

Communication and Content: Circumstances and Consequences of the Habermas–Brandom Debate

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Abstract

The recent exchange between Robert Brandom and Jürgen Habermas provides an opportunity to compare and contrast some aspects of their systems. Both present broadly inferential accounts of meaning, according to which the content of an expression is determined by its role in an inferential network. Several problems confront such theories of meaning – one of which threatens the possibility of communication because content is relative to an individual's set of beliefs. Brandom acknowledges this problem and provides a solution to it. The point of this paper is to argue that it arises for Habermas's theory as well. I then present several solutions Habermas could adopt and evaluate their feasibility. The result is that Habermas must alter his theory of communicative action by contextualizing the standards for successful communication.

Keywords: Brandom; Habermas; meaning; communication; inference; holism

In their recent exchange, Jürgen Habermas and Robert Brandom discuss several issues that are central to their respective philosophical projects. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Habermas produced a philosophical system with unsurpassed scope. The system extends to virtually every corner of the discipline and into several neighbouring fields as well. Likewise, with *Making It Explicit*, Brandom attempts to reorient the primary areas of philosophy around a distinctive account of linguistic practice; the result is one of the most formidable philosophical works to appear in decades. Philosophers will undoubtedly benefit from attempts to compare and contrast these two sprawling theories well into this century. However, this paper does not purport to attempt such a mapping. It merely provides an entry point for this endeavour by tracing a certain constellation of problems through their respective accounts of meaning and models of communication.

Their systems are surprisingly similar; both ultimately depend on accounts of language. Indeed, both philosophers ground their projects in pragmatics – theories about the use of linguistic expressions. At the centre of each system lies a theory of meaning for which both endorse broadly inferential accounts. That is, the meaning of an expression essentially depends on its role in an inferential network. Among the problems that arise for any such strategy is one that threatens the possibility of communication. Brandom acknowledges this problem and provides a solution for it. I show that this problem also plagues Habermas's theory, and that, to solve it, he must significantly alter his theory of communicative action.

In the first section of this paper I outline the problem an inferential theory of meaning poses for Brandom's model of communication. I argue in the second section that the problem Brandom identifies arises for Habermas as well. Section 3 contains several potential Habermasian objections to this argument and my replies. In the final section, I present several solutions Habermas could adopt and discuss the consequences of each.

1 Brandom's Model of Communication and the Interpersonal Problem

In Brandom (1994), the fundamental project is to provide a model of discursive practice that explains how humans acknowledge and attribute normative statuses and how the expressions employed in such a practice have content conferred on them by their use. According to Brandom's semantic theory, the content of a sentence is its inferential significance in a discursive practice. The inferential significance of a sentence includes both the sentences that may be used as premises in inferences to the sentence in question and the sentences that may be inferred from it. The inferential significance of a sentence also includes the perceptual circumstances that may lead to it being uttered and the practical consequences for action of its being uttered. Brandom's inferential semantics is extended to individual words with a substitutional structure whereby a word's meaning is its contribution to the inferential significance of sentences in which it occurs. This theory is extended to indexicals and demonstratives with an anaphoric structure whereby these performances have meaning in virtue of serving as initiators in anaphoric chains of expressions.¹

Brandom's semantic theory is grounded in his pragmatics. The primitive notion of his semantic theory is inferential proprieties (norms governing inference). This notion is explained in terms of his scorekeeping pragmatics, which is his account of the use of linguistic expressions. The two central notions of scorekeeping are statuses and attitudes. Commitment and entitlement (i.e. obligation and permission respectively) are the two types of status, while undertaking and attributing are the two types of

attitude. Members of a discursive practice keep score on one another by undertaking and attributing commitments and entitlements. One of Brandom's central doctrines is methodological phenomenalism, whereby statuses are explained in terms of attitudes.²

What is Brandom's account of communication and what are the aforementioned problems it faces? Brandom's model of communication depends on his scorekeeping pragmatics. Communication occurs between two scorekeepers, A and B, when a claim, *p*, undertaken by A (usually as a result of A uttering the sentence that expresses *p*) becomes available to B as a premise in B's inferential system. B understands A's assertion if B attributes the right commitment to A as a result of A's utterance. A necessary condition for B's understanding of A's utterance is for B to know the consequences of endorsing the claim herself. That is, B must be able to assess the utterance's inferential significance relative to her commitment set. Communication requires that B must be able to select a sentence that (if she uttered it) would have the same (or relevantly similar) inferential significance relative to her commitment set as A's utterance has relative to his commitment set.³

One consequence of inferential accounts of meaning is that, in Brandom's terms, the inferential significance of an utterance is relative to one's set of other commitments because the set of inferences in which it serves as a conclusion and the set of inferences in which it is a premise will depend on which other claims are available to serve as premises. For example, 'if *p* then *q*' alone does not imply '*q*', but together with '*p*' as an auxiliary premise, '*q*' is in the set of its consequences.

