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ASSERTIBILIST TRUTH AND OBJECTIVE CONTENT

Still Inexplicit?

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Michael Dummett's pioneering work from the 1960s onwards on the metaphysics and epistemology of meaning has bequeathed an outstanding challenge to contemporary philosophy of language: to show how a broadly use-based, or *assertibilist* conception of linguistic competence can underwrite a satisfying account of language mastery and of the full range of norms and contents that it embraces, or to show – once and for all – that it cannot, and that in order to do so, more traditionally Realist materials are needed. Robert Brandom's landmark researches[1] fashion a more thoroughgoing answer to this challenge than can be found in the writings of any other living philosopher. Here, however, we review one aspect of his answer – better, his answer to one aspect of the challenge – which seems to us continuingly problematical, and attempt to explain why, as it seems to us, a more orthodox 'assertibilist' approach than Brandom's may yet better serve the purpose.

I Assertibility, truth and objectivity

Brandom's approach assumes – in contrast to that of, say, Quine – that for the purposes of the sought-after account of language mastery, use – the patterns of practice that have to be mastered – may be *normatively* characterised, in terms of notions of propriety and impropriety understood on the broad model of allowable moves in a game.[2] Descriptions of use – the data on which the account of meaning is to be built – will thus consist in the characterisation of what moves are permissible, or mandated, or forbidden for a particular player of the language-game in a particular context. Brandom also follows Dummett's lead in taking *assertion* to be the basic form of move on which the theorist of meaning should concentrate. It is thus normatively conceived assertibility-conditions – conditions of *proper* assertion – that are going to play the central role in the attempt by Brandom's 'pragmatist' (henceforward: the Assertibilist) to construct a workable philosophical semantics.

Any such project has to confront a familiar and awkward-looking hazard – the fact that, as Brandom stresses,[3] assertoric practice is essentially subject to a norm which *contrasts* with warrant. I may with full warrant – hence commendably – assert what is actually not so, and I may unwarrantedly – hence reprehensibly – assert what, luckily for me, is so. But untruth is still a form of failure, a way for even the

best-warranted assertion to be in bad standing; and truth is still a form of success, a point of commendation for even the most capricious claim. How, using just the kind of materials which the Assertibilist allows himself, can a conception of the content of moves be constructed which will allow them – as they must be, if they are assertions – to be subject to both these apparently contrasting norms?

Call that the *Truth question*. It is not, on the face of it, identical to another question, on which Brandom expends a more explicit effort. This is the *Objectivity question*: can the Assertibilist provide for the emergence of assertoric moves whose contents are objective in the specific sense that they do not describe the situation of the agent – what is or is not permitted, or prohibited, for her in that particular context – nor other features of her attitudes? Assertibility is relative to an assertor, to her context and state of information in relevant respects. But the content of what is asserted is, typically, not so relative. The Objectivity question concerns the recoverability of contents of this kind on the basis of materials legitimately available to the Assertibilist.

Any viable assertibilism has to address both questions. In 'Objectivity and the Normative Fine Structure of Rationality',[4] Brandom gives most of his attention to the Objectivity question – though one may well gather the impression that he feels he is thereby treating the Truth question, without clearly separating the two. But however that may be, the questions are – at least initially – distinct. Reflect, for one thing, that the Truth question is not restricted to objective contents – a contrast between truth and warrant applies equally to claims that are not objective in Brandom's sense. For another, it is not clear why a good answer to the Objectivity question would necessarily have to say anything about truth. Any assertibilist construction of a general contrast between objective and non-objective claims must ultimately proceed by reference to differentiating patterns of use in the light of norms which are recognised as legitimate assertibilist materials from the outset. If such a construction can be given, then rather than issuing in the emergence of truth as a superintendent norm on assertoric practice generally, one might expect it to show, rather, how certain differences – normally thought to require a contrast between truth-conditions and assertibility-conditions – may be explained without bringing in truth-conditions, and hence without any need to invoke the notion of truth at all. Indeed, some, though not all, of Brandom's remarks suggest that this is his own perspective. He writes, for example:

> The fact is that the distinction between sentences sharing assertibility conditions and sharing truth-conditions ... can be made out in terms of commitments and entitlements, without the need to invoke the notion of truth.[5]

This suggests that Brandom views the Objectivity question as crystallising the real challenge posed by the Truth question, but in a purer form, absent a theoretical prejudice.[6] But other passages convey a different impression. He allows, for example, that there is a challenge

to show how the conceptual raw materials ... [the assertibility] approach allows itself could be deployed so as to underwrite attributions of propositional content for which this sort of *objective* normative assessment [in terms of truth and falsity] is intelligible.[7]

At this point, then, there is a worry that a conflation may be at work in Brandom's thinking between explaining how the assertibility-conditional approach can sanction propositional contents for which 'objective normative assessment' is intelligible, and explaining how it can sanction propositional contents which are objective in the sense of concerning matters other than the situation/perspective of a thinker/assertor. The Truth question requires the Assertibilist to explain how he can recognise the distinction between the two distinct norms over assertoric practice of truth and assertibility – where the distinctness of these norms involves their potential extensional divergence, in the sense that conformity with either norm is consistent with failure to conform with the other. The Objectivity question requires the Assertibilist to explain the distinction between a range of contents, of which we may take the schematic

It is assertible that *p*

as representative, which are non-objective in the sense that they involve an essential reference and relativity to the epistemically relevant circumstances, attitudes, and so on, of some player or group of players in the assertoric practice, and the corresponding objective content that *p*.

