

“Hegel’s weakly inferentialist, pluralist logic”

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Synopsis: With his “inferentialist” approach to semantics, Robert Brandom has shed light on one dimension of Hegel’s strangely sounding claim that the syllogism is the “truth” of the judgment: we cannot have a conception of what is actually said in a judgment without understanding its relations to other judgments in patterns of inference. In this paper I argue that on examination Hegel’s inferentialism is weaker than Brandom’s own, in that for Hegel inferential relations are necessary but not sufficient for a judgment to have content. This in turn, I suggest, is linked to the *pluralist* nature of his logic—that is, that Hegel employs two distinct senses of logical consequence. Finally, I suggest an alternative way of thinking of the dynamics of Hegel’s logic by weakening what Brandom discusses in terms of the notion of doxastic commitment to the attitude of presupposition.

1. Introduction

Prior to Robert Brandom, few recent philosophers have attempted to make sense of, let alone defend, Hegel’s claim that the syllogism is the “truth” of the judgment. From the perspective of his own inferentialist semantics,¹ Brandom’s daring rehabilitation of Hegel as a significant presence within the logico-metaphysical core of contemporary philosophy has involved a retelling of the history of modern philosophy such that rationalists and idealists have been given star billing. Against the empiricists, the rationalists argued for the *necessary* contribution of inferential reasoning in determining the semantic contents of our intentional states. More than that, they *defined* “representational properties in terms of inferential ones”, and took “truth and representation as features of ideas that ... *consist* in their role in reasoning”.² To define or explain “representational” or semantic properties by the role they play in inferential reasoning is, I take it, a mark of the *strong* semantic inferentialism that Brandom endorses—the willingness to take inferential relations among sentences as not only necessary but also as *sufficient* for their meaningfulness. But traditional rationalism, of course, was bound to the sorts of metaphysical assumptions with which few contemporary philosophers would be happy. What *idealism* later added to the mix was Kant’s recasting of mental talk in normative

¹ As presented most fully in Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

² Robert B. Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 47, emphasis added.

rather than ontological terms. Hegel's contribution here was to refine this normativist framework by shifting attention to social practices and insisting that "normative statuses such as authority and responsibility are at base *social* statuses".³ While in rationalism inferential properties *explained* semantic ones, in Hegel, this inferentialist semantics could in turn be founded upon a normative *pragmatics* of language use.

Of course this is not how the history of modern philosophy has been typically seen from within analytic philosophy. At the time of the founding of analysis, with the exception of Leibniz's logical advances, analytic practitioners had been willing to acknowledge little if anything from the rationalist-idealist tradition. But once analytic philosophy became established, in Brandom's telling, a dialectic similar to the earlier rationalist-idealist one has been played out. Thus Quine, in his critique of Carnap, had reasserted the intertwining of the semantic and epistemic dimensions of thought,⁴ while from another flank, Sellars attacked the "Myth of the Given" characteristic of early analytic thought and traditional empiricism. In fact, something like Hegel's strong semantic inferentialism could be seen lying dormant in the approach of the godfather of analysis, Gottlob Frege, who had defined the semantics of *logical* terms by their inferential role. When the empiricist appeals to givenness subsequently came under strain, Frege's inferentialism could be extended to the meaning of the entire semantic content of sentences. Finally, this came to be enframed within a quasi-Hegel-styled approach to the pragmatics of language games by the mid-twentieth century with key figures such as the later Wittgenstein.

I find Brandom's story a compelling one. Nevertheless, I want to argue *against* the thesis that Hegel can be considered as a strong semantic inferentialist and propose that he be seen as a weak one, for whom inferential relations are necessary but not sufficient for semantic content, and this suggests a different picture of the development of idealism from Leibniz through Kant to Hegel. On Brandom's account of this historical dialectic, Kant's main role was to de-ontologize mental talk, but despite his opposition, to leave rationalism's strong inferentialism untouched. Kant had, of course, invoked the concept-intuition distinction to criticize Leibniz, striking at his strong inferentialism, and one might think that for Hegel, Kant's dichotomy of concepts and intuitions had gone the way of all dichotomies, with strong inferentialism thus *saved*. However this, I suggest, misrepresents Hegel's relation to Leibniz and Kant. While it is true that Hegel like the other post-Kantian idealists rejected this dichotomy of representational types, he nevertheless, I will argue, replaced it by a distinction that was meant to function in an analogous but more flexible way. While Kant had assigned to *intuitions* the function of a source of

³ Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 66.

⁴ Robert B. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

empirical content, Hegel assigned this function to a particular *type of judgment*. For Hegel, perceptual judgments were to be understood as having a logical form *distinct* from the form that allowed judgments to be integrated into greater inferential totalities, committing Hegel to a variety of *logical pluralism*.

It is this pluralistic reading of Hegel's logic that I'll be arguing for in the first half of this paper. This pluralism, while committing Hegel to a critique of the idea that representational properties cannot be understood in isolation from the inferential processes of reasoning within which they function, nevertheless also makes him critical of the inverse idea that representational properties can be, in rationalist style, entirely *defined* or *explained* in terms of inferential ones. For the most part, I won't attempt to defend weak inferentialism against Brandom's strong inferentialism, although I think a defense is here possible. In the second half of the paper, I will look to ways that Brandom's pragmatics itself *might* be weakened, were one *to want* to accommodate this weakening of semantic inferentialism along the lines that I ascribe to Hegel.

