An Appraisal of Robert Brandom's *Making it Explicit*

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Abstract

This paper attends to the moral thought of Robert Brandom as it appears in his 1994 magnum opus *Making It Explicit*. Insofar that it is necessarily to outline Brandom's thought the presentation will refer to the conception of deontic commitments as providing a basis for inference and entitlements for the purposes of meaning making. Accepting these remarks as sound enough, the paper directs attention at the role of inference in moral-decision making. Finally, it offers an appraisal of Brandom's moral thought system.

Keywords
Robert Brandom, philosophy of language, American pragmatic ethics, moral philosophy

Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that Robert Brandom's *Making It Explicit* (1994, hereafter as MIE) is one of the most important philosophical works to be published in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Despite all of MIE's majesty, however, few scholars (except a select band of specialist philosophers of language) have tackled the book with much enthusiasm. It is my impression that the same can be said for communication studies scholars. I do not know what accounts for such avoidance within communication studies scholars, given MIE is anchored in the analysis of language. Perhaps this is due to the fact that, amongst professional philosophers at least, MIE has gained a measure of notoriety for its perceived difficulty. Rowland Strout (1999), for instance, writes that MIE appears "daunting," and that much knowledge of the book is of a "vicarious" nature, delivered through collegial corridor "mutterings" (p. 35). In a similar vein, Slavoj Žižek (2002, p. xi) believes that MIE falls into a category of books that while cited, or referred to, are seldom read "page by page"[i].

Respectfully, I disagree with this strategy. There is certainly much missed by avoiding MIE. Although primarily a work addressing the semantic-pragmatic interface in the philosophy of language, MIE nevertheless does not shy from discussing the wider implications of its proposed technical solution. These implications are crucial for communication studies to consider, given that much of what we do implicitly rests upon philosophical frameworks that investigate foundational concepts such as truth, reference, meaning, possibility, assertion and the like. Moreover, at stake in the semantic-pragmatic interface debate is, as Scott Soames writes, "whether the traditional conception of the relationship between meaning and use can survive" (2010, p.3)[ii]. This alone should whet the appetite of any communication scholar worth their salt.

Indeed, even if MIE is found wanting in areas outside of the philosophy of language, we would be intellectually poorer for not applying our minds to Brandom's meta-claim that the context of inferential semantics influences cognition, social practices, and institution making. Or indeed his claim that normative reasoning is possible even after admitting the roles that context and inference play in constituting meaning. Of course, many would find these claims contentious to say the least; but this ought not to be a reason for dismissal or indifference. Rather we should use it as a test piece against which to evaluate the current conceptual conventions.

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As I have not encountered many communication scholars examining American pragmatic ethics, what follows is a sympathetic discussion of the broad contours of Brandom's thought on social-linguistic practice as it relates to his model of deontics.[iii] The goal here is to provide familiarity for those who have not had the opportunity to come to grips with Brandom's thought. Hereafter, I offer a critique Brandom's analysis of deontics. To be clear, this paper is not a critique of the role that context plays in inferential semantics itself, but rather a critique of how Brandom has applied it to an understanding of moral development and practice.

The Broad Contours of Brandom's Edifice

Put succinctly, the goal of Brandom's project is to provide an arbitrational meta-vocabulary able to analyse vocabularies, their associated transactional practices, and the norms and attitudes that are a result of expressive discourses. However, one should not be quick and take this to mean that he wishes to provide a philosophical meta-vocabulary to supersede vocabularies, in turn coming to suggest 'proper' actions. Thinking so would be a mistake. On the contrary, the type of arbitrational work to which Brandom aspires is one that is able to model how people delineate and adjudicate between various assertions to assess those that have normative merit, and those that do not. Primarily this arbitration concerns itself with establishment of measures to normative moral reasoning that arise in a particular vocabulary, or to problems of moral reasoning that arise when several different vocabularies intersect.

