

REPRESENTATION OR INFERENCE

Must We Choose? Should We?

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In his monumental 1994 work *Making It Explicit*,¹ Robert Brandom announces a revolution in the philosophy of language. Brandom in some ways self-consciously models his revolution on Kant's famous "Copernican revolution" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*² – so much so that a clever parody posted for some time in the University of Pittsburgh philosophy department superimposed Brandom's title on the well-known cover of the Norman Kemp Smith edition of the first *Critique*.³ With the publication in 2000 of *Articulating Reasons*,⁴ Brandom's shorter guide to his philosophical program, we need only await the appearance of a B-edition of *Making It Explicit* to complete the parallel.⁵

Nonetheless, I will contend that Brandom's philosophical revolution neglects a crucial insight of Kant's critical philosophy. I will show this by exploring one of Brandom's favorite ways of expressing what is distinctive about his approach to the philosophy of language, his contrast between two "orders of explanation," which he calls "representationalism" and "inferentialism." According to Brandom, philosophy of language in the twentieth century has embraced the "representationalist" order of explanation, for which notions of representation, reference, truth, and the like are taken as explanatorily basic, and other notions, in particular notions of the correctness and incorrectness of inference, are explained in terms of them. In place of the representationalist order of explanation, Brandom advocates inferentialism, which takes broadly inferential notions as explanatorily basic. One of the main tasks of his work is then to show that representational idioms and locutions can be accounted for on this inferentialist basis. In particular, Brandom sets himself the goal of recapturing in inferentialist terms the *objective evaluability* of our linguistic performances. I will argue, though, that Brandom's attempts at accounting for representational talk, and so for objectivity, fail, and that the reason that they fail is that his purely inferentialist program does not leave room for a proper conception of the *objects* which make up the world to which our linguistic performances are responsible, and of our cognitive relation to those objects. In a word, Brandom's inferentialism has no room in it for that dimension of experience which Kant calls "intuition."

The rhetoric of "orders of explanation," "relative priority," and so on pervades Brandom's books. Time and again he locates his view in these terms. His view

grants explanatory priority to the distinctive features of discursive, concept-using creatures over their similarities with other sentient beings; to practical knowing-how over theoretical knowing-that; to linguistic over mental intentionality; and so on. Frequently, he presents his view as reacting against a “standard” or “normal” order of explanation, reversing it or “turning it on its head.” Where he admits antecedents to his views in other philosophers, these philosophers are usually portrayed as in the distinct minority, if not prophetic voices crying in the wilderness.

As noted above, Brandom’s revolution in the philosophy of language claims inspiration from Kant. Certainly his use of the rhetoric of “inverting orders of explanation” may be reminiscent of Kant’s famous remarks in the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them *a priori* through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an *a priori* cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us. This would be something like the first thoughts of Copernicus, who, when he did not make good progress in the explanation of the celestial motions if he assumed that the entire celestial host revolves around the observer, tried to see if he might not have greater success if he made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest. (CPR, Bxvi.)

And indeed Brandom appeals to Kant’s authority in motivating his inferentialist order of explanation. Closely associated with his rejection of representationalism is his adoption of what he calls a “top-down” rather than “bottom-up” semantic explanatory strategy. Representationalists typically begin with subsentential linguistic units – names and predicates – and their non-linguistic correlates – names refer to objects, and predicates to classes of objects, for example. Semantic features of sentences are then derived on this basis, on the model of Tarski’s famous definitions of truth and of logical consequence. Thus the usual order of explanation is from terms or concepts, to sentences or propositions, to inferential connections between sentences or propositions. In contrast, inferentialism requires that we treat sentences as prior in the order of semantic explanation to terms, since it is sentences which are caught up in inferential relations. Hence Brandom is committed to explaining the contents of subsentential expressions in terms of their contributions to the inferentially articulated contents of the sentences in which they occur.

Brandom traces this thesis of the “priority of the propositional” back to what he describes as Kant’s “claim that the fundamental unit of awareness or cognition, the minimum graspable, is the *judgment*.” (MIE, p. 79) He justifies attributing this doctrine to Kant by appeal to the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

“As all acts of the understanding can be reduced to judgments, the understanding may be defined as the faculty of judging.” (CPR, A69/B94) For [Kant], interpretations of something as classified or classifier make sense only as remarks about its role in judgment. A concept just is a predicate of a possible judgment, which is why “the only use which the understanding can make of concepts is to form judgments by them.” (CPR, A68/B93) Thus for Kant, any discussion of content must start with the contents of judgments, since anything else has content insofar as it contributes to the contents of judgments. (MIE, pp. 79–80)

Brandom sees the thought which he here attributes to Kant as expressed in linguistic form in Frege’s famous context principle that “it is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning.”⁶ This leads him to go so far as to speak of the “Kant-Frege strategy for explaining the concept of objects,” (MIE, p. 403, AR, p. 155) namely the strategy of explaining the concept of an object through the concept of a singular term, and the concept of a singular term through an analysis of the distinctive contribution of singular terms to the sentences in which they occur. Outlining his top-down strategy, he says “Talk of objects and object-representings and properties and property-representings would then proceed in terms of role in propositions and proposition-representings (as it does for Kant).” (MIE, p. 337)

