

"Brandom, Truth, Assertibility and Objective Content: Still not Explicit?"

HANDOUT/OUTLINE/DIY KIT

1. A familiar and awkward-looking hazard for assertibilist theories¹: assertoric practice is essentially subject to a norm which *contrasts* with assertibility. How, using just the kind of materials which the assertibilist allows himself, can a conception of the content of assertoric moves be constructed which will allow them to be subject to apparently contrasting norms of warrant and truth? (The *truth* question.)

Contrast: the *objective content* question: how to provide for the emergence of assertoric moves whose contents are objective in the sense that they do not describe the informational situation of the agent nor other features of his attitudes? Assertibility is relative to assertors, to their context and state of information in relevant respects. But the content of what is asserted is, typically, independent of all that. How may contents of this kind be recovered on the basis of materials legitimately available to the assertibilist?

Any viable assertibilism has to address both questions.

2. What is the relation between these two obligations? Does discharging either put one in position to discharge the other?

(a) Truth question first. Strategy: seek to construct a notion out of basic assertibilist materials that appropriately contrasts with assertibility itself and otherwise behaves in relevant respects as a notion of truth should. My favourite—

Superassertibility:

A content is superassertible if and only if it is, or can be, warranted, and some warrant for it would survive arbitrarily close scrutiny of its pedigree and arbitrarily extensive increments to or other forms of improvement of our state of information.

This gives:

(i) A straightforward answer to the truth question:

(a) Superassertibility is a property which marks an assertion as a good or correct one if assertibility does;

(b) While aiming at superassertibility is inseparable from aiming to make only warranted assertions, being superassertible and being warranted are extensionally distinct—distinct ways for a contentful move to be correct—just as the truth question requires.

(ii) An equally straightforward answer to the objective content question. For suppose truth is superassertibility. If, in a certain context *c*, it is assertible that *p*, then that this is so—i.e. that it is assertible in *c* that *p*—is itself superassertible. But that leaves it entirely open whether the content that *p* is superassertible. And conversely, it can perfectly well be that it is superassertible that *p*, without its being assertible in a given context *c* that *p*. Whether or not *p* is

¹ Brandom (2000), p.187

assertible is relative to and depends upon the informational context; whether or not p is superassertible does not. In short, precisely because p and ‘it is assertible that p ’ have different superassertibility conditions — information-context relative in the case of the latter, but not in the case of the former — they differ in content in just the manner required.

(b) Brandom however puts the objective content question first. Suppose we start from an answer to the objective content question, somehow achieved. How can we get an answer to the truth question? Well, the difference in content in general between: *It is assertible that p* (briefly $A(p)$) and plain p can’t be shown up by finding any difference in their unreconstructed assertibility conditions; the problem is that, in any given c , there is no such difference. But they behave differently under negation, e.g.:² not- p does not entail not- $A(p)$ in general (states of information can be misleading) and not- $A(p)$ does not entail not- p (states of information can be neutral). But if we introduce a truth operator, governed by the standard Equivalence scheme:

$$Tr(p) \text{ iff } p$$

then p and $Tr(p)$ will be mutually entailing. The argument that ‘ Tr ’ expresses a norm over assertion distinct from ‘ A ’ can then follow the tack in ch. 1 of *Truth and Objectivity*.

3. Brandom on the objective content question

Any claim that is objective in Brandom's sense—is not about the attitudes or informational situation of any particular subject or group of subjects—will be co-assertible with certain non-objective claims. Such are the respective pairs:

“The swatch is red”

“That the swatch is red is properly assertible by me now”

“I will write a book on Hegel”

“I foresee that I will write a book on Hegel”

“All ravens are black”

“We have a body of evidence corroborating the claim that all ravens are black and no significant counter-evidence”

How can assertibilism properly distinguish these contents?

Brandom’s response:

(i) Distinguish *two kinds* of assertibility—what a speaker ought to be prepared to assert qua *entitled* to it and what a speaker ought to be prepared to assert qua *committed* to it.³

(ii) Reflect that the intuitive differences in content between members of the pairs issue in differences concerning which claims they are respectively compatible or incompatible with.

² This, of course, is what the assertibilist has to explain.

³ See Brandom (2000), p.190ff.

(iii) Try to construct a notion of incompatibility out of materials provided by the distinguished notions of assertibility, viz. commitment and entitlement, that will reflect these intuitive incompatibility differences. (This will give us the negation asymmetries)

Here is his basic suggestion⁴: that an assertoric move M be regarded as incompatible with a move N just in case *a commitment to the first precludes an entitlement to the second*.

But what is ‘preclusion’?? Three glosses, three problems.