Given that MIE is primarily a work anchored in the philosophy of language, it is unsurprising that practices feature prominently and provide the first point in Brandom's analysis. This is also partly due to the pragmatist orientation and an intellectual disposition that stresses practical reasoning over propositional reasoning. Amongst practices, sociolinguistic practice by far receives the most attention. Minimally, socio-linguistic practice is a product of a community comprising ~~of~~ rational beings, each of whom has the ability to give and take reasons. It is not necessary that these communities, their members, and their reasons be complex, nor sophisticated. What is necessary is the ability to exchange reasons, a precondition of which is the ability to express, assert and recall. Simply, it is akin to language use.

In MIE, practices cannot be disentangled from their context(s) or goals without diminishing their value(s). It comes as little surprise then that Brandom's practices bring to mind Bernard Williams' "thick concepts" (1985, pp. 129-130, 140-142). While dissimilar in purpose, both concepts share the following distinctive features: 1) an entanglement of descriptive and evaluative content[iv] and 2) simultaneously world-guided and action-guiding resources to make sense of actions. To coin a term, both concepts are "reasons-ready-at-hand". As such, we see how Brandom's model lends itself to moral thought insofar that he presses us to pay attention to the transaction of the implicit and shorthand conventions that pass as adequate reasons and justification of actions given a particular context. One should not think that this makes Brandom a closet relativist. A tacky label like this misdirects more than it illuminates. Rather Brandom asks us to be sensitive to how a particular context shapes the satisfaction criteria for actions to be assessed as either morally obligatory, praiseworthy, or blameworthy.

Commitments, Entitlements and The Islanders

To assist in bringing these concepts to life, we can enrol Jay Rosenberg's conceptualization of "islanders" (1997, pp. 179-197). Rosenberg proposes that we imagine an isolated community that has four members, Ada, Bill, Carl, and Dee. These members engage in a simple discursive practice. Indeed, the only thing they talk about is Nuanceberries. Nuanceberries grow year round, can be harvested at any time, ripen off branch, and are nutritional super foods. Therefore, they are the only food source required for the community. However, it is important only to eat them when they are

ripe. If not, one becomes unpleasantly ill. Fortunately, it is relatively easy to tell when Nuanceberries are ripe. Normally they are white, but when they start to ripen, they progressively turn from white to pink, then red, at which point they are edible. The Islanders have found a suitable way to talk about Nuanceberries. They can identify and determine when a berry is red, pink, or white. They can also discriminate between shades, saying this Naunceberry is darker or lighter, and they can say that a berry is edible ('yummy') or inedible ('yucky'). Having collected the Nuanceberries, the Islanders separate them into three piles, red, pink, and white. It is not much of a vocabulary, but it is enough to provide them the ability to assert and partake in the giving and taking of reasons.

Using Brandom's edifice we would say that a commitment arises when someone asserts something. For example, when Ada asserts 'this is red,' she has made a commitment. Or when Bill asserts 'this is darker than that' he has made a commitment. Brandom holds that once these commitments have been made the other Islanders are entitled to infer certain meanings therefrom. For instance, Carl is legitimately entitled to infer that the Naunceberry to which Ada refers is yummy.

Through these acts Brandom holds that when one asserts one is not only committed to the assertion itself, but rather also to the legitimate inferences that stem from it.[v] Thus in Brandom's model, when one is determining meaning, one is able to use entitlements to assist in making sense and evaluating the original commitment. Quite simply by Carl saying 'this is lighter than that' and 'that is pink' Dee is entitled to mean that that Naunceberry is white. However, Bill asserting 'this is pink' does not entitle Carl to understand the statement as expressing that this Naunceberry is yummy. In this case, Carl's understanding would be incorrect. On the other hand, if there is a situation where Bill asserts 'this is red' and 'that is lighter than this', then Carl and Dee are entitled to think that Bill has committed to meaning that 'that is pink or white.' At which point they themselves could examine that Nuanceberry to determine whether it was red, pink, or white, i.e. to test the inferred commitment through their assessment of the material environment.

