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**Habermas, Brandom and the Politics of Pragmatism**

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After having spent many years addressing – and profoundly reshaping – major issues of social theory, political theory, public reason and communicative ethics, Jürgen Habermas, in the late 1990s, turned his attention to fundamental problems of philosophy in general and epistemology in particular. He did so largely by engaging materials in the contemporary analytic mode including, and arguably most fruitfully, the work of Robert Brandom. It was an engagement, moreover, to which Brandom himself responded in detail. I want to suggest here that an analysis of the interchange between Habermas and Brandom can shed important light on at least three large issues of continuing relevance: the problem of mind and world, the relationship between theoretical and practical reason, and the nature and status of philosophical pragmatism as it relates, in particular, to political thought and action.

To be sure, in Habermas and Brandom we clearly have a mutual admiration society. Brandom views Habermas as nothing less than a “hero” (Brandom, 2015), while Habermas tells us that Brandom’s work “owes its exceptional rank to its rare combination of speculative impulse and staying power” (Habermas 2003, 131). Their exchange, nonetheless, has a distinctive structure. Habermas criticizes Brandom both for failing to distance himself from the kind of free-standing and passive internalism associated with “objective idealism” or “conceptual realism,” and also for failing adequately to distinguish the pursuit of theoretical truth from that of normative right. Brandom, for his part, does not criticize Habermas per se but instead defends his theory against Habermas’s critique, denying that he himself is guilty of any kind of epistemic passivity and insisting that his brand of inferentialism fully accommodates the theoretical/normative distinction. Brandom argues, in effect, that his views are more compatible with those of Habermas than Habermas would seem to allow, and indicates that any differences between them are overwhelmed by, above all, a shared commitment to philosophical pragmatism.

I want to suggest here that Brandom’s self-defense is both unconvincing and unnecessary. Specifically, I believe that his approach is, at once, deeply different from but also substantially preferable to Habermas’s with respect to the most serious issues of thought and thing on the one hand, fact and value on the other. I hope to show, further, that those issues are more intimately connected to one another than either Habermas and Brandom seem to suppose, and that certain important elements of Brandom’s own account would indicate as much.

It's worth observing, I think, that the materials in question may be especially interesting because of the sense of philosophical unity that they evoke. Habermas comes out of a continental tradition, broadly conceived, but is deeply influenced by any number of developments in analytic philosophy. Brandom, on the other hand, is an analytic philosopher who is unusual in taking continental thinkers – Hegel and Heidegger above all – seriously indeed. The result is a set of arguments that fully acknowledge the analytic/continental divide while at the same time demonstrating both the universality of certain fundamental themes and the utility of juxtaposing, with respect to those themes, two quite different but ultimately commensurable modes of discourse.

It should also be clear at the outset that in talking about pragmatism I am talking primarily about how that term is used by Habermas and Brandom. The literature has, of course, amply demonstrated the wide divergence of views among the so-called Holy Trinity of American pragmatist thought, and theoretical divergences have gotten only wider over the years as others have pursued putatively pragmatist agendas. Indeed, the term itself has always been, and continues to be, of uncertain application. It seems to describe, in some sense, one or another approach to the problem of truth that in some way and for some reason gives pride of place to some set of practical consequences arising from some kind of active involvement in some aspect of the world. That, obviously, is hopelessly nebulous. But again, this paper is not about pragmatism per se. Rather, it is primarily about Habermas’s notion of pragmatism, Brandom’s situation vis-à-vis that notion, and the possible implications of the relevant material for a certain kind of pragmatist – but also a certain kind of pragmatics-driven – theory of politics.

Ultimately, this essay is intended to be a contribution to the philosophy of politics, its intended audience composed primarily of political theorists. One might well think otherwise, for I shall have little to say directly about politics, focusing instead on epistemological questions of mind and world and the general problem of objective validity. My view, nonetheless, is that political thought does not operate in an intellectual vacuum. Every effort at political theory rests upon one or another set of philosophical foundations, whether expressly or not, and this suggests that a systematic examination of such foundations ought to be an integral part of the political/theoretical enterprise. In the instant case, I hope to suggest that thinking about politics, both in an abstract theoretical register and in an on-the-ground practical setting, is routinely governed by principles of logic and coherence, that at least some forms of pragmatism fail to redeem those principles, and that the tradition of coherentism, internalism and holism can and often does provide a platform for taking seriously the idea that political judgment and action typically is, and also ought to be, rooted in considerations of rational truth. As such, the materials presented here argue strongly against both the Rawlsian strain of contemporary political thought, which insists on a theoretical and practical outlook that is “political, not metaphysical” and that privileges workable agreement over truth, and the Arendtian strain, which, according to one commentator, “persistently emphasizes the way truth denatures politics by marginalizing and degrading opinion” (Villa 1996, 95). Political judgment and action is, I believe, routinely underwritten by notions of objective validity, and I shall argue that such notions might be best formulated in terms of something like pragmatic inferentialism.

**1**

For both Habermas and Brandom, the question at hand is, indeed, the question of objective validity.[[1]](#footnote-1) But of course, this is generally treated as two questions. On the one hand, can propositions that we assert about how things in the world really are be objectively valid and, if so, how? On the other hand, can propositions that we assert about how we should act in the world be objectively valid and, again, if so, how? In each case, the question is ultimately a question of justification. On what basis, if any, are we justified in saying of a claim about one or another state of affairs that it is true? And on what basis, if any, are we justified in saying that one course of action, including political action, objectively fulfills, while another objectively fails to fulfill, the requirements of moral right, whatever they happen to be? Importantly, Habermas and Brandom both say that these are in fact very different questions involving very different kinds of answers. This, it turns out, will be problematic. But for the moment we will focus on the problem of objective validity with respect to theoretical rather than practical argument, in large part because the theoretical argument will form the basis for – indeed, it essentially constitutes – the subsequent argument about normativity.

A focus on theoretical validity means, of course, that the Habermas-Brandom exchange operates squarely within the world of post-Kantian epistemology and, as such, addresses the basic Cartesian problematic: how can we be sure that our thoughts about mind-independent reality accurately depict or are otherwise faithful to that reality? In both historical and philosophical terms, and writing in broad strokes, Habermas identifies, plausibly enough, three alternative approaches. The first of these posits a deep affinity – one might call it a compatibility, or a kind of isomorphism, or even something like an identity – between the character and structure of the external world and the character and structure of our intellectual apparatus. This, of course, has many versions, each of which has multiple aspects. According to one version, for example, reality is composed entirely of ideas, matter is an incoherent and unsustainable notion (or not really a notion at all), and the human mind, as the faculty in which ideas reside and operate, is well and uniquely equipped to know what those ideas are. According to another, the world is composed of chunks of physical matter in motion, the human mind is, at least in part, similarly physical in nature, certain features of the mind – sense organs, specifically – are apt themselves to move as they are physically struck by those active external chunks, and these second-order motions are somehow registered and recorded as reliable indicators of reality. In one form or another, one might think of all such theories, however different they might be, as examples of crude objectivism. It is crude because it appears simply to wish away the fundamental problem of modern philosophy as unearthed principally by Descartes and as developed to most telling effect first by Hume and then by Kant.

That problem is utterly simple in its logic and staggeringly difficult in its ramifications. We might say that the question of objective validity with respect to any theoretical or descriptive proposition about the world involves three elements. Let us therefore call it, for convenience sake, the tripartite model.[[2]](#footnote-2) There is, first, the world itself qua mind-independent reality, whatever that happens to be. There is, second, our intellectual apparatus – presumably including faculties both of perception and of reflective analysis – on the basis of which we engage, think about, and develop accounts of that reality. And there is, third, the effort to assess or evaluate the degree to which our perceptions and thoughts accurately describe or are faithful to or otherwise correspond with that reality, i.e., to what degree is our intellectual apparatus up to the task. The problem is that this third element, the process of assessment and evaluation, can only be entirely internal to – it can be nothing other than an exercise of – the intellectual apparatus itself, the very thing we are seeking to assess. It is itself perforce a matter of perception and thought, and cannot be otherwise. As such, it fails to provide any kind of independent assessment of the accuracy of our claims about reality. We use our intellectual apparatus to assess the adequacy of our intellectual apparatus. There is nothing else for us to use; and if that apparatus is somehow flawed, this presumably will affect both the accuracy of our claims about the world and, in the same way and to the same degree, the accuracy of our assessment of those claims. Since the apparatus whose adequacy is at issue is being judged by that self-same apparatus, there’s really no external assessment at all. Thus, to pick just one common example, an effort to evaluate perceptual claims by increasing the number of data points – gathering ever more observations – will not be very helpful with respect to the Cartesian problematic or the tripartite model, for if our perceptual faculties cause us to misrepresent reality with respect to the initial data points, they will presumably be more or less equivalently inaccurate with respect to the added ones.