2 Hegel's Logical Pluralism

In the article, "Logical Pluralism", J. C. Beall and Greg Restall⁵ attempt to explain the proliferation of various so-called "logics" in contemporary logic by appealing to an underlying binary pluralism based on a difference between a "pretheoretical (or intuitive)" and a more reflective *truth conditional* understanding of the nature of consequence.⁶ Beall and Restall link this distinction to one between *situations* and *complete worlds* as semantic domains relevant to these different logics. Importantly, they point to the different treatments of negation in each. "Situations", they point out, "'make' claims true and they 'make' others false. However, some situations, by virtue of being *restricted* parts of the world, may leave some claims undetermined... It follows that the classical account of negation fails *for situations*".⁷

My suggestion is that a broadly similar dualism of conceptions of inference underpinned by local and global conceptions of the semantic domains of the judgments involved can be found in Hegel's "Subjective Logic" in Book III of the *Science of Logic*.⁸ The initial source of this dual conception of inference is to be found in different conceptions of predication—predication as *inherence* of the predicate in

⁵ J. C. Beall and Greg Restall, "Logical Pluralism", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 78, 4 (2000), pp. 475–492.

⁶ The authors here refer to the "menagerie of non-classical logics, such as relevant logics, intuitionistic logic, paraconsistent logics or quantum logics". *Ibid.*, p. 475.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 482.

⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, translated and edited by George di Giovanni, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

the subject and predication as *subsumption* of the subject under the predicate. While Hegel seems to take this from Aristotle's "is in" and "is said of" conceptions of predication in the *Categories*,⁹ the idea of subsumption is later transformed into a conception of what I'll call "super-subsumption" that Hegel finds at the heart of Leibniz's attempt to convert Aristotle's syllogistic into a type of calculus of concepts. The distinction between the first conception of predication as *inherence* and the final as *super-subsumption*, I'll suggest, maps quite smoothly onto that between judgments made true by situations and those made true by "the world".

In the *Science of Logic* this distinction between predication as inherence and as subsumption makes its first explicit appearance in Hegel's discussion of *judgment* where he separates "judgments of determinate existence [*Dasein*]" and "judgments of reflection".¹⁰ Judgments of *Dasein*, he tells us, have a logical structure such that "the universal [predicate] is [like the subject itself] singular". An example of this type of judgment he gives as "the rose is fragrant", which, I suggest, we are clearly meant to think of as a perceptually based judgment in which the predicate "fragrant" is meant to refer to the *particular phenomenologically distinct fragrance* that is perceived as "in" that particular existent—here, the particular rose *smelt*.¹¹ An important feature of such judgments of *Dasein* becomes explicit in Hegel's discussion of their *negative* form. Just as in this judgment the predicate, in its *singularity*, takes on features (the singularity) of the perceived *subject*, so too does the subject term take on features of *universality* of the predicate—its typical subject term is thus a singular instance of a genus, as in "the rose" or, as Hegel sometimes suggests, using the demonstrative,

⁹ "Of things that are: (a) some are *said of* a subject but are not *in* any subject. ... (b) Some are *in* a subject but are not *said of* any subject. ... Some are both *said of* a subject and *in* a subject. ... (d) Some are neither *in* a subject nor *said of* a subject." Aristotle, "Categories", in *Categories and De Interpretatione*, translated with Notes and Glossary by J. L. Ackrill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), Ch 2. For a clear account of Aristotle's distinction see Gareth B Matthews, "Aristotelian Categories" in Georgios Anagnostopoulos (ed.), *A Companion To Aristotle* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) and Allan T. Bäck *Aristotle's Theory of Predication* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), ch. 6.

¹⁰ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, pp. 557–68 and 568–75. I have given a fuller account of Hegel's treatment of judgment and syllogism along these lines in "The Role of Logic 'Commonly So Called' in Hegel's *Science of Logic*", *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 22, 2 (2014), pp. 281–301).

¹¹ In terms of contemporary analytic metaphysics, Hegel seems to have in mind here the type of "abstract particulars" or "property instances" often discussed as "tropes". Garreth Matthews ("Aristotelian Categories") argues for this interpretation of Aristotle's idea of a "primary property" that is "in" a substance and gives the history of interpretative debates over this matter.

“this rose”.¹² While the demonstrative brings out the specificity of the rose referred to, we might use Donnellan’s well-known account of definite descriptions used *referentially* rather than *attributively* to capture the sense of the phrase “the rose” as used here.¹³ We might also say that is used to express a contextually specific “*de re*” intentional attitude typical of perception. But a judgment of *Dasein qua* contextually specific *de re* perceptual attitude might also be thought of as a “*de se*” or “self-locating” one.¹⁴ It reveals to the subject something of *where* that subject is in the world—to be a perceiver is to be in the *presence* of—to be in roughly the same spatio-temporal situation as—that which is perceived. Such a determination of the subject of a judgment of *Dasein* broadly coincides, I suggest, with the object of perception [*Wahrnehmen*] as discussed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, chapter 2.¹⁵

As “self-locating”, judgments of *determinate* existence (judgments of *Dasein*) are contextually or situationally limited judgments in the sense indicated by Beall and Restall: they are judgments made true or false by features of the situation—specifically, features of the co-situated object perceived—in which they are made. Crucially, they should not be thought of as what are *now* considered “existential judgments”, judgments that are existentially quantified, and so made true or false by “the world”. Aristotle clearly seems to have had something like an Hegelian judgment of *Dasein* in mind when he declared in *The Categories* that a judgment made about a

¹² This is a treatment of perceptible objects that we have seen in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in the characterization of the object of “perception” as a “*this such*” in contrast to a “bare *this*”. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), ch 1.

