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**MAKING IT EXPLICIT AND CLEAR: FROM ‘STRONG’ TO ‘HYPER-’
INFERENCEALISM IN BRANDOM AND PEIRCE**

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the question of how Robert Brandom’s new and original ‘inferentialist’ philosophical framework should be positioned with respect to the broader pragmatist philosophical tradition. It is argued that Charles Peirce’s original attack (in “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man” and other early papers from his career) on ‘intuition’ as a methodology in nineteenth century philosophy of mind is in fact a form of inferentialism, and an antecedent to Brandom relatively unexplored by him in his (otherwise comprehensive and illuminating) ‘tales of the mighty dead’. An argument is mounted that by Peirce shows the way for Brandom to work his ideas through to a clearer and more radical form.

The concept of mental ‘content’ is widely used by contemporary philosophers, who largely take for granted that it has a clear and distinct meaning. Nevertheless Robert Brandom (1998, 2000, 2002) has managed to make explicit (and thus call into question) a distinction between two interestingly different conceptions of mental content. The conceptions differ over which of the concepts of *representation* and *inference* is the more primitive notion. Whereas primitivism with respect to representation is the *de facto* understanding of mental content, Brandom wishes to call our attention to inferentialism’s neglected virtues.

In this paper I will examine this debate in the light of the philosophy of Charles Peirce. Certain of Peirce’s key philosophical themes, I shall argue, echo Brandom’s concerns in ways not yet explored by him¹ (or others). Such congeniality is perhaps unsurprising given Brandom’s explicit pragmatist commitments. However I shall argue that Peirce went further than Brandom in certain crucial respects. Where Brandom’s inferentialism ‘hedges its bets’ by claiming that there is some non-inferential mental content, although it is parasitic on the inferential and can only be ‘inferentially articulated’, Peirce followed inferentialism to its full logical conclusion. I shall inquire whether Brandom’s Hegelianism injects a Cartesian dimension into his thinking – recent explicit disavowals of Cartesianism notwithstanding (2004) – which Peirce sought from the beginning of his career to eliminate from Western philosophy.

Section i) of this paper outlines Brandom’s inferentialism, contrasting it to the representationalism he wishes to reject. The next section considers the variety of mental content for which inferentialism is arguably least appealing – namely our ideas of direct sensory experiences – and outline Brandom’s response to a ‘*qualia* objection to inferentialism’. The paper then turns to consider an actual debate between representationalism and inferentialism in nineteenth century philosophy of mind, which is so far undiscussed in the context of Brandom’s position, yet highly relevant to it. This debate occurred between a “Millian” and a “Hamiltonian” school, who argued over the degree to which a founding role in philosophy of mind should be given to ‘intuitions’ (by which they precisely meant mental content not derivable from inference but somehow

¹ In fact Brandom appears to deny that Peirce was an inferentialist at all, at (2002, 32).

delivered to the mind directly). It is argued that this debate followed a dialectic which is in certain interesting ways the reverse of what the broad sweep of Brandom's historical synthesis would have us expect.

Section iv) examines Peirce's contribution to this nineteenth century debate in which, it is argued, Peirce in fact offered the discussants the first inferentialism so complete that it countenanced no 'intuitions' whatsoever. This raises the question of how Peirce's view might address the *qualia* objection to inferentialism already posed against Brandom, which is answered in the following section. The final section concludes with an argument for Peirce's more thorough ('hyper-') inferentialism over Brandom's merely 'strong' version.

i) Brandom's Inferentialism. Brandom performs an original historical analysis according to which, "[e]nlightenment epistemology was always the home for two somewhat uneasily coexisting conceptions of the conceptual" (2000, 46). The first conception, he claims, is that contentfulness consists in primitive, discrete *representations* (by the mind of worldly objects or states of affairs). Brandom sees the early modern British empiricists as paradigmatic in this regard. Views expressed in terms such as the following:

...our Senses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind...perceptions of things, according to those various ways wherein those objects do affect them. And thus we come by those *ideas* we have of *yellow, white, heat, cold, soft, hard, bitter, sweet...* (Locke, 1964, II, I, 3)

[all the] creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience (Hume, 1975, section II).

lead Brandom to conclude the following (2000, 24):

[Empiricism's] general course...is marked out by commitment to grounding theoretical and practical reasoning and concept use in the occurrence of episodes we

immediately find ourselves with: sense-experiences on the cognitive side, and felt motivations or preferences on the active side.