Yet Brandom is clearly over-reading Kant here. His mistake is very like a mistake made by Hans Sluga in his interpretation of Frege, which Brandom also reproduces. Sluga points out that as early as the period of the *Begriffsschrift* of 1879 Frege already held to a Kantian thesis of the priority of judgment over concepts. He cites Frege: “In contrast to Boole, I begin with judgments and their contents and not with concepts. ... The formation of concepts I let proceed from judgments.”⁷ Sluga then goes on to remark that the context principle as found in Frege’s *Foundations of Arithmetic* of 1884 seems to imply “that there is a priority of sentence meaning over word meaning for every language, including a logically perfect one. In this stronger sense the principle would amount to the reaffirmation of the Kantian doctrine of the priority of judgments over concepts.” (GF, pp. 94–5) Brandom effectively takes over this reading of the development of Frege’s thought in his account of the antecedents of his top-down semantical strategy. Yet, as Michael Dummett has made clear, it is a mistake to see the Kantian thesis of the priority of judgment over concepts as an anticipation of the context principle: “The priority thesis concerns only concepts and functions, or, more exactly their linguistic expression; the context principle applies to words of all kinds, and is expressly invoked by Frege as applying to abstract singular terms.”⁸ Dummett’s point is that in adopting the context principle and using it as he does in *Foundations*, Frege is departing from the original Kantian insight that *concepts* – that is *general* representations – can only be understood as *predicates* of possible judgments, and moving to the distinctly *non-Kantian* view that *all* terms, general or singular, have meaning only in the context of a proposition. And he is doing so in service of the distinctly *non-Kantian* project of arguing that arithmetic is analytic and that *objects* – the numbers – can be *given*

to us simply through our grasp of the propositions in which names of those objects occur – so that “In arithmetic we are not concerned with objects which we come to know as something alien from without through the medium of the senses, but with objects given directly to our reason and, as its nearest kin, utterly transparent to it.” (FA, p. 115)

The crucial point here is simply that for Kant it is the *understanding* which is the faculty of judgment, and it is *concepts* which are nothing but predicates of possible judgments. But for Kant to suppose that from inference alone we could arrive at *objects* is a rationalist delusion. For cognition of objects we of course need not only judgment and concepts, but *intuition*. Kant follows the sentence which Brandom cites – “the understanding can make no other use of these concepts than that of judging by means of them” – with the remark that “since no representation pertains to the object immediately except intuition alone, a concept is thus never immediately related to an object, but is always related to some other representation of it (whether that be an intuition or itself already some other concept).” (CPR, A68/B93) As Kant famously claims:

Our cognition arises from two fundamental sources in the mind, the first of which is the reception of representations (the receptivity of impressions), the second the faculty for cognizing an object by means of these representations (spontaneity of concepts); through the former an object is *given* to us, through the latter it is *thought* in relation to that representation (a mere determination of the mind). Intuition and concepts therefore constitute the elements of all our cognition, so that neither concepts without intuition corresponding to them in some way nor intuition without concepts can yield a cognition. ... Neither of these properties is to be preferred to the other. Without sensibility no object would be given us, and without understanding none would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind. It is thus just as necessary to make the mind’s concepts sensible (i.e. to add an object to them in intuition) as it is to make its intuitions understandable (i.e. to bring them under concepts). Furthermore these two faculties or capacities cannot exchange their roles. The understanding is not capable of intuiting anything and the senses are not capable of thinking anything. Only from their unification can cognition arise. But on this account one must not mix up their roles, rather one has great cause to separate them carefully from each other and distinguish them. (CPR, A50/B74–A52/B76)

What emerges here is that for Kant receptivity of sensibility and the spontaneity of the understanding are *independent* yet *interdependent* aspects of all of our cognition. They are *interdependent* in the sense that only in concert do they give rise to cognition at all; yet they are *independent* in that neither can be reduced to the other. Seen in this light, Kant is revealed as a philosopher who, rather than claiming to invert some standard order of explanation, refuses to take up the purported

explanatory task. Kant, faced with a traditional “rationalist” order of explanation which tries to reduce all of our cognitive life to the conceptual, and an “empiricist” order of explanation which takes sensibility as basic and tries to explain everything in terms of it, refuses the choice. Both rationalists and empiricists are right, in that both sensibility and the understanding are basic faculties of the mind; neither is right in that neither sensibility nor the understanding can be reduced to the other.

From this Kantian perspective, Brandom’s inferentialism and his top-down semantic strategy can only appear as a rationalistic over-reaction to the equally mistaken and one-sided bottom-up representationalist program. In particular, Brandom commits the same error as Frege in supposing that *objects* can be *given* to us in a way which depends only on the inferential articulation of propositional contents.

Of course, none of this yet establishes that such a Kantian criticism of Brandom is in fact justified; showing this will require a detailed discussion of some of Brandom’s arguments, a task to which I will turn shortly. But first I want to point out that my discussion of Kant opens up at least a possible alternative to Brandom’s choice between orders of explanation: representation or inference, names or sentences. On this alternative view, representation and inference, naming and saying, are independent but interdependent aspects of meaningful language. Neither can be reduced to the other, yet each can only be understood in the light of the way in which it works together with the other. In a pair of Kant-like slogans, I would like to say: representation without inference is blind, but inference without representation is empty; names without sentences are blind, but sentences without names are empty.

Brandom, in a footnote to *Making It Explicit*, admits the theoretical possibility of the sort of view I am here suggesting:

It should be acknowledged that although the discussion of this chapter has been framed throughout in terms of a stark opposition between two complementary orders of explanation – the representationalist and the inferentialist – these alternatives are not exhaustive. Other possibilities include treating neither representation nor inference as explanatorily prior to the other. One might then go on to explain both in terms of some third notion, which is treated as more fundamental. Or one might eschew reductive explanations in semantics entirely and remain contented with describing the relations among a family of mutually presupposing concepts – a family that includes representation, inference, claiming, referring, and so on. (*MIE*, 669)

However, in the argument of the book itself such a view never surfaces as one worthy of consideration. Elsewhere, responding to John McDowell’s pressing of a similar point to the general one that I am making here, Brandom explains:

Of course I agree that rejecting representationalist explanatory strategies does not commit one to an inferentialist order of explanation. Instead of treating one of these semantic notions as antecedently intelligible and

prior to the other in the order of explanation, one may insist that one must start with both, and restrict one's explanatory ambitions to illuminating the relations between them. And I agree that bracketing or abstracting from any substantive arguments on either side, such a strategy must be counted as initially more plausible than either of its more ambitious reductive competitors. But I undertake commitment to the bolder, riskier program in full awareness of its safer alternatives – and not just because it is good Popperian methodology to adopt the stronger, more easily falsifiable hypothesis to see how far it can be pressed.⁹

Brandom clearly thinks that his adoption of the “bolder, riskier program” is justified by the payoff – an account of representation in terms of inference and of names and objects in terms of sentences and propositional contents. But, one might reply, representationalists have their own accounts of inference in terms of representation, and of sentences in terms of their subsentential parts. In response, Brandom can point to critical defects and shortcomings in these representationalist accounts. To undercut Brandom's inferentialism, then, one would have to point to similar defects and shortcomings in his inferentialist explanations. The force of my argument in the rest of this paper will be precisely that: to show that Brandom's inferentialist accounts of representational idioms are open to objections in many ways parallel to the objections which Brandom himself would raise against representationalism. In order to develop this argument I will first give some indications of the force of Brandom's critique of representationalism. Then I will outline some of the key features of Brandom's inferentialist alternative. Finally I will raise difficulties for Brandom's account, difficulties which, I hope, will be sufficient to motivate interest in a non-reductive alternative to both inferentialism and representationalism.