What we have here, of course, is something like the Myth of the Given. Thus, Strawson (1992, 64) famously acknowledges that in assessing propositions of empirical fact we might be tempted “to step outside the entire structure of the conceptual scheme [intellectual apparatus] we actually have and then to justify [our claims] from some extraneous point of vantage.” The temptation must be resisted, however, for the simple reason that “there is nowhere to step… no such extraneous point of vantage.” Putnam (1981, 49-52), at least in one of his earlier moods, agrees: “there is no God’s-eye point of view that we can know or usefully imagine,” hence “objects do not exist independently of conceptual schemes…. [W]e cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description....” And so too Davidson (1968, 312): “Of course we can’t get outside of our skins to find out what is causing the internal happenings of which we are aware.”[[3]](#footnote-3) It is, I think, very difficult to imagine how one could intelligibly deny such claims. And as Habermas himself well understands, it is hard to imagine how the problem does not definitively rule out crude objectivism, which, in any of its forms, clearly presupposes that we are able to access a standpoint independent of mind and world.

Habermas thus identifies a second general approach, which he thinks of as a kind of “conceptual realism” or “objective idealism.” The unavailability of an independent standpoint means, of course, that we are forever trapped, so to speak, inside our own mental processes, including and especially the processes by which we arrive at (what we think of as) sense perceptions and analyses of sense perceptions. On such an account, the question of what reality is like, independent of our thoughts, is bracketed out to one degree or another, and the typical result is a kind of coherentism, internalism, and holism according to which objective validity is solely and entirely a matter of self-consistency. Again, some such perspective admits of different versions, and those differences are, at least in part, a matter of what we *can* confidently say about mind-independent reality. According to the canonical version, for example, we can say *that* there is a world out there that is somehow responsible for our perceptions and thoughts, but we can say no more than that. Specifically, we cannot know what the real world actually consists of, how it looks in itself, how it operates, how it gives rise to our experiences, and the like. (Note that our conviction that there is a real external world may itself be a matter of self-consistency; we cannot coherently live our lives while denying that there is such a world.) According to another approach – arguably attributable to Hegel and more confidently to Heidegger – the question of mind-independent reality is something like a nonsense question, hardly intelligible at all. Since we are trapped forever inside the prison-house of our intellectual apparatus, any attempt to say what reality is apart from our thoughts could not but be an utterly silly and futile exercise (on Hegel, see Hance 1992, 352-58).

Of course, this kind of coherentist, internalist and holist theory is widely criticized on two interrelated grounds. On the one hand, it is said to render human thought as, in McDowell’s evocative phrase (McDowell 1994, 50, 66), a “frictionless spinning in a void,” making no discernable contact with reality and, thus, epistemologically barren. It is, at least as far as we could possibly tell, unconstrained by anything external to itself, and thus stands as a massive structure of irresolvable skepticism regarding the external world. On the other hand, and precisely for this reason, there seems to be nothing to prevent the construction of two or more systems of thought, each perfectly self-consistent but utterly incompatible with the other(s), as a result of which, given the lack external friction, there seems to be no way to adjudicate between or among them. The coherentist perspective is thus accused of giving up on the fundamental project of epistemology, namely, to know how things really are. It seeks objective validity, but of a very different kind.

The third perspective that Habermas identifies also gives up on the epistemological project, but does so by rejecting the very idea of objectivity itself. Here we have not the Myth of the Given but the Myth of Justification. Our engagement with the world is unconstrained either by the structure of the world or by the structure of our mental apparatus. There are, in fact, no such structures; things are post-structural. Propositions may be rooted in aesthetic preferences, self-interest, the vicissitudes of individual psychology, the playfulness of fantasy, the will to power, the ineffable arbitrariness of language, and the like. But in all such cases, what we have is a radical subjectivism that effectively renders the very idea of justification moot. To the degree that we make claims and seek to persuade others to accept those claims, we do so not through justifying argument but through force, including the force of physical violence or, more often, the force of rhetoric or art in all its forms.

Importantly, subjectivism must be sharply distinguished from relativism (see Brandom 1994, 52-55). The relativist happily admits that our engagement in the world may well reflect the particular socio-historical context in which we to find ourselves, and that different contexts may well produce different claims. But the idea of justification and argument remains central. Robust standards of true and false operate more or less undiminished. It is simply that objective validity is relative to this or that particular conceptual context or structure; internal to that context or structure, some claims will qualify as objectively valid, others not. A thoroughgoing subjectivism – assuming there can be such a thing – vigorously denies this. We are, each of us, more or less on our own, enjoying what Hegel once called the freedom of the void. In principle, no belief is better than any other. What counts is the power to persuade, more or less by any means.

Now Habermas rejects all three of these approaches. Of course, his principle ambition is to recover robust notions of rationality and objectivity in social and political life, and this means that the radical anti-rationalism and subjectivism of post-structural theory is, for him, a non-starter (though see Verosvsek 2022). On the other hand, he is enough of a Kantian to reject any kind of crude objectivism. We live in what he often calls a post-metaphysical age, and this means, among many other things, that we are permanently denied access to the noumenal realm, other perhaps than to accept its mere existence. But Habermas also finds the frictionless spinning criticism of coherentism to be compelling. He refuses to give up on an objective and consequential engagement with mind-independent reality. And this presents him with a conundrum. How to redeem the ambitions of realism while embracing the stern limitations imposed by the tripartite model?

Habermas purports to find a solution in pragmatism. We have no direct access to the noumenal realm, to external reality. But we can know very well when our projects and plans succeed and fail, and it is reasonable to suppose that they succeed or fail, at least in part, because of some (otherwise unknowable) feature of reality. Indeed, when a project fails, this strongly suggests that the world itself, whatever it is, has somehow resisted. And here we have real friction. It is reasonable to conclude that external reality will allow us to complete this plan and won’t allow us to complete that one – this is something that we discover in practice – and the result is a truth claim about the external world. Again, we cannot know what it is about mind-independent reality that permits some courses of action and prohibits others. But we can hold it to be true that reality does so permit and prohibit, and the result is to provide the basis for a non-trivial kind of objective validity. Habermas calls this “weak naturalism,” weak because it provides no details, naturalism because it retains the idea of external reality about which we can know something, namely, when it does and doesn’t resist. In this way, Habermas is, among other things, able to justify his own neo-Marxist convictions regarding the objective analysis of capitalism by invoking a type of theory/practice nexus of a sort sketched in, for example, Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach.”

We should note that Habermas formulates his approach as a kind of de-transcendentalized Kantianism. For Kant, our engagement with the world – our capacity to generate claims that are objectively valid – presupposes that each of us has, in advance of that engagement, faculties of sensation or intuition structured in terms of space and time, concepts or categories of analysis or cognition with which to order or arrange our sensations/intuitions according to notions of quantity, quality, relation, and modality, and formative principles of judgment including the schematism and the so-called axioms of intuition, anticipations of perception, analogies of experience and postulates of empirical thought. These are structures of thought that every rational individual must be assumed to have. Since it is impossible to imagine an intelligible engagement with the external world absent those capacities, their existence, as universal features of individual human mental life, is necessarily presupposed. To be sure, we may not in fact be engaging an external world at all; the Cartesian problematic persists. But *if* we are engaging an external world, this can be, on pain of contradiction, only because of the faculties and processes of individual human thought described in the transcendental aesthetic and the transcendental analytic; and since, as normally active human beings, we *necessarily* presuppose, on pain of contradiction, that we are indeed engaging a real world, our claims about that world are *transcendentally* proved – they are objectively valid. There is no other possible proof.

