

Meaning, Conduct and Cultures of Inquiry

Henrik Rydenfelt
University of Helsinki

Brandom vs. Peirce

- What are the real differences between Brandom's and Peirce's positions?
- Brandom appears to gradually come closer to Peirce's views (and not only Brandom)
- However, Brandom is critical of (what he takes to be) Peirce's view on *meaning*

Brandom's inferentialism

“The meaning conferred on an expression by its role in a language game can be identified with the pair of its circumstances of appropriate application, specifying when it is properly uttered, and its appropriate consequences of application, specifying what properly follows from its utterance.”

- Entitlement and commitment
- Entry moves and exit moves

Clear commonalities 1

Full claims (propositions, assertions) as starting point:

Brandom 2000: “Pragmatist semantic theories typically a top-down approach because they start from the *use* of concepts, and what one does with concepts is apply them in judgment and action”

Peirce 1907: “[T]he total meaning of the predication of an intellectual concept consists in affirming that, under all conceivable circumstances of a given kind, the subject of the predication would (or would not) behave in a certain way [...]”

Clear commonalities 2

Modal (including deontic) terms used to explicate “meaning”:

Brandom 2014: “As I would like to put the point, in knowing how to (being able to) use any ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary, each interlocutor already knows how to do everything she needs to know how to do in order to be able to deploy the modal locutions that register the subjunctive robustness of the inferences that determine the content of the descriptive concepts that vocabulary expresses.”

Peirce 1903: “Pragmatism is the principle that every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in the indicative mood is a confused form of thought whose only meaning, if it has any, lies in its tendency to enforce a corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional sentence having its apodosis in the imperative mood.”

Brandom's criticisms 1-2

1. One-sidedness:

“Empiricist, verificationist, reliabilist, and assertibilist semantic theories are defective because they ignore the consequences of application of expressions in favor of their circumstances of application. Pragmatist semantic theories are defective because they make the complementary mistake of ignoring the circumstances in favor of the consequences. In fact, both aspects are essential to meaning.”

2. Action-directedness:

“The second mistake the pragmatists make is to look only at the role of beliefs in justifying or producing actions. But their role in justifying or producing further beliefs is equally important in articulating their content, [...]”

Brandom's criticisms

3. Desire-blindness:

“[T]hey were ignoring the necessary third component in the equation: desires, preferences, goals, or norms [...] What actions beliefs rationalize or produce depends on what desires, aims, or pro-attitudes they are conjoined with.”

4. Success theory of truth:

“[T]hey equated the success of actions with the satisfaction of desires, and wanted to attribute to the beliefs that conduced to satisfaction and hence success a special desirable property: their successor notion to the classical concept of truth” (Brandom 2004, 12)

Clear mistakes

3. The notion that desires/aims would be lacking in the pragmatist picture (Peirce's conceivable circumstances!)
4. The notion of a success theory of truth (or of a "pragmatist theory of truth"!)!

And of course the idea of a pragmatist "semantic theory" in general...

But was pragmatism one-sided?

No. The issue of entitlement was not addressed in semantic-sounding terms. It was considered by all of the classical pragmatists under the label of *inquiry*.

Indeed, inquiry entails just the sort of linguistic doing Brandom thinks the pragmatists neglected (contra criticism 2)

Why the misconception?

- Success theory of truth
- The search for a semantic theoretical vocabulary

Brandom's problem

“[S]ince no two speakers share the same beliefs, they will inevitably be disposed to make, or treat as correct, different inferential transitions involving an expression. Hence, according to IRS [inferential role semantics], the same word in different mouths will possess a different meaning and be understood in different ways. It seems to follow that communication is impossible.” (Whiting 2008)

- Holism, no essential moves that define the meaning of a word
- Brandom appeals to *de re* ascriptions, but seems to assume what is to be explained, viz., successful communication

Common ground

- Enough shared beliefs (and desires) may alleviate concerns about communication
- But how much common ground can we assume?
- The problem most poignant in cases where our views about *entitlement* differ considerably
 - E.g. scientists vs. religious fundamentalists

Peirce to the rescue

- Peirce's pragmatism's "one-sidedness" may help
 - Pragmatist "meaning" shared as long as much of the conduct side is the same
 - Practices or cultures of inquiry may vary without our getting lost in translation

Recap

1. Much in common between Peirce and Brandom
2. Brandom's criticisms mostly mistaken
3. The most interesting criticism of one-sidedness based on neglecting the centrality of inquiry
4. A "one-sided" pragmatism might help in addressing Brandom's own problem with communication