To begin with, however, what does Brandom find lacking in representationalism? He does not ever really develop a full-fledged critique of this order of explanation, being more concerned to set up the contrast between it and his own view – in many cases by considering only particular variants of representationalism. However, from the various things he does say one can tease out some more general lines of argument. First of all, Brandom is suspicious of representationalism as involving in some fashion the “Myth of the Given.” This would be illustrated clearly in a version of atomistic, bottom-up representationalism such as that found in early Russell, in which the meaningfulness of names derives from our standing in a primitive, pre-propositional, and pre-judgmental state of *acquaintance* with the objects named, paradigmatically *sense-data*, and the meaningfulness of all language is explained on this foundation. However, that there is a more general problem in the vicinity is suggested by a threefold distinction which Brandom draws between representational *purport*, representational *success*, and representational *uptake*. Representational vocabulary tends to show an ambiguity between representational purport and representational success – when we speak of what a belief is *about* or what a word *refers* to, we may or may not mean to imply that the intended object *exists*. The representationalist tradition has tended to emphasize the issue of representational

success over representational purport, but this has also led to a failure to account for representational *uptake*. In other words, the representationalist tradition has neglected the problem of *understanding*, of accounting for what it is for a subject to *take something as a representation*. (MIE, 70–4) The characteristic failure of representationalism here is again represented by the Russellian view which attempts to found understanding entirely on cases of representational *success*, guaranteed by acquaintance – as encapsulated in Russell’s well-known “principle of acquaintance”: “Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted.”¹⁰

In contrast, Brandom argues, following Wilfrid Sellars, that representational *uptake* has to be understood in inferentialist terms – to take something *as* a representation is to locate it in what Sellars calls the “logical space of giving and asking for reasons.”¹¹ Notice, however, that this point does not by itself entail an inferentialist *reduction* of representational talk – it could easily be accommodated by the alternative, non-reductive view I am aiming at here, as making clear one of the directions of *interdependence* between representation and inference – representation without inference is blind. Moreover, even a pure representationalist would seem to have a response to this argument, for after all, representationalism offers an *account* of inferential relations in representational terms, and could it seem, make use of this account to embrace Brandom’s point.

To this representationalist move, however, Brandom has a powerful reply. Following Sellars, he argues that the inferences which are involved in representational uptake, in *understanding*, include not only *formal* but also *material* inferences. I understand, for example, “red” *as* the representation that it is only if I have mastered the network of inferential relations between “red” and other color words, inferential relations such as that “crimson” implies “red” and that “green” is incompatible with “red.” These inferential relations are *materially* but not *formally* correct. However, the reply proceeds, representationalist accounts of inference yield only formal inference, not material inference, and so cannot explain understanding properly.

The representationalist might object, however, that this argument makes sense if the representationalist is restricted to the resources of something like Tarski’s account of truth and logical consequence, but that more sophisticated versions of representationalism can account for material inferences as well as formal inferences. Possible worlds semantics, for example, provides a representationalist framework within which we can discern entailment relations between propositions which are not formally valid. “This apple is crimson” entails “this apple is red,” for example, because there is no possible world in which the first is true and the second false.

It will be instructive to examine this reply briefly, even though, insofar as it relies on the example of possible worlds semantics, its failure can at best establish the plausibility of the argument here sketched against representationalism. We should distinguish two attitudes prevalent among those who champion the appeal to possible worlds in the philosophy of language.¹² One attitude is that of the “possibilists,” represented by David Lewis,¹³ who take possible worlds with utmost ontological seriousness, as alternative universes just as real as the actual universe. The other,

less metaphysically demanding, attitude is that of “actualists” like Alvin Plantinga,¹⁴ who insist on understanding possible worlds as mere abstract entities inhabiting the actual world. Let us consider the representationalist reply sketched above in the light of these two views of possible worlds.

First of all, actualist accounts seem unable to support the representationalist reply. For actualist accounts do not really support a representationalist reduction of entailment relations at all – rather, actualist accounts of possible worlds treat modal concepts such as entailment and incompatibility as primitive. Thus, for example, Plantinga defines a possible world as a maximal possible state of affairs, where a state of affairs is maximal if it either *includes* (entails) or *excludes* (is incompatible with) every other state of affairs.¹⁵ At the same time, these possible worlds are taken to *represent* the actual world, in such a way that one of them is uniquely singled out as *correct*. Hence, actualist versions of possible worlds semantics are neither representationalist nor inferentialist, but instead provide a real live example of the sort of third alternative for which I am arguing in this paper.

On the other hand, Lewisian possibilism not only comes at an extravagant metaphysical price, it may nonetheless end up unable to reply to the Brandomian argument against representationalism. Lewis seeks to reduce modal vocabulary to what he thinks of as the ordinary quantificational apparatus of first-order logic. Thus, for Lewis, to say that proposition *p* entails proposition *q* is just to say that every world in which *p* is true is a world in which *q* is true. But here worlds are simply entities which our quantifiers can range over, and the only sense in which one is singled out as *actual* is that we happen to inhabit it. Thus the truth that “this is crimson” entails “this is red,” that is the truth that every possible world in which this is crimson is a possible world in which this is red, is assimilated to an empirical generalization like “all ravens are black.” It then appears that only the inferences counted as *formally* valid by first-order (or perhaps higher-order) quantificational logic can in fact be recognized as such by Lewis.