What is the relation between these two questions/explanatory tasks? Does discharging one of them put one in position to discharge the other? If so, is there a preferred direction of explanation?

Let's first flag the possibility of answering the Objectivity question on the basis of an answer to the Truth question. One obvious strategy for the Assertibilist is to seek to directly construct a notion out of his basic materials which appropriately contrasts with assertibility itself and which behaves in relevant respects as a notion of truth should. A natural candidate is *superassertibility*. A content is superassertible, roughly, if warranted by some accessible state of information and by all accessible improvements of it. The identification of truth with superassertibility provides a very straightforward answer to the Truth question. Assertibility in a given state of information need not imply superassertibility as characterised. And superassertibility need not imply assertibility in any particular (present) state of information. Further, it is only a little less obvious that it provides a very straightforward and agreeably simple answer to the Objectivity question. For suppose truth is superassertibility. If, in a certain context *c*, it is assertible that *p*, then that this is so – i.e. that it is assertible in *c* that *p* – is itself *superassertible*. But that leaves it entirely open whether the content that *p* is *itself* superassertible. And conversely, it can perfectly well be that it is superassertible that *p*, without its being assertible in context *c* that *p*. In short, *p* and it is assertible that *p* have different superassertibility-conditions, hence different truth-conditions, and so differ in content, just as required.

If we credit Brandom with clarity about the distinction between the Truth question and the Objectivity question, then the foregoing order of explanation contrasts with the direction he would appear to favour – according to which, instead of building on an answer to the Truth question to get an answer to the Objectivity question, we are to start from an answer to the Objectivity question. So suppose the Objectivity question somehow satisfactorily answered in assertibilist terms, so that we have recovered a difference in content in general between:

It is assertible that p (briefly $A(p)$)

and plain p. Now introduce – for we can hardly be barred from doing so – a truth predicate, or truth operator, governed by the standard Equivalence scheme:

It is true that p iff p (briefly $Tr(p)$ iff p)

The assumed difference in content between them involves a potential divergence in the assertibility-conditions of the contents $A(p)$ and p. That is, either may be assertible without the other being so. So suppose, first, that the latter is assertible but that the former is not, i.e. $A(p)$ but $\neg A(A(p))$. Then applying the Equivalence scheme to $A(p)$, we have that $Tr(A(p))$ but $\neg A(A(p))$. Hence the senses of the operators, $Tr(\ )$ and $A(\ )$, are distinct. Suppose, conversely, that $A(p)$ is good, but p is not, i.e. $A(A(p))$ but $\neg A(p)$. Taking $A(p)$ for p in the Equivalence scheme and contraposing, we obtain $\neg Tr(A(p))$, and hence

$A(A(p))$ but $\neg Tr(A(p))$.

So again Tr and A diverge.

This gives distinct predicates – or more precisely, operators – of truth and assertibility, but that is so far consistent with deflationism about truth. To complete an argument against deflationism, one now needs to argue not just that these predicates/operators diverge in extension, but that truth is a distinct *norm* from assertibility. For this it suffices that Tr, introduced as by the Equivalence scheme, is normative over the discourse concerned. We believe that this should not be regarded as relevantly controversial, but will merely take it for granted here.[8]

In sum, given an answer to the Truth question – given that a norm appropriately contrasting with assertibility has been supplied – it is straightforward to answer the Objectivity question. And conversely, given an answer to the Objectivity question, we can explain how truth and assertibility predicates will diverge in behaviour in a way that may be taken to reflect the existence of distinct norms which they respectively express.

It appears, then, that with some qualifications, the Truth question and the Objectivity question can in principle be tackled in either direction, so to say, in confidence that success with one will lead to success with the other. So the Assertibilist has two salient possible strategies. One is to tackle head-on the distinction between truth

and assertibility, to fashion a conception of truth out of assertibilist materials suitable for recovery of the essentials of the intuitive contrast between the two notions, and to proceed in the kind of way outlined above to the distinction of objective contents from others by the means it provides. The other is Brandom's actual route: to provide directly for a distinction between objective and non-objective contents in assertibilist terms, and thereby to recover a device, again as outlined, to discharge (the uncontroversial aspects of) the role of 'true'. A salient question is why Brandom forsakes the former, rather more straightforward-seeming strategy. But before getting to that, let us explain why we at least can foresee no clear prospect of success following the route he actually takes.

II Brandom on the Objectivity question – the 'normative fine structure of rationality'

Say that two claims are co-assertible just in case any body of information warranting the one warrants the other and conversely. Then any claim that is objective in Brandom's sense – that is, is not about the attitudes or informational situation of any particular subject or group of subjects – will be co-assertible with certain non-objective claims. Such are the respective pairs:

"The swatch is red"	"That the swatch is red is properly assertible by me now"
"I will write a book on Hegel"	"I foresee that I will write a book on Hegel"
"All ravens are black"	"We have a body of evidence corroborating the claim that all ravens are black and no significant counter-evidence"

How can the Assertibilist properly differentiate these contents? No doubt their differences are indeed manifest in differences in the assertibility-conditions of claims in which they are respectively embedded: for instance the *negations* of each of the contrasted pairs will have different assertibility-conditions, as will *conditionals* in which they are the respective antecedents. Thus, for example, the negation of "The swatch is red" will be co-assertible with "That the swatch is not red is properly assertible by me now", not with "That the swatch is red is not properly assertible by me now". But these differences are apt to seem unintelligible so long as the Assertibilist allows, what may seem undeniable, that the content of a negated, or conditional claim must be construed as a function of the content of the claim negated, or of the antecedent and consequent, and that the contents of the latter, ingredient claims are fixed by conditions of assertibility. The problem posed for the Assertibilist by these pairs is not to find differences in conditions of warranted assertion of containing statements to reflect what are the intuitive differences in their contents, but to do so in a way that respects semantic compositionality and the other presuppositions of the view.