Habermas chooses to replace this with a socially-based account. The capacity to recognize the success and/or failure of our projects and plans, pragmatically to revise those projects and plans in cases of failure, and to register, thereby, the real though otherwise unknowable fact of external resistance is a fundamentally linguistic and discursive enterprise. We do these things together, socially and politically. The rules of communicative competence – the ideal speech situation – establish principles of equity, sincerity, veracity, and the like. On the basis of those principles, the actual citizens of an actual polity – not merely hypothetical decision-makers – deliberate about matters of success and failure and, in cases of failure, choose what seem to be the most likely alternatives in a process that describes, for Habermas, the very essence of pragmatist politics, properly understood. The propositions that emerge from this process, in virtue of the discursively shared experience of success and failure and the procedural norms that govern the relevant conversations, will be, with respect to theoretical right, objectively valid (Habermas 1979).

Though de-transcendentalized, the position remains decidedly Kantian in at least two respects. First it requires us to presuppose, on pain of contradiction, a real external world – a noumenal realm – even as it denies us any access to the particular and defining features of that world. But second, it insists that objective validity – evidence of success and failure – arises out of an *active* or “spontaneous” engagement with the world. As with Rorty and many others including Brandom, Habermas rejects the mirror in favor of the lamp. Knowledge and truth emerge out of *doings*. They are a function of theoretically informed praxis on the basis of which projects and plans are tested and either succeed or fail. Hence, we have nothing less than what Habermas calls “Kantian pragmatism” (Habermas 2002, 213).

**2**

With respect to Brandom’s account of theoretical reason, Habermas offers three central criticisms. First, he accuses Brandom of adopting a version of the second of the three positions described above. This is to say that Brandom’s view is basically just another form of coherentism, internalism and holism. It may well be an especially interesting and challenging form, rooted, as it is, in the general pragmatics of Wittgenstein and Dummett and the more specific pragmatics of Austen, Searle and Grice. As such, it provides a high-powered account of how coherence itself emerges and achieves acceptance, and this, arguably, is Brandom’s principal achievement.. But like any form of coherentism, it is inadequate because it gives up on the epistemological project. Brandom’s inferentialism produces simply another frictionless spinning in a void, hence loses virtually all relevant contact with external reality.

Second, Habermas acknowledges that Brandom is aware of the problem and is “too much of a pragmatist” to be content with such frictionless spinning (Habermas 2003, 137). Brandom, in other words, himself insists on the need to find a notion of objective validity that is epistemologically robust (see Brandom 1994, 137). The difficulty, according to Habermas, is that there is no evidence of Brandom having actually found such a thing. Brandom simply fails to explain how even a linguistically sophisticated and compelling notion of inferentialism could avoid the more generic problems inherent in plain old coherentism, as articulated in the tripartite model. The character of what Brandom describes as objectively true “is never really explained” (Habermas 2003, 138). He essentially drops the ball. In doing so, he actually contradicts himself, specifically by claiming to embrace a pragmatist approach to objective validity in theoretical reason without really doing so: Brandom’s account “propels him in the end toward a linguistic variation on an objective idealism that does not sit well with the picture of a pragmatist transformation of Kantianism….” (Habermas 2003, 145).

Indeed, Habermas says that Brandom does rather the opposite and is, thus, guilty of one or another kind of intellectual “passivity.” This is Habermas’s third argument, and it raises crucial issues that demand investigation. As we have noted, Habermas variously identifies Brandom’s inferentialism as a kind of objective idealism, according to which the only things that are real are our ideas about reality, or a kind of conceptual realism, which is pretty much the same thing. In both cases, objective validity is entirely internal – “there is nowhere to step… no such extraneous point of vantage” – and the result can only be a frictionless spinning in which claims passively emerge as reflections of what our pre-existing conceptual apparatus entails. Brandom thus fails to satisfy his own pragmatist, anti-skeptical, friction-searching instincts. A linguistically well-informed coherentism remains a form of coherentism nonetheless, with all of the flaws inherent therein. Again, the epistemological project is largely abandoned in favor of an internalist one.

Brandom vigorously rejects the passivism charge and insists that his approach is the very opposite of that, hence very much akin to Habermas’s own activist/pragmatist approach. I have already alluded to the negative image of the mind-as-mirror, but one might also usefully invoke something like the “spectator model.” This has (at least) two versions. According to the crude objectivism of pre-Cartesian thought, reality is out there, independent of us, and we are merely passive spectators, observing from the outside what the world offers up. On the other hand, coherentism sometimes suggests we are equally passive consumers, but this time of our own conceptual apparatus, mechanically reproducing whatever that apparatus requires of us. In both cases, passivity is the defining element. Now Brandom initially stakes out his position by firmly agreeing with Habermas in rejecting any version of the spectator model: “[w]e cannot understand things unless we take full account of the fact that we are not just spectators…. I agree with all these criticisms of epistemological theories that present knowers as passive spectators” (Brandom 2000a, 357). Like Habermas, Brandom insists that our engagement with the world is a matter of activity: “[W]e need to *act* in order to find out how things are….” (357-58 [emphasis in the original]). Specifically, at the core of inferentialism is the game of giving and asking for reasons, on the basis of which we keep score in terms of “correct” or “appropriate” answers and “incorrect” or “inappropriate” ones, resulting in claims that we can think of as true. Brandom understands this as fundamentally a matter of *doing* (cf. Brandom 1994, for example at 173). In making claims and inferences we are engaging in speech *acts*. The business of giving and asking for reasons is a discursive *practice*. We *test* our claims through the score-keeping game of “correct” and “incorrect” answers, and this is therefore an exercise in pragmatism, much like Habermas’s social, linguistic, and communicative approach to objective validity.

In making his case for pragmatism, Brandom repeatedly notes and emphasizes that his theory is essentially a matter of linguistic pragmatics, the study of how language is actually used in practice (as opposed to the study of syntax, which pertains to the formal/structural features of language, and the study of semantics, which deals with the ways in which language encodes meaning). But his treatment of this issue seems highly problematic. In a standard collection of essays on linguistic pragmatics, the editor (Levinson 1983, 1n.) insists that any apparent connection between “pragmatism” and “pragmatics” is purely an accident of language and that there is virtually no substantive connection between them at all.[[4]](#footnote-4) “Pragmatism” is largely a set of epistemological theories about objective validity and the relationship between mind and world. In Habermas’s version, it is a kind of success/failure theory. The success or failure of our projects and plans provides us with an objectively valid account of at least one feature of an otherwise unknowable world, namely, that it does or doesn’t resist those projects and plans. “Pragmatics,” on the other hand, says, in and of itself, nothing at all about any of that. It simply tells us how communication per se is possible, regardless of subject domain, hence how we are able to exchange meanings more or less effectively. It is about intelligible interaction, not truth. Now Brandom seems to want to argue that the one is fully assimilable to the other, and that his embrace of pragmatics – his focus on the active use of language in the inferential game of giving and asking for reasons – makes him a full-blooded, non-passive philosophical pragmatist á la Habermas. But there is nothing in Wittgenstein’s account of language-in-use that says anything about the specific question of mind and world, while speech act theory and the theory of conversational implicature are essentially theories of the meaning or “force” of our utterances, hence about how we comprehend each other when we use language, regardless of subject matter. In and of themselves, they have nothing to say about the objective validity of our utterances.

It turns out that Brandom is aware of the problem, but his argument for a close connection – or even just a kinship – between pragmatism and pragmatics is troubling. In effect, he chooses to uses the term pragmatism “more broadly” to refer to any form of discourse “centered on the primacy of the practical,” and in that context he identifies a variety of different kinds of pragmatism: methodological, semantic, fundamental, normative, classical (Brandom 2002). Of course, Brandom can certainly use the term however he wishes, including assimilating linguistic pragmatics to general pragmatism. But his broad understanding of the term does little to justify any connection between what he calls pragmatism and what Habermas calls pragmatism.[[5]](#footnote-5) If anything, Habermas’s pragmatism is closest to what Brandom calls “classical pragmatism” – it emphasizes the empirically observable results of our projects and plan – and it is important to realize that Brandom is at pains sharply to criticize classical pragmatism for its instrumentalist focus on the satisfaction of desires. His argument about that may be right or wrong – I myself think it is right – but this only serves further to separate Brandom’s view of “practical consequences” from that of Habermas.