A. Preclusion as *mutual inconsistency*. But how can there ever actually be such a ‘preclusion’ in the relevant kind of case—where the commitments and entitlements in question are to assertoric claims? Presumably there is to be no requirement of ancestral entitlement in one’s commitments—consequences of claims which one makes prejudicially, or dogmatically, or otherwise without entitlement, are no less *commitments* on that account than those which flow from claims to which one is entitled. So a player can always be committed to *p* and entitled to not-*p*. So interpreted, Brandom’s relation is empty, so too weak for purpose.

B. Preclusion as *mutual illegality*. Suppose ‘preclusion’ is understood *quasi-legally*: as a situation in which one committed to M thereby *forfeits* any entitlement to N, no matter what his evidence.

Any good? Well, reflect that the relevant kind of incompatibility—that holding between e.g. “That the swatch is red is properly assertible by me now” and “No-one knows anything about the colour of the swatch” but not between the latter and “The swatch is red”—is (of course) symmetric. Hence if we are trying to determine whether a quasi-legal gloss on ‘preclusion’ can recover the different *semantic* compatibility relations which a pair of assertoric moves, M and M*, respectively bear to a particular assertoric move, M⁺, it cannot matter whether we put the question as:

Is an entitlement to M⁺ precluded by a commitment to M*, but not by a commitment to M ?

Or, symmetrically, as

Does a commitment to M⁺ preclude an entitlement to M*, but not an entitlement to M ?

Focus on the latter form of the question. And suppose that M and M* are *co-entitlements* (i.e. that, as far as the legalities are concerned, any situation in which one is entitled to one is a situation in which one is entitled to the other.) Let it be that a commitment to M⁺ does indeed preclude entitlement to M*. So the rules of the language-game prescribe that any situation in which one is committed to M⁺ is a situation in which one is not entitled to M*. But now, since M and M* are co-entitlements, the situations in which one is not entitled to M* are all and only situations in which one is also not entitled to M. So commitment to M⁺ must preclude entitlement to M as well.

No evident progress. Provided preclusion is understood legalistically, and the pairings of objective and non-objective contents which exercise Brandom are all cases of co-entitlement, his proposal is seemingly impotent to draw the intended distinctions in full and correct detail.

⁴ Cf Brandom (2000), p.194 ‘We can say that two assertible contents are *incompatible* in case *commitment* to one precludes *entitlement* to the other.’

In his (forthcoming), Brandom has responded to this line of objection as betraying misunderstanding. He writes that it

“.....is the product of a failure to understand the interactions between entitlements and incompatibilities in the dynamic context of keeping deontic score—in particular, the distinction between *initial* and *final* entitlements [my emphases]. For a scorekeeper to treat two claimable contents as incompatible is for her to withhold attribution of final entitlement to one whenever she attributes commitment to the other. As described in Chapter Four of *MIE*, incompatibilities matter at the third stage of the scorekeeping process. In response to a new assertion by some interlocutor, the scorekeeper first *adds* a corresponding commitment to the interlocutor’s score, and attributes as well commitment to any other claimables that the scorekeeper takes to be commitment-consequences of it. At the second stage, if the scorekeeper takes the interlocutor to be *entitled* to those new commitments, the scorekeeper *adds* to the interlocutor’s score *prima facie* entitlements to any claimable contents that are the consequences of good entitlement-preserving inferences that have them (along with any other commitments to which the interlocutor is similarly entitled) as premises. At the third stage, the scorekeeper considers whether the interlocutor has any commitments that are *incompatible* with those to which *prima facie* entitlement has been attributed at the second stage. If so, entitlements to those commitments are *subtracted*, yielding a final score of what the interlocutor is (according to the scorekeeper) committed and entitled (now, not just *prima facie*, but all things considered). *Final* entitlements are what the scorekeeper attributes to the target after going through the three-stage process of computing the pragmatic deontic significance of an assertional speech act.”

Thus the objection allegedly

“...fail[s] to distinguish the provisional entitlements attributed at stage two from the final entitlements that survive the winnowing by incompatibilities at stage three. If two claims were “co-entitlements” in the sense that an interlocutor is *finally*, not just *provisionally*, entitled to them under the same circumstances, then they would indeed have to have the same incompatibilities, and would in that sense be synonymous. But the point of the objectivity proofs is that it does *not* follow that because an interlocutor is *provisionally* entitled to two claims under the same conditions, that they *do* have the same incompatibilities.”

Remark: if this helps, it will be because, at the third stage, reflecting on the entries for his interlocutor under “Commitments” recorded after the second stage, a competent scorekeeper may be required to subtract e.g. P from the entitlement set of his interlocutor while leaving her entitled to e.g. ‘P is assertible by me now’. And he will do this, apparently, in the light of consideration whether the former, but not the latter, is *incompatible* with any of her entered commitments. So *he* has the notion we are trying to understand—the notion whereby objective/non-objective content pairs of the kind illustrated can sustain differing incompatibility relations. But how does to the observation that the sought- for distinction can be manifested in the practice of a scorekeeper in this way respond to the demand to explain, in assertibilist terms, the relevant notion of ‘preclusion’ and how it grounds the distinction? We — theorists — already know what the distinction is and myriad ways it is manifested (content sense and ingredient sense). The question is how it could be grounded in an assertoric practice in a way that doesn’t merely draw on unreconstructed differences in the contents of the types of claims in question. How does Brandom’s rejoinder address this?