¹³ Keith Donnellan, “Reference and Definite Descriptions”, *Philosophical Review* 75 (3), pp. 281-304. To say this is not, I suggest, to anachronistically read a recent distinction back onto Hegel. The logic textbook used by Hegel as a student at Tübingen, written by Gottfried Ploucquet, one of the leading logical theorists of the second half of the eighteenth century, effectively makes the same distinction when distinguishing “exclusive” from “comprehensive” readings of the indefinite article. See Gottfried Ploucquet, *Logik* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2006), §§12–16. On Ploucquet’s use of the distinction, see also Karl Aner, *Gottfried Ploucquets Leben und Lehren* (Halle: Verlag. von Max Niemeyer, 1909; republished, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1999), pp. 19–21.

¹⁴ An analysis between the phenomenal features of perceptual experience in terms of the idea of self-locating beliefs has been explored in relation to Frank Jackson’s “Mary” example has been pursued within analytic philosophy by a number of theorists, especially John Perry. See the especially helpful account given here by Robert Stalnaker in *Our Knowledge of the the Internal World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), chs. 2, 3 and 4.

¹⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), Ch 2.

possible future event (the judgment made *today* about a sea battle possibly occurring *tomorrow*) could be *neither* true nor false when made. In short, there are no features of the temporal situation within which the judgment was made that *could* make the judgment true or false. By requiring that the act of judging post-date the “*re*”—in this case the event—judged, Aristotle makes the judgment reliant on the possibility of a situationally specific perceptual judgment in which the occurrence of the event could affect the content of that judgment.

Things are very different with Hegel’s judgments of *reflection*. In these subsumptive judgment, the property predicated of the subject is a universal in the standardly abstract sense. Here “fragrant” is an “essential universal” that can be equally *said of* a variety of different flowers and that therefore *cannot* be identified with any phenomenologically *particular* fragrance. Here, “fragrant” presumably means something more like a disposition to produce certain phenomenological experiences in non-specified times and places, and, as such, should perhaps be thought of more in terms of the posited “forces” that explain the fluctuation of appearance as explored by Hegel in Chapter 3 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “Forces and the Understanding”.¹⁶ In keeping with this, the subject term of this standardly *de dicto* reflective judgment will be determined as a “singularity as such” rather than a perceivable particular instance of a kind—some particular “*re*”. It is the indeterminate nature of the subject to which this essentially universal predicate can be applied that allows such judgments to be *quantified*, as in “all flowers are fragrant” or “some flowers are fragrant”. As such, these judgments will *not* have the specifically “self-locating” features of the contextually specific *de re* judgment. The making of the *de dicto* judgment of reflection does not demand that the judge occupies any *particular* region of time and space. Ultimately, it will be seen that the form of predication involved in this judgment is an instance of “super-subsumption”, although this does not become explicit until Hegel’s account of *inference*.

The distinction between predication as inherence and predication as subsumption in Hegel’s account, while most explicit in these early two forms of judgment, does not end there. As in conformity with his principle of “*Aufheben*”, we find that aspects of the *de re* form of judgment that had been superseded by the *de dicto* reflective judgment, return when the superseding *de dicto* form is itself superseded. For example, the final form of the subsumptive, *de dicto* judgment of reflection is the universal judgment “all Ss are P”—a judgment in which the universality involved is simply that of a “commonality (*zusammenfassen*) of self-subsisting singulars” that has come about “by way of comparison”. In contrast, the first form of the following *judgment of necessity*, the “categorical judgment”, is

¹⁶ See my “Hegel’s Anticipation of the Early History of Analytic Philosophy”, *The Owl of Minerva: Journal of the Hegel Society of North America*, vol. 42:1–2 (2010–11), pp. 18–40.

universal in a *different* sense. It is, in effect, a judgment *about* a universal—a *secondary substance* or *natural kind*. Therefore, now, the subject term designates the *essential nature* of something—that which makes the thing *what it is*.¹⁷ With this, the *concrete* character of the subject term of the earlier superseded judgment of *Dasein* has returned, but now in combination with the universality of the reflective judgment, which is *itself* being superseded. The new subject is thus a *concrete universal*, Hegel's examples including judgments about natural kinds, such as judgments about “the rose as such”.