As we have seen, linguistic pragmatics provides the basis for understanding how language is actually used to communicate and persuade effectively. But for Brandom, one especially important part of this – though it is not the only one – involves the active, discursive basis for communication and persuasion specifically concerning theoretical claims about how things in the world really are. Again, it is the actual activity of giving and asking for of reasons that allows us, among many other things, to say “correct” or “incorrect” about a truth claim; and in inferential pragmatics, Brandom wants to give pride of place precisely to specifically *assertoric* speech acts that make propositions about reality. The trouble is that, under the tripartite model, the justification for such propositions is and can only be completely and entirely *internal*. A claim is true IFF it can be rationally inferred from other claims, and rational inference pertains only and exclusively to relations among propositions. This is pure coherentism, and not pragmatism as that term is normally understood and certainly not as Habermas understands it.

It is true that Habermas’s own notion of discourse and truth is itself an explicit exercise in linguistic pragmatics. But we must not be confused. For in Habermas, language is used to communicate and adjudicate claims regarding the success or failure of our projects and plans in the real world. Agreement is, indeed, a matter of coherence (along with the various ethical, political and conversationally normative rules that make for communicative competence), but the underlying justification for theoretical truth claims is understood to be external, not internal. It is the mind independent fact of success or failure, hence the concrete fact of non-resistance or resistance, that underwrites truth claims about reality. Pragmatism generally requires, moreover, that we actually go out into (what we take to be) the real world, seek naturally and concretely to implement projects and plans, and only then, after the fact, generate assertoric speech acts claiming to show what succeeded and what failed. This is why Habermas’s philosophical pragmatism is indeed a form of naturalism, albeit a “weak” realism – external reality is dispositive – whereas Brandom’s linguistics pragmatics, when applied to the problem of mind and world or thought and thing, is simply another form of frictionless idealism.

With respect to the question of pragmatism, at least in the most common use of the term, Brandom’s inferentialism thus stands guilty as charged. Linguistic pragmatics does not somehow turn into philosophical pragmatism, and certainly not how Habermas understands it. The activity of giving and evaluating reasons in terms of the logic of rational inference is not at all the activity of concretely or materially engaging the world in order to understand it, and of trying thereby to test the truth of our propositions about the world against the world itself, if only in terms of otherwise unexplained patterns of` friction or resistance. Inferential pragmatics simply pursues relationships among ideas, and this means that Habermas’s and Brandom’s projects operate at polar opposite ends of the post-Kantian continuum.

Such a conclusion, to be sure, needs to be further qualified. As I have indicated, my focus here is on Habermas’s notion of pragmatism, rather than pragmatism per se. But as I have also indicated, pragmatism per se is an essentially contested notion. In this context, it’s worth quoting James at some length. As he sees it:

“[t]he process here is always the same. The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them in strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger; and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. He saves as much of it as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives. So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that… until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock… This new idea is then adopted as the true one. It preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification…. The most violent revolutions in an individual’s beliefs leave most of his old order standing. Time and space, cause and effect, nature and history, and one’s own biography remain untouched. New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions” (James 1907, pp. 59-61).

Here we have one of the arch pragmatists providing a splendid account of precisely the kind of coherentism, internalism, and holism that I am attributing to Brandom and that, by undeniable inference, I myself am recommending. In and of itself, it says nothing about practical consequences. Now, of course, James goes on to talk about the “utility” of truth and of the “work” that it does in “satisfying” needs and wants. But the passage itself demonstrates, I think, how the extension of the term pragmatism remains problematic and unclear. In addressing the question of whether or not Brandom is a pragmatist, then, the ultimate answer can only be that it depends. What is nonetheless clear is that, despite what he himself says, his overall view is sharply different from that of Habermas.

**3**

If Brandom seems to be effectively accused of abandoning the epistemological project,   
this actually depends on how that project is conceived. Presumably the goal is to generate objectively valid claims about how things in the world really are, and I want to suggest that inferentialism in fact offers a serious and even compelling account of how best to achieve that goal. Indeed, pragmatic inferentialism is, in my view, more promising than Habermas’s pragmatism.

In what seems to me a foundational claim of his entire project, Brandom insists that our engagement with the world is nothing other than an engagement with facts: “[t]h world is in the first instance as a collection of *facts*, not of *things*” (Brandom 2000a, 357). He says that facts are conceptual and, more strongly, that there is “*nothing outside the realm of the conceptual*” (Brandom 2000a, 357 [emphasis added]; see also Brandom 2000c, 160-63). It’s a striking claim. Facts are our only subject matter, and they are constructed by us. They must be understood not as external entities or objects but as conceptually developed accounts of (possibly or putatively) external entities or objects. They are not, as we say, things in themselves but, rather, are mediated by thought, through and through. And there is, for us, literally nothing else. Our engagement with the world is purely conceptual, presumably a matter of working through the various ramifications of our conceptual apparatus. Such an account is, indeed, very much what Habermas calls objective idealism or conceptual realism, and the point cannot be overemphasized. If the subject matter of human thought is composed entirely of facts, if facts are essentially conceptual, and if there is nothing outside of that, then there is nothing for us to think about except facts qua conceptual, and concepts are certainly not things or objects.

In this context, Brandom’s account clearly embraces or conforms to the tripartite model and is, thus, very much in the spirit of what authors such as Strawson, Putnam and Davidson have had in mind, as outlined above. We have no access to the external world of things or objects. We may talk about such entities, but we are really talking about facts, and facts are, again, constructs of mind. In evaluating our claims about facts, we can rely only and entirely on our conceptual apparatus[[6]](#footnote-6) – once again, there is nothing outside of that – and Brandom argues, principally, that this involves giving and asking for reasons that define the facts, all of which is understood as an essentially discursive or communicative process involving nothing other than logical or coherent inferences from one fact to another. We operate entirely within the Sellarsian space of reasons; for us there is literally no other space. The result is, precisely as Habermas would have it, a frictionless spinning in a void.

Of course, facts take the form of propositions, and propositions to which we are favorably disposed take the form of beliefs. In a pragmatic context, moreover, beliefs are presented in the form of statements, and statements are typically expressed in the form of sentences. Here, then, we have a canonical account of truth bearers: propositions, beliefs, statements, sentences. And focusing for the moment on beliefs, we may say that beliefs provide the reasons for other beliefs. The result is that the space of reasons is populated by a complex web of interrelationships among a wide range of doxastic commitments (Brandom 1994, 92).[[7]](#footnote-7)

From an inferentialist perspective, I would suggest that beliefs are of three kinds. Some are *express* *beliefs*. These are beliefs that are actively at play in the mind and in conversation, whether the conversation is between or among different people or internal to a particular person. If I look at the newspaper and discover that my candidate lost the election, and if I say to myself or to my wife that my candidate lost the election, this is an express belief. On the other hand, a great many beliefs are *tacit* *beliefs*. These are beliefs that were once express beliefs, but that have now drifted into the background, presently inactive and unexpressed but available to be hauled out more less immediately and utilized in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Tacit beliefs themselves, however, seem to be of more than one kind. I believe that Albany is the capitol of New York. I have not had that thought, and have not articulated that sentence or other sentences like it regarding Albany, in quite some time. But it’s a belief that I have thought and articulated many times in the past, and I believe it as much as I believe anything. If someone asks me what the capitol of New York is, I can quickly access and activate my belief and answer without much hesitation. I also believe that Carson City is the capitol of Nevada. Now that’s a belief that I had forgotten; I had to look it up. But having looked it up, I recognize that it is a belief that I have thought and articulated many times in the past, and so it too would qualify as one of my tacit beliefs. In effect, tacit beliefs can be more or less hidden. A little reflection will suggest, moreover, that any normal individual will possess a virtually unlimited number of tacit beliefs, hidden or otherwise. I myself have tacit beliefs about all of the state capitols, and about millions upon millions of other things as well, political and otherwise. The clear upshot is that the normal web of belief with which the average person operates is nothing less than staggering in size and complexity.