C. Preclusion as *rational incompatibility*. I think the following may be indicative that Brandom's idea is misconceived not just in execution but in principle — that it must stop short of the intended distinctions on any plausible account of 'preclusion'. Consider the pair:

- (i) All ravens are black
- (ii) We have a body of evidence corroborating the claim that all ravens are black and no significant counter-evidence.

Now, (i) is, whereas (ii) is not, incompatible with

- (iii) A grey raven is nesting in the Cairngorm Mountains.

Hence, if Brandom is right, a commitment to (i), but not a commitment to (ii), should preclude final entitlement to (iii). Well, suppose the rules forbid the ascription of any entitlement to a subject whose uptake is rationally incompatible with one of her commitments. Then, since the two contents are contradictory, they will forbid ascription of an entitlement to (iii) to an interlocutor committed to (i). But the same would be true if the commitment is not to (i) but to (ii), — the claim that one has a body of evidence corroborating the claim that all ravens are black and no significant extant counter-evidence. For while (iii) is not inconsistent with (ii), *an entitlement to it* is — and this holds whether the entitlement is provisional or final, from the scorekeepers' perspective.

Here's the point: (i) and (ii) typify the kind of difference—between an objective content and a corresponding non-objective content—which Brandom sets himself to differentiate. But even when we understand a commitment's precluding an entitlement in terms of the *rational impossibility* of uptake of the entitlement alongside continuation of the commitment, we fail to recover an appropriate contrast between (i) and (ii) in relation to (iii). Uptake of an entitlement to (iii) is *rationally incompatible* with a continuing commitment to (ii), no less than to (i). The crucial difference is that it is the *fact* of an entitlement to (iii) which is inconsistent with (ii), and the *content* of an entitlement to (iii) which is inconsistent with (i). Again, the distinction between provisional and final entitlement seems to make no difference to the point.

Conclusion? Tentatively: that there seems no prospect of recovering *this* difference unless we already have the means to appeal not merely to rational incompatibilities between entitlements and commitments in general but to the narrower sub-class in which the incompatibilities are sustained *purely by the contents* of the commitments and entitlements in question. Even rational incompatibility — our strongest (and presumably from an assertibilist starting position, illicit) notion of preclusion yet— between commitments and entitlements is too crude a notion to distinguish these two crucially different kinds of case.

4. So why not an ideal assertibility approach instead?

Brandom did not originally consider superassertibility. But he does consider the older Peircean idea that what is true is to be identified with what is ideally assertible:

The attempt by assertibility theorists to satisfy this central criterion of adequacy of semantic theories has typically taken the form of appeals to some sort of ideality condition. Assessments of truth are understood as assessments of assertibility under ideal conditions (what Sellars called 'semantic assertibility')—of what claims one would be entitled to or justified in making if one were an ideal knower, or given full information, maximal evidence, at the end of inquiry, and so on.

and rapidly dismisses it

I'm not going to argue the point here, but my own view is that this sort of strategy is hopeless. If it is the best available, we should just give up the assertibilist project.⁵

In a note to this passage, he (a little darkly) explains:

My thought is that there is no way to specify the ideality in question that is not either question-begging (in implicitly appealing to a notion of truth) or trivial, in the light of the sensitivity of the practical effects of otherwise more ideal status for one belief both to the *falsity* of collateral beliefs and (even more damaging) to *ignorance* concerning them.⁶

The Peircean type of proposal does indeed face serious, probably insurmountable difficulties; here are three:

That it is irremediably unclear what would constitute the relevantly ideal circumstances;

That the counterfactual, 'S would be assertible for an ideally situated judge', seems to call for a categorical ground;

That paradoxes flow from applying truth, so construed, to assertions inconsistent with the antecedent of such counterfactuals⁷

But these seem not to afflict the idea, roughly, of a content's being and remaining assertible under—informationally speaking—*ordinary* but *indefinitely improving* conditions.⁸ And none of them seems to be what Brandom has in mind. Discussion point.

So why does Brandom spurn this direction?