This alternation between predication as inherence and predication as subsumption is not restricted to the realm of judgment, but also runs through Hegel's treatment of logical consequence. Both the “in a subject” and “said of a subject” conceptions of predication can be thought of as transitive, and this can be exploited to capture the nature of consequence.¹⁸ As Hegel portrays him, Aristotle had conceived the syllogistic relation in terms of the particular transitivity of the *inherence* or containment relation,¹⁹ but the transitivity of such relations is found in only certain syllogisms, importantly in those “perfect” syllogisms in the first-figure, such as *Barbara*.²⁰ In such cases, the consequence relation is immediately apparent, but in Aristotle's second and third figures it is no longer the case that the “middle term” transmits the inherence relation by playing the role of subject in one premise and

¹⁷ Elsewhere Hegel shows a clear awareness of the logical assumptions that distinguish Aristotle's philosophy from the philosophy of the Stoics, with the form of Aristotelian judgments as expressing *de re* attitudes and Stoic *de dicto* ones. In contrast to the Aristotelian-styled judgments of existence, the Stoic-styled reflective judgments are *de dicto*, but with the transition from judgments of reflection to judgments of necessity we see a return of the *de re* form. See my “Hegel, Aristotle and the Conception of Free Agency”, in Gunnar Hindrichs and Axel Honneth eds, *Freiheit: Stuttgarter Hegelkongress 2011* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2013), pp. 389–404.

¹⁸ Günter Patzig, *Aristotle's Theory of the Syllogism: A logico-philological study of book A of the Prior Analytics*, trans. Jonathan Barnes (Dordrecht: reidel, 1968), pp. 7–50.

¹⁹ “When three terms are so related to each other that the one extreme is in the entire middle term, and this middle term is in the entire other extreme, then these two extremes are necessarily united in the conclusion. What is here expressed is the repetition of the equal relation of inherence of the one extreme to the middle term, and then again of this last to the other extreme” (Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 591; W, 6.356)

²⁰ “I call that a perfect syllogism which needs nothing other than what has been stated to make plain what necessarily follows; a syllogism is imperfect, if it needs either one or more propositions, which are indeed the necessary consequences of the terms set down, but have not been expressly stated as premisses.” Aristotle, *Prior Analytics*, Book 1, Part 1.

predicate in the other, and so the consequence relation is no longer intuitively apparent. Thus the “imperfect” syllogisms in these figures require proofs, which for Aristotle are to be effected by the application of various ‘conversion’ rules that convert sentences expressing the judgments into the structures required by the perfect forms by, for example, reversing subject and predicate terms as when All As are B is transformed into Some Bs are A. For Hegel this need for conversion rules indicates the flawed nature of Aristotle’s privileged conception of consequence. The imperfect syllogisms in the second and third figures demonstrate their “lack of conformity to the general form of the syllogism” that was on view in the perfect syllogisms of the first, thus showing that the “truth” of the general form to have been that of “a subjective, contingent conjoining of terms”.²¹ Clearly, Hegel is far from affirming the adequacy of Aristotle’s syllogistic.

In fact, what we witness in Hegel’s discussion of the syllogism through the various syllogistic figures of first syllogistic type, the *syllogism of Dasein*, is the gradual replacement of the transitivity principles appropriate for Aristotle’s logic by more general principles that *can* accommodate the inferences represented by the conversion rules themselves. In short, a weaker idea of logical consequence, keyed to the preservation of appropriate relations among the judgments’ *unchanging* truth values comes to replace a more intuitive conception of consequence found in Aristotle’s purportedly “perfect” syllogisms. This process comes to completion in the so-called “fourth figure” or “mathematical” syllogism that Hegel identifies with the logic of Leibniz and the Tübingen logician—effectively Hegel’s own logic teacher—Gottfried Ploucquet. Hegel describes the conception of predication operating in this syllogism with the principle, “if two things or two determinations are equal to a third, then they are equal to each other. ... A ‘third’ is in general the mediating term; but this third has absolutely no determination as against the extremes”.²² Hegel is clearly aware that this depends on a conception of predication that goes beyond the alternative of “is in” and “said of”. This new conception of predication—predication as super-subsumption—had been provided by Leibniz who, in places, had reinterpreted the subject term of a judgment *as* a predicate that, along with the original predicate, subsumed some “common third”. This third, of which both subject and predicate *predicates* are “said”, is a substance no longer explicitly named in the surface structure of the judgment at all. It is a mere *posit*—an “object” conceived as the indeterminate universal subject of reflective judgments that thereby lacks all determination because it is not an object experienced. Now the terms within the surface structure of a syllogism are thus construed as *abstract universals* that can be related to each other only in virtue of the fact that they are understood as being satisfied by “quantitative” posited entities. For Hegel, this *predification* of subject terms has effectively eliminated the source for the provision of empirical content for

²¹ Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 599, W, 6.367.

²² Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 602, W, 6.371.

judgments, the function that had been the task of the concrete and determinate subject terms of judgments of *Dasein*.

As Hegel realizes, the new logically powerful conception of predication used by Leibniz had done away with the idea of the transitivity modeled on either that of inherence *or* subsumption, such that the new middle term of the mathematical syllogism can no longer mediate the inference according to the patterns of either inherence or subsumption. What results is a conception of inference as a proof in an axiomatic system, the axioms of which rather than being self-evident truths, are simply formal, abstracting “from every qualitative diversity of determinations and admit(ing) their quantitative equality or inequality” only. Moreover, the components of the mathematical syllogism are, for Hegel, no longer judgments at all, but merely “propositions” (*Sätze*), by which Hegel means something like external associations between pairs of meaningless singular terms and other *naturally* associated pairs of spatio-temporal particulars. With this, thought, the most *spiritual* of spiritual activities—thinking—has been reduced to a quasi-natural mechanical process, as indeed had been envisaged by Leibniz and Ploucquet. This is a process in which consciousness or the relations of conceptuality as Hegel understands have ceased to play any role at all.