From the interaction of the above features emerges an understanding of consistency, trust, credibility, commitment, and entitlement. These states Brandom calls deontic concerns. When one assesses or discusses deontic concerns one becomes engaged in the practice of deontic reasoning, a practice that Brandom states cannot be divorced from socio-linguistic practice. Thus, deontic reasoning is descriptive and evaluative, world-guided and action-guiding, all of which point to a pragmatic component to moral agreement and moral conflict.

Brandom proposes that within a community deontic claims come to be assessed by the members of that community. He calls this process "deontic scorekeeping." Simply this means that members of a socio-linguistic community keep track of one another's assertions to ensure that they are asserting consistently; in effect keeping score on one another's commitments and entitlements.[vi] Even in our Islanders example one can find deontic scorekeeping, for even with their minimal vocabulary there can be defaults, challenges, and vindications. For example, a challenge can arise when Ada asserts 'this is red' while at the same time Dee asserts 'this is pink.' Clearly, this is a conflict, but one that admits a resolution. Ada might respond by producing some premises to attempt to justify her claim, but if she cannot find adequate support for her assertion then she can no longer legitimately hold her entitlement. Ada would have to concede the point and undertake to hold the same commitment that Dee holds, that in fact the berry in question is pink. In doing so Ada would also be adopting the claim that the berry is edible.

There are also limits to inference. For instance, when Bill asserts 'this is yucky,' Carls is not entitled to automatically think that that particular Nuanceberry is white. It could be white or pink. In this case, there is insufficient information to entitle Carl to draw a definite conclusion.

Of course, there are social forces at play amongst the Islanders. There could well be differences in perception, capacity, or experience. Power and authority might feature as well. But these brute facts do not diminish that what is occurring in the discursive practice is the licensing of entitlements through inferences based upon the logic of their particular discourse.

Through these mechanics, we can begin to appreciate how MIE proposes a way to analyse the regulative practices of claim making. Two things operate at the root of Brandom's model. The first is a notion of consistency and practical attitudes (cf. MIE 161). This deontic scorekeeping is a form of practical reasoning. What underpins this model is the standard that a legitimate inference has to be consistent and compatible with the other assertions. And practical attitudes give rise to treating someone as committed or entitled to do something or think something; which are deontic statuses. The Islanders utterances and the inferences network in which they sit confer conceptual content and propositional content, and thus norms around which the discourse practice can orient. Operating in the discursive practices, The Islanders are able to keep one another accountable.

Some Difficulties with Brandom's Edifice

Having demonstrated the basic mechanics of Brandom's edifice, we can now turn our attention to some of the difficulties that arise therein. First, one might ask about inconsistencies and incompatibilities; what does the model have to say about these features of language use? To accommodate these potentially crippling lines of critique, Brandom defers back to the notion of deontic scorekeeping, suggesting that this process will refine out the inconsistent and the incompatible. This seems unlikely, but, even if we were to put faith in such a process, what secures against the problems of inter-subjective agreement? Brandom's appears to leave this question open.

This leads us to the second difficulty, which relates to expression. Most would agree that asserting claims are expressions that have propositional conceptual content, the standard model of meaning. However, in Brandom's model, an assertion is considered to only have meaningful content when it is set in relation to other assertions. Brandom would hold, for instance that the assertion, 'this is darker than that' only has meaning for the Islanders because of their discursive practice around Nuanceberries. Furthermore, he would hold that we, as analysts of this discursive practice, understand the original assertion because of the capacity of our meta-vocabulary to set that original assertion in relation to our discursive practice. In other words, our ability to make sense of the assertion is due to our particular semantic-pragmatic interface as opposed [**to**] a propositional logical apparatus. But, if this were the case, then it would appear that to fully understand how a particular assertion functions, one would have to be fully engaged with it and the discursive practice in which it resides, that one would have to be fully engaged with the entanglement of descriptive, evaluative, world-guided, and action-guiding features. Critique or disagreement then cannot be arrived at without some engagement of the pragmatic component of the moral system at hand. This is a peculiar tenet given Brandom's arbitrational tendencies. Surely we would want to avoid conflicts from degenerating into perspectivism.