Well, it turns out he does view superassertibility as vulnerable to essentially the same difficulty he sees for Peircean assertibility. In each case, possibilities of *error* foul up the proposed characterization of the target notion. Some earlier unpublished notes⁹ are quite explicit, even if somewhat tentative:

The suspicions I express about ideal assertibility theories do extend to superassertibility. But they are *suspicions*—I haven't done the work necessary to claim an argument. My general worry ... take[s] the form of a dilemma. Either the 'improvements' of informational or epistemic situation under which assertibility is to be stable are so specified as to rule out the acquisition of *false* collateral information, or they are not. I doubt that the former condition can be achieved noncircularly (i.e. without appeal to a truth-like notion). And if one can acquire false collateral beliefs while generally improving one's epistemic situation—surely the general case—then one has no way of ensuring that these collateral falsehoods do not infirm the assertibility of the target claim. That is, in this case *nothing* will be stably assertible under epistemically improving circumstances.

⁵ Brandom (2000), pp.187-8.

⁶ *ibid*, note 3, p.219. Brandom develops the line of objection suggested here against one particular proposal in his earlier paper Brandom (1994b).

⁷ Alvin Plantinga seems to have been the first to spot this kind of wrinkle — see Plantinga (1982).

⁸ For more detailed explanation, and discussion of the conditions under which superassertibility may serve as a truth predicate, see Wright (1993), pp.411-25 and Wright (1992), pp.44-61.

⁹ Private circulation

So the problem Brandom sees turns on the key notion of *improvement* in information state. Either transitions to improved information states are so characterized that they may include acquiring false beliefs, or they are restricted so as to allow only acquisition of true beliefs. On the first alternative—the thought appears to be—no warrant can be stable under arbitrary improvements of information state, since there will be, for any warrant, possible ‘improvements’ which involve acquiring false beliefs which disrupt it. On the second, this pitfall is avoided, but—unless some way is found to enforce the required exclusions without explicitly deploying the notions of truth and falsehood—the proposed account of truth as superassertibility collapses in vicious circularity.

How should the ‘superassertibilist’ respond? Consider just the instability horn. (Much to say about the circularity horn.) Brandom seems to be saying that *any* warrant will be liable to disruption by suitable addition of falsehoods to one’s information state. That is, for any warrant for any proposition *p*, there will be some false proposition *q* such that belief that *q* would disrupt that warrant, and some overall improved information state will include the belief that *q*. So no warrant will be stable under *arbitrary* improvement of information states, hence no statement will be superassertible.

This seems completely unmotivated. The superassertibilist should insist that if an information state is to constitute an improvement of predecessor, any new claims it incorporates, even if false, must be *warranted*. Sure, for any given warrant for a content *p*, potentially disruptive augmentation of our information state by false but still warranted contents must remain a *possibility*. But that is beside the point. Superassertibility requires that we reach a stage after which it will not *in fact* occur, no matter what actually assertible claims we go on to accumulate. That we cannot ever exclude the mere possibility of warranted but disruptive (false) additions is beside the point.

5. Brandon’s riposte

This is from his (forthcoming):

It seems to me that, as defined, [superassertibility] is bound either to define the *wrong* norm, or to be viciously (vacuously) circular. On the first horn of the proposed dilemma, there are *lots* of norms we can assess claims according to that contrast with assessments of evidence or warrant. We can assess claims accordingly as they are or are not witty, hip, interesting, charmingly irreverent, pleasing to God, and along many other dimensions. Superassertibility no doubt defines *a* norm that contrasts with warrantedness. But how truth-like is it? Here everything turns on what counts as an “improvement of one’s information state.” Are we to stipulate that only the addition of *true* claims counts as “improvement,” or not? If we are, then the problem lies on the circularity horn of the dilemma, which I’ll discuss below. If not, then my worry is that it is easy to envisage circumstances in which *false* claims qualify as superassertible, because the presence of *other* false claims in our “information state” immunize them from what would otherwise serve as counterevidence. My false belief that boiling hides in water with birch bark, but not with oak bark, will cure and tan them will remain robust and maintainable if my information state has been ‘improved’ by the addition of the false belief that birch trees produce acorns, and have rough, brown, vertically striated bark and lobed leaves, while oaks have white, horizontally striated bark and oval, saw-toothed leaves.

This looks like a different objection. Previously the objection seemed to be that nothing will qualify as superassertible unless we stipulate that improvements to a state of information add

only truths. For if false additions are allowed, it will always be possible to defeat a warrant. Now by contrast the objection seems to be that there is nothing to stop some false claims from getting to be superassertible since we can (always? sometimes?) *defend* the warrant for a false claim by suitably selecting collateral false claims to immunise it against defeat.

Clearly Brandom cannot make both objections. But the new one seems even more tendentious. In order for a false claim to be so immunised by collateral falsehoods that it maintains its assertibility, *every* actually feasible improvement of the relevant information state will have to incorporate these falsehoods. So their falsehood has to be actually undetectable. That is an idea that is familiar to and found acceptable by most representationalists. But what ground does Brandom, qua *pragmatist*, have for thinking that such a thing is possible?

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