

Brandom between Anthropology and Metaphysics

Bernd Prien

bprien@uni-muenster.de webpage: [http:// www.uni-muenster.de/PhilSem/mitglieder/prien/prien.html](http://www.uni-muenster.de/PhilSem/mitglieder/prien/prien.html)
Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster
Philosophisches Seminar
Domplatz 23
D - 48143 Münster

Abstract. I argue that one should distinguish between two phases in Brandom's explication of claiming. The first phase explicates claiming in terms of the game of giving and asking for reasons, the second in terms of the practice of rational rectification. The crucial difference between these two phases lies in the fact that the first one only invokes norms governing our speech-acts, while the second also invokes environing physical facts, i.e., does not fall entirely on the word-side of the word/world gulf. In this sense, the first phase can be called anthropological and the second metaphysical. In this paper, I will explain why the second, fact involving phase is necessary in the explication of claiming, and I will argue that it is legitimate for Brandom to invoke physical facts in his explication. Furthermore, I will argue that Brandom can uphold his deflationism about truth only in the first, but not the second phase of his explication of claiming.

1 Introduction

Huw Price has drawn a distinction between an anthropological and a metaphysical approach to philosophical questions (p. 12). If I understand him correctly, an anthropological approach to, e.g., assertions, tries to make sense of them by describing the function and role they play in our lives. The metaphysical approach, on the other hand, "is concerned to give us an account of the nature and constitution of matters of philosophical interest, such as conceptual content and the referential aspect of language" (p. 12). On the face of it, these two approaches seem incompatible. Yet, a number of quotes from both "Making It Explicit" (MIE) and "Between Saying and Doing" (BSD) seems to indicate that Brandom "straddles the divide" (p. 12).

In this paper, I will be concerned with the following particular instance of the apparent conflict between anthropology and metaphysics in Brandom's writings: On the one hand, Brandom aims at explicating what claims are in terms of the game of giving and asking for reasons. In Price's terms, this approach falls on the anthropological side of the divide because Brandom here describes the role assertions play in our lives. Instead of invoking truth conditions or reference relations to make clear what propositional contents are, Brandom proposes a pragmatist inferentialism

to account for them. On the other hand, Brandom claims, both in MIE and in BSD, that the assertional practices do not entirely fall on the word-side of the word/world gulf. It turns out, in other words, that Brandom does not confine himself to the way expressions are used in order to tell us what assertions are. Instead, he thinks that it is necessary to invoke physical facts as well. As Price notes, this seems to betray a “continuing attraction to [...] the more representationalist side of the fence” (p. 15). In this paper, I want to show that Brandom himself distinguishes more or less explicitly between two phases of his explication of claiming. As I will explain, the first phase invokes only the way we use claims and can in sense be called anthropological, while the second phase also invokes environing physical facts and can in this sense be called metaphysical. I will then defend Brandom against an objection that could be made against the ‘metaphysical’ phase. Finally, I will argue that the existence of the ‘metaphysical’ phase commits Brandom to a non-deflationist notion of truth.

2 Explanation and Explication

In the passage where Brandom draws the distinction between two phases of the explication of claiming he also draws a distinction between explication and explanation. So, we have to be careful to keep these two distinctions apart. The passage I have in mind is in Brandom’s reply to Habermas, “Facts, Norms, and Normative Facts”. There, Brandom endorses “the pragmatist explanatory commitment, which insists that the category of *facts* can in principle only be made intelligible in the context of an account of the practice of *claiming*.” (2000b, 369) Brandom here refers to his thesis, expounded in MIE, that “Facts are just true claims” (1994, 622). In order to understand what a fact is, I have to understand that this is something that can be claimed by a claim. Thus, the concept ‘claim’ is prior to the concept ‘fact’. Brandom then goes on to explain:

“There is an asymmetry here, but it is intended to be understood as an explicative asymmetry, rather than an explanatory asymmetry. The concepts of claiming and of facts mutually involve one another, in the sense that one cannot deploy the concept of claiming without already at least implicitly having brought the concept of facts to bear as well. But the involvement may, at least to begin with, be only implicit. That is, I claim that one can make explicit various crucial aspects of claiming without yet having talked about facts—even though one of the things one will discover by doing that is precisely that fact-talk is already implicit in claiming-talk.” (2000b, 369)

Let me start with a few remarks about what Brandom means by “explanation” and by “explication” in general before I get to the distinction between the two phases of the explication of claiming indicated by the last sentence of this quote.