As indicated above, all of this is intended as at most a plausibility argument against representationalism – the argument being that representationalism fails to produce an account of inference which is adequate to explain representational uptake, and so representational purport. Brandom then pursues the alternative order of explanation, taking for granted notions of inferential connectedness, and endeavoring to explain in these terms the primitive notions of representationalism. What I want to argue, however, is that Brandom’s account of representational locutions fails in a precisely analogous way to the failure of representationalist accounts of inferential locutions. Just as representationalist accounts of inference yield only formally valid inferences, so Brandom’s account of representation will yield only a *formal* conception of representation, and of the objects represented. (What I mean by this, I hope will emerge in the ensuing discussion.) The result will be that Brandom is unable to give an adequate account of representational *success* – and so also of representational purport.

My main focus will be on Brandom’s account of *singular terms*. This, Brandom tells us, gives the key also to an account of *objects*. There are roughly Kantian reasons

for thinking that this is a particularly important aspect of Brandom's thought on which to focus attention. First, as we saw, a key difference between Kant and Frege, which Brandom overlooks in his haste to claim Kant as his philosophical ancestor, concerns the question whether a strategy which starts only with the conceptually and inferentially articulated contents of judgments, or propositional contents, can end with an account of our being given *objects*. Second, Kant's negative answer to this question is important for its connection to Kant's account of the possibility of *synthetic a priori* knowledge, which is of course the crux of the whole *Critique of Pure Reason*. For Kant, the objective validity, and so truth-evaluability, of all our judgments – even analytic judgments – in the end requires that they be referred to intuition. And synthetic judgments in particular can only be made intelligible on this basis; it is only in the intuition of an object that the unification of disparate concepts which is the mark of synthetic judgment is possible. Now when Brandom, following Sellars, takes *material inferences* to be constitutive of the propositional contents which they relate, he is clearly working with something in the vicinity of Kant's *synthetic a priori*, as Sellars himself saw.¹⁶ Kant would therefore be suspicious of Brandom's claim to be able to make such material inferences intelligible antecedently to a grasp on *objects*, and indeed to use such material inferences as the basis for explaining our grasp on objects. From Kant's point of view, such a claim sins against the dictum that thought without intuition is blind.

This, nonetheless, is Brandom's goal in the ambitious chapter 6 of *MIE*, which bears the subtitle "What Are Singular Terms, and Why Are There Any?". Brandom notes a difficult challenge faced by the inferentialist order of explanation:

the notion of content as inferential role seems naturally adapted to account only for *propositional* content, for it is only commitments with contents of this category that can play the role of premise and conclusion in inference. But the sentences that express propositions typically have significant parts that are not sentences, which do not express propositions, and so cannot serve as inferential premises and conclusions. Yet these subsentential expressions certainly ought to be said to be contentful ... How can a broadly inferential approach to semantic content be extended ... to ... subsentential categories? (*MIE*, p. 335)

Brandom's answer to this challenge is, in the first place, to understand the content of a subsentential expression as "the contribution it makes to the sense or content of sentences containing it." (*MIE*, p. 343) This answer, however, will not enable us to distinguish among the syntactic categories of subsentential expressions. In particular, it will not enable us to distinguish between singular terms and predicates.

Representationalists can respond that singular terms are those subsentential expressions which refer to objects, while predicates are those subsentential expressions which objects can be said to satisfy. Brandom, however, must eschew this line of explanation; he will instead try to explain the distinction between singular terms and predicates in inferentialist terms, and use this distinction in turn to explain the notion of object. To

accomplish this, Brandom combines two Fregean ideas – Frege’s *Begriffsschrift* account of predicates as derived from sentences by the omission and replacement of singular terms, and Frege’s account of singular terms in the *Foundations of Arithmetic* as those expressions which can flank the identity sign. The first idea reflects Frege’s commitment to Kant’s doctrine of the priority of judgment over concepts. Frege spells this out by defining a predicate to be the frame or pattern which is common to the family of sentences obtained when one singular term is replaced by others in a sentence. On this view, we obtain the predicate “*x* loves Tom” from the sentence “Tom loves Tom” by regarding the first occurrence of “Tom” as replaceable by another; we obtain the predicate “*x* loves *x*” from the same sentence by regarding “Tom” as replaceable by another name in both its occurrences. Brandom picks up this idea by stipulating that singular terms are terms which are both *substituted-in* and *substituted-for*; predicates, on the other hand are the *substitutional frames* into which singular terms are to be inserted to produce sentences.

This account so far, however, does not give us a handle on the notion that singular terms, as opposed to predicates, stand for *objects*. In the *Foundations of Arithmetic*, Frege, concerned to argue that the numbers are individual objects about which we can have substantive knowledge, rejected the Kantian view that objects can only be given to us in intuition. Instead, he proposed that numbers could be *given* to us through our grasp of propositions in which numerals occur. In particular, he insisted that to be given an object we must have fixed conditions of identity for that object; we must be able, in his words, to “recognize it as the same again.” Thus, for Frege, it is sufficient for us to be given an object that we have determined the sense of identity statements in which the name of the object occurs.

Brandom adapts this idea to his inferentialist context by distinguishing two kinds of *substitution-inference* in which a term can be involved. On the one hand, a term might be involved in *symmetrical* substitution inferences – the correctness of inferring by substituting one term for another brings with it the correctness of the converse inference, substituting the second term for the first. Such substitution inferences are characteristic of the inferences which would be backed up by an identity statement. On the other hand, a term could be caught up in *asymmetrical* substitution inferences, such as the inference from “*x* is a whale” to “*x* is a mammal,” in which we can substitute “mammal” for “whale,” whatever *x* may be, but not vice versa. Such substitution inferences are characteristic of the relations of broader and narrower predicates.