This *mathematical syllogism* has brought the series of figures making up the *sylogism of Dasein* to completion, making explicit the conceptual determinations involved, but generally not explicitly, in all judgments—universal, particular, and singular. The series also shows the interweaving through history of the approaches of Aristotelian term logic, Stoic propositional logic, and, finally, Leibniz’s version of a concept calculus that emerges from propositional logic. *Qua terminus* of this development, this last, mathematical form of logic has brought logic itself to the point of collapse—the death of thought itself—but what this signals, I suggest, is the catastrophe that is seen as resulting from the attempted *reduction* of the diverse logical forms to one form—the Leibnizian—regarded as the hidden *telos* of the Aristotelian approach from which the discipline of logic had commenced. For Hegel, the appropriate response is neither despair nor the retreat to the Aristotelian verities, but rather the *negation* of this negation of the Aristotelian starting point, and hence the re-emergence of syllogistic thought *in a new form*. Hence, from this point we now follow the syllogism through its succeeding forms of the *sylogisms* of “reflection” and “necessity” that unpack the inferential relations that were implicit in the earlier corresponding *judgment* forms. In the final syllogism—the syllogism of necessity—the syllogism shows *itself* to be a concrete universal, effectively a collective social process of syllogizing. Here I won’t try to follow Hegel into this difficult territory, but rather will simply stay with the idea of the *irreducibility* of the particular forms that constitute Hegel’s logical “pluralism” and that underlie these developments of judgment and syllogism. In particular, I’ll focus on his insistence on the retention of a

place for the traditional S is P form of judgment in a reconstituted *science* of logic that has passed through the crucible of Leibniz's logical modernism.

Such a picture will still for the most part put Hegel at odds with mainstream thought in analytic philosophy during most of its first century, which, with a few exceptions, has been happy to abandon the old logic in the rush to embrace the new—the mathematizable conception of logic foreshadowed by Leibniz that finally came to replace the traditional syllogistic at the end of the 19th century.²³ And despite Brandom's divergences from the analytic mainstream on many issues, it is his commitment to strong inferentialism, I suggest, that similarly puts him at odds with Hegel's pluralism. For Brandom as for Frege, it is the sentence or proposition that is the minimal semantic unit, and we are to understand the role of subsentential elements in terms the relevance they have to that sentences inferential potential—a move that represents the triumph of the Stoics over the Aristotelians, rather than some *Aufhebung* of both. But, as we have seen with the allusion to “self-locating” judgments certain developments in analytic philosophy since the last quarter of the 20th century have, contra Brandom, challenged the *univocal de dicto* interpretation of judgment form, and have given rise to the recent *pluralist* position in logic. In the final section I want to explore ways in which an interpreter sympathetic to this pluralistic aspect of Hegel's logic might want to supplement Brandom's *pragmatics* so to preserve this dimension of Hegel's logical thought and preserve something of the idea of a non-inferential source of semantic content.

3. *Default entitlement and conservative presupposition updating assertions*

I have so far stressed Brandom's own “strong” inferentialism, but want to start with the suggestion that there are nevertheless elements of Brandom's *pragmatics* that pull against, or at least complicate, the strong inferentialism of his semantics. One such notion is that of a speaker's has “default entitlement” to her claims. Perhaps also the “spirit of trust” theme present in Brandom's writings on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* might be read as suggesting this complication. Here, however, I will concentrate on the former idea.

At the level of pragmatics, strong semantic inferentialism is correlated with the Sellarsian idea that to *assert* is to place a sentence in the “space of reasons”. When one makes an assertion to an interlocutor, one is permitting her to build it into the store of beliefs on which she act, but to preserve the self-correcting character of this form of language use, an interlocutor needs to be able to question that the asserter is *entitled* to the content of their assertion, and not *simply* committed to it. The act of assertion must thus be understood as undertaking to offer reasons for the claim,

²³ Those holding out against this tendency include Peter Strawson and Fred Sommers.

should these be requested. It is in *this* sense that the assertion stands in a set of potential inferential relations to other assertions that could be offered as the grounds for the first. These are the paths of retrospective conferral of semantic content as conceived by the strong semantic inferentialist.

Brandom, of course, recognizes that reasons cannot be demanded for *every* assertion.²⁴ Surely the question of “entitlement” can also be raised in relation to the interlocutor who *demand*s reasons for an asserter’s initial claim: one should *have* a reason *to* demand reasons. Brandom’s response is that in this potential clash of challenges to entitlement, default entitlement should be seen as belonging to the original asserter. This constitutes what he calls the “default and challenge” structure of the game of giving and asking for reasons.²⁵ But one might now ask whether the spirit of default entitlement sits comfortably with the spirit of strong inferentialism. Strong inferentialism focuses on the statement’s position within the space of *potential* inferences that are triggered by challenges, but the “default and challenge” principle tells us that for the most part assertions will not, *and should not*, spark the type of challenge that leads to the giving of reasons. We might ask, then: is it *actual* or *potential* inferential relations that should be seen as doing the semantic work of determining the original claim’s empirical content? The thesis of strong inferentialism seems to suggest the latter, but I want to explore possible ways of thinking about a pragmatics that might answer in terms of the contribution of the *former*.