The relativity of inferential significance to a set of background commitments causes an *interpersonal problem* pertaining to communication. If assessing the inferential significance of a claim is a necessary condition for understanding it, and the inferential significance is relative to a commitment set, then different participants in a conversation will not be able to understand each other's utterances. In a conversation, person A utters a sentence, *p*, with which he associates an inferential significance that is relative to the set of commitments he acknowledges. Person B hears A's utterance, but associates *p* with the inferential significance that it would have relative to her set of auxiliary commitments. Because A's and B's sets of commitments differ, they associate different inferential significance to *p*. Thus, B misunderstands A's utterance. The only case when this would not happen would be that in which A and B had the exact same set of background commitments (which is impossible and also eliminates the need for communication).

When a scorekeeper attributes a commitment to another or undertakes a commitment by uttering a sentence, the content of the commitment must be specified. Just which commitment is attributed is relative to the attributer's commitment set because its specification will depend on the

available auxiliary commitments. In other words, different scorekeepers cannot understand one another or communicate because they attach different contents to the utterances they use to specify each other's commitments.⁴

Brandom considers several solutions to this problem and finds further difficulties with each. Quine proposed a solution to the problem of the relativity of inferential significance whereby meaning is eliminated from all but the largest linguistic units. He treats reference as the only semantic feature and allows only extensional information to be communicated; inferential significance is given no role whatsoever. This solves the interpersonal problem: communication consists in transmitting extensional information. Intensions can be defined in terms of extension, but they have no direct role in communication.⁵ The problems with an extensional account of communication notwithstanding, Brandom cannot adopt Quine's solution without abandoning the inferential approach to semantics. Further, Quine's solution requires an independent account of extension and reference, whereas Brandom explains reference and extension inferentially.

Another possible solution is to define semantic contents as functions from sets of commitments to inferential significances.⁶ This allows contents to be shared and communicated. One person understands another when she grasps the content of his utterance; that is, she determines which functions he associates with his expressions.⁷ Kripke's discussion of Wittgenstein provides a criticism of this solution – there are far more contents (functions) than there are expressions. It is always possible to construct many functions that agree with the use of a term on all its past applications and on the future applications that one is disposed to give, but that differ beyond these. Because there is no sense in which one of these functions is associated with the term but not the others, it is impossible to have a determinate content attached to an expression simply by using it.⁸ I will refer to this as the *underdetermination difficulty*. (Brandom endorses a different version of this solution that avoids the underdetermination difficulty.)

A third solution is to restrict the class of meaning-constitutive inferences by distinguishing between a set of primary inferences that constitute the content of an expression and a set of secondary inferences involving the expression that are merely correct applications. The interpersonal problem is solved because a hearer understands a speaker when she grasps the primary inferences associated with the speaker's expressions, but their beliefs can diverge beyond these.⁹ Quine famously criticized one version of this idea with his critique of the analytic/synthetic distinction. He showed that one way of construing the distinction between primary and secondary inferences could not be implemented by linguistic usage.¹⁰ I will discuss Brandom's actual solution to the interpersonal problem in the last section

of this paper after arguing that the same problem arises for Habermas's theory of communicative action.

2 The Interpersonal Problem for Habermas

Since its inception, Habermas has altered his account of meaning in several ways. At an early stage, he endorsed Searle's notion of *literal meaning*, which concerns being grammatically well-formed.¹¹ Participants in communication presuppose that they grasp the same literal meaning. Habermas's early theory of universal pragmatics presupposed the notion of literal meaning and gave an account of pragmatic meaning, which pertains to the interpersonal relation established through the illocutionary element of a speech act. That is, literal meaning was assumed to be autonomous. Habermas then altered his theory to accord with Searle's claims that literal meaning can be understood only in the context of assumed background knowledge.¹² One of the functions of the lifeworld is to provide such a background in Habermas's theory. On this early account, Habermas attempted to explain the pragmatic meaning of an utterance while taking its literal meaning for granted.

Habermas eventually expanded his theory to meet the more ambitious task of explaining linguistic meaning associated with understanding as such. This shift can be seen as a move toward an account of the conditions of *understanding* instead of an account of the conditions of *mutual understanding*.¹³ His theory of meaning took on the characteristics it has today: Habermas explains all meaning in terms of acceptability conditions. Thus, he gave up literal meaning in favour of an inferential conception of meaning. All that remains of the early view is that speakers and hearers share a common language (which is explained in terms of their being able to produce grammatically well-formed sentences in accordance with rules that both master) and presuppose that they use their terms with identical meanings. Thus Habermas's current position explains understanding meaning *in general*.¹⁴

Habermas reorients traditional theories of meaning with an account of what it is to *understand* meaning.¹⁵ Instead of presenting necessary and sufficient conditions for an expression to have a particular semantic content, he provides criteria for determining whether someone understands the meaning of a speech act. Consequently, understanding plays the central role in his model. The theory of communicative action is an account of the coordinating properties of language that allow participants to pursue their goals cooperatively. Such properties depend on the process of reaching understanding. Habermas distinguishes understanding from reaching understanding. 'Understanding' means grasping the meaning of an expression or utterance. 'Reaching understanding' means coming to agreement about an issue.¹⁶ The process of reaching understanding is

ultimately explained in terms of validity, which functions as a primitive notion for Habermas. Agreement is reached when both parties in a communication accept the same validity claim for the same reasons.