Brandom's response is that assertibilism needs to operate with a more finely discriminated notion of assertibility. Specifically, we are to distinguish between what a speaker ought to assert, or be prepared to assert, qua *entitled* to it and what a speaker ought to assert, or be prepared to assert, qua *committed* to it.[9] How is this to help the distinction of the co-assertible pairs? The intended notions of entitlement and commitment need interpretation, of course,[10] but one would expect – though more about this shortly – that the members of such pairs would have the same entitlement conditions. The expectable proposal therefore has to be that they can, in effect, be distinguished as commitments. But what Brandom suggests, while in keeping with that, is actually more subtle. Reflect that the intuitive differences in content between members of the pairs issue in differences concerning which claims they are respectively compatible or incompatible with. For instance, the non-objective members of the pairs will in general be compatible with the falsity of the objective members; and the objective members will in general be compatible with the non-satisfaction of certain necessary conditions for particular subjects' being in the informational states described in the corresponding non-objective claims. Brandom's idea is to try to construct a notion of incompatibility out of materials provided by his finer-grained conception of assertibility that will enable the reflection of these intuitive differences.

But can he succeed? We'll canvass three specific difficulties – though in fact they are all aspects of the same problem.

Brandom's suggestion[11] is that a move M be regarded as incompatible with a move N just in case a commitment to the first precludes an entitlement to the second. An immediate intuitive difficulty is that it is hard to see how there can ever actually be such a 'preclusion' in the kind of case – where the commitments and entitlements in question are to assertoric claims – which it is Brandom's goal to explicate. Presumably there is to be no requirement of ancestral entitlement in one's commitments – consequences of beliefs which one holds prejudicially, or dogmatically, or otherwise without entitlement, are no less *commitments* on that account than those which flow from beliefs to which one is entitled. Indeed, this is no mere presumption but a presupposition of Brandom's whole approach. If he were to restrict the idea of commitment in such a way as to require, to the contrary, that commitments must be based on anterior entitlements, then – assuming the transmissibility of entitlement across entailment and other relations of commitment – his account of incompatibility would collapse into one of preclusion between entitlements and the entire point of the bipartite refinement of the notion of assertibility would be undermined. But now: how can there ever be a conflict between a groundless commitment and an entitlement? The fact may simply be that someone is committed to a certain claim, p, because it follows from things she accepts; and simultaneously that she is entitled to not-p, because her epistemic situation fully warrants it. There is no tension here.

We are not saying of course that there is nothing to be made of the idea of, say, a *game's* being so constrained by norms of commitment and entitlement that a commitment to a certain move, say, always trumps what would otherwise be an

entitlement to a different move. The point is rather that if we, as it were, peek ahead and help ourselves to an ordinary understanding of *assertions*, and what it is to be committed to or entitled to endorse them, then commitment, so long as it does not have to be entitlement-based, and entitlement simply pass each other by. What one ought to accept because one is committed to it is one thing; what one ought to accept because one's informational input warrants it is quite another. There are no collisions or 'preclusions' between these domains.

What follows is that Brandom's proposal needs a better interpretation of 'preclusion' – one compatible with the capacity of virtually any assertoric (or doxastic) commitments and entitlements peacefully to co-exist in fact. The obvious thought is that the modality involved in preclusion should be read along the broad lines of illegality, rather than impossibility. But now a second difficulty needs to be reckoned with. Suppose commitment to move M so precludes entitlement to move N. What the Assertibilist may *not* do in the first instance is understand this as a relation between the (putative) *contents* of M and N. Rather the preclusion must – in the context of Brandom's project – be understood *quasi-extensionally*: it will have to be understood as consisting just in the circumstance that – as far as the legalities are concerned, as it were – any situation in which one is committed to M is thereby a situation in which one forfeits any entitlement to N. Incompatibility, that is, has to be a pragmatic relation in the first instance, a relation turning, in the light of the controlling norms on move-making, just on the physiognomy and context of moves – the construction of a consequential semantic relation, one turning on their *content*, being precisely what Brandom is in the business of attempting.

So what? Well, we now need to be very clear about what it is to answer the Objectivity question. In order merely to distinguish the members of the relevant kind of objective/non-objective pairings, Brandom has only to show that certain of their inferential connections are somehow different. However merely *somehow* distinguishing objective statements from (putatively) co-assertible non-objective ones is not enough. In addition, they have to be distinguished *fully and correctly*: the Assertibilist has to show specifically how he can make a contrast between the members of such pairs which is a correct reflection of the *conceptual* relations which the propositions in question actually respectively bear to propositions at large. The challenge is not merely to get *some* kind of distinction going between objective/non-objective pairs but to track the detail of the conceptual compatibility/incompatibility relations which they respectively actually sustain across contents in general.