Consider the approach to the pragmatics of language games that focuses on the context within which linguistic interaction takes place, interpreted in terms of the notion of “common ground”.²⁶ On this approach, introduced by Paul Grice and

²⁴ Brandom’s response, in the spirit of Hegel, is to bring into question the *doubter’s* entitlement to their doubt.

²⁵ “Claims such as ‘There have been black dogs’ and ‘I have ten fingers’ are ones to which interlocutors are treated as *prima facie* entitled. They are not immune to doubt in the form of questions about entitlement, but such questions themselves stand in need of some sort of warrant or justification. Entitlement is, to begin with, a social status that a performance or commitment has within a community. Practices in which that status is attributed only upon actual vindication of appeal to inheritance from other commitments are simply unworkable, nothing recognizable as a game of giving and asking for reasons results if justifications are not permitted to come to an end.” Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, p. 177.

²⁶ While Stalnaker’s approach to context has links to those of Kaplan and David Lewis, he treats the features of context relevant to issues of meaning as entirely internal to the intentional structure of the discursive agents involved rather than simply objective features of the world. See, Robert Stalnaker, *Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chs 1 & 2.

developed by Robert Stalnaker,²⁷ acts of asserting are thought to take place within a context of presuppositions shared between the interlocutors, the “common ground”.²⁸ Each act of assertion will both presuppose the presuppositions in the common ground and aim to modify the constituents of that ground. It is the *iterative structure* of the presuppositions of the common ground that will here be significant for us.

Starting from the iterative features of knowledge and belief found in Hintikka’s earlier treatment of epistemic logic, Stalnaker applies this idea of iteration to the common beliefs of the common ground:²⁹ for interlocutors A and B, some proposition *p* will belong to the common ground if both A and B believe that *p*, believe that *the other* believes that *p*, believe that the other believes that *they* believe that *p*, and so on.³⁰ Although the starting point of this analysis seemed to presuppose an individualist approach to intentionality, this iterative structure results in a picture of a plurality of minds strongly unified in terms of their common contents—a picture familiar from Hegel’s concept of the recognitive intersubjective structures of “objective spirit”. From such a viewpoint, the iterative contents of the common ground suggests a form of common-mindedness *different* to the sort found in the “deontic score-keeping” games of Brandom’s pragmatics. While we might think of the type of entitlement-tracking approach of Brandom as analogous to the sorts of contractual exchanges of “title” to *property* found in Hegel’s characterization of the *market* exchanges of civil society, the common-mindedness of the “common ground” suggests more those “immediate” forms of *Sittlichkeit* found in the family, in which not only the *fact* of shared intentional attitudes is important, but also the shared *awareness* of the fact *that* those attitudes *are* shared. For Hegel, these two forms of “objective spirit” are *different* but *complementary*,³¹ and both meant to be sublated or *aufgehoben* into more complex patterns of common-mindedness, and perhaps we

²⁷ Robert Stalnaker, “Pragmatics”, *Synthese* 22, 1-2 (1970), pp. 272–89, reprinted in in *Context and Content: Essays on Intentionality in Speech and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 31–46; and *Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²⁸ On the recent history of the approach to context within pragmatic theorizing and the relation of “common ground” to other approaches, see Stalnaker, *Context*, ch 1.

²⁹ Jakko Hintikka, *Knowledge and Belief: An Introduction to the Logic of the Two Notions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962). It is this iterativity of belief and knowledge that is discussed as the “K–K principle”, that if a subject *knows* that *p* then they *know* that they know that *p*.

³⁰ Stalnaker, *Context*, ch 2.3.

³¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge 1991), Part three, “Ethical Life”. I have explored the complementarity of these associative forms further in *Hegel’s Hermeneutics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), ch. 9.

might think of the difference conceptions of linguistic context and interaction in Stalnaker and Brandom as somehow *complementary* along similar lines.

Like Brandom, Stalnaker has a type of “score-keeping” approach to the “game” of assertion,³² but Stalnaker stresses the way the contents of the common ground determine what can and cannot be normally asserted.³³ First, one cannot assert a proposition that is already *in* the common ground—an assertion is meant to convey something *new* to the interlocutor. But neither can some content *be* asserted if it is *incompatible* with propositions in the common ground, as these are meant to be presupposed *by* what is asserted. On Stalnaker’s model, which uses a possible worlds analysis of belief states, an assertion standardly updates the presuppositions in the common ground by adding the asserted propositional content, thus eliminating certain *possibilities* compatible with the beliefs in the common ground. Thus, I might tell you, say, that Hegel died in 1831 of cholera, *presupposing* that you know that Hegel existed and who he was, but estimating that you may not know how and when he died. For all you know, he *may have* been the case that he committed suicide, or have been poisoned, or died sometime in the late eighteenth century, or the mid nineteenth. On this account, *that* this particular philosopher lived and died might be thought of as part of the common ground, while the variety of possible times and ways of his death would, prior to the assertion, be thought of as possibilities *compatible* with what was in the common ground. On this picture, knowledge increases with the *reduction* of possibilities compatible with what is known.