Two claims form the core of Habermas's theory of meaning. One understands the meaning of a *sentence* if one knows how to use it to reach agreement with someone about something in the world; that is, if one knows how to utter it as a speech act in a process of reaching understanding. One understands the meaning of a *speech act* if one knows its *acceptability conditions*. The acceptability conditions are the conditions under which a hearer could be persuaded to accept the speech act and endorse its validity claim. An essential aspect of a speech act's acceptability conditions is the set of potential reasons the speaker could give to support the validity claims contained therein. Therefore, understanding (and consequently meaning) is explained in terms of potential agreement.¹⁷

How does the interpersonal problem affect Habermas's model? Recall that the interpersonal problem is a consequence of the relativity of inferential significance (in Brandom's theory). For Habermas, the meaning of a term and the success of communication are both determined by the acceptability conditions of the relevant speech act. The essential (and primary) component of these conditions is the set of reasons that could be given as justification for the claims contained in the speech act. Furthermore, an essential aspect of understanding a speech act is knowing the reasons that could be given for it and (to a lesser degree) how it could be used as a reason for other claims. These two components of meaning correspond roughly to the inferential aspects of Brandom's notion of inferential significance. Let them together be known as the *inferential role* of the claim.¹⁸

Habermas endorses Toulmin's theory of argumentation as a model for discourse, which allows (as do all plausible accounts of argumentation) multiple-premise inferences.¹⁹ The set of inferences for which a claim functions as the conclusion and the set of inferences for which a claim functions as a premise both depend on the auxiliary claims available. Thus Habermas is committed to the fact that the inferential role of a claim is relative to a set of auxiliary claims.

The inferential role of a claim is an essential part of its acceptability conditions. The inferential role of a claim is relative to a set of beliefs. Thus, the acceptability conditions of a claim are relative to a set of beliefs. One understands a speech act if one knows its acceptability conditions. Because a claim's acceptability conditions are relative to a set of beliefs, the speaker and hearer associate different acceptability conditions with a speech act. The speaker can know the acceptability conditions of her speech act relative to her beliefs and the hearer can know the acceptability conditions of the speech act relative to his beliefs, but neither can know the acceptability conditions of the speech act relative to the other's beliefs.

For Habermas, communication is successful if the speaker's speech act brings about an interpersonal relationship in which the hearer understands and accepts the validity claims intended by the speaker in her speech act.²⁰ Because the acceptability conditions of a speech act are relative to a set of beliefs, the speaker and hearer will always associate different acceptability conditions with the speaker's speech act. The hearer cannot understand the speech act as intended by the speaker, and consequently cannot accept the speech act's validity claims. Therefore, communication is impossible on Habermas's model.

3 Objections and Replies

Objection one: Habermas has recently distinguished between weak and strong communicative action. This distinction is explained in terms of the difference between actor-independent and actor-dependent reasons. Actor-independent reasons are shared by all the members of a community, while actor-dependent reasons are not. Weak communicative action takes place when the validity claim in question can be supported only by actor-dependent reasons. It can have mutual understanding as a goal, but not agreement. That is, the hearer can understand the speaker's claim and agree that the speaker's reasons for its validity are good *for the speaker*. However, the hearer is not rationally motivated to accept the claim as valid because the reasons are not actor-independent. Strong communicative action corresponds to Habermas's standard theory, in which processes of reaching agreement require actor-independent reasons to justify validity claims.²¹

The distinction between strong and weak communicative action provides Habermas with two objections against the argument of the previous section. First, it offers an account of understanding that does not rely on agreement. Two people need not accept the same validity claim for the same reasons in order to understand one another. Thus the argument fails to show that mutual understanding is impossible. Second, the availability of actor-independent reasons secures the possibility of agreement and communicative success.

Reply: The first point misconstrues the argument of the previous section. I argue that, for Habermas, the relativity of inferential role implies that understanding another's speech act is impossible, and thus communicative success is impossible. My argument is *not* that agreement (accepting the same validity claim for the same reasons) is impossible, and thus understanding another's speech act is impossible. Therefore, the objection fails because the distinction between weak and strong communicative action presupposes the possibility of mutual understanding, which my argument shows is impossible on Habermas's model. The second point would be a legitimate objection if the notion of an actor-independent reason were unproblematic. Talk of reasons obscures the difficulty here

because whether or not one claim counts as a reason for another depends on what other claims are available. One claim serving as a reason for another is not an intrinsic relation between them. Consequently, one cannot partition the set of claims believed by members of a community into actor-independent and actor-dependent without specifying the claim for which they are to serve as reasons and the set of other claims available as reasons. Certainly, any claim can be used by some member of a community to support some claim or another. However, given a specific claim in need of justification, no claim will be held to support it by everyone in the community. Therefore, there is no such thing as an actor-independent reason in the sense that Habermas needs to secure the possibility of agreement and communicative success.