To see why one might be pessimistic about the prospects, reflect that the relevant kind of incompatibility – the semantic incompatibility which obtains, for example, between "That the swatch is red is properly assertible by me now" and, say, "No one knows anything about the colour of the swatch" but does not obtain between the latter and "The swatch is red" – is of course symmetric. So any successful pragmatic surrogate for it had better be symmetric too. We may take it accordingly that Brandom's surrogate – that a commitment to one move (legally) precludes entitlement to the other – has to be symmetric[12]. Hence if we are trying to determine whether the pragmatic surrogate correctly reflects the different *semantic* compatibility

relations which a pair of moves, M and M*, respectively bear to a particular move, M+ – let it be, for instance, that intuitively M* is incompatible with M+ but M is not – it cannot matter whether we put the question as:

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

or as

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

Focus, therefore, on the latter form of the question. And suppose that M and M* are *co-entitlements* (i.e. that, as far as the legalities are concerned, any situation in which one is entitled to one is a situation in which one is entitled to the other.) Let it be that a commitment to M+ does indeed preclude entitlement to M*. On the quasi-extensional understanding of preclusion, that just means that the legalities require that any situation in which one is committed to M+ is a situation in which one is not entitled to M*. But now, since M and M* are co-entitlements, we have that the situations in which one is not entitled to M* are all and only situations in which one is also not entitled to M. So commitment to M+ must preclude entitlement to M as well.

In other words, provided preclusion is understood quasi-extensionally, and the pairings of objective and non-objective contents which exercise Brandom are all cases of co-entitlement, then his proposal *has* to be impotent to draw the intended distinctions in full and correct detail. The contents of "That the swatch is red is properly assertible by me now" and "The swatch is red" are indeed distinguished by their differing incompatibility relationships to "No one knows anything about the colour of the swatch". But if this distinction has to be recovered in terms of Brandom-incompatibility, quasi-extensionally construed – in terms of there being a legal proscription on situations of commitment to "No one knows anything about the colour of the swatch" involving entitlement to "That the swatch is red is properly assertible by me now" but no such proscription on their involving entitlement to "The swatch is red" – it goes fugitive. For the legalities require, by hypothesis, that any situation in which one is not entitled to the second is one in which one is not entitled to the third either, and conversely.

This assumes, to be sure, that the relevant kind of objective/non-objective pairs are co-entitlements. But that they are may seem no more than a restatement of the basic datum for the problem – that to be entitled to assert *p* is to be entitled to assert that one is entitled to assert *p*, and so on. At one point Brandom seems to question this,[13] suggesting in particular that reliabilism might open a gap between entitlement to a claim and the possession of good reason to believe that one is so entitled. But this move seems confused. For one thing, if reliabilism may make one's first-order entitlements inscrutable, it can presumably do the same for one's

second-order entitlements as well. (One form of externalist misgiving about the KK-principle involves the same confusion.) But more important, if such a gap *can* be opened – whether by reliabilism or however else – then there already is the solution to the Assertibilist's initial problem! Brandom's proposal, and the attendant break-up of assertibility into commitment vs. entitlement, will not be needed. In short: if Brandom allows that the objective/non-objective pairs are co-entitlements, it seems his proffered apparatus cannot get their semantic compatibility/incompatibility relationships right; and if he doesn't so allow, he doesn't need that apparatus to distinguish them.

At this point, the reader may begin to suspect that any notion of incompatibility that does draw the sought-for distinctions cannot be understood in the quasi-extensional way the Assertibilist ought to understand it, but has rather to be understood in terms of an *independently achieved* conception of assertoric content. If a commitment to M is to preclude an entitlement to N in the kind of way that is needed, then the relation between the two moves has to be something like this: that, because of their respective contents, one cannot *rationally and clear-headedly endorse both moves simultaneously* – cannot rationally and clear-headedly recognise the entitlement alongside retention of one's antecedent commitments. What merits remark, finally, is that even *this* notion – whose unreconstructed appeal to rationality surely must anyway put it beyond the base materials of assertibilism sanctioned by Brandom's game analogy – won't deliver the intended contrasts unless taken in a specifically anti-assertibilist way.

To see why, consider how the proposal might work in response to a particular example – say, the third pair above:

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

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

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

Hence a commitment to (i), but not a commitment to (ii), should preclude entitlement to (iii). But while it's true that one could not rationally and clear-headedly welcome an entitlement to the belief that a grey raven is nesting in the Cairngorms alongside a commitment set that included the belief that all ravens are black, the same would also be true if one's commitment set included the belief (ii), whereby there is a body of evidence corroborating the claim that all ravens are black and no significant extant counter-evidence. For while (iii) is not inconsistent with (ii), an entitlement to it is.

The pair, (i) and (ii), are a prototype of the kind of difference – between an objective content and a corresponding non-objective content – which Brandom sets himself to differentiate. Yet it seems that even when we understand a commitment's precluding an entitlement not merely quasi-extensionally but – surely illicitly, in

the present context – in terms of the rational impossibility of accepting the entitle-ment alongside continuation of the commitment, we fail to recover an appropriate contrast between (i) and (ii) in relation to (iii). Recognition of an entitlement to (iii) is *rationally incompatible* with a continuing commitment to (ii), no less than to (i). The difference is that it is the *fact* of an entitlement to (iii) which is inconsistent with (ii), and the *content* of an entitlement to (iii) which is inconsistent with (i). But there seems no prospect of recovering *this* difference unless we have the means to appeal not merely to rational incompatibilities between acceptance of entitlements and commitments in general but to the narrower sub-class of such in which the incompatibilities are sustained *purely by the contents* of the commitments and entitle-ments in question. And once we have that narrower focus, of course, it will anyway be incidental that the contents in question are envisaged as commitments and enti-tlements respectively – and then the pragmatics of commitment and entitlement will no longer have any role to play in the explication of the incompatibilities.

