in different directions – the former is 'inclusive', the latter 'exclusive'.
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- Distinguish two 'nodes' within philosophical uses of the notion of representation.
 - ① **e-Representation**: emphasis on 'environment tracking', covariation, 'indicator relations'.¹
 - ② **i-Representation**: defined in terms of systemic *functional* or *inferential* role – e.g., a move in the game of giving and asking for reasons.²
- **Claim**. Both notions are useful, *but they're not the same thing*.

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These two notions of representation are easily confused, if we confuse:

- 1 Normative answerability **within the conversational game** – an **external** constraint from the perspective of every player, though **internal** to the game itself.
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Again, both notions may be useful, for various theoretical purposes – *but we shouldn't confuse them.*

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We need to distinguish between two objects of enquiry:

- 1 'True' as a word used within the conversational game – here our theoretical focus is on **the use of the term** (e.g., on what role it plays, what difference it makes, etc.); and what we need, arguably, is an expressive or pragmatist explanation of that.
- 2 Truth (or correctness, or accuracy) as a relation between e-representations and the external environment of the creatures or systems employing those e-representations – here, our theoretical focus is on a natural relation between natural objects; and we need a substantive account of the relation, *not* an explanation of the use of a term.

Again, both studies may be well-motivated, but we shouldn't confuse them.

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Again, both studies may be well-motivated, but we shouldn't confuse them.

'Truth' is ambiguous

There's a temptation to call both kinds of external constraint 'truth' – but again, we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that we're dealing with two aspects or sub-species *of a single notion of truth*.

We need to distinguish between two objects of enquiry:

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1 Background

2 Today's talk – on-screen 'handout'

“An account of the conceptual might explain the use of concepts in terms of a priori understanding of conceptual *content*. Or it might pursue a complementary explanatory strategy, beginning with a story about the practice or activity of applying concepts, and elaborating on that basis an understanding of conceptual content. The first can be called a *platonist* strategy, and the second a *pragmatist* . . . strategy. One variety of semantic or conceptual platonism in this sense would identify the content typically expressed by declarative sentences and possessed by beliefs with sets of possible worlds, or with truth conditions otherwise specified. At some point it must then explain how associating such a content with sentences and beliefs contributes to our understanding of how it is proper to use sentences in making claims, and to deploy beliefs in reasoning and guiding action. The pragmatist direction of explanation, by contrast, seeks to explain how the use of linguistic expressions, or the functional role of intentional states, confers conceptual content on them.”

“It offers an account of knowing (or believing, or saying) *that* such and such is the case in terms of knowing *how* (being able) to do something. . . . The sort of pragmatism adopted here seeks to explain what is asserted by appeal to features of *assertings*, what is claimed in terms of *claimings*, what is judged by *judgings*, and what is believed by the role of *believings* . . . – in general, the content by the act, rather than the other way around.” (Brandom 2000: 4)

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If you prise the statements off the world you prise the facts off it too; but the world would be none the poorer. (You don't also prise off the world *what the statements are about* – for this you would need a different kind of lever.) (Strawson, 'Truth', my emphasis)

Ontology and the perspectival fallacy

“A quasi-realist [e.g. about ethical claims] can mimic our formal practice with the concept of truth or fact. But surely he cannot give the facts any role in explaining our practice. To do so is to embrace their real distinct existence, or so it might seem.” (Blackburn, 1993: 31)

DISQUOTATIONAL SCHEMA: ‘P’ is true iff P; ‘x’ refers to x.

Expressivism all the way down?

- 1 Science and the status of modality.
- 2 The modality and generality of language in general.

“A similar fate awaits us, in many peoples’ view, if we pose [an expressivist’s] external-sounding question about at least the coastal waters of science. How come we go in for descriptions of the world in terms of energies and currents? Because we have learned to become sensitive to, measure, predict and control, and describe and refer to, energies and currents. That is science’s own view of how we have got where we are, and there is none better.” (Blackburn, 2007, 7–8)

END