Objection two: There is a difference between a theory of meaning (an account of something determinate associated with each expression of a language) and a theory of meaningfulness (an account of which expressions of a language are significant for communication). The interpersonal problem can arise only for a theory of meaning, not a theory of meaningfulness. That is, only a theory that associates determinate meanings with linguistic expressions can be susceptible to the criticism that participants in communication associate different meanings with their expressions in such a way that mutual understanding and agreement are impossible. Because Habermas presents a theory of understanding grounded in communication, he is not committed to determinate meanings and thus is not susceptible to the interpersonal problem.

Reply: It is certainly true that the interpersonal problem does not apply to theories of meaningfulness, and it is true that Habermas explains a sentence's meaning in terms of understanding grounded in communication. However, he is committed to determinate meanings and therefore to a full-blooded theory of meaning.²² Notice that my argument in section 2 that communication is impossible according to the theory of communicative action was formulated in terms of understanding, acceptability conditions, and inferential role. I made no appeal to determinate meanings. However, this objection implies that my argument implicitly presupposes that Habermas is committed to determinate meanings. I will assume that my argument does have such a presupposition and proceed to justify it.

First, for Habermas, each participant in a process of reaching understanding must adopt a performative attitude. The fact that an essential aspect of the performative attitude is the assumption that all members of the community use their linguistic expressions with the same meaning is evidence that Habermas's theory is more than just a theory of meaningfulness.²³ Indeed, he argues that participants in a process of reaching understanding can recognize that they attach the same meaning to their expressions through the interaction of their mutual presuppositions in the process of meeting each other's expectations for behaviour.²⁴

Second, Habermas's commitment to the notion of determinate meanings follows from his commitment to the performative attitude for participants in a process of reaching understanding and his argument that a purely descriptive account of understanding is impossible. Habermas (in 1984) argues that it is impossible to produce a purely descriptive account of understanding meaning because an interpreter must participate in the process of reaching understanding. If the interpreter is to understand the members of the community he is interpreting, he must know the acceptability conditions of their speech acts. Thus he must know the kinds of reasons a speaker could give for his claim. Therefore the interpreter must be a part of the process of assessing the validity claim contained in a speech act if he is to understand the speaker at all. He can understand the reasons that determine the meaning of the speech act only if he can evaluate them; thus, his own standards are brought into the interpretation. Which interpretation he ascribes to the community will depend on the norms that govern the processes of reaching understanding in this community. Therefore, the external perspective of the interpreter coincides with the internal perspective of the participant engaging in a process of reaching understanding. Consequently, a theorist cannot provide a purely descriptive theory of understanding because he must adopt the performative attitude when interpreting a community member. Furthermore, because a theorist (e.g. Habermas) must adopt the performative attitude when interpreting the members of a community, he must assume that they attach the same meanings to their expressions. Therefore, Habermas is committed to a theory that employs determinate meanings and not just the notion of meaningfulness.

Third, Habermas's commitment to a theory of meaning instead of a theory of meaningfulness is manifested in his system as the order of explanation between action coordination and communicative success. If he were committed to a mere theory of meaningfulness, then he would explain communicative success in terms of action coordination. This order of explanation makes communicative success relative to a communicative context and requires no more than that speech acts are deemed meaningful enough for coordinating action. Sameness of meaning (or understanding) plays no role in this order of explanation. However, for Habermas, the order of explanation is reversed. Action coordination is explained in terms of communicative success, which is not relative to a communicative context. There is a universal standard for communicative success – that speakers accept the same validity claims for the same reasons. If Habermas were to alter his theory of communicative action so that it contained no more than a theory of meaningfulness, then he would have to reverse this order of explanation and give up the assumption that community members mean the same thing by their expressions. Indeed, this strategy is one of the potential modifications I consider in the next section.

Objection three: The reply to objection two referred to an argument (in Habermas, 1987) where it is shown that participants in a process of communication can secure mutual understanding by ensuring that they mean the same thing by their linguistic expressions. This argument shows that Habermas avoids the interpersonal problem by appeal to participants' presuppositions.

Reply: The claim that Habermas offers an explanation of sameness of meaning in terms of participants' presuppositions is misleading. He explains how a speaker and a hearer can come to recognize the same sentences as grammatically correct, but this is far from establishing identical meanings. It could guarantee identical meanings only if meaning were taken to be literal meaning. Since Habermas gave up literal meanings and adopted an inferential approach, no such explanation of sameness of meaning in terms of participants' presuppositions is available. Thus the argument that participants' presuppositions can secure meaning identity fails.