Brandom’s ingenious suggestion is then this: we can define a singular term as an expression which is *substituted-for* and which has a *symmetric substitution-inferential significance*. He then provides an equally ingenious argument that there *must* be singular terms in this sense, if we are to be able to apply the substitutional apparatus to generate complex predicates within a language containing at least the logical resources of negation or of the conditional.¹⁷ He concludes that:

it is worth pointing out here that in the context of this order of explanation, to explain why there are singular terms is in an important sense to explain why there are objects – not why there is something (to talk about) rather

than nothing (at all), but rather why what we talk about comes structured as propertied and related objects. ... To ask the question, Why are there singular terms? is one way of asking the question, Why are there objects? How odd that the answer should be: because it is so important to have something that means what *conditionals* mean! (MIE, p. 404)

Brandom's gloss on the question "why are there objects?" shows, however, that there is an important sense in which his account of singular terms has not yet answered the question "why are there objects?" For he has as yet given no account of the *existence* of objects. Brandom recognizes this: he writes that a

shortcoming in the account of picking out objects in terms of substitutional triangulation as adumbrated so far is that it is primarily addressed to the phenomenon of *purported* singular reference. Although general reasons have been offered motivating a direction of explanation that begins with the notion of representational purport, it remains to say something also about the *success* of such purport. To this end, the next section discusses what we are doing when we take it that a singular term succeeds in referring, in that the object the term purports to refer to actually *exists*. An account is offered of *existential* commitment as a kind of *substitutional* commitment. (MIE, p. 431)

This account of existential commitment is built on a notion of "canonical designators" – different *species* of existential commitments will be determined by different classes of these "canonical designators." For example, standard numerals serve as the canonical designators for claims of numerical existence. Thus a claim like "there exists a prime number between 10 and 15" is *vindicated* by the fact that a suitable choice of canonical designator produces the true substitution instance "11 is a prime number between 10 and 15." Given a singular term with the form of a definite description, such as "the smallest prime number between 10 and 15," the question of representational *success* for that term can then be reduced to the question whether there is a unique canonical designator satisfying the describing predicate.

Brandom admits that on this account, "the issue of the success of their singular referential purport does not arise for expressions such as '121' and '161' in the same way that it does for expressions such as 'the smallest natural number such that every larger one is the sum of distinct primes of the form $4n + 1$.'" It is to take a frankly inegalitarian approach to referential purport and its success." (MIE, pp. 441–2) He concludes that "On this relaxed account, there is no reason to boggle at claims that numbers or other abstract objects exist. One must insist only that a determinate sense have been given to such claims, by specifying the relevant class of canonical designators. ... existential claims have been given definite sense and are themselves true. (Of course, how *interesting* they are is another matter.)" (MIE, p.449)

Brandom applies the machinery of canonical designators to supply accounts of fictional existence and, more importantly for our purposes, physical existence. His

explanation of physical existence relies on the idea that to say of a physical object that it exists is “to say that it exists *somewhere* in space and time ... that it has some address in the structured space of spatiotemporal coordinates centered on the speaker.” (MIE, p. 444) He introduces terms of the form “ $\langle x,y,z,t \rangle$ from here” as canonical designators of spatio-temporal regions. These terms, like the canonical designators of numbers, are, he says “guaranteed to succeed in their referential purport.” (MIE, p. 445) However, canonical designators of physical *objects* involve the application of a physical *sortal* or common noun to a spatio-temporal region – “the horse located at $\langle x,y,z,t \rangle$ from here.” In this case, one is not automatically entitled to apply the relevant sortal to the region in question – thus one is not automatically entitled to take “the horse located at $\langle x,y,z,t \rangle$ from here” as a canonical designator of a physical object. In order to do this “one must show ... that the sortal properly applies to the region.” (MIE, p. 446) Brandom comments:

The variety of spatio-temporally individuating sortals means that there is nothing useful and general to be said about how one becomes entitled to claims applying a sortal to a region. The appropriate circumstances of application for applying the sortal-derived predicate ‘... is an elephant’, or ‘... is occupied by an elephant’ to a particular space-time region are quite different from those of ‘... is (or is occupied by) an electromagnetic force field.’ But these details concern the use of these particular sortals and predicates, not the notion of existence in general. The surplus significance of a commitment to physical existence lies in the *accessibility* to the one undertaking the commitment (via a continuous trajectory from here-now) of a spatiotemporal region to which the sortal (or its derived predicate) is properly applicable. For that reason appealing to the notion of a predicate or sortal being applicable to a region does not make this way of thinking about physical existence circular. (MIE, p. 446)

Thus, in brief compass, I have outlined some of Brandom’s most important moves in attempting to account for the representational purport, and the representational success or failure, of singular terms, and thereby for our awareness of the world as populated by *objects*. It is now time for me to recite my complaints. I will first criticize Brandom’s characterization of the representational *purport* of singular terms – their substitution-inferential significance. I will try to show that Brandom cannot substantiate his claim to have captured the *singular* character of singular terms, their implicit claim to designate *particular* objects. I will conclude that Brandom has identified an important inferentialist necessary condition on singular representational purport, but mistakenly taken this for a sufficient condition, thereby neglecting an equally important necessary contribution from the representationalist side. I will then turn to his account of the representational *success* of singular terms – that is, of existence. This second line of argument will lead us, in the end, to Brandom’s treatment of demonstratives. But here again, though we will find an important inferentialist insight into a necessary condition for the use of an expression as a demonstrative, we will also find that by treating this necessary

condition as sufficient, Brandom strips himself of the resources needed to meet the difficulties developed in my arguments.

Consider first, then, Brandom's account of the representational purport of singular terms. Brandom tells us that his approach "incorporates *particularity* by distinguishing between the symmetric role of singular terms in *substitution* inferences and the asymmetric role of predicates in substitution inferences." (MIE, p. 623) But has Brandom really captured "particularity" in this way? The worry I want to bring into focus is that through distinguishing singular terms on the basis of symmetric substitution-inferential roles, Brandom can at best have isolated *roles* or *types* that might in fact be filled each by more than one *object*.¹⁸

To begin to motivate this worry consider the following apparent counterexample, discussed by Brandom in a footnote to chapter 6, to the claim that singular terms can only be caught up in symmetric substitution inferences:

The inventor of bifocals is Benjamin Franklin

therefore

The inventor of bifocals is an American.