2.1 Explanation

To my knowledge, Brandom nowhere says in general terms what an explanation is. However, we can get a grip on this notion if we look at Brandom’s distinction

between an objectivist and a subjectivist order of semantic explanation in BSD 6.4: The former “begins with the way the world is—construed here as what really follows from what and what is really incompatible with what” (2008, 194f) which “is then taken to define the goal of inquiry” (2008, 195). The subjective order of semantic explanation, on the other hand, “seeks to make the notion of objective modal relations intelligible in terms of this process [of rectifying and amplifying commitments]” (2008, 195). Thus, we can try to explain incompatibility in the subjective sense in terms of incompatibility in the objective sense, or the other way around. (In terms of these incompatibilities we can then understand the notions ‘fact’ and ‘claim’, respectively.) In both cases, incompatibility in the one sense is taken to be conceptually prior to incompatibility in the other sense.

In the above quote, Brandom stresses that he endorses neither order of semantic explanation. He defends the thesis (which he calls “objective pragmatism”) that incompatibility in each sense is “in principle fully intelligible only in terms of its relation to the other.” (2008, 196) Consequently, the explanatory relation between the concepts ‘claim’ and ‘fact’ is symmetric, they “mutually involve one another” (2000b, 369), i.e., they are reciprocally sense-dependent: One can fully understand either concept only if one also understands the other (cf. 2002, 194f).

The upshot for the notion of explanation in general is this: That one concept is explained in terms of another means that the latter is antecedently intelligible and that our understanding of the former concept is derived from it. And in this sense, Brandom points out that neither of the concepts ‘fact’ and ‘claim’ is fully intelligible apart from the other.

2.2 Explication

When considering explications in general, it should, first of all, be noted that different concepts can be the target of an explication: One can explicate, e.g., facts, claimings, and inferences. To explicate something (or to make it explicit) means that we put something we otherwise only do in explicit words. We describe, specify, or codify what we do. Probably the best known example of this is the explication of inferences in terms of conditionals. We can implicitly treat an inference from ‘p’ to ‘q’ as good by drawing it ourselves and expecting others to draw it, and we can make this doing explicit by endorsing the conditional ‘if p then q’ (cf. 2008, ch. 2.4).

As becomes clear in the course of BSD, there are different ways in which one can specify the practice of drawing an inference. Inferences can be made explicit both in normative and modal vocabulary. The inference from ‘p’ to ‘q’ can be codified by saying ‘if p is the case, q must be the case as well’ (modal vocabulary) and by saying ‘if you endorse p, you should endorse q as well’ (normative vocabulary).—The explication in terms of conditionals seems to be an aspect common to both the modal and the normative case (cf. 2008, 46, fn. 6).

However, the explication of inferences is not the case that primarily concerns us here. In the passage quote above, Brandom considers the explication of the act of claiming. As I will now explain, Brandom proposes to explicate claimings in terms of the game of giving and asking for reasons and in terms of the practice of rational rectification.

These are explications in normative vocabulary because in describing these practices, we put in normative words what we otherwise only do when we use claims.

3 Two Phases in Brandom's Explication of Claiming

I have discussed what Brandom means by 'explanation' and 'explication' in general. I will now turn to the explication of claiming and the distinction between two phases of this explication. This distinction is at least implicit in Brandom's remark that "one can make explicit various crucial aspects of claiming without yet having talked about facts" (2000b, 369) which part of the explication I will here refer to as its first phase. The second phase becomes necessary because one will discover "that fact-talk is already implicit in claiming-talk." (2000b, 369) What I will refer to as the second phase makes this implicit fact-talk explicit. I will now say a little more about what the two phases consist in and why exactly the second phase is necessary.