Objection four: Habermas certainly admits that members of a community can use an expression and mean different things by it. Indeed, one of the central features of the theory of communicative action is the account of discourse as recourse for participants involved in communicative situations where misunderstanding occurs. Thus, Habermas's theory has the resources to deal with the situations appealed to in my argument that the interpersonal problem threatens his theory. Therefore, the division of labour between action coordination and discourse solves the interpersonal problem.

Reply: When participants enter into a discourse to argue about the validity of a claim, they must be able to communicate to settle the issue. Discourse can serve its purpose of eliminating misunderstandings only on the assumption that communicative success on other topics is possible. But this is exactly the issue at hand. The relativity of inferential role implies that different participants *never* understand a speech act in the same way because they *always* have different beliefs. Thus misunderstandings are the only possible outcome of attempts at communication. No interaction can result in communicative success, whether it is in action coordination or in discourse. Thus Habermas cannot appeal to the division of labour between communicative action and discourse to avoid the relativity of inferential role or its consequence of complete mutual misunderstanding.

Objection five: The lifeworld guarantees the possibility of communication because it ensures that participants in communication mean the same thing by most of their utterances. One of the core commitments of Habermas's philosophical project is that humans attach the same meanings to most of their expressions because they are socialized in the same lifeworld. In fact, Brandom's theory is far more individualistic than Habermas's. That is, for Brandom, each member of a discursive practice

has her own inferential network of commitments and entitlements. And each member attempts to correlate her own inferential network with those of others in the practice. The practice and its norms institute a set of contents that are expressed by the utterances of the members. This set of contents characterizes the deontic status of the practice as genuinely discursive. Brandom explains this status in terms of the attitudes of the members of that (or another) community attributing it, which just reflect their individual inferential networks. For Habermas, the lifeworld has an inferential network of meanings and tacit knowledge that is intersubjectively constituted by its interactions with the members of a community (and their participation in processes of reaching understanding). Processes of communication influence and are influenced by the lifeworld in a constant feedback loop. But the inferential network of the lifeworld cannot be explained in terms of the inferential networks of the members of the community. Thus Habermas's account of communication has an important holistic aspect that Brandom's does not. Because of the role of the lifeworld in Habermas's theory of meaning, members of a community are guaranteed to have access to identical meanings. Thus the interpersonal problem with which Brandom grapples never even poses a threat to Habermas's project because this problem presupposes the individualistic approach of which Brandom's theory is an example.²⁵

Reply: Habermas's assumption that members of a community mean the same thing by most of their expressions merely shifts the problem. The problem now becomes that his broadly inferential theory of meaning is in tension with his commitment to members of a community having access to identical meanings through the lifeworld. The assumption that two speakers involved in a process of reaching understanding have access to the same meanings for most of their terms will ensure that communication is possible. However, the inferential account of meaning is at odds with these shared meanings.

To illustrate, assume that there are two people attempting to communicate; one utters an expression whose meaning is shared between them. This expression cannot have its meaning by virtue of its role in any inferential network. Assume that it can. If the meaning of the expression is determined by its role in either of the individuals' inferential structures, then the interpersonal problem occurs. If the meaning of the expression is its role in the inferential network of the lifeworld, then several other problems arise. First, allowing the lifeworld to have an inferential framework abandons the idea that an inferential network belongs to an agent by virtue of her dispositions to infer some claims from others. Indeed, the notion of a lifeworld's inferential network seems incoherent. Second, if the meaning of an expression is determined by its inferential role in the lifeworld, then it is impossible to disagree with someone who belongs to the same lifeworld on its meaning. But the most serious problem is a

consequence of the fact that, for Habermas, a person understands an expression when he knows its role in his inferential network – when he knows the claims that count as reasons for it and the claims for which it counts as a reason. Because an individual person’s inferential network will not be identical to the lifeworld’s, he cannot understand any expression whose meaning is determined by its inferential role in the lifeworld’s inferential network. Thus, individuals can mean the same thing by an expression, but only at the cost of neither one understanding it. Consequently, the expression’s meaning cannot be its role in the lifeworld’s inferential network. Therefore, Habermas’s commitment to the claim that members of a lifeworld mean the same thing by most of their utterances conflicts with his commitment to an inferential explanation of the meaning of these utterances. On the one hand, he can secure identical meanings for participants’ utterances but cannot explain their meaning inferentially because such an explanation would lead to the conclusion that they do not mean the same thing. On the other hand, Habermas can explain the meaning of people’s utterances inferentially, but this explanation implies that participants attempting to converse never attach the same meaning to their utterances.