This concept of *immediacy* (in the “episodes we immediately find ourselves with”) is crucial for Brandom in defining his inferentialism. One might ask: what exactly does it mean for a mental “episode” to be immediate (as opposed to ‘mediate’)? Can such immediacy be explicated beyond Locke’s now hackneyed metaphor, ‘like writing on a blank slate’? It is worth noting at this point that although in the examples given above, the content delivered immediately to the mind is delivered by the senses (and is seen as immediate precisely because it comes from this source), cognitive immediacy need not *necessarily* be a sensory immediacy. The epistemological tradition does contain claims that other types of ideas are delivered to the mind directly. Ideas of one’s self and mathematical insights furnish just two examples here. This issue will be revisited in greater detail in section iii).

At any rate, Brandom nicely points out the way in which the atomism of the classical British empiricist epistemology and theory of mind led directly to Humean inductive scepticism, which consists in questioning certain inferential relations naively assumed to hold between discrete representations. According to the second conception, then, “the way in which representings point beyond themselves to something represented is to be understood in terms of *inferential* relations among representings” (Brandom, 2000, 46)². In other words, the kind of inferences one can make using one’s mental contents are capable of being understood antecedently to, and are in fact constitutive of, what those contents might be.

Thus, for example, a belief such as, “Austin is North of San Antonio” does not derive its meaning from some primitive mental analogue of a road-map, but rather from its facilitation of inferences to conclusions such as, “San Antonio is South of Austin” and, “Austin and San Antonio are not in the same place.” For after all, if someone were to prove themselves unable to perform these two inferences, we would be loath to attribute to them the belief that that “Austin is North of San Antonio”, no matter how sincerely

² Note that the inferences in question include not just the deductively but also the ‘materially’ valid.

they avowed such a belief, or claimed that they could “picture” the relevant proposition mentally.

By contrast to the representationalism he attributes to classical empiricism, Brandom sees inferentialism as the heir of the classical rationalist tradition, particularly Kant. He thus describes his philosophical mission as one of ‘de-Humeing’ and ‘en-Kanting’ analytic philosophy, the inspiration for which he attributes to Sellars. In order to effect this, one needs, he argues, to “do justice...to the normativity of concept use”, and to focus on the conceptual articulation of perceptually acquired and practically pursued commitments and entitlements rather than on the experiences and inclinations with which we simply find ourselves. (2000, 32)

However Brandom’s view is also obviously a form of pragmatism, insofar as pragmatism is (very broadly conceived) a view which seeks philosophical mileage from the fact that we are agents in the world. In the introduction to *Articulating Reasons*, Brandom describes his view as pragmatist as it offers, “...an account of knowing (or believing or saying) *that* such and such is the case in terms of knowing *how* (being able) to do something” (2000, 4). Whereas representations might be something we ‘just have’ (without the possession of those representations producing any behavior necessarily)³, inferences are necessarily something we *do*.

To the degree that one takes representing or inferring to be primitive with respect to mental content, Brandom claims, one will consider *truth* (understood as veridical representation) or *inference* to be the primary object of study in logic, semantics and related inquiries. To this end, Brandom provides an interesting discussion of the young Frege who, he claims, swapped from an inference-based to a truth-based conception of logic over the course of his career. When Frege wrote the *Begriffsschrift* (around 1879), he saw the very definition of ‘conceptual content’ to be, “that part of judgements which affects the possible inferences”. From 1890 onwards, however, Brandom claims, he made the “false step” of concluding that in logic truth was ‘the object of study’, and the analytic

³ At least this is true of representations as classically understood, for instance by early modern philosophers (subsequent pragmatist challenges to this conception of representation notwithstanding). Thanks are due to Anne Freadman for pointing this out.

philosophical tradition then followed him in the latter rather than the former approach to content. Thus some form of representationalism is widely taken for granted by currently dominant philosophical theory⁴. However Brandom urges that we reconsider the value of the second, inferential, conception.

ii) *A 'Qualia Objection to Inferentialism'*. Precisely to the degree that “observable properties, such as colors” provide the very paradigm for a certain classical empiricist representationalism, Brandom recognises that one might object to an inferentialist account of mental content with respect to such properties. What inferences should a belief such as, “This ball is red” be cashed out in? If someone says that they smell fresh coffee, what are the conclusions which, were they unable to draw them (analogous to the inferential failures which would disqualify someone’s truly believing “Austin is North of San Antonio” listed above), we would say that they did not have the belief which they avow?