III   Brandom's doubts about the ideal assertibility approach

Our central concern in the preceding sections has been to assess Brandom's preferred answers to two challenges confronting his kind of assertibilism, encapsu-lated in what we have been calling the *Truth* and *Objectivity* questions. The first of these, recall, is the question: How, using just the kind of materials available to the Assertibilist, can we construct a conception of the content of moves which allows them to be subject to the two contrasted norms of truth and warranted assertibility? The second takes off from the fact that, while warranted assertibility is relative to the assertor, to her context and to her state of information in relevant respects, what she asserts is typically not so relative. The Objectivity question is then: (How) can the Assertibilist provide for the emergence of assertoric moves whose contents are objective, in the specific sense that they do not concern the situation of one who makes those moves – and in particular, those features of her situation bearing upon what moves are permitted or prohibited? The challenge is to explain how to do justice, in assertibilist terms, to the contrast between contents which are, and contents which are not, objective in this sense.

If the arguments we have presented thus far are good, they justify a degree of pessimism about the prospects of Brandom's attempts to meet these challenges. Our aim in what follows is to canvass the merits of the alternative approach briefly adumbrated in section 1, which remains within the assertibilist framework, but which tackles our two questions in the opposite direction to that followed by Brandom. On this approach, recall, we focus initially on the Truth question – what the Assertibilist needs to circumscribe is a property of contentful moves meeting two conditions: first, its possession by a move (or, perhaps better, by its content) entails that the move is in some sense a good or correct one; and second, a move's possessing or lacking the property is independent of its being warranted.

As Brandom observes, one fairly standard move made by those who've favoured this direction has been to attempt to characterise a suitable property in terms of

some sort of idealisation of ordinary warranted assertibility. What is true is to be identified with what would be assertible by a thinker operating under certain idealised conditions – full information, unblemished rationality in assessment of evidence, and so on. Brandom characterises the approach in these terms:

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

and rapidly dismisses it

> I'm not going to argue the point here, but my own view is that this sort of strategy is hopeless. If it is the best available, we should just give up the assertibilist project.[14]

In a note to this passage, he explains:

> My thought is that there is no way to specify the ideality in question that is not either question-begging (in implicitly appealing to a notion of truth) or trivial, in the light of the sensitivity of the practical effects of otherwise more ideal status for one belief both to the *falsity* of collateral beliefs and (even more damaging) to *ignorance* concerning them.[15]

We are inclined to agree that the particular type of proposal Brandom targets in these remarks – broadly, the conception of truth as consisting in assertibility under ideal conditions – faces serious, probably insurmountable difficulties. That it is usually irremediably unclear what would constitute the relevantly ideal circumstances; that the counterfactual, 'S would be assertible for an ideally situated judge', seems to call for a categorical ground which, one would suppose, should be the real concern of the philosopher interested in truth; and that paradoxes flow from applying truth, so construed, to assertions inconsistent with the antecedent of such counterfactuals[16] – are just three! But these seem not to afflict the quite different approach we are recommending, on which an assertibilist concept of truth is to be constructed, not by identifying truth with assertibility under *ideal* conditions, but in terms of the idea, roughly, of a content's being and remaining assertible under – informationally speaking – *ordinary* but *indefinitely improving* conditions. A little less roughly, the idea is a that a content is *superassertible* if and only if it is, or can be, warranted, and some warrant for it would survive arbitrarily close scrutiny of its pedigree and arbitrarily extensive increments to or other forms of improvement of our state of information.[17]

This characterisation is, of course, quite vague in important respects – in particular, further clarification of the key notions of 'state of information' and 'improvement' is certainly desirable, and may well be needed before we can profitably consider whether superassertibility really does avoid the difficulties besetting idealised assertibility. But – assuming that doubts on that score can be satisfactorily answered – we are already in position to see that the identification of truth with superassertibility provides a straightforward answer to the Truth question. For it is clear enough, first, that superassertibility is a property whose possession by a contentful move – or, perhaps better, by the move's content – marks the move out as, to that extent and in that respect at least, a good or correct one. Superassertibility is evidently something at which we do and should aim in our assertional practice, just as it should be if it is to constitute a notion of truth. But second, and crucially, while aiming at superassertibility is inseparable from aiming to make only warranted assertions, being superassertible and being warranted are clearly distinct and independent properties. Provided, as it is reasonable to assume, warrants for assertion may be defeasible, we may be warranted in asserting a content which is not superassertible, because no warrant for that content is without defeaters. And conversely, since superassertibility demands only that a content *can* be (stably) warranted, not that it actually is, a content may be superassertible but not warrantedly assertible in any particular (present) state of information. Thus being true (= superassertible) and being warranted are distinct norms – distinct ways for a contentful move to be correct, just as the Truth question requires.