Here, apparently, we have a correct material substitution inference – "an American" is substituted for "Benjamin Franklin" – which is asymmetric – one cannot reverse the order of substitution and preserve validity, since

The inventor of bifocals is an American

therefore

The inventor of bifocals is Benjamin Franklin

would not be a correct material inference. Thus we would seem to have a counterexample to the claim that singular terms are caught up only in symmetric substitution inferences.

Brandom, however, claims that by restricting attention to *substitution* inferences he has blocked this apparent counterexample: "The restriction to substitution inferences is required because one may, for instance, infer asymmetrically from the applicability of a singular term to the applicability of a predicate ... These do not count as substitution inferences ... because they cross syntactic categorial boundaries." (MIE, p. 690, fn. 33) Given that Brandom's aim is to discern syntactic categories on the basis of substitution-inferential patterns, however, he cannot without circularity rely on a previous grasp of syntactic categories to determine what is to count as a substitution inference. That would plainly be circular. On what grounds, then, can he assert that "Benjamin Franklin" and "an American" are of different syntactic category?¹⁹

What this example shows is that we cannot extract from Brandom's account a non-circular test for a single subsentential item *t* to be a singular term. One might think that the test would go as follows: take the item *t* and consider all legitimate substitution inference patterns involving *t* – if some of these are asymmetric, *t* is not a singular term, whereas if all are symmetric, *t* is a singular term. But the problem is that we cannot know what counts as a substitution inference involving *t* without knowing which other subsentential items are of the same syntactic category as *t* and which are not. Yet our goal was precisely to determine the syntactic category of *t*, at least up to determining whether *t* is or is not a singular term.

At best, then, Brandom has provided a *global* test for a *class* of subsentential items to be a *class* of singular terms:

T is a class of singular terms only if any correct substitution inference involving two members of *T* is symmetric.

As I have formulated this test, it provides a *necessary* condition for a class *T* of subsentential items to be the class of singular terms. And as such it expresses an important inferentialist insight. In Fregean terms: a self-subsistent object is that which can be recognized as the same again, under different linguistic guises; and we express this recognition through our willingness to treat the associated terms as interchangeable. But can this necessary global condition be strengthened to a sufficient condition? Can we assert that

T is a class of singular terms if and only if any correct substitution inference involving two members of *T* is symmetric?

No, we cannot. For consider any hierarchy of genera and species, such that for each member of the hierarchy there are two distinct synonymous expressions in the language, and take all the expressions for members at the same level of that hierarchy. For example (with some idealization) consider a set of expressions like

“dog,” “canine,” “cat,” “feline,” “horse,” “equine,” and so forth.

If this is our class *T*, *T* will pass the test given above: any substitution inference involving any two members of *T* is symmetric. Yet clearly the members of *T* are not singular terms.²⁰

Now in this case it is open to Brandom to reply that *within our language* there are terms that constitute a lower level in the hierarchy such as

“Poodle,” “Persian,” “Arabian,” ...

such that every member of *T* is caught up in an asymmetric substitution-inferential relation with some member of this lower level. This suggests strengthening our global condition as follows:

T is a class of singular terms if and only if any correct substitution inference involving two members of T is symmetric, and there is no class of subsentential items S such that every member of T is caught up in an asymmetric substitution-inferential relation with some member of S .

The problem with this approach, however, is that it makes the question whether a class of items is a class of singular terms *depend on what other subsentential items are available within the language*. But perhaps our language is *expressively impoverished*. Thus, it might turn out that what *look* to be singular terms in our language are really just common nouns occupying the lowest level of an unfinished hierarchy of genera and species, such that in an extended form of our language, each of these putative singular terms turns out to contain below it several objects picked out by the singular terms of the extended language.

And here I have reached my first conclusion: by taking a plausible and important inferential necessary condition on being a singular term and transforming it into a sufficient condition for singular termhood, Brandom has failed to capture the full representational purport of singular terms. In particular, he has failed to capture the sense in which singular terms are genuinely *singular*, their *particularity*.

What, then, is the alternative? Recall Kant's famous dictum that "without sensibility, no object would be given to us." (CPR, A51/B75) "Sensibility" here is of course "the way in which we are affected by objects." One insight contained here is that the *particularity* of our thought is something that can only stem from our *being related to particular objects*, and cannot be accounted for in any other way. Thought alone, absent such a relation to the objects, can never give us anything but general concepts. My argument has in a sense merely echoed this Kantian claim in the face of Brandom's particular attempt at a reconstruction of the notion of particularity from inferential resources alone. As we have seen, Brandom takes an inferentialist necessary condition on singular-term-hood and tries to turn it into a sufficient one; but in doing so he loses hold of the other, equally necessary representationalist condition, reference to an object. In reminding us that representation without inference is blind, he ends up forgetting that inference without representation is empty.²¹

Turning to Brandom's account of representational *success*, we will find that we are led to a similar moral. I will begin with Brandom's discussion of abstract entities such as numbers. Here, his account of representational success comes perilously close to collapsing representational success into representational purport, in spite of Brandom's own initial warnings that to do so is to end up "with no room for the notion of error, of representation that is incorrect or mistaken; and a notion of representation so thin as to preclude assessments of correctness provides no basis for any recognizable concept of intentional content." (MIE, p. 71) Brandom's account of numerical existence leaves room for a distinction between representational purport and representational success only at the level of *descriptions*, but not at all at the level of *names*. This "frankly inegalitarian attitude" towards numerals as canonical designators, according to which "the issue of success of their singular

referential purport does not arise for such expressions as ‘121’ and ‘161’” makes things too *easy*.