As a type of dynamic logic of language games, this account has some similarities to Brandom’s deontic scorekeeping account considered as tempered by the “default and challenge” principle, but there are as well some important differences. In Brandom’s framework, unless you have grounds to doubt my claim you should grant me default entitlement to it. But theoretically, *any* potential source of the sentence’s falsehood could become the target of questioning. For example, having read Terry Pinkard’s biography of Hegel, you might have grounds to doubt that he died of cholera, but presumably we could not rule out *a priori* some other much more radical form of challenge: you might come to believe, for example, that you have reasons for doubting that the philosopher Hegel actually existed!³⁴ From Stalnaker’s perspective,

³² Both theorists acknowledge the influence of David Lewis’s “Score-keeping in a language game”, *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 8 (1979), pp. 233–49.

³³ Stalnaker’s classical account of assertion is to be found in “Assertion”, first published in *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 9, (1978), reprinted in *Context and Content*, 78–95.

³⁴ Thus, while claims such as “There have been black dogs” and “I have ten fingers” are treated as ones to which interlocutors are treated as *prima facie* entitled, they are nevertheless “not immune to doubt in the form of questions about

however, there looks to be the basis for a distinction *within* the claim, between parts more strongly resistant to question than others. There will be part of the content belonging to the common ground, here, say, having to do with Hegel's existence, and there will be another part having to do with something *compatible* with the common ground but *not* (yet) part of it, the purported facts of his demise. Thus we might say then that there are two different grades of default entitlement in Stalnaker's account. For the stronger grade, you do not simply default to me entitlement to some commitment; rather, as a presupposition within the common ground, it is one which you *positively* accept. But this idea of an internal distinction between a *presupposed* part of the statement and an *asserted* part now points to a path to the retention of the traditional *S is P* reading of logical form, as advocated from the early 1950s by Peter Strawson.

In his attacks on Russell's theory of descriptions, Strawson had used the notion of presupposition to defend traditional Aristotelian "S is P" conceptions of logical structure against the way Russell had *analyzed them away* in the first decades of the century. We might here think of Russell as having pursued a type of reduction of traditional logic to mathematical logic with its predification of subject terms of the type that Hegel had seen at work in Leibniz and Ploucquet and which he had resisted. For example, Russell had criticised the assumption that a sentence such as "All Greeks are wise" should be thought of as *about* the subject "all Greeks". Here the S is P surface structure had to be translated into its *proper* logical form as a *conditional* expressed in the new quantified predicate calculus. Part of the motive here was to eliminate presuppositions about the existence of the subject matter discussed. In Aristotle, for example, it seems to follow from a universal affirmative assertion about Greeks that Greeks exist,³⁵ but Russell wanted to preserve a truth value for cases in which there *were* no Greeks.³⁶ An analogous treatment had then been extended to sentences with definite descriptions in subject place, as with the famous "The present king of France is bald". Later Quine extended this style of analysis even to sentences

entitlement". Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, p. 177. This could presumably be said about the claim "Hegel existed".

³⁵ This is the phenomenon of so-called "existential import" in Aristotle. In the new logic, existence now becomes explicitly asserted with the existential quantifier which replaces the traditional idea of the particular judgment form. "Some a is F" becomes, there exists x, such that x is F. Again, we might see Aristotle's thought here as presupposing a model of judgment along the lines of *Hegel's* "judgments of (determinate) existence [*Dasein*]" rather than *modern* "existential judgments". Perceptual judgments thought of on the model of S is P judgments *assert P of S*, but don't *assert S* of anything else. The existence of S is not asserted by presupposed.

³⁶ Apparently ignorant of earlier suggestions of a similar move, Russell championed the paraphrasing of such sentences as *conditionals*: "All Greeks are wise" thus being rendered by the formula " $\forall x$ (Greek x \supset wise x)".

with proper names in subject position, rendering terms like Socrates and Pagasus into verbs, that is, predicates—an analysis, as we have seen, anticipated by Leibniz, just as Leibniz had (anticipating Russell) rendered categorical judgments as “hypotheticals”. Of course, there was much that was genuinely new to the modern version of mathematical logic—for one, the introduction of *quantifiers* now thought of as *binding* the variables that “ranged over” what Leibniz had posited as the realm of “common thirds”, but at least some of the underlying moves here had been made by Leibniz and, as I have argued, had been known to Hegel, who had responded in a way that was neither simply to dismiss the new logic nor the old, but to somehow try to systematically accommodate the new along with the old as a moments of his intended radicalization of logic. Strawson’s later reassertion of elements of the traditional logic was to involved the *denial* that sentences such as “All Greeks are wise” or “The present king of France is bald” *asserted* or *entailed* the existence of particular ethnic collectivities or national monarchs, and to make explicit the fact that they were presupposed. The retention of the traditional S–P form of the judgment structure was, among other things, to signal this functional difference between what *in* the judgment was to be thought of *as* asserted (the predicate) and what was presupposed (the subject). As suggested in the first section, we might understand so-called “self-locating” beliefs in this way as well. If, in a judgment, I am *locating* myself with respect to the object that the judgment is about, some particular rose, say, then it would seem to suggest that the existence of that object is presupposed, rather than asserted.