Further, superassertibility seems to give us an equally straightforward and agreeably simple answer to the Objectivity question. For suppose truth is superassertibility. If, in a certain context c, it is assertible that p, then that this is so – i.e. that it is assertible in c that p – is itself *superassertible*. But that leaves it entirely open whether the content that p is *itself* superassertible. And conversely, it can perfectly well be that it is superassertible that p, without its being assertible in context c that p. Whether or not p is assertible is relative to and depends upon the context; whether or not p is superassertible does not. In short, precisely because p and 'it is assertible that p' have different superassertibility-conditions, hence different truth-conditions – context relative in the case of the latter, but not in the case of the former – they differ in content, and do so in just the manner required to answer the Objectivity question.

IV Brandom's doubts about superassertibility answered

Superassertibility, then, offers seemingly straightforward and promising answers to the two leading questions confronting any Assertibilist. Since those answers, in sharp contrast with any approach which seeks to identify truth with assertibility under ideal conditions, appeal only to arbitrary but ordinary improvements on ordinary conditions of assertion (and specifically, of our state of information), and make no play with the problematic notion of some kind of idealised conditions, one might naturally suppose that the superassertibilist approach can avoid the objections which

arguably sink idealised assertibility approaches. And since the contrast is obvious enough, one might then wonder what may have deterred Brandom from embracing it. The answer, of course, might simply be that he thought he had a better one – in terms of commitments and entitlements. But it seems that he does in fact take superassertibility to be vulnerable to essentially the same difficulty as he urges explicitly against idealised assertibility in the note from *Articulating Reasons* quoted above, and against so-called Success Semantics in 'Unsuccessful Semantics'. In each case – that of the identification of truth with superassertibility, that of identifying truth with idealised assertibility, and that of Success Semantics – the possibilities of *error* and *ignorance* play havoc, he thinks, with the proposed characterisation of the target notion. In the second, the characterisation of ideal conditions of assertion will give incorrect results if ideality is consistent with the assertor's holding relevant false beliefs, or being ignorant of relevant facts, but will be viciously circular if it explicitly excludes these possibilities. In the third, the attempt to characterise a belief's truth-condition as that condition which guarantees the success of any action motivated by that belief coupled with an appropriate desire misfires because failure may result from false collateral beliefs or relevant ignorance – and again, there appears to be no way to exclude these possibilities without begging the question. In the first, the same two possibilities cause trouble for the key notion in the characterisation of superassertibility – that of an *improvement* in our information state. We have, unfortunately, no explicit published statement of the difficulty in this case. But in some unpublished notes,[18] Brandom is quite explicit, even if somewhat tentative:

> The suspicions I express about ideal assertibility theories do extend to superassertibility. But they are *suspicions* – I haven't done the work necessary to claim an argument. My general worry concerns the way in which account is taken of the effect of a) false and b) missing collateral information on the (super)assertibility assessment of target claims. In this case the suspicions take the form of a dilemma. Either the 'improvements' of informational or epistemic situation under which assertibility is to be stable are so specified as to rule out the acquisition of *false* collateral information, or they are not. I doubt that the former condition can be achieved noncircularly (i.e. without appeal to a truth-like notion). And if one can acquire false collateral beliefs while generally improving one's epistemic situation – surely the general case – then one has no way of ensuring that these collateral falsehoods do not infirm the assertibility of the target claim. That is, in this case *nothing* will be stably assertible under epistemically improving circumstances. Even if this dilemma can be avoided for *false* collateral beliefs (error), I see no prospects for avoiding it for *missing* ones (ignorance). Yet the inferential effects of the latter are every bit as dire as those of the former.

The worry, apparently, is that the proposal to identify truth with superassertibility must get stuck on one or other of the horns of a dilemma – or more precisely, of a

pair of dilemmas, one concerning error, the other ignorance – turning on the key notion of improvement in information state. Either transitions to improved information states are so characterised that they may include acquiring false beliefs (or, we might add, losing true beliefs), or they are restricted so as to allow only acquisition of true beliefs (or jettisoning false ones). On the first alternative, – the thought appears to be – no warrant can be stable under arbitrary improvements of information state, since there will be, for any warrant, possible 'improvements' which involve acquiring false beliefs (or dropping true ones) which disrupt it. On the second, this pitfall is avoided, but – unless some way is found to enforce the required exclusions without explicitly deploying the notions of truth and falsehood – the proposed account of truth as superassertibility collapses in vicious circularity.

A similar – and if anything, worse – dilemma confronts us, Brandom suggests, over ignorance. We are less confident here about just how the dilemma is supposed to go. In general terms the thought is presumably to the effect that *either* we characterise improvements in such a way as to allow them to consist with ignorance of germane matters of fact, *or* we don't, with bad results either way. And it's reasonably clear that the evil which is supposed to result on the second alternative is some sort of vicious circularity. What is less clear – to us, anyway – is just how allowing improved information states to involve ignorance of relevant matters is supposed to cause trouble. However, we'll shelve that question for the present, since there are other reasons to doubt the effectiveness of the proposed dilemma(s) which are unaffected by the answer to it.