But however staggering in size our store of tacit beliefs might be, it is almost certainly dwarfed by the number of *implicit* *beliefs* to which we are committed (see Lycan 1986). An implicit belief of mine is a belief that I have never expressly thought and articulated, but to which I am nonetheless committed as strongly as to any other belief. I believe that an ordinary bar of soap is smaller in size than the Matterhorn. I am certain that I have never previously had or expressed that particular thought; indeed, it is almost certain that no one has ever had or expressed that particular thought. And yet, it is certainly something that I know and believe as firmly and confidently as I know and believe anything. In Brandom’s terms, it is an inferential deontic commitment in virtue of my (usually tacit) beliefs about bars of soap and about alpine mountains. It should be obvious, moreover, that the number of implicit beliefs, so defined, that any normal person possesses is beyond galactic in size and scope. One can only conclude that the raw materials of normal inferential reasoning are rich beyond all possible calculation (see Brandom 1994, 89-93).

Of course, the vast majority of these beliefs – express, tacit, or implicit – will be shared. They are the stuff upon which communities and societies and civilizations are based. I’m not the only one who believes that a bar of soap is smaller than the Matterhorn. The pragmatic inferential game is, by definition, a social phenomenon, underwritten by a more or less common set of propositional commitments that make it possible for us to communicate with one another intelligibly; without them we couldn’t meaningfully interact at all. Habermas’s demand that objective validity be rooted in real-life communicative processes is thus more than met by an inferential form of coherentism.

We should also note that the infinitely complex web of shared beliefs will surely instantiate some kind of structural hierarchy that informs inferentialist practice. One might think of concentric circles. Toward the center are beliefs that resist pretty much any questioning: fire burns, children are born of women, the sun rises in the east, and the like. At the perimeter are beliefs whose foundation is far less secure: Basquiat is a great artist, abortion is murder, spinach is delicious. Of course, in between will be an enormously complex and moving set of continua composed of beliefs that are more or less eligible for criticism and revision, depending on the circumstance. And it is precisely the process of criticism and revision that provides inferentialism with a robust notion of objective validity. Beliefs are tested against other beliefs, and typically this means that the less secure beliefs, usually those toward the periphery, are evaluated in terms of their logical compatibility with some set of more secure ones, those that are closer to the center. We might think of Plato’s *Euthyphro* as establishing a kind of model (see Brandom 1994, 105-106, 127-130). Euthyphro’s own various definitions of piety are rejected because they are shown, through the *elenchus* (see Brandom 1994, 178; Brandom 2000c, 176), to entail beliefs that are inconsistent with beliefs that Euthyphro himself would not want to give up. According to such a model – a model that is, as we have seen, explicitly embraced, at least up to a point, by James himself (James 1907, pp. 59-61) – a belief that is genuinely consistent with or entailed by the larger set of beliefs of which it is a part is a belief that must be accepted on pain of contradiction. Such a belief, once firmly established, is, for that reason, effectively *irrefutable* – as long as the larger structure remains intact. Of course, the tripartite model tells us that none of our beliefs can be confirmed or disconfirmed by consulting external reality. We are, in a sense, spinning without friction. And while this latter claim will actually turn out to be more complicated than one might suppose, the result is that irrefutability internal to the prevailing system of belief is the best we can do. But it is also all that we would ever need. Internal to the prevailing system of belief, an irrefutable belief is a belief that absolutely must be accepted as objectively true, if, that is, one is interested in making sense. It is a winner in the scorekeeping game of giving and asking for reasons. That, of course, is the only game we have. But it’s also the game that we can and must rely on for responsibly ordering and arranging our collective lives. For all intents and purposes, the winning proposition is true.

It seems certain, moreover, that the prevailing system of belief will compose, in effect, nothing less than a vast and complex theory of how things in the world really are. Such a theory might be thought of as having at least some features of what Strawson calls a descriptive metaphysics. It will describe the world as we necessarily take it to be, well aware, as we should be, that the world may in fact be quite different from that – i.e., from a God’s-eye point of view – but reasonably content in the knowledge that our embrace of irrefutable propositions gives us a reliable, definitive and objective method for deciding questions and controversies, pretty much regardless of subject matter. In the world of Kantian and post-Kantian thought, epistemology and metaphysics are inseparable, understanding metaphysics in the most general sense to be an account of how things in the world really are as opposed to how they appear to be. According to such an approach, there is no such thing as a post-metaphysical age. We cannot help but have a conception of reality, *as we take it to be*. This, I would suggest, is precisely what a pragmatic inferentialist approach wishes to exploit. It promises a reconstruction of, and an on-going, active critical engagement with, our shared notion of how things really are.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It is in this context, moreover, that we can perhaps make sense of the highly controversial issue of representative content. On the one hand, Brandom sharply contrasts inferentialism with the representative way of approaching things, understanding the latter to be, roughly, the standard correspondence idea of thinking about the relationship between mind and world. Indeed, rejecting the representational approach is arguably the central overall theme of Brandom’s work. On the other hand, he also frequently insists that inferentialism must make room for representative content; inferentialist claims must be *about* something. Brandom’s remarks in this respect are widely viewed as puzzling and deeply unsatisfying, and the language he chooses is not especially helpful. From a coherentist, internalist, and holist perspective, however, we can perhaps understand how inferentialism can incorporate representiationalist content if we attend to the difference between the expression of a proposition and the justification of a proposition. It seems that inferentialism can allow for – or, indeed, may even require – that we *express* claims about how things in the world really are, and this means that our claims are understood as representing reality. But the *justification* of such claims always obeys the stringent limits of the tripartite model, hence is always internal to the particular socially-constructed space of reasons that characterize the prevailing system of belief.

To be sure, the very idea of a prevailing system of belief may itself raise issues about the possibility of multiple and competing systems of belief. This is a question that calls for a systematic discussion in its own right, and clearly such a discussion would be largely orthogonal to the topic of the present paper. But one might briefly hazard two broad possibilities. According to one, rival systems might be commensurable, and to the degree that that’s true, one could contemplate something like a fusion of horizons along Gadamerian lines or, alternatively, an argument to the effect that the rivals are not really rivals at all but, rather, different aspects of a single system, perhaps as Davidson might suggest. According to the other, rival systems are truly and profoundly incommensurable, in which case relationships between or among them would seem to involve one of only two possible options, namely, avoidance or war – if, that is, they were able even to recognize one another at all.

**4**

A few clarifications are in order:

We should note, first of all, that there is a fundamental asymmetry between Habermas’s account and that of Brandom. For Habermas, pragmatism is something to be recommended. If we want to know how things really are – or at least a small piece of how things really are – we should seek actually to implement our projects and plans, observe patterns of success and failure, and produce, in political conversation or deliberation, objectively valid claims about where and when external reality is and isn’t resistant. This is, in effect, a prescription, something that we ought to do if we seek knowledge. Brandom, much to the contrary, understands inferentialism as a straight-forward description of how normal social interaction actually takes place. In everyday society, we do indeed give and ask for reasons, we do indeed keep score, and this is what makes social interaction intelligent. It’s true that we’re not always fully and self-consciously aware of doing these things, and it would be better if we were. If we were to “make it explicit” – moving, as Brandom would have it, from the “rational” to the “logical” – our critical purchase on the game of giving and asking for reasons would be sharper, and we would make fewer mistakes. Nonetheless, the overall picture that Brandom draws is intended not as a recommendation but as a reconstruction of ordinary, intelligent human interaction as it occurs in real life.

Now I have indicated that, for Brandom, facts are constructed by minds. Brandom appears to deny this when he says (Brandom 2000a, 357) that “neither concepts nor facts are causally dependent on thinkers,” and when he says a short while later (Brandom 2000a, 359) that “we don’t *construct* our concepts…. We always already have them – that is, we always already find ourselves bound by concepts.” Indeed, Brandom insists that facts existed before there were sapient creatures to engage with them. One might say, for example, that the Pythagorian theorem was true – it was a fact – before there were any mathematicians at all (see Brandom 2000c, 162). Presumably, claims like this that might lead someone like Habermas to accuse Brandom of conceptual realism or objective idealism. But these are slippery terms. Brandom’s firm rejection of the spectator model rules out any kind of crude – in this case Berkeleyan – objectivism according to which ideas constitute the fundamental nature of external reality. But his discussion does not rule out the idea that each of us is born and raised and becomes an intelligent agent within a particular culture, that any such culture will largely be a structure of facts reflecting some set of conceptual materials that have integrity and force beyond what any particular person thinks and does, and that individuals therefore do not create facts but rather discover them as the socio-culture inheritances that makes them who they are in the first place. It is, I think, a Hegelian idea. The universe of facts that populate the space of reasons emerges from the historical – and possibly historically diverse – processes in which theories and claims and propositions are developed and handed down. What is ultimately at work here is a kind of shared intelligence – we might call it *Geist* – that arguably unfolds as an ongoing and ever developing process of inferential scorekeeping with respect to “correct” and “incorrect” answers. As for facts that existed before there were humans, surely we will want to say that those facts are invariably interpreted, shaped and reformulated by us on the basis of our own conceptual apparatus, hence are, in a non-trivial sense and as they function in inferential discourse, intelligent constructions.