3.1 Phase I

The first phase of Brandom's explication of claiming consists in his description of the game of giving and asking for reasons. In describing this game, Brandom puts in explicit words what otherwise we only do when we endorse claims. This is an explication in normative terms that specifies the norms of score-keeping, challenges, *de re* ascriptions, etc. In doing so, we only talk about speech-acts, and not about facts. This is also true for the description of the practice of non-inferential entitlements. The main concern of this paper is the explication of claiming, the first phase of which has just been sketched in briefest outline. It should be noted, however, that Brandom also explicates the concept 'fact' as what is claimed in a possible true claim. Here, the concept 'claiming' is no longer the target of explication, but rather that which explicates. We can thus speak of a second step of the first phase of the explication. On the face of it, 'true claimable' is a curious way of saying what a fact is, but if one wants to explicate facts on the basis of our practices, this is what one should say. In the context of this particular explication, the concept 'claim' is prior to the concept 'fact'. However, this feature does not hold for explications in general. As we will now see, we also need the concept 'fact' in order to explicate the concept 'claim'.

3.2 Phase II

In the above quote, Brandom writes "that one can make explicit various crucial aspects of claiming without yet having talked about facts", though one will discover that such an explication must remain incomplete because "fact-talk is already implicit in claiming-talk." (2000b, 369) In his paper "Vocabularies of Pragmatism", Brandom writes that "it is a consequence of the Quinean point with which we began that we can also only understand the notion of a vocabulary [i.e., claimings] as part of a story that includes facts." (2000a, 163) The "Quinean point" mentioned here consists in his criticism of "attempts by Carnap and other logical positivists to divide the explanatory labor addressed to linguistic practices between meanings and beliefs." (2000a, 156).

Quine argues that these attempts are misguided because there are no analytical inferences that are immune from revision in the face of recalcitrant experience. Instead, all inferences are subject to a standard of correctness set by the way the world is.

Since claimings are explicated in terms of inferences, and inferences are subject to standards set by the way the world is, “fact-talk is already implicit in claiming-talk.” (2000b, 369) With the description of the practice of rational rectification (illustrated by his acid-example), Brandom provides a detailed account of the way in which claimings have to be “part of a story that includes facts.” (2000a, 163). Very abstractly, the idea of rational rectification is this: Suppose, I acquire entitlements to incompatible commitments because of my observational entitlements and the conditions and consequences of application of my concept ‘acid’. If this happens, the world is telling me, as it were, that my concept ‘acid’ is inadequate. In that case I am obliged to modify some of my inferential commitments so as to avoid the incompatibility (cf. 1994, 332; 2008 184f; 2005, 146).

In my view, the necessity of invoking enviroing facts is a very important point because it means that according to Brandom, a pragmatist account of assertions, as it is most naturally understood, fails: One cannot explicate claimings exclusively in terms of their use; instead, one also has to invoke enviroing facts to do so.

3.3 The Difference between the Two Phases of Explication

I have argued that one can distinguish two phases in Brandom’s explication of claiming, where the first one invokes the game of giving and asking for reasons, and second the practice of rational rectification. The most striking difference between the two phases lies in the kind of practices invoked to explicate claimings. In the first phase, the practice consists merely of acts of claiming, challenging, attributing deontic statuses, etc., or rather norms governing these acts. In the second phase, however, the practice also involves an enviroing physical world and a determinate way the world is. Since the first one only invokes our actions or the way we use expressions, it can be called anthropological, while the second can be called metaphysical because facts going beyond our use of expressions are invoked here.

For this reason, Brandom says that the practice of rational rectification is solid, corporeal, thick, or lumpy (cf. 1994, 332; 1994, 632; 2008, ch. 6.1), i.e., it does not fall entirely on the ‘word’-side of the word/world gulf. This means that in codifying these latter practices, it is not sufficient merely to describe speech-acts and the norms they are subject to. Rather, one also has to assume enviroing physical facts in which these performances of speech-acts are embedded. In other words, the minimal vocabulary VP-sufficient to describe the practice of rational rectification differs significantly from the minimal vocabulary VP-sufficient to describe the game of giving and asking for reasons.

4 The Rejection of Pragmatist Idealism

In evaluation of Brandom’s explication of claiming it could be argued that its second phase has to be rejected because we do not have access to a reality independent of

language and thus not to the ‘thick’ practice of rational rectification. Apparently in this vein, Price argues that Brandom should have stayed resolutely on the ‘word’-side of the word/world gulf (p. 15), and he lists the second phase as an instance of Brandom’s regrettable metaphysical leanings.