4 Potential Modifications to Habermas’s Theory of Communicative Action

The main goal of this paper is to establish that the relativity of inferential role poses a significant problem for Habermas’s theory of communicative action. Having done that, in this final section I engage in some speculation by considering several modifications Habermas could make to his project that would solve the problem. The first is not so much a modification as it is an elaboration. That is, it does not require Habermas to reject any of his claims; rather it involves restricting the scope of the inferential account of meaning. The second modification is for Habermas to adopt Brandom’s solution to the problem. The third requires Habermas to abandon the notion of determinate meanings that members of a community share and instead give an account of meaningfulness – what it is to understand each other well enough to coordinate actions in a given context.²⁶

I have demonstrated that Habermas’s inferential theory of meaning and his commitment to speakers meaning the same thing by most of their expressions conflict. Maybe altering the inferential theory of meaning in some way can ease this tension and overcome the problems presented in the reply to objection five.²⁷ One idea is that one’s inferential network could be thought of as partitioned in such a way that changes in one domain do not reverberate throughout the entire network. Unfortunately this would do little to help the interpersonal problem, which would still

occur because two people would not share all the same beliefs in a single domain and there would be discrepancies about the boundaries of the domains.

Another suggestion could be to add a temporal element to the inferential account such that a change in one part of one's inferential network would not instantly affect all the other elements. Instead, the change would move gradually throughout the network. This would ease the tension between the inferential account of meaning and Habermas's claim that participants in communication mean the same thing by many of their terms by virtue of being brought up in the same lifeworld. New beliefs and interaction with the lifeworld would constantly alter one's inferential network. The latter action would have the effect of keeping large parts of everyone's inferential network the same. The participants in communication could use the agreement between their respective inferential networks to secure mutual understanding.

Upon closer inspection, this modification involves several serious difficulties. First, newly acquired inferences would have no immediate effect on the meaning of the terms involved. Second, when one acquires a new belief, it is technically meaningless for some period of time until the inferences between it and the elements surrounding it affect its meaning. The third, and most serious, problem is that the modification in question (again) merely shifts the problem. The temporalized inferential theory of meaning would be an account of the meaning of the elements of an inferential network at time t_1 , given their meaning at an earlier time t_0 . This theory would require a base account of the meanings of the elements of the inferential structure for it to determine their meanings at any later time. Thus, such a theory would be a theory of meaning change, not an account of meaning. Adopting it would merely put off the real issue, the account of meaning for the elements of the network at the base level. Of course, Habermas could use a traditional inferential theory of meaning for this purpose, but that would just reinstitute all the problems the temporalized inferential theory was supposed to solve. Therefore, the temporalized inferential theory does not solve the interpersonal problem or the problems outlined in the reply to objection five – it simply relocates them.

If restricting the scope of the inferential account of meaning is not an option, then maybe Habermas could adopt Brandom's solution. Brandom's solution to the interpersonal problem involves three steps. First, he replaces the traditional account of communication where participants transmit something (meaning) between them with a model of communication where scorekeepers coordinate their respective commitment sets. Each scorekeeper must keep two sets of books to keep track of which commitments and entitlements other scorekeepers acknowledge. When attributing commitments to a speaker, a scorekeeper must be able to pick

out a commitment that has the same inferential significance relative to his commitment set that the speaker's claim has relative to hers. Then the scorekeeper must substitute his claim for hers in order to specify the right commitment in his attribution.

Second, Brandom provides an account of how scorekeepers coordinate their commitment sets. When interacting with a stranger, one attributes a core set of commitments that are assumed to be endorsed by all scorekeepers. Then commitments are added or subtracted from this set through the use of anaphoric chains that link the commitment set of a scorekeeper with the book of commitments kept on her by another scorekeeper. Pronouns, indexicals, and demonstratives play an essential role in this process but are not the whole story. Brandom presents an anaphoric account of proper names (which one could extend to natural kind terms) that provides scorekeepers with more resources for coordinating their commitment sets.

Third, Brandom endorses a version of externalism that allows him to model contents on functions from commitment sets to inferential significances without falling prey to the underdetermination difficulty. He combines a theory of meaning and a theory of meaningfulness by distinguishing between contents (both sentential and subsentential) and our conceptions of them. Contents are functions from commitment sets to inferential significances, while one's conception of a content is her dispositions to apply it and use it to make speech acts and inferences. Brandom's term for the connection between these two notions is *tactile Fregeanism*. One grasps a content through one's dispositions to use it. How many correct moves one must make to count as grasping a content is open to debate. Brandom's version of externalism involves explaining a community's status as a discursive practice in terms of an interpreter attributing this status. The status of a community as a discursive practice is characterized by a determinate set of contents conferred on the linguistic expressions used by its members. The norms that govern the interpreter's choice of interpretation dictate how a discursive practice's contents extend beyond its members' conceptions of them. According to the interpreter, the content of an expression used in the discursive practice 'outruns' the members' dispositions to apply it. Although the members' dispositions do not determine a particular content, they do allow the members to grasp particular contents. Norms governing the choice of interpretation determine that the members grasp one particular content and not another. This strategy solves the underdetermination difficulty.²⁸