Beyond this, we need also to think about the entire question of active and passive. Within the relevant literature, the issue has arguably been dominated by Kant’s own distinction between the mere receptivity of intuition or sense experience, on the one hand, and the “spontaneous” engagement of cognition or judgment, on the other. In effect, perception is passive, thought active. But I think such an interpretation is problematic. Kant is clear in saying that space and time are not features of the noumenal world. Exactly how he can say this is uncertain; one would imagine that a better claim would be that we have no idea whether space and time are features of the noumenal world, and there’s no reason to believe either way. But for our purposes, the crucial point is that structures of space and time are plainly understood to be in some way imposed by the mind on incoming data. As forms of *our* sensibility, hence as aspects of *our* mental apparatus, space and time in effect shape, arrange, order, structure or in some other way put our stamp on whatever it is that we are perceiving. It’s true that, in one sense, we don’t seem to *do* anything in receiving incoming data; we simply absorb it, and this looks passive. We don’t purposefully or self-consciously exercise or engage or employ the relevant faculty. But in another sense, our mental apparatus is indeed shaping the data. One might think of a filter. Filters appear to be passive. They are simply there, motionless. But in another sense, through their very presence they do indeed “act” upon whatever is coming through them and change the relevant material in ways that are often decisive. The suggestion, then, is that the intellectual faculties described in the transcendental aesthetic act much like filters, lacking the temporally successive and intentional movements and changes characteristic of cognition and judgment but acting nonetheless. And so too, perhaps, for the raw materials of Brandom’s inferentiality. The historically and culturally generated conceptual apparatus that produces the facts that populate the space of reasons inclines us spontaneously to move from fact to fact by giving and asking for reasons; but it is at least possible to think of the entire structure as based upon some kind of perceptual filter that encounters and formulates that which is coming from a mind-independent world. It is not clear that this is Brandom, but it might well be Brandom-friendly, especially regarding his account of the role of “noninferential reports” and of anaphoric substitutions involving, canonically, pronouns and prosentences, and it might further identify his approach as not at all passive.[[9]](#footnote-9)

We should note, further, that the account of Brandom that I am proposing would seem to be plainly refuted by his apparently clear claim (Brandom 2000a, 358) that “we must extract inferential consequences from our candidate doxastic commitments, including practical consequences for what would or should happen if we act in certain ways, and then seek to assess the truth of those consequential claims….” The added emphasis here on *practical* consequences and real happenings seems obviously designed to meet Habermas’s concerns about pragmatism. Inferentialism is not a frictionless spinning. The giving and asking for reasons tell us what really works and what doesn’t. It describes the on-the-ground results of giving “correct” answers and “incorrect” answers. Keeping score is, in effect, a matter of the concrete success or failure of our inferential practice, and Brandom is thus justified in linking philosophical pragmatism to a pragmatic approach to language-in-use.

Such an account seems to me utterly undermined by Brandom’s foundational claim that the world we deal with – the domain we analyze and reason about – is entirely and exclusively a world of facts populating a space of reasons. As we have seen, we don’t think about things or objects; we think about facts. But if that’s the case, then anything that might be called a “practical consequence” would necessarily be just another fact. To think of practical consequences or “real happenings” as somehow accessible outside of our conceptual world would be to endorse a version of the Myth of Given – we might call it the Myth of the Given Consequence – something Brandom must reject if he is to be self-consistent. He insists that perceptions are not merely given; they are mediated by thought, and that mediation takes us away from any direct access to mind-independent reality. But on this account, what could practical consequences be other than bundles of perceptions? As such, we can, of course, reason inferentially about them. We can demonstrate the logical consequences of making certain claims and denying others pertaining to consequential facts. We can keep score to determine winners and losers. But those inferential consequences will be, again, entirely internal to the processes of human thought, and fail to get us closer to external reality. Brandom’s reference to practical consequences does nothing to combat the charge of frictionless spinning, and has little if any connection to what Habermas thinks of as pragmatism.

A final clarification is perhaps the most important of all. For it seems clear that Habermas himself is guilty of embracing the Myth of the Given Consequence (for a similar argument, see Brandom 2002, 52-53). As we have seen, he is strongly committed to some version of Kant’s account of thought and thing. Again, he formulates this in terms of a de-transcendentalized Kantianism, according to which objective validity is rooted not in transcendentally proven faculties of individual human perception and thought but, rather, in socially and politically generated processes of communicative competence. And in de-transcendentalizing Kant, he maintains the central feature of Kantian theoretical philosophy: we can have no direct or reliable access to the thing in itself. But of course, he allows for an exception. The success or failure of our projects and plans tells us that reality, for unknown reasons, is non-resistant or resistant, depending on the circumstance. But in this regard, Habermas’s critique of Brandom actually redounds against himself, rather than against Brandom. Habermas is correct in emphasizing the very large difference between his own views and those of Brandom., something that Brandom wishes to resist. We can re-summarize the difference as the difference between (1) a *pragmatism* that emphasizes the activity of testing our plans and projects in the world out there in order to discover the practical consequence of success and failure representing the otherwise unknowable non-resistance or resistance of mind-independent reality, which constitutes, in effect, a non-trivial kind of friction, and (2) a *pragmatics* that emphasizes the activity of engaging in inferential discourse so as to discover what our conceptual apparatus permits in terms of “correct” answers “incorrect” answers. Brandom is wrong to defend himself by insisting on a common ground between him and Habermas. There is no common ground. Instead, Brandom’s inferentialism is a perfectly self-consistent – perhaps the only self-consistent – way of dealing with the tripartite model, which he formulates in terms of our embeddedness in a world of facts populating a space of reasons. It is Habermas who adopts the untenable – which is to say, incoherent – position. Absent some account as to why perceiving the success or failure of our projects and plans eludes, or takes us out of, the Sellarsian space of reasons – or, if you like, the prison-house of mind – Habermas’s pragmatism is a violation of the tripartite model, and this means that it is inconsistent with Kantianism, whether de-transcendentalized or not.

**5**

It certainly seems that Brandom’s inferentialism contemplates a kind of frictionless spinning in a void.[[10]](#footnote-10) Given the tripartite model, this appears to be unavoidable. But it is not necessarily problematic. One way to think about the issue would be to look a bit more closely at the very idea of a frictionless spinning which can actually mean different things.

Internalism in general and inferentialism in particular do not presuppose that we are unaffected by external reality. They presuppose only that we have no idea what that reality is or how it affects us. Or, perhaps more accurately, any impact or consequence of our engagement with external reality will simply be registered as another constructed fact – a new fact – entirely internal to the space of reasons. In this sense, we might *take* it that the new fact is a result of our engagement with external reality, as long as we realize that this can never be confirmed. Looked at in a slightly different way, external reality cannot enforce specific *interpretations* upon us. The world does not tell us *what* to think, and that includes success and failure, resistance and non-resistance. Our encounter with the world becomes intelligible – it results in particular thoughts or propositions – only when viewed from the perspective of, and substantively mediated by, our own conceptual apparatus. Again, there are, for us, no other options, no other available points of access. But such a process is not necessarily frictionless. When something occurs in the external world, and if our perceptual apparatus is somehow making contact with that something, whatever it is, the result will presumably be a mental event of some kind, an experience. Thus, when a certain feature of the external world to which we are presumably attending or exposed changes in some way, our thoughts will often change accordingly. How could we think otherwise? We have literally no way of knowing what really changed or how the change might have affected us. But when the new datum emerges, we must assume that this will be registered as a new, or at least different, fact that will have, in one way or another, new or different consequences for the inferential scorekeeping process. The new fact might well be, from a God’s-eye point of view, profoundly wrong. It can never be confirmed or refuted with reference to how things in the world really are, independent of our perspective, since no such reference is possible. But the new fact must nonetheless be understood as rooted precisely in a kind of friction, since it results somehow – who knows how? – from the external change.