In my view, this objection is mistaken. To see this, let us take a closer look at the claim that we somehow don’t have access to things on the other side of the word/world-gulf. This claim can be understood in analogy with classical sense-data theories of cognition. These theories assume that we have access only to our sense impressions and that we should understand physical facts in terms of these sense-impressions, e.g., as that which gives us the impressions.¹ In analogy to this, it could be argued that we really only have access to our speech-acts and that we should understand what facts are in terms of these speech-acts.² The idea is that we are in some sense acquainted to or in immediate contact with our own speech-acts, while we are not in the same way acquainted to physical facts in the world. And, it could be argued, this kind of acquaintance with items invoked in the description of practices is required if an explication is to provide real understanding of a concept.

I would agree that we are in some sense acquainted to our speech-acts, in a way we are not acquainted to facts in the world around us. What I doubt is that this is a necessary condition for an item to play a role in practices that are drawn upon to explicate something. The view that the terms in which practices are described have to be directly, intuitively intelligible to us does not go well with an inferentialist approach to content, in this case the contents of concepts such as ‘inference’, ‘claim’, and ‘fact’. According to inferentialism, our understanding of a concept does not consist, at least not exclusively, in our acquaintance with objects falling under it, but rather in our (at least practical) grasp of the inferential relations it stands in. Thus for an inferentialist, the fact that we are not directly acquainted with facts on the world-side of the word/world-gulf does not mean that we cannot invoke these facts in the description of our practices. Doing so just means that we start from the concept ‘fact’ to see how it is inferentially related to other concepts, such as ‘claim’, in order to get clear about the inferential roles played by both of these concepts.

5 Brandom’s Deflationism about Truth

Against Brandom, however, I would argue that his deflationism about truth and reference can only be upheld in the context of the first phase of the explication of claiming. In ch. 5 of MIE, Brandom accounts for the use of ‘true’ as a pro-sentence-forming operator by means of which we can anaphorically refer back to other assertions.

I think that a deflationist account of truth is inevitable in the first phase of the explication of claiming because the explication starts from the practice of giving and asking for reasons and aims at explicating what claims are in terms of these practices and, in a second step, what facts are in terms of claims. Therefore, we cannot invoke

¹ Brandom, following Sellars, rejects this way of thinking because it presupposes the independent intelligibility of looks-talk, which in fact is dependent on is-talk (cf. Brandom 2008, 12).

² This is what Brandom does in the second step of the first phase.

facts and claims as independent relations in order to explain the notion of truth. However, in the second phase, which invokes 'thick' practices, a deflationist account is bound to appear incomplete. In the second phase, we have at our disposal both the explication of claims in terms of the game of giving and asking for reasons and the description of the practice of rational rectification which involves physical facts. If we confine ourselves in this context to say about the expression 'true' only that it serves as a pro-sentence forming operator, we leave out something crucial. In this context, we also have to say about the expression 'true' that it is properly 'applied' to a claim if and only if the fact that is expressed by it really obtains.

In practice, Brandom seems to agree with this view. In his "Sketch of a Program for a Critical Reading of Hegel", where a detailed elaboration of the second phase of the explication of claiming is provided, Brandom says that, according to Hegel, "any set of determinate empirical claims [...] not only must omit some claims that are *true* and may contain some claims that are *not true*, it must contain some claims that are *not true*." (2005, 139, my emphasis) Here, I am not concerned with Brandom's or Hegel's claim that any set of beliefs must contain falsehoods. I want to point out that Brandom speaks of the truth and falsity of claims and that the context of this passage makes clear that the point of using the expressions 'true' and 'false' is not to refer anaphorically back to earlier claims. The point is to express the adequacy or inadequacy of systems of beliefs to the way the world is, which can show up in the experience of error when we acquire incompatible commitment by what we take to be correct applications of concepts.

The upshot of these considerations is that Brandom should be a deflationist about truth only in the first phase of his explication of claiming, but not in the second phase. Moreover, it seems that Brandom agrees with this view, at least in practice, because in the passage quoted, which belongs to the second phase of the explication, he seems to employ a non-deflationist notion of truth.

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