

Inferentialism Goes to School

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Robert Brandom's *inferentialism* offers a "unified vision of language and mind," embracing the nature of concepts, thought, awareness, and understanding.¹ It is surely the most sophisticated of such theories that adopt a pragmatist stance, and philosophers of education have reason to take it seriously. Karim Dharamsi offers a welcome gesture in this direction in his "The Logic of Objectivity: Reflections on the Priority of Inference," but he provides little sense of the nature of the theory or how it might bear on learning and teaching. "Contextualism" and "objectivity," making and drawing, and inference in the *Meno* all feature prominently in Dharamsi's essay, but the connections between them, the connections between them and *inferentialism*, the forms of contextualism and objectivity in question, and the significance of *inferentialism* for educational theory are not clearly articulated.

Dharamsi makes what appears to be a bold claim about education in the essay's introduction. There is a tension between contextualism and objectivity, he says, and he will show that educational practices avoid it. In doing this, he will rely on *inferentialism*. "Educational practices are discursive and, as such, *inferential* and normative. Their rationality, and their objectivity, is secured by the logic of inference," he says. Showing that our educational practices are rational would be a fine achievement indeed.

What is the logic of inference? It is the logic we use when we, for example, see that affirming the antecedent of a conditional statement implies the consequent of that statement. I see the roads are slippery, believe that *if* the roads are slippery *then* I should drive carefully, and grasp or *infer* that I should drive carefully. Good inference preserves truth, and when logicians define *systems* of logic they assume a prior notion of truth and rely on techniques of proof to establish that the inferences licensed by those systems are indeed truth preserving.

What is distinctive in Brandom's approach is that he begins from the idea that making good inferences is something we *do*, and takes the distinction between good and bad inferences to be more basic than the notion of truth:

Rationalist or inferentialist pragmatism reverses the order of explanation...It starts with a practical distinction between good and bad inferences, understood as a distinction between appropriate and inappropriate *doings*, and goes on to understand talk about truth as talk about what is preserved by the good moves.²

This is part of a larger strategy of semantic explanation. Brandom regards inferential doings as fundamental to being a sentient — or thinking, concept-using, and language-using — creature, and he regards practices of giving and asking for reasons as "conferring conceptual content on performances, expressions, and states suitably caught up in those practices." The basic idea is that

Saying or thinking *that* things are thus-and-so is undertaking a distinctive kind of *inferentially* articulated commitment: putting it forward as a fit premise for further inferences, that is, *authorizing* its use as such a premise, and undertaking *responsibility* to entitle oneself to

that commitment...Grasping the *concept* that is applied in such a making explicit is mastering its *inferential* use: knowing (in the practical sense of being able to distinguish, a kind of knowing *how*) what else one would be committing oneself to in applying the concept, what would entitle one to do so, and what would preclude such entitlement.³

The obvious and historically dominant alternative to assigning a fundamental semantic role to inference in this way is to assign a fundamental role to *representation*; awareness, concepts, semantic content, and the understanding or grasping of such content have usually been understood in terms of representations.

This all too brief introduction to Brandom's theory will have to suffice as a basis for assessing Dharamsi's assertion that "Educational practices are discursive and, as such, *inferential*," rational, and objective. It is trivially true that educational practices are discursive — they involve language, thought, and the use of concepts — and to say they are inferential *because discursive* is just to agree with Brandom that language, thought, and the use of concepts fundamentally involve inferential activity. This implies that educational practices are rational in the *minimal* sense in which the very possibility of thought rests on our being creatures who are in some sense and to some degree rational, but it does not imply that educational practices are rational without qualification — rational in the sense of *justifiable* on the evidence and defensible values — or that they escape a tension between "contextualism" and "objectivity."

Dharamsi is not explicit about what he means by "contextualism," except that it entails "situational standards" for knowledge, the denial of a Platonist theory of eternal, unchanging ideas, and apparently the incommensurability of concepts belonging to different social contexts. He implies that *inferentialism* entails a non-Platonic form of objectivity or stability of concepts *across social contexts*, and in that way provides an attractive middle way between contextualism and Platonism. One of Brandom's central aims is to show that his approach to constructing semantic content from the way terms are used in a linguistic community preserves the genuineness or objectivity of the norms governing the "propriety of particular applications of concepts," such that "it is possible not only for individuals but for the whole community to be mistaken in its assessments."⁴ However, the objectivity of conceptual norms *within a linguistic community* does not entail the *stability* or *commensurability* of concepts across linguistic communities that the central idea of Dharamsi's paper seems to hinge on. On the other hand, he offers no reason to take contextualism seriously, and it is implausible to suppose that human linguistic communities are not just partially incommensurable but completely and radically incommensurable. There are enough common *points of reference*, common *human interests*, or common *practices* (take your pick) across temporally and spatially distant human linguistic communities for us to track continuities and discontinuities in the use of concepts well enough for most purposes — sometimes only through great intellectual labor, of course.

When we get to the heart of Dharamsi's essay, we find him arguing that *inferentialism* "has its first formulation in Plato" and that the "priority of inference" (the priority of inference *over reference*, according to Brandom) is "the discursive core of all educational practice" that makes it possible for us to understand the slave

boy's geometrical learning in the *Meno*. I have explained why the priority of inference over reference *per se* would not enable us to understand learning in the *Meno* if we did not have much more in common with Plato's world than a shared logic of inference. Regarding the suggestion that Plato has or anticipates an inferentialist theory of semantic content, I see no support for this in the text of the *Meno* or anywhere else in the Platonic corpus.

In the *Meno*, the boy can only do geometry because he possesses the ability to reason and feel the force of reasons, Dharamsi says, and "he is able to reason out explanatory content that is neither from the world, *per se*, nor entirely from his social context." Where the content comes from is not the determinative consideration, however, but rather whether the content is at root representational or instead inferential, and nothing in the dialogue suggests that Plato regards semantic contents as reducible to inferential roles. The first question Socrates puts to the boy is, "Tell me now, boy, you know that a square figure is like this?"⁵ The word "this" signifies an act of *ostention*, of directing the boy's attention to a drawn figure of a square, and this serves to anchor what they are talking about, as do subsequent references to further features of the figure as those are added. What they are talking and thinking about is first of all a figure they are both looking at. Socrates then asks the boy to verify his familiarity with the *definition* of a square: "A square then is a figure in which all these four sides are equal?"⁶ The boy's affirmation of this definition assures Socrates that they are talking and thinking *not only* about the figure of a square before them, but about squares in general. Ostention and the specification of defining conditions are reference-fixing devices quite compatible with the *representational* or *designational* account of awareness, understanding, and semantic content that Brandom rejects and Plato clearly endorsed.

A serious investigation of Plato's thoughts about semantic content would focus on the *Cratylus*, his dialogue on language. It offers no hint of an impulse to move beyond representationalism and points firmly toward an account of names or individual words as signifying objects by description or vocal imitation. Each component sound in a word is understood to carry a descriptive or imitative content, much as the visual elements of a picture might, and the point of a word is to accurately imitate or identify the nature of its object. The measure of accuracy of whether a thing has been *correctly named* is provided by the Forms.

Inferentialism is a theory of comparatively recent vintage, and it will require more than a little effort to articulate any lessons for education it may hold.

1. Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), xxiii.

2. Robert B. Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 12.

3. *Ibid.*, 11.

4. Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, 54, 180n, and 599n. See also Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 185n.

5. Plato, *Meno*, in *Plato: Meno*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 82b.

6. *Ibid.*