Imagine an entity in the external world that we can think of as *Fo*, where *o* refers to the object itself as something that exists in the real world and *F* refers to a real-world property or characteristic of it. Assume that I am situated with respect to *o* such that *o* somehow “impinges” on me, resulting in an experience of mine that we can all *Ge*, where *e* designates the object as I experience it and *G* designates some property or characteristic that I predicate of that experienced object, from which, moreover, I am apt to generate a fact or proposition to which I am committed, namely, the fact that *e* is characterized by *G* or *PGe*. Of course, I understand, as a good post-Kantian, that I have no reason to believe that *G* is an accurate rendering of *F*. I could know that only from a God’s-eye point of view. The best that I can say is that *F*, whatever it happens to be in reality, is, as a characteristic of *o*, somehow “responsible” for my experiencing *G* as a characteristic of *e*, hence for my acceptance of *PGe* as a fact internal to the space of reasons and eligible for playing a role in inferential discourse. Now suppose that *o* undergoes a change in the real world such that it is now characterized not by *F* but, rather, by *H*, a different property. If we assume that *o* continues to impinge on me, then it seems that the change from *Fo* to *Ho* will very possibly register as a change in *e* such that I might now predicate *I* of *e*. Again, there’s no reason to suppose that *I* is an accurate rendering of *H* , and no way to find out. But given this new fact – *PIe* – I can no longer coherently believe in *PGe*. Coherence requires, rather, that I believe in the new fact, and this new fact then become an integral part of my discursive, inferential process. Of course, *PIe* could very well be an utter mischaracterization of *Ho* as it really is, and we can never know about that one way or the other. But we can be fairly confident that the change from *PGe* to *PIe* does in some non-trivial sense map on to what has happened in the real world. This is friction and is, as such, far from trivial. Since this new fact is an integral part of our inferential process, and since that process is governed by logical principles of coherence or non-contradiction – that, basically, is what governs the scorekeeping process – our belief in the fact is imposed upon us on pain of contradiction. It is, internal to the space of reasons, irrefutable. Irrefutability is, in effect, the standard by which we determine whether or not a proposition is true.

At first blush, this might actually look something like Habermas’s model. The new fact in question might be thought of as reflecting the non-resistance or resistance of external reality in the face of efforts to implement projects and plans. But there are large differences. First, as we have seen, success or failure are themselves facts, as are resistance and non-resistance, hence nothing other than products of the inferential system that operates entirely within the space of reasons. Consequences are never simply given; they are constructed. Second, inferentialism must reject any kind of realist or naturalist claim – even including Habermas’s “weak naturalism” – if it is to respect the tripartite model. Any assessment of the accuracy of our beliefs, including beliefs about non-resistance and resistance, must be an assessment internal to thought itself. From this there is no escape, not even a weak one. It is important to note that I am using the word “friction” here to denote something more general than resistance. Habermas’s notion of resistance evokes the idea of a firm natural structure of some kind so constituted that it, whatever it is, allows some projects and plans and disallows others. But there’s no reason, apart from our conceptual apparatus, to doubt that friction might in fact be utterly random, that external reality is a chaotic non-structure and that patterns of success and failure really reflect statistical anomalies. Similarly, there’s no reason to doubt, apart from our conceptual apparatus, that friction might represent the cunning device of an evil demon or the playful scheme of a capricious and arbitrary God – perhaps the God of Job – and that nature has nothing to do with it. Indeed, there is no reason, apart from our conceptual apparatus, to suppose that reality obeys or conforms to our category of mechanical, temporally successive cause and effect. The very idea of cause and effect may be ours and ours alone. (In fact, there are actually reasons, internal to our conceptual apparatus, to suppose precisely that.) In any case, even a weak naturalism assumes too much.

While we cannot forget that an irrefutable fact about reality might actually be a complete mischaracterization of reality, saying this can never be other than a kind of empty platitude (as in Brandom 2000c, 168). If we cannot possibly know whether or not a fact accurately describes what it purports to describe, then questions of realism and skepticism are idle at best. We nonetheless have to *take* *it* that the fact is somehow connected to the world out there – friction of some kind must be in play – and we can be confident that the fact is warranted to the extent that it is not contradicted by and, indeed, is logically entailed by other facts in the space of reasons. This is a form of transcendental argument.

Once again, the overall perspective is, I would say, Hegelian, understanding Hegel as describing the historical self-unfolding of Mind as an internal process that regards the question of mind-independent reality as literally a non-question. This is, to be sure, a tendentious reading. But it assumes that Hegel respects some version of the tripartite model, an assumption that allows us, I would argue, to make sense of his system as it begins to develop from the very first pages of the *Phenomenology of Mind*.

Of course, there is also the issue of pragmatism. As indicated at the outset, this paper is not about pragmatism per se but only about pragmatism as understood by Habermas and Brandom. Nonetheless, I hazard the suggestion that the position staked out here might be closest to that of Peirce, at least in some of his moods. Thus, Peirce (1934, 416) says that “[y]our problems would be greatly simplified if, instead of saying that you want to know the ‘Truth,’ you were simply to say that you want to attain a state of belief unassailable by doubt.” This sounds very much like what I am calling irrefutability.

**6**

With respect to practical, normative or ethical judgment, the Habermas/Brandom interchange has, *mutatis* *mutandis*, pretty much the same structure as before. Habermas accuses Brandom of failing adequately to acknowledge and accommodate the distinction between theoretical and practical reason. Brandom denies the accusation and insists that his account of this distinction is entirely compatible with that of Habermas. But as before, I want to suggest, on the one hand, that the two accounts are profoundly different from one another and, on the other, that the difference strongly redounds to Brandom’s advantage. Pragmatic inferentialism provides, in my view, a uniquely powerful way of thinking about objective validity – truth – in ethical and political judgment and action. Importantly, our analysis of theoretical reason in inferentiality will translate directly into an analysis of normative reason in inferentiality. This means that most of the important work has already been done, and that the question of normativity can be handled with considerable expedition.

Habermas offers an utterly conventional account of the distinction between theoretical and moral or normative discourse. He tells us that moral discourse involves “no factual knowledge,” that “assertions say what *is* the case” whereas “injunctions or prohibitions say what *ought* or ought not to be the case,” and that morality “says how people ought to act, not how things are with objects in the world” (Habermas 2003, 239 [emphases in original]). We have here a very sharp, though also very standard, notion of the difference between fact and value, is and ought, descriptive and prescriptive, the theoretical and the normative. One unavoidable consequence is that Habermas’s pragmatism – the analysis of the success and failure of our projects and plans – is of no help with respect to moral or normative questions. There are no moral facts, so even the weakest kind of realism is, in this context, irrelevant.

In its place, of course, Habermas proposes a type of proceduralism. The features of the ideal speech situation – especially the requirement of equal participation by or mutual inclusion of all affected parties, as formulated by so-called principle “(U)” – in and of itself guarantees that the outcomes will be ethically right (Habermas 1979, 65-68; Habermas 1998, 42). Such an account is very much in the tradition of the categorical imperative, whereby the procedure of universalizing the maxim of an action is both necessary and sufficient to justify the action itself in moral terms, and also similar to Rawls’s so-called Kantian constructivism, whereby the procedural features of the original position, including and especially the veil of ignorance, are such as to ensure outcomes that are fair, hence morally justified. In all such cases, of course, objective validity has nothing to do with the external world. Rather, it is hostage to the premises and principles that underwrite the particular procedure that is being proposed, and these will be matters of agreement rather than fact. The result, for Habermas, is that whereas theoretical judgment produces that which is true, moral or normative judgment produces that which is right.

With this in mind, Habermas accuses Brandom of promiscuously employing the language of ethics: “he makes use of an overly inclusive conception of normativity” (Habermas 2003, 140). The focus here is very clear. When talking about factual assertions that emerge from the discourse of pragmatic inferentialism, Brandom certainly does use the language of normativity. Indeed, this is arguably the central motif of *Making* *it* *Explicit* (Brandom 1994, 5-17). He does so, I would suggest, in an entirely natural and plausible fashion. If the game of giving and asking for reasons results in an assertion of fact that follows logically from – it is correctly inferred from – the set of relevant facts with which it is connected, then one *ought* to accept that assertion as valid. This is, in effect, a normative rule. Habermas’s complaint is that Brandom, simply in virtue of employing such language, obscures or confounds the difference between theoretical and normative discourse.