My complaint can be dramatized by considering the history of Frege’s own thinking about logical objects. Brandom seems to assume that Frege unproblematically saw how to give a fully satisfactory account of numbers and other abstract objects. Thus Brandom tells us that “Frege’s discussion of abstract objects shows clearly” that it is “substitution-inferential triangulation that is what our cognitive grip on objects consists in.” (MIE, p. 431) Yet Frege’s most basic use of this “substitution-inferential triangulation,” his introduction of *extensions of concepts* through the identity-conditions stipulated by Basic Law V of his *Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, ran aground on the shoals of Russell’s paradox. Frege’s own response to this predicament can be interestingly compared to Brandom’s easy willingness to assert that numbers exist. Upon being informed of the paradox by Russell, Frege replied that “It seems ... that my law V ... is false, and that my explanations in sect. 31 do not suffice to secure a meaning for my combinations of signs in all cases.”²² On Brandom’s account of substitution-inferential triangulation, however, it is difficult to see what could have gone wrong with Frege’s arguments that all the signs of his logical system “have a meaning,” that is enjoy representational success. Late in his life, Frege wrote that:

One feature of language that threatens to undermine the reliability of thinking is its tendency to form proper names to which no objects correspond. ... A particularly noteworthy example of this is the formation of a proper name after the pattern of ‘the extension of the concept *a*,’ e.g. ‘the extension of the concept *star*.’ Because of the definite article, this expression appears to designate an object; but there is no object for which this phrase could be a linguistically appropriate designation. From this has arisen the paradoxes of set theory which have dealt the death blow to set theory itself. I myself was under this illusion when, in attempting to provide a logical foundation for numbers, I tried to construe numbers as sets.²³

In his last preserved writing, Frege distinguishes three sources of knowledge: sense perception, the geometrical source of knowledge, and the logical source of knowledge. He writes that “The last of these is involved when inferences are drawn, and thus is almost always involved. Yet it seems that this on its own cannot yield us any objects.” Because of this, Frege turns to the geometrical source of knowledge to provide a basis for arithmetic as well – so that “the whole of mathematics flows from one and the same source of knowledge.”²⁴

Thus Frege, unlike Brandom, would not accept the easy way out of taking numerals as canonical designators whose referential *success* is secured *de jure*. For Frege, providing a foundation for arithmetic always meant *establishing* in some way the existence of infinitely many numbers; and Brandom’s technique appears in this light to have, in Russell’s memorable phrase, “all the advantages of theft over honest toil.”²⁵

Turning now to Brandom's account of physical existence, the objection which I have raised to his account of numerical existence does not seem to apply so readily; for although he takes canonical designators of spatiotemporal regions to enjoy *de jure* representational success, the same is not true of canonical designators of physical objects, such as "the *K* located at $\langle x,y,z,t \rangle$ from here." Such terms must *earn* their status as canonical designators through the sortal *K*'s being *applicable* to the spatio-temporal region designated by " $\langle x,y,z,t \rangle$ from here." Yet at this point, in spite of Brandom's protestations to the contrary, the account becomes, if not circular, then the source of a vicious regress. For on Brandom's account, the term "the *K* located at $\langle x,y,z,t \rangle$ from here" is a physical-object canonical designator just in case the sortal *K* applies to the region located at $\langle x,y,z,t \rangle$ from here. But, whatever *criteria* we might appeal to in order to determine whether this is the case, surely the sortal *K* applies to the region located at $\langle x,y,z,t \rangle$ from here just in case there *exists* a *K* in that region. But now Brandom must explain this last claim essentially in terms of a correct substitution inference to an *instance* of the form "CD is a *K* located at region $\langle x,y,z,t \rangle$ from here" – where "CD" is a *physical-object canonical designator*. Yet then "CD" must have the form "the *K*1 located at $\langle x_1,y_1,z_1,t_1 \rangle$ from here," and this term too must *earn* its status as a physical-object canonical designator – and we are off on a regress.

There is one way in which Brandom might try to respond to this regress, however. He might point to our capacity to use *demonstratives* as grounding at least some of our uses of physical-object canonical designators. This capacity is invoked, for example in his account of "epistemically strong *de re* belief attributions" which attribute belief in "object-dependent singular thoughts." To attribute belief in an object-dependent singular thought, according to Brandom, is to undertake oneself an existential commitment:

de re ascriptions of epistemically strong *de re* beliefs involve existential commitments. ... (weak) *de re* ascriptions ... need not involve such commitments. If someone who has never heard the name 'Pegasus' believes that Bellerophon's horse has wings, I can specify the content of that belief in the weak *de re* way by saying that he believes *of* Pegasus that he has wings, without undertaking any existential commitment to the existence of such a horse. But if I say that he believes *of*_{strong} Pegasus that he has wings, I am committed to his being able to pick out Pegasus by using a demonstrative, and hence to the spatiotemporal accessibility of that horse in the common environment he and I share, which is what a commitment to the physical existence of the horse comes to on the analysis presented in Chapter 7. (MIE, p. 569)

This passage suggests the thought that some cases of physical object canonical designators can be secured as anaphorically linked ultimately to demonstratives.

Thus we might turn to Brandom's discussion of demonstratives for further illumination of the concept of physical existence, and so of non-abstract representational

success. However, what we will find there, while instructive in many ways, will disappoint us in our particular quest. Brandom's fundamental theme concerning demonstratives is this: "deixis presupposes anaphora." What he means is this: the use of a demonstrative is an unrepeatable event, a linguistic *tokening* rather than a type. This event can have no linguistic significance unless it is caught up in inferential links with other linguistic performances; yet such inferential links cannot be established by uses of sentences containing the same linguistic *type* as that involved in the specific demonstrative event. In this sense it is impossible for a demonstrative to *recur*. Instead, we use anaphoric devices such as pronouns to get the effect of the recurrence of the demonstrative. This for Brandom tells us the essential function of demonstratives – they are initiators of anaphoric chains. Yet this question – the question of the role unrepeatable tokenings such as demonstratives can play in inference – becomes for Brandom the *only* interesting question, and he loses sight in a characteristic manner of the fact that demonstratives, after all, "demonstrate." He writes: "it is helpful to put to one side the difficult psychological question of how scorekeepers ... correctly discern what object is being indicated or demonstrated, and also the difficult conceptual question of what makes it *correct* to take or treat one object rather than another as the one being demonstrated." (*MIE*, p. 461) This question is "put to one side" – but never, as far as I can tell, returned to. And this is no accident. For what is being put to one side is precisely the residue of the question of *representation*, an ineliminable residue which Brandom's inferentialism cannot account for, and which is equally put to one side in his account of physical existence. In other, Kantian, terms, it is the residue of intuition, of immediate cognitive contact with objects – not understood, to be sure, as prior to and intelligible apart from inference, or thought, but not simply reducible to it either, and indeed indispensable for it as well.