When combined, these two difficulties point to deep problems within Brandom's model of moral development and exchange. For the sake of brevity and focus I cannot hope to cover them in the treatment they deserve. What I shall do instead is examine what I consider the most acute difficulty, that Brandom's makes an overly simple connection between judgments, emotions, and context.[vii] This is because Brandom assumes that reasoning is actually rational (i.e. logical). By extension, pragmatic reasoning is also logical. The problem, however, that arises is whether logic can capture all the forms of pragmatic reasoning? One doubts so.

The account present in MIE can best be described as neo-sentimentalist in tone, and thus inherits many of the criticisms thereof.[viii] What I mean by neo-sentimentalism is the view that "to make an evaluative judgment is not to *have* but to *endorse* a sentiment" (D'Arms, and Jacobson, 2000: 729). The implication for models of morality that subscribe to neo-sentimentalism is: "to think that X has some evaluative property Ω is think it appropriate to feel F in response to X" (D'Arms, and Jacobson, 2000: 729). To my mind, Brandom's claim that one must be fully engaged with the entanglement of descriptive, evaluative, world-guided, and action-guiding features in order to understand how it is set to and against other expressions in the discursive practice is the equivalent of

the tacit endorsement of that particular discursive practice's ability to best understand the context in which it resides. Thus this practically becomes sympathy if not tacit endorsement of the sentiments that create the entanglement of descriptive, evaluative, world-guided, and action-guiding features in the first place. Elevating these as criteria for judging like action and thought does little to assist in finding binding resolutions by which to assess the moral quotient of an action.

Let us turn to the Islanders to demonstrate the problems of neo-sentimentalism. Firstly, let us assume that while the Islanders' discourse does not have a complex vocabulary to make the particular nuances of their sentiments known, sentiments are still present in the community, and members can have them. For example, Dee can feel resentful when the other Islanders use deontic scorekeeping and bring her commitments into question. Secondly, even in what little vocabulary exists, there are features that are both descriptive and evaluative. For example when Dee asserts 'this is darker than that' plainly we see both a descriptive and an evaluative act.[ix]

However, merely having these two properties does not make the model neo-sentimentalist. Rather, the mistake is to think that evaluations *are* endorsements of sentiments, and further that to understand the sentiment expressed, one must endorse the description offered. To illustrate the mistake let us examine the expression, 'that is bat-shit crazy.' Clearly, this expression has evaluative and descriptive properties. A neo-sentimentalist would say that to understand the meaning and the moral quotient in question, the sentiment, one would have to endorse the evaluative and descriptive properties. That is to say to endorse the evaluation that the act being called 'bat-shit crazy' meets the criteria for being 'bat-shit crazy' and can fairly be described as such. Needless to say neo-sentimentalism trades on a false equivalency, believing that two different persons using the same description will lead to the same evaluation. Additionally, we must ask whether we must be burdened by a price of admittance that requires us to subscribe to the pre-offered descriptions and their weighting?

Brandom's model holds that when Ada asserts an evaluative judgement ('this is red') she makes a particular commitment to which gives others entitlements to draw inferences. If this is not endorsement of a particular understanding, evaluation, or description, I hardly know what is. Further several sentiments are present in Ada's assertion; 1) the particular Nuanceberry is Yummy; 2) her fellow Islanders will find that berry Yummy; and 3) they can trust her that the berry will be Yummy. In the model, the assertion that Ada makes is in effect an evaluative judgement that endorses a sentiment.