Here I will suggest a crude amalgam of elements of Strawson and Stalnaker—that we might attribute to a fictional philosopher, Peter-Robert Strawnaker—simply to try to indicate the broad shape a possible pragmatics that might be thought able to complement Brandom’s deontic score-keeping approach by developing his treatment of default entitlement. But equally clearly, this “Strawnaker” model would *itself* need complementing were it to try to address the *types* of changes in discourse that Brandom’s model easily accommodates, as it seems to have no place for challenges to and up-datings of presuppositions *themselves*. For example, on this simplified Strawnaker model, the claim “The sun rises in the east” might seem to presuppose “The sun rises”, and were the evolution of our knowledge to render this unquestionable we might forever be locked into the Ptolemaic cosmos.³⁷

To accommodate this pragmatic pluralism we would presumably have to look to a type of contextualism in which some discursive practices were seen to function in certain ways in some contexts and different ones differently in others. For example, we might think of the distinction between reasoning about the elements of what

³⁷ Here I am entirely abstracting from the aspect of the possible worlds approach which deal with the introduction of new presuppositions in terms of the phenomenon of “”.

Sellars referred to as the “manifest image” of the world, and reasoning within the framework appropriate to the “scientific image”. In fact, something like this distinction seems suggested by Stalnaker’s own notion of a “manifest event” as a typical source of elements for the common ground. An example of a manifest event is given as “a goat walks in the room”.³⁸ For those in the room, the existence of “the goat” becomes a shared presupposition, and in this context we shouldn’t think of claims about the goat as having a Russellian form that commences with the existential quantifier. As *presupposed*, the goat’s existence is *not* capable of being asserted or entailed. Here, the route via which the goat makes it into our discourse as a discussable content will be different to that found in Brandom’s account.

For Brandom, as we have seen, the empirical content of even perceptual judgment is to be thought of as determined inferentially, but of course that cannot be the whole story. Underlying a speaker’s inferential competence will be dispositions to respond reliably to environmental objects in ways that are continuous with, say, a parrot’s capacity to squawk noises similar to English names in the presence of particular things.³⁹ Some, however, have argued that Brandom’s account leads to counter-intuitive claims about perceptual occurrences, as when the particle physicist, who can reliably respond to the presence of mu-mesons in a cloud chamber, is said to thereby “observe” rather than make inferences to the presence of the particles. Stalnaker’s intruding goat, however, offers a more intuitively plausible picture of what it typically is to “see” something. The typical case here is thus the immediate seeing of an object in a context where it is appropriate to talk of seeing *others* see it, seeing others *see* that *one* sees it, and so on. Against the background of such unproblematic seeings, with their characteristic phenomenological features, the physicist’s *observing* of the particle might be now thought of as exemplifying a very contextually specific type of “observation”, something typically found in activities involved in the elaboration of the “scientific image”, but also as *presupposing* the intuitively plausible account of seeing.⁴⁰ Moreover, this distinction might now be thought of as implying a weakening of the enframing inferentialism, Stalnaker’s goat suggesting a way that semantic contents may get into the system via a form of “sentience” that is not as antithetical to human “sapience” as suggested in Brandom’s picture.

³⁸ Stalnaker, *Context*, p. 47.

³⁹ Brandom, “The Centrality of Sellars’s Two-Ply Account of Observation to the Arguments of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*”, in Robert B. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁴⁰ Presumably in the process of becoming someone who can respond reliably to the presence of mu-mesons the physicist has had to rely on observing unproblematically “seeable” phenomena, such as vapour-trails.

Stalnaker's goat might now be thought of as just the sort of content that Hegel has in mind with his idea of the subject of a judgment of *Dasein*. Such judgments of *determinate* existence are not *existential* judgments in the modern sense; they are assertions *about* things taken as existing not assertions *that* those things exist. In contrast, the physicist's assertion about the mu-meson will be an instance of some more developed form of judgment in Hegel's taxonomy—a judgment involving the *positing* of something's existence, and as such a form of judgment presupposing the earlier form of judgment that has now been sublated (*aufgehoben*) in its own form. We might underline something of the pragmatic differences between such judgments by substituting a well-known Dretskean example for Stalnaker's one, and talk of a zebra waking into a room. Dretske's example raises the dilemma: should we understand the common belief concerning the zebra's presence as entailing a commitment to the idea that it *was* indeed a zebra *and not* a cleverly disguised mule, as the principle of closure suggests we should?⁴¹ This surely seems to set the epistemic bar too high in such a context. However, the analogous claim seems entirely appropriate with respect to the physicist's belief about the mu-meson. If a physicist detects the presence of a mu-meson in a suitable apparatus, we would, I take it, understand her as committing herself to its *not* being a gluon, a quark, a Higgs boson, and so on. We should think of these two types of assertion as serving different functions, and these functional distinctions as suggesting different logical forms. This is the type of consideration, I suggest, behind Hegel's logical pluralism—a form of pluralism for which we can find analogues in the present. But at the same time, it suggests a weakening of the type of inferentialist semantics that is rightly, I think attributed to him.

⁴¹ The example is from Fred Dretske, "Epistemic Operators," *Journal of Philosophy*, 67 (1970): 1007–1023. Bernhard Nickel raises this as a problem for Brandom's inferentialist semantics in "Dynamics, Brandom-Style", *Philosophical Studies* 162, 2 (2013), pp. 333-354.