It is, first, just not clear that, even if it should prove necessary to deploy the notion of truth in explaining what constitutes an improved state of information, the resulting circularity must be vicious in the context of the project at hand. It would be so, of course, if the aim were to provide an *analysis* of the concept of truth in terms of superassertibility. What is not clear is that someone sympathetic to Brandom's general project has to take on that aim. The Truth question calls for an explanation how an assertibilist notion of content can be subject to contrasted norms of truth and warranted assertibility. That doesn't obviously call for any analysis of truth. What it does require, on the present proposal, is that we should be able to see how aiming for superassertibility can constitute a norm distinct from warranted assertibility, and so exercise a distinctive regulative influence on our assertoric practice. There is a clear distinction between criticism of an assertion as unwarranted when made, on the one hand, and criticism of it as shown to be incorrect by subsequent disruption, in an improved information state, of any warrant we may have had for it, on the other – and this distinction is not obviously undermined by the (supposed) impossibility of satisfactorily explaining what constitutes an improvement without appealing to the notion of truth. It is equally unclear that the superassertibilist answer to the Objectivity question is put in jeopardy by the circularity; the requisite contrast is made out in terms of two types of content having different superassertibility-conditions – the identification of those conditions as truth-conditions is inessential to the answer.

It may be, then, that the circularity horns of the proposed dilemmas are too blunt to do much damage, even if it should prove impossible to avoid appeal to the

notions of truth and falsehood in giving a satisfactory account of what constitutes an improvement of information state. But it seems to us that, even if that prospect should prove illusory, there are other defensive moves open to the superassertibilist. Let us focus, initially, on the dilemma turning on error. There seem to be at least two ways in which the damaging effects of allowing improvement to include acquisition of false beliefs can be avoided without inducing potentially vicious circularity.

In the case of the error version of the dilemma, the problem seems straightforward enough – either (a) we characterise improvement of information states in such a way that achieving an improved state can't involve acquiring some false beliefs, or (b) we don't (i.e. it is allowed that adding some false beliefs might form part of an overall improvement in information state). (a) is trouble – so the thought goes – because there is no way to bar such 'improvements' without using truth-words, and so lapsing into vicious circularity. (b) is trouble, because any warrant will be liable to disruption by suitable addition of false beliefs – that is, for any warrant for any proposition p, there will be some false proposition q such that belief that q would disrupt that warrant, and some overall improved information state including the belief that q – with the upshot that no warrant will be stable under *arbitrary* improvement of information states, and hence that no statement will be superassertible.

Well, even if, as urged on the first horn, one cannot non-circularly proscribe 'improvements' which include the addition of false beliefs, it is certainly not obvious that the second horn is effective. There could be no objection, on grounds of circularity or otherwise, to insisting that if an information state is to constitute an improvement on its predecessor, any new beliefs it incorporates, even if false, must be *warranted*. The point here is that while, for any given warrant for a content p that is a candidate for superassertibility, potentially disruptive augmentation of our information state by false but still warranted beliefs must remain a *possibility*, the chances of achieving such disruption diminish with successive improvements. For – or so we may reasonably presume, and so, certainly, Brandom has no right to assume *false* – enlargements of our stock of warranted beliefs will render it more and more difficult for additional false beliefs to be warranted. While disruption by false but warranted beliefs may postpone achievement of a stable warrant for any given content p, it is at best not clear – and at worst rather implausible – that every warrant must eventually succumb to such disruption unless false additions are proscribed.

Further, it is arguable in any case that 'improvements' involving false beliefs *can* be excluded without circularity. At least, provided that one is allowed propositional quantification (in effect, second-order quantification through zero-place predicate position), one might – at least to a first approximation – define a notion of improvement which avoids the difficulty on the (b) horn of the dilemma as follows:

$$\text{J improves on I} \quad \text{iff} \quad \exists p(p \in J \wedge p \notin I \wedge p) \wedge \neg \exists p(p \in J \wedge p \notin I \wedge \neg p) \wedge \forall p((p \in I \wedge p) \rightarrow p \in J)$$

This expresses the intuitive idea that one's information state improves when one acquires a piece of new knowledge (first clause), one doesn't acquire any new false

belief (second clause), and one doesn't lose any knowledge one previously possessed. And it does this without using any truth words.[19] To be sure, it might be complained that our definition is too narrow, since intuitively, an improvement might come about by jettisoning some false belief, rather than by acquiring a true one. But that could be handled by expanding the first conjunct above to:

$$\exists p((p \in J \wedge p \notin I \wedge p) \vee (p \in I \wedge p \notin J \wedge \neg p))$$

That is, one improves one's information state by either acquiring a new true belief, or by dropping a false one, provided that one doesn't acquire any new false belief or lose any true one.

As already remarked,[20] Brandom claims that even if the superassertibilist can somehow wriggle out of the dilemma turning on error (false beliefs), there is a matching dilemma turning on ignorance (missing beliefs) which is both unavoidable and at least as serious – 'the inferential effects of the latter [ignorance] are every bit as dire as those of the former [error]'. But while it is reasonably clear why and how false beliefs, if allowed to intrude in improved information states, might be supposed to threaten the disastrous consequence that no warrants can be stable under arbitrary improvements – although we have queried this – it is quite unclear why or how missing (true) beliefs are supposed to do so. Brandom is clearly right in thinking that relevant ignorance poses a serious, and possibly lethal, problem for Success Semantics – since an action motivated by a true belief and appropriate desire may just as easily fail to bear the desired fruit because its agent suffers material ignorance as it may be thwarted by her false collateral belief(s).[21] But how, exactly, is the possibility of material ignorance supposed to threaten the identification of truth with superassertibility? Brandom doesn't say. One might conjecture that his idea is that if improving one's information state is consistent with remaining in ignorance, the 'missing beliefs' could – for all one knows – disrupt any one of the warrants one has, or might acquire, for any given belief – with the upshot, as with interfering false beliefs, that nothing can be superassertible, since no warrant can be stable. The underlying thought would seem to (have to) be that while improvement in information state may always reduce ignorance, it never reduces it to zero – there is no such thing as achieving (or at least knowingly achieving) a complete information state, in which all truths are known.