One might ask what indeed is faulty with this view. Surely, the thought of evaluations as endorsements is a meaningful understanding of moral expression. Is not Ada sincere when she uses her capacities to offer an evaluation as best as she can? Moreover, while there are some expressions that cannot be sincere or insincere (orders for instance) this is not the case with expressions that relate to those of a deontic nature; beliefs, values, and the like. They speak to a person's intentions and the things that reside under the expression. Expressions of emotion work in the same way. Sincerity seems to offer an appealing line of argument. In spite of this attraction, three difficulties seem to indicate that sincerity is not the correct line to pursue.

The first is whether it makes sense to evaluate utterances and expressions as sincere or insincere? For a moment imagine that that were indeed the case. Do utterances and expressions that are not sincere have no merit? Or when a person asserts something *considered* insincere do they have no entitlement whatsoever to what was asserted? Lastly, apart from very blatant moments of insincerity, it is difficult to judge when someone is insincere. Sober second thought shows this to be out of step. Is there no place for irony and metaphor then? And surely even behind insincerity resides a commitment of one sort or another. It might not be readily apparent, but it exists in much the same way that a falsehood recognises the existence of truth. So what is gained by refusing to recognise the insincere? At least in recognition one is open to the opportunity to assess the claim against the commitment to which it claims to nod.

Secondly, there is a slippage here from the endorsement of what one asserts, one's own project of asserting, and merely asserting and endorsing what is commonly understood by the wider collective. For example, let us think of cases where there is some disagreement about sincerity. What if Bill sincerely believes that what Carl and Dee asserts is pink is in fact red because for whatever reason, unknown to those involved, Bill's body is able to digest on pink berries and thus by the common criteria is yummy? Does deontic scorekeeping diminish Bill's claims that 'this is darker than that', 'that is white' and 'this was yummy'? Surely Carl is sincere when he asserts all of these. And because Bill cannot digest pink berries, are we to say that Carl is insincere, or is lying, or in fact that he is not endorsing the sentiments of the wider collective?

The question that this raises is whether Brandom's conception of deontic scorekeeping can adequately accommodate the particular workings of individual projects and beliefs. I suspect not. So the neo-sentimentalist position becomes one where one endorses the pre-established set of meanings and understandings. This is not to fall afoul of perspectivism, but rather to suggest that though endorsement of the existing reasons ready at hand, one is alienated from the possibility of enhancing individual projects and beliefs. It is a problem of continual self-reference.

The third difficulty rests with there being counter examples to Brandom's position. Say Ada was angry with Bill, she could quite easily lie, or be deceitful when she claims 'this is red.' There is a complex relationship in moral thought and discourse between sincerity and emotions, which is psychologically very important and individuated. It thus resists the making of any general connection between the two, linguistic of otherwise.

Imagine that anthropologists come to visit the Islanders, and due to different dietary habits do not find Nuanceberries yummy. Let us suppose in fact they find them outright disgusting. So when eating Nuanceberries they cannot have the same dispositions as the Islanders. Does this inability to endorse sincerely hinder the anthropologists from understanding the roles and discursive practices that are involved with the Islanders community? Or must the Anthropologists endorse the statement "Yummy" to understand the conditionals 'this is darker than that, that is pink, this is red, this is yummy'? Of course not, insisting on this therefore seems preposterous. It is a fallacy to believe that for one to understand the moral quotient of an action, one must have the same disposition as another person. As Bernard Williams has said "An insightful observer can indeed come to understand and anticipate the use of a concept without actually sharing the values of the people that use it" (1985: 141-142).

As a response, Brandom might suggest that these difficulties will not arise in the Islanders community because they give and exchange reasons, and that they are well aware that they are giving and taking reasons, that is to say that they are fully engaged with the process of giving and taking reasons. And that when the anthropologists come to partake in the giving and taking of reasons in that community they will be able to endorse the wider sentiments themselves, if not necessarily coming to endorse any particular sentiment itself. But this seems a difficult line of appeal if the concepts are so rooted to a particular pragmatic conception, that it is difficult to merely say look at the facts at hand, by asking whether 'this lighter or darker than that.' In sum, I do not think sincerity gets us any further along in arbitration, it merely provides a mime running at a different tempo.