This solution to the underdetermination difficulty requires endorsing what Brandom calls *I-thou sociality* with respect to evaluative issues instead of an *I-we* model.²⁹ On an I-thou account, one can always distinguish what is taken to be correct from what is correct. Every perspective is locally privileged, but none is globally privileged. On the

other hand, I–we accounts unconditionally privilege one perspective (usually that of the community as a whole). The privileged perspective has the ultimate say in what counts as correct. Consequently, there can be no point of view on the privileged perspective whereby one distinguishes between what is *actually* correct and what it *takes* to be correct.³⁰

Habermas's theory of communicative action is an I–we account because it defines truth and rightness as what is taken to be correct by the members of a community under ideal conditions. For Habermas, there is no distinction between what this privileged perspective takes to be correct and what actually is correct. Recently, Habermas recanted his discourse theory of truth because of the problems associated with such accounts.³¹ This is a significant step away from I–we sociality. If he were to endorse Brandom's solution to the problem of the relativity of inferential role, then he would have to give up his I–we model entirely. The semantic externalism characteristic of Brandom's solution precludes a perspective for which one does not distinguish between what is correct and what is taken to be correct. For Habermas, one problem with endorsing Brandom's solution to the interpersonal problem would be that giving up I–we sociality implies giving up his moral theory as well.

Habermas's moral theory (i.e. discourse ethics) is based on the theory of communicative action; it shows that the conditions for rational acceptability in communicative action and discourse place constraints on answers to moral questions. Discourse ethics provides the criteria according to which norms can be justified as morally right. A norm is morally right if it is discursively redeemable – all rational agents can endorse it under conditions of the ideal speech situation.³² Thus discourse ethics does not allow for a situation where all relevant people under proper conditions rationally accept a norm, yet it turns out to be not morally right. Indeed, moral rightness is defined as that which is taken to be right by all human beings under specific conditions. This moral theory is not available to one who endorses I–thou sociality where the distinction between what is correct and what is taken to be correct is in force for every perspective.

In his reply to Habermas (2000), Brandom argues that his I–thou theory (in Brandom, 1994) *does* allow for a Habermasian transcendental moral theory. He claims that such a theory would 'ground one's ethics in commitments that turn out to be implicit in engaging in discursive practices at all' (Brandom, 2000). Actually, no such account could have the universality Habermas requires for discourse ethics. One could certainly ground a moral theory on the conditions for discursive practice as Brandom describes them. But according to Brandom's theory, one must be able to draw the distinction between taking to be correct and being correct *even for the perspective of Brandom's own theory*. That is, even Brandom's perspective as theorist cannot be privileged according to his I–thou sociality. Indeed, Brandom must admit that the proprieties governing his

theory construction must be cashed out in terms of the scorekeeping norms of his home community. Thus the conditions for discursive practice according to Brandom's theory are not universal according to the standards of his own theory.³³ Therefore Brandom (1994) could support only what Habermas calls an *ethical* theory rather than a *moral* theory. An ethical theory provides conditions for normative justification relative to a given community, while a moral theory aims for universal legitimacy. Discourse ethics is a moral theory. Therefore, assuming that giving up discourse ethics is not an option, Habermas cannot endorse Brandom's solution to the inferential problem.³⁴

The third modification is giving up determinate meanings for an account of meaningfulness. After all, how much do meanings differ from person to person because of the relativity of inferential role? Is it not enough to mean *almost* the same thing for most purposes? If you and I are building a fence together, our action coordination does not depend on your belief about the number of digits of pi required to calculate the circumference of the known universe with an error value less than the diameter of a hydrogen atom. According to Habermas's model of communication, a community shares a set of determinate, common meanings for its speech acts. This is a consequence of the fact that, for Habermas, communicative success is not relative to action coordination. The suggested modification would be to explain communicative success in terms of action coordination and explain understanding in terms of potential action coordination. Such an explanatory strategy would require adopting standards for communicative success that are relative to each action context. A contextualized standard for communicative success would allow Habermas to keep his explanation of understanding in terms of acceptability conditions and to give up the theory of meaning for a theory of meaningfulness.

This solution eliminates the interpersonal problem because the criterion for determining whether two participants reach mutual understanding is whether they achieve their plans through action coordination. The inferential role of a claim is relative to one's background beliefs, but this is no longer problematic because communicative success is judged by action coordination instead of sameness of inferential role. The speaker's warranty to provide reasons for his claim is still a necessary condition for communicative success. And the hearer must have reasons for accepting the speech act offer, but these reasons need not be the same. Whether or not the hearer accepts the same reasons as the speaker could be determined in discourse if action coordination fails. Otherwise successful action coordination constitutes mutual understanding and agreement.