As before, Brandom strongly denies the accusation, insisting that his account does full justice to the difference between fact and value, very much as outlined by Habermas. As before, however, his denial ignores the sense in which his account is actually profoundly different from that of Habermas and oddly overlooks, thereby, the possibility that his approach to normativity may actually be more compelling than Habermas’s proceduralism. Brandom recognizes “a crucial distinction between facts and norms,” and describes it as follows:

“Normative facts… are a distinct kind of fact. That the universe has a mass large enough to cause eventual gravitational collapse is, if true, a nonnormative fact. For the concepts that articulate it are not concepts, such as commitment or entitlement, which play the expressive role with respect to practical reasoning that qualifies them as normative” (Brandom 2000a, 365).

Again, we have a conventional statement of the fact/value dichotomy. In effect, normative clams are about actions that can be chosen or not, while nonnormative claims are simply about how things are. And in elaborating this distinction, Brandom emphasizes the different vocabularies that participants use in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Normative reasons involve the language of commitment and entitlement, the former suggesting the idea of willful decision, the latter the idea of right or legitimacy (see Brandom 1994, 159-63). This is allegedly different from inferential discourse regarding the nature of things. Importantly, Brandom emphasizes that normative concepts and claims are “socially instituted” (Brandom 2000a, 365). They are constructed rather than found and they reflect, as such, the values or predilections of the relevant community. They express, thereby, a distinctively moral, rather than merely factual, sensibility.

Such an account seems troubling in a number of ways. It is not clear, for example, why believing claims that pertain to how things are is not very much a matter of decision and commitment. The recurrent phenomenon of science denial suggests that doxastic commitments are real commitments indeed, involving willful decisions to accept what the inferential process offers up. And so too for entitlement. In the game of giving and asking for reasons, one is not today entitled to believe in a geocentric universe and is fully entitled to believe in a heliocentric universe. We can agree that these types of commitments and entitlements are different in kind from commitments and entitlements with respect to acceptable and unacceptable courses of action. Claims about how things are and claims about what we should do are not the same. They are substantively different; they have different contents. But normal discourse comprises many different kinds of claims, and these differences are, I want to suggest, overridden by a deeper identity. Three things need to be emphasized here. First, in both theoretical and normative discourse, we are indeed talking about facts – remembering now that, for Brandom, facts are conceptual constructs of more or less collective human intelligence that populate the space of reasons, which, in turn, functions as the limiting horizon within which we operate. Second, facts are recognized as such – we are normatively required to believe them and are entitled to believe them – insofar as they are correctly inferred from the relevant set of other facts to which we are committed. And it is hard to see why this isn’t every bit as true of moral or ethical facts as of theoretical or descriptive facts. It follows from this, third, that the basis of objective validity of moral or normative facts is the same as for nonnormative facts (see Brandom 2000b, 31-38). In each case, truth is a matter of irrefutability, understanding irrefutability to be a matter of coherence whereby claims must be accepted on pain of contradiction. Along these lines, then, Brandom’s insistence that normative claims are distinctive in being socially instituted is unpersuasive. Given his view of the nature of facts and the role that they play in inferential discourse, one would imagine that all claims, normative and nonnormative alike, should be considered products of social institutions. Indeed, Brandom sometimes seems to indicate precisely that (see Brandom 2000b, 34).

Yet again, the argument is, I would argue, largely Hegelian. For Hegel, the truth of right is, in epistemological terms, no different from the truth of science or metaphysics or any other systematic field of inquiry. Thus, for example, the objective validity of the claims of the third part of the *Encyclopedia* have the same bases as those of the second part, and those bases are outlined in the first part. Our knowledge of right is every bit as secure as our knowledge of nature and of things in general.

And so too, I would argue, for pragmatic inferentialism. As a doctrine of coherentism, internalism and holism, the force of pragmatic inferentialism is to deny any important epistemological differences between facts and values, between the theoretical and the normative. The relevance for political judgment and action ought to be obvious. As we have indicated above, what is perhaps especially important about Brandom’s inferentialism is that, unlike Habermas’s account of communicative competence, it is not presented as an ideal procedure to be attained through effort. Rather, Brandom is purporting to describe the normal manner of human interaction with respect to questions of true and false, right and wrong. We habitually and routinely give and ask for reasons, and assess reasons on the basis of inferential soundness. This, I would suggest, is as characteristic of normal political discourse and activity as of any other. The claims of politics, *pace* Rawls and Arendt and many others, are rooted in the inferential structure of what it means to make sense, hence what is true, at least according to our lights. Moreover, to the degree to which the conceptual structures with which we operate invariably function as something akin to Strawson’s descriptive metaphysics, there can be no such thing as political judgment and action that is truly innocent of metaphysical commitment. Indeed, the exact opposite is true.

In this connection, it is, I think, useful to note that political theorists seem to have been far more engaged with Brandom’s teacher Rorty than with Brandom himself. The explanation for this is, in a sense, simple, since Rorty is generally far more upfront about his (primarily democratic) political commitments than Brandom. But those commitments are essentially based on his philosophical standpoint, which is in important respects quite different from but in other respects similar to those of Brandom, especially on the interpretation of Brandom that I have provided here. The central political implication, I suggest, is that Brandom’s philosophical position provides a powerful set of arguments for understanding normal political discourse, hence normal political judgment and action, as, like virtually all normal judgment and action, deeply rooted in considerations of coherence, rationality and truth.

Of course, insofar as we behave abnormally in public life and ignore the strictures of logic and inferential reason – insofar as we systematically embrace lies and deception, for example – we have not another kind of politics but, rather, the absence of politics, to be replaced in one form or another by regimes of despotism.

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1. Much of the secondary literature tends to focus on an issue that I shall not address, namely, the difference between a second-person and a third-person account of scorekeeping See, for example Wanderer (2008, 168-72) and Wanderer (2010, 101). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This phrase should not be confused with Brandom’s frequent use of the same phrase in *Making it Explicit*, where the reference is simply to the standard threefold (pre-Gettier) formula for knowledge: true justified belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Of course, the point is Kantian. See for example, section A104 of the First Critique. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Much of the literature on Brandom, like Brandom himself, directly violates this principle. See, for example, MacFarlane (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The formal definition of pragmatism that Brandom provides in *Making it Explicit* (1994, 143) seems to be entirely a matter of linguistic pragmatics, and has no apparent connection to Habermas’s notion of pragmatism. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. What I am calling a “conceptual apparatus” is, I think, similar or even equivalent to what Brandom (following Rorty) calls a “vocabulary,” understanding that there are no concepts without words and no words without concepts. Brandom says (2000c, 163), for example, that “[w]e can only understand the notion of a fact by telling a story that makes reference to vocabularies….” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Here and elsewhere I refer to “beliefs” for convenience sake. Brandom prefers to speak of “deontic commitments,” thereby emphasizing the normative aspect of undertaking and attributing propositional claims. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This may appear to be inconsistent with Brandom’s argument in *Making it Explicit*, where he often connects objective validity not with what we “take” things to be but with claims that are actually “correct.” But I think this should be read not as an embrace of any kind of externalist realism but, rather, as a rejection of subjectivism. Claims are indeed correct insofar as they emerge coherently and logically within the internal space of reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In *Making it Explicit,* Brandom appears to endorse a modified form of externalist reliabilism, of a sort developed especially by Goldman (Brandomm1994, 209-211; see also Brandom 2000c, 165-66). But the modifications are crucial. Externally reliable reporters such as parrots or thermostats do not have knowledge because they lack the kind of understanding necessary to participate in the communicative, inferential and highly internalist – and also decidedly antifoundationalist – game of giving and asking for reasons. In discussing objective validity, then, *Making it Explicit* understands it as a matter of socially-generated practices of undertaking and attributing doxastic commitments involving, *inter* *alia*, “noninferential *de re* reports,” (roughly, sense perceptions). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Such a criticism of Brandom has, of course, been made perhaps most forcefully, and repeatedly, by McDowell himself. But McDowell’s own account of objective validity – or of representational content – seems to me highly problematic. See [reference deleted]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)