Reaching this conclusion does not imply that Brandom's goal of arbitration is folly. I think it is important that we find the means to resolve deontic conflict. What is clear however is that it is not enough to merely propose that we keep deontic scores on each other's commitments and entitlements. For forever much we might wish it otherwise these features are too cumbersome. Not appreciating this feature leads to much of the analysis of commitments occurring at too high a level of abstraction with the co-current oversimplification unable to account for much of the subtle complexities of socio-linguistic practice. It misses much of the thick and rich nature of everyday moral exchange. Indeed, Brandom provides no supple account of the role of emotion and dispositions play in commitments. For this reason, Brandom cannot help explain individual's inconsistencies bar to

call the individual person's assertions into question through deontic scorekeeping. For an analysis that aspires to an arbitrational meta-vocabulary status, this is a major oversight.

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Notes

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[i] Granted there is glib embellishment to both Strout and Zizek's remarks, but they each do point to the underlying concern that many have of MIE, which if we are to be explicit is really a question of whether the emperor has no clothes. Brandomphobes worry that the style, tone, and the wide-ranging arguments of MIE serve to cloud a work that is ultimately flawed. However, giving pause to such fierce declaration is the potential to lose face and endanger their status if they themselves are mistaken. On the other side of the fence Brandomphiles charge sceptics with professional tardiness and being subject to an unnecessarily constrained narrow mindedness brought about by over-specialization. The best introduction to Brandom's work I have found is Wanderer (2008).

[ii] The traditional conception holds that the "semantic content of a sentence in context is always a proposition … [which] … is both asserted by utterances of the sentence in the context, and itself the source of whatever subsidiary assertions may result" (Soames 2010, 3-4).

[iii] There of course must be the obligatory caution. For the sake of brevity and focus, I cannot address the nuances that lurk in the intellectual nooks and crannies, nor the suggestions that apply to the apparent shifts within the mode of philosophical concern.

[iv] An example of this entanglement would be the sentence, "that was cruel thing to do" which indicates a description of an event and the belief that the action in question was on some level wrong.

[v] The demarcation between legitimate and illegitimate inferences is one based on the rule of the particular discourse and its relation to material.

[vi] This presumes that the Islanders can keep score for themselves. As in that they are not forgetful and have some sense of temporality that "marks" past from present from future, and that their future commitments must be consistent with the past.

[vii] The reason I draw attention to the role of emotions in our understanding of morality is because in the years preceding MIE's publication considerable attention was given to the role of emotions, disposition and sentiments in forming moral positions. It is therefore not an unfair treatment of MIE to examine to what extent it had incorporated such insights and concerns. The insight from early 1990s moral philosophy and ethics is the extent to which emotional dispositions and psychology are involved in our moral claims and inferences. This is supported by works that historically compared particular moral concepts. David Konstan's *Before Forgiveness* (2010), Martha Nusbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness* (2001), and Bernard Williams' *Shame and Necessity* (1993) are three good examples that speak to this point.

[viii] Now is not the time to digress into the debate surrounding neo-sentimentalism. Instead, I will confine my critique to the nature of endorsement. For those interested in a full critique of neo-sentimentalism, see Goldie (2009) or Rachels (1986).

[ix] A more cumbersome example showing that even the purely descriptive consider when Ada asserts 'this is red.' Here she is both describing the Nuanceberry and making an evaluation that it is yummy; if Ada is aware that others have entitlements to infer certain things from her commitment, surely she is aware of at least some of those inference herself, and surely in her assertion she is aware that those inference will be used to evaluate her assertion. In other words, when Ada asserts 'his is red' she is aware that others will evaluate that assertion. In other words, Ada is aware that her assertion is both descriptive and evaluative.