Hence, if my argument has had any value, we have found that Brandom's inferentialism, like the representationalism it is supposed to supplant, is, in the end, one-sided. Just as representationalism cannot provide an adequate account of representational *uptake*, inferentialism cannot provide an adequate account of representational *success*. Brandom's anti-representationalist arguments are salutary insofar as they remind us that representation without inference is blind; but taken as arguments *for* inferentialism, they lead us astray, causing us to forget the equally important insight that inference without representation is empty.

Notes

- 1 Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994. Henceforth *MIE*.
- 2 P. Guyer and A. Wood, eds. and trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Henceforth *CPR*, cited in the traditional A \times /B y format.
- 3 John Haugeland has informed me that he was responsible for this parody.
- 4 Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. Henceforth *AR*.
- 5 In this parallel, Brandom's Locke Lectures, *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) would have to be cast in the role of the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, or perhaps the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Of course, at this point the supposed parallel has been stretched

- to the point of incredulity – not to mention the problem of fitting in *Tales of the Mighty Dead* in some fashion.
- 6 Gottlob Frege, *Foundations of Arithmetic*, J.L. Austin, trans. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1980), p. 73. Henceforth FA.
 - 7 Gottlob Frege (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 91–2.
 - 8 *The Interpretation of Frege's Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 239.
 - 9 “Replies,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (1997), p. 189.
 - 10 Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 58.
 - 11 Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 169. Sellars says that “in characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.”
 - 12 For a very clear discussion of these positions, see Peter van Inwagen, “Two concepts of possible worlds,” in *Ontology, Identity, and Modality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Van Inwagen calls actualists “abstractionists” and possibilists “concretists.”
 - 13 *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
 - 14 “Actualism and Possible Worlds,” *Theoria* 42 (1976), pp. 139–60; *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974). Van Inwagen lists as other members of the “Sensible Party” Saul Kripke, Robert Stalnaker, Robert Adams, R.M. Chisholm, and John Pollock.
 - 15 “Actualism and Possible Worlds,” p. 144.
 - 16 “Is There a Synthetic ‘A Priori?’” in *Science, Perception and Reality*.
 - 17 Ingenious or not, the cogency of this argument has been questioned, particularly by Peter J. Graham in “Brandom on Singular Terms,” *Philosophical Studies* 93 (1999), pp. 247–64. My discussion below does not turn on the success or failure of Brandom’s argument.
 - 18 The following paragraphs represent one line of objection to Brandom’s attempt to capture the category of singular term in purely inferentialist terms. Related lines of thought have been developed in the literature, especially in Mark McCullagh, “Inferentialism and Singular Reference,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 35 (2005), pp. 183–220. A much more detailed and comprehensive critique of Brandom’s inferentialist account of the syntactic category of singular terms than I can offer here is contained in my student Tom Lockhart’s dissertation-in-progress, “Frege, Singular Terms and Logical Objects,” University of Chicago.
 - 19 Elsewhere Brandom considers another line of response to putative counterexamples turning on asymmetric substitution inferences involving singular terms, such as Fodor and Lepore’s example “Father was at Magdalen, therefore Father was at Oxford.” Unlike the example considered in the text above, this example does not involve substituting across intuitively recognizable syntactic category boundaries. Brandom’s response to this sort of example depends on restricting attention to *general* substitution inference patterns. (*MIE*, pp. 386–7) Difficulties with characterizing the notion of generality involved in this response are discussed in McCullagh, “Inferentialism and Singular Reference.” McCullagh focuses on the need to distinguish between extensional and intensional contexts of substitution, and shows that the needed distinction between extensional and intensional contexts cannot be drawn on purely inferentialist grounds. Thus McCullagh’s argument leads to a conclusion similar to mine, through a different route.
 - 20 Peter J. Graham makes a similar point in a footnote: “the synonyms ‘a is a bachelor’ and ‘a is an adult unmarried male’ are substitutable (replaceable) symmetrically. Does it then follow, on Brandom’s view, that synonyms are singular terms?” (“Brandom on Singular Terms,” 263, fn. 3) I note that Graham attributes this point to my brother, Philip Kremer. To which I can only say that great minds think alike.

- 21 In the concluding chapter of *MIE*, Brandom discusses Kant's concept/intuition distinction and argues that Kant has really run together three separate distinctions into one: form and matter, general and particular, and spontaneity and receptivity. (*MIE*, pp. 615–16) Brandom resists aligning these three contrasts, claiming that assimilating them leads to an “unworkable dualism.” (*MIE*, p. 615) On my view, however, Kant was right to align the second and third contrasts mentioned by Brandom, in at least the broad general sense that without some mention of a representational relation to particular objects, the particularity of our thought cannot be accounted for.
- 22 *Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence*, G. Gabriel, et al., eds, H. Kaal, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 132.
- 23 “Sources of Knowledge of Mathematics and the mathematical Natural Sciences,” in *Posthumous Writings*, H. Hermes et al, eds, P. Long and R. White, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 269.
- 24 “A New Attempt at a Foundation for Arithmetic,” *Posthumous Writings*, 278–9.
- 25 It is worth comparing Brandom's approach here to the neo-logicist program in contemporary philosophy of mathematics, initiated by Crispin Wright's *Frege's Conception of Numbers as Objects* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1983). Neo-logicism attempts to revive Frege's logicism by taking “Hume's Principle,” that the number of Fs = the number of Gs just in case the Fs and the Gs are in one-to-one correspondence, as analytic of the concept of number. Neo-logicism thus accepts at least *some* stipulations of the same form as that of Basic Law V as giving us access to abstract objects. However, the development of this program has necessitated serious attempts to sort out *which* such stipulations can be acceptable and which need to be ruled out. (One cannot simply rule out *inconsistent* stipulations, like Basic Law V, and accept all others; for there are stipulations of the same form which are singly consistent but contradict one another.) While I am skeptical of the ultimate success of this Wright-inspired program, it is noteworthy that nothing like the task I have just outlined is attempted by Brandom.