Of course, one must investigate the consequences of relativizing success conditions; with a system as vast as Habermas's, such an investigation would be no small task. However, assuming no other solution is available,

such a change seems the only way for Habermas to solve the interpersonal problem so that communication is possible on his model.³⁵

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Notes

- 1 Brandom, 1994: Chs 2, 3, and 4.
- 2 *Ibid.*, chs 1 and 3.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 478–82.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 587.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 81–2, 477–8, and Quine, 1960.
- 6 This move involves a slight change in the definition of semantic content.
- 7 See Brandom, 1994: pp. 482–3.
- 8 See Kripke, 1982.
- 9 Brandom, 1994: pp. 483–4, 634.
- 10 See Quine, 1951.
- 11 See Searle, 1979: pp. 117–36.
- 12 See Habermas, 1984: pp. 330–7, Habermas, 1988b: p. 258, and Habermas, 1985: pp. 172–3, for Habermas’s use of literal meaning.
- 13 Habermas, 1988c: p. 298.
- 14 See Lafont, 1999: pp. 196–206; Cooke, 1994: pp. 124–5; Heath, 1998: pp. 28–31; and Fultner, 1996: pp. 242–7, for accounts of Habermas’s shift.
- 15 Habermas, 1988c: p. 277.
- 16 Habermas, 1984: pp. 115, 286.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 113–15; Habermas, 1988c: p. 297; Habermas, 1988a: p. 232; Habermas, 1986: pp. 197–9; and Habermas, 1996b: 339.
- 18 In proposing the claim that inferential role is an essential and primary component of propositional content for Habermas, I am implicitly endorsing a deflationary interpretation of validity claims instead of an inflationary interpretation where propositional content is explained in terms of validity conditions. See Heath, 1998: pp. 33–8, for a discussion of these two interpretations. For Habermas, meaning is explained in terms of reaching understanding, which is explained in terms of acceptability conditions. An essential aspect of acceptability conditions is the reasons the speaker could give to support his claim if challenged on its validity. Thus meaning is ultimately determined by inferential role, not validity condition. See Habermas, 1985: p. 170.
- 19 See Habermas, 1973: p. 23, Habermas, 1984: pp. 24–7, and Toulmin, 1958.
- 20 Habermas, 1976: pp. 56, 82 and Habermas, 1984: p. 307.
- 21 Habermas, 1996b.
- 22 The legitimacy of theories of meaning has been hotly debated in the second half of the twentieth century. Discussing the myriad of criticisms and defences of theories of meaning is beyond the scope of this paper and largely irrelevant for my purposes. My objective is to show that the interpersonal problem applies to Habermas’s theory of communicative action and to evaluate several strategies for dealing with it. My argument neither depends on the criticisms of theories of meaning nor implies that such theories are legitimate. However, if one endorses the criticisms of theories of meaning, then she should be even more likely to accept the modification I suggest for Habermas’s theory.
- 23 Habermas, 1996a: pp. 4, 19, and Habermas, 1986: p. 205.

- 24 Habermas, 1987: pp. 12–26. See also Habermas, 1985.
- 25 This objection has been influenced by several conversations with Habermas about the interpersonal problem and how the theory of communicative action might deal with it.
- 26 I assume that Habermas would not want to adopt either the Quinean solution or the solution that involves an appeal to the analytic/synthetic distinction discussed earlier.
- 27 Several of the suggestions in this first modification grew out of conversations with Habermas.
- 28 See Brandom, 1994, chs 7, 8, and 9 for his solution to the interpersonal problem. Brandom calls his version of externalism *semantic*, but a more appropriate name would be *cognitive externalism* to reflect its place in the Fregean model. Semantic externalism is a doctrine about the relation between semantic contents and the environment – physical (Putnam), social (Burge), and historical (Davidson). The doctrine in question pertains to the relation between agents and semantic contents. This is often referred to as the cognitive dimension of the Fregean model. It constitutes an alternative sceptical solution to Kripke’s sceptical paradox. The fact that Brandom explains the relation between agents and semantic contents in terms of potential interpretation by an agent who has command of semantic contents reflects the fact that it is a sceptical solution; i.e. there is no non-circular way to specify facts about an agent that constitute his grasp of one content rather than another.
- 29 These are Brandom’s terms and I use them as labels only. Habermas argues at length that the theory of communicative action should be thought of as privileging the relationship between the first-person and second-person perspective, while Brandom privileges the relationship between the first-person and third-person perspective. Thus it may seem odd to call Brandom’s account ‘I–thou’. Keep in mind that ‘I–thou’ and ‘I–we’ do not distinguish between the type of relationship privileged in interaction but rather between privileging some particular perspective and not doing so with respect to evaluating claims in a particular class.
- 30 Brandom, 1994: pp. 599–600.
- 31 See Habermas, 1996c.
- 32 See Habermas, 1990.
- 33 Accordingly, Brandom argues for pragmatic justification of his theory (where one endorses it on the basis of how well it works) instead of presenting his theory as compulsory. See Brandom, 1994: p. xii.
- 34 See Habermas, 1993: pp. 4–8, and Habermas, 1996a: pp. 160–1.
- 35 I would like to thank Jürgen Habermas, Thomas McCarthy, Cristina Lafont, and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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