We hesitate to attribute this line of argument to Brandom, since it seems so clearly addled. For one thing, if that were the alleged difficulty, Brandom's dilemma structure would, in the case of ignorance, be quite inept. For if there really were a difficulty here, it could not be avoided – even at the alleged cost of circularity – by recourse to truth-idioms. It is just a fact of cognitive life that ignorance doesn't get entirely eliminated – even if we somehow got to know everything *else*, we wouldn't, and couldn't, know that we had done so, so there would remain at least one fact of which we would be necessarily ignorant. So it would be a problem anyway, circularity or no.

But in fact it is not a problem – at least, not for the identification of truth with superassertibility. We should distinguish two claims:

(i)   ineradicable ignorance means that nothing is superassertible
(ii) ineradicable ignorance means that claims about what is superassertible are always defeasible.

Claim (i) is false – what the ever present fact (or at least presumption) of ignorance does mean is that any given warrant may turn out not to be stable ('may' is epistemic here); but that is consistent with there being warrants which are in fact stable – and that is all that superassertibility requires; claim (ii) is true but harmless – indeed, it is exactly what the proponent of superassertibility should expect and indeed desire.

It thus appears – to us, at least – that the supposed dilemma turning on ignorance is spurious, and that while it is reasonably clear how *mistaken*, as opposed to merely *missing*, beliefs may be thought to pose a serious problem for the superassertibilist approach to the Truth and Objectivity questions, there are effective replies to the dilemma turning on error. Our tentative conclusion is that the more straightforward treatment of those questions based on superassertibility remains the Assertibilist's best option. We look forward to learning Brandom's reasons for thinking otherwise.

Notes

1   Centrally, of course, the monumental *Making It Explicit* itself (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994a) together with the much briefer development of many of the same themes in *Articulating Reasons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
2   For light on the distinctively normative character of Brandom's pragmatism, and its relation to earlier thinkers – especially Wittgenstein – see Brandom (1994a), chs. 1 and 2 (especially pp. 21–3, 76, 101, 110, 123, 132, 137), ch. 5 (especially pp. 289, 296, 300, 322), and ch. 8 (591–2), and Brandom (2000), ch. 6.
3   Brandom (2000), p. 187.
4   Brandom (2000), ch. 6.
5   Brandom (2000), pp. 201–2.
6   Brandom confirms that this is his view in 'Notes for Reply to Crispin Wright's "Comments on Brandom's 'Objectivity and the Normative Fine Structure of Rationality'"'. These unpublished notes formed the basis of Brandom's reply to Wright's commentary at the Central Divisonal meeting of the APA at Pittsburgh in April 1997. We are grateful to Robert Brandom for his permission to refer to, and subsequently quote from a revised version dated the same year.
7   Brandom (2000), p. 187, with our interpolations.
8   For argument to this effect, see Wright (1992), ch.1. This is in effect an argument against deflationism about truth. But that is as it should be, since the Truth question only arises on a non-deflationary perspective. For a deflationist-assertibilist, there is, in effect, only the Objectivity question.
9   See Brandom (2000), pp. 190ff. In Brandom (1994a), a more complicated theory is defended – for a brief but very clear account of which, see Brandom (2000), p. 221, n. 7. But the complications have, so far as we can see, no impact on the issues under discussion here – hence our focus on the somewhat simplified presentation of Brandom's ideas in his later and shorter book.
10 Brandom says surprisingly little about how he would like the reader to interpret them.
11 Cf. Brandom (2000), p. 194: 'We can say that two assertible contents are *incompatible* in case *commitment* to one precludes *entitlement* to the other.'

12 If it weren't, that would be an independent, and lethal, objection – but in fact it is clear that Brandom's definition entails that incompatibility is symmetric. See n. 11.

13 Brandom (2000), p. 200.

14 Brandom (2000), pp. 187–8.

15 Ibid., p. 219, n. 3. Brandom develops the line of objection suggested here against one particular proposal in his earlier paper Brandom (1994b).

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

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

18 See n. 6.

19 It might be objected that propositional quantification somehow sneaks in the notion of truth by the back door, or is somehow equivalent to employing truth words. But (i) this is just implausible – propositional quantification is simply the limiting case of quantification into predicate position (the 0-place predicate case), and the claim that second-order quantification in general is equivalent to truth talk is surely wrong; anyway (ii) Brandom will hardly object to it on this ground, given the predilection he evinces for a version of the prosentential theory of truth in his 'Notes for Reply to Crispin Wright'.

20 See the last two sentences of our extended quotation above, from Brandom's notes. Much of Brandom (1994b) is devoted to arguing for a parallel claim about the damaging effects of ignorance on the success semantical proposal under fire there.

21 Thus in Brandom's delightful example, his lack of knowledge that wet weather has so swelled the cupboard door that it cannot be opened may thwart his efforts to obtain cookies, in spite of his true beliefs that there are cookies in the cupboard and that the cupboard is in the pantry, just as easily as could a true belief that there are cookies in the cupboard, combined with a false collateral belief that the cupboard is in the kitchen. See Brandom (1994b), p. 175.

References

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