Direct sensory experiences of such kinds seem to produce a kind of belief that is direct and incontrovertible (though what exactly might be the *object* of that belief has been much disputed). Brandom therefore concedes that the reports that one might make of one’s qualia (such as, “This ball is red”), *qua* reports, are “noninferential”, and thus, that “the conceptual content of a concept such as red has as a crucial element its noninferential circumstances of appropriate application” (Brandom, 2000, 21). His concession to inferentialism, however, is to claim that “even such noninferential reports must be inferentially articulated” (Brandom, 2000, 47).

What does this mean? What is the difference between a noninferential report inferentially articulated and an inferential report? Brandom does not proceed by giving clear, directly contrasting examples of an ‘inferential report’ and a ‘non-inferential

⁴ It’s worth noting that this interpretation of Frege is mediated *via* Dummett, and even as cited second-hand, Frege doesn’t actually say that truth is the *sole* object of study for logic, which would seem to be what is required for this argument to go through. Brandom points out as much in his more extended discussion in *Making it Explicit*, and also notes that a mere philosophical preoccupation with truth *per se* is not necessarily sufficient for representationalism given that “the mature Frege treats truth as indefinable and primitive” (97). In other words, a Fregean redundancy theory of truth on its own arguably provides insufficient support to representationalism, which would seem to require commitment to some kind of correspondence notion.

report'. (In fact by his own lights it would not be straightforward for him to do this, since whether a given report is inferential or not depends for him not only on *what* is reported, but also on the circumstances and purposes of the utterance.) However, he does discuss in detail what he means by a 'non-inferential report inferentially articulated'.

The capacity to inferentially articulate a non-inferential report, Brandom claims, is what marks the difference between ourselves and machines such as thermostats, insofar as they report in a primitive way upon temperatures, or animals such as parrots, insofar as they can distinguish red objects from objects of other colours. Even a mere chunk of iron, he notes, "classifies its environment as being one of two kinds, depending on whether it responds by rusting or not" (2000, 48). Thus it is necessary to draw a distinction, "between merely responsive classification and specifically *conceptual* classification".

What does this difference consist in? In *Articulating Reasons*, Brandom begins by claiming that it consists in a certain "*awareness*" (had by us but not thermostats), which is what makes it the case that, "the thermostat and the parrot do not understand their responses, those responses mean nothing to them, though they can mean something to us". However, he concedes that this 'easy but uninformative' answer might require further explication. He then claims that properly conceptual classification consists in matters such as that if one has the *concept* of red, one knows that if something is red then it isn't green:

The parrot does not treat 'That's red' as incompatible with 'That's green', nor as following from 'That's scarlet' and entailing 'That's colored'. Insofar as the repeatable response is not, for the parrot, caught up in practical proprieties of inference and justification...it is not a *conceptual* or *cognitive* matter at all. (2000, 48).

A parrot trained to peck a certain spot on being presented with a red stimulus doesn't know that the stimulus is not green, Brandom claims. (Or does it? After all, the parrot does not peck a green stimulus. The parrot does peck a scarlet stimulus. I will return to this point in section vii.)

This is another way of saying, Brandom points out, that to master any concepts (such as 'red'), one must master many concepts (such as 'green', 'blue'...and so on), "[f]or

grasp of one concept consists in mastery of at least some of its inferential relations to other concepts". One may successfully apply certain concepts in certain circumstances by means of a simple trained response to a specific feeling. However, Brandom argues (following Sellars, and in an interesting direct contrast to traditional empiricism) such uses of language are parasitic on prior inferential relations. In other words, there exist, under certain specific and unusual circumstances, pure observation-reporting uses of terms, but the idea that there might be a language built entirely from them is a representationalist's fiction.

In this way Brandom offers a rich and interesting double-headed analysis of concepts, according to which our proper use of them consists in our understanding of both their antecedent assertibility conditions and their subsequent normative commitments. This analysis enables him to critique both traditional empiricism for allegedly attending to the former and neglecting the latter, and also classical pragmatism for allegedly attending to the latter and ignoring the former.

Brandom's attention to our concepts' normative commitments should be seen against the background of a broad philosophical theory which he attributes to Hegel and Sellars (among others). According to this theory, something important separates human consciousness in a quantum leap even from that of higher animals, namely that we and we alone can participate in "a game of giving and asking for reasons" (2000, 48-9, 165-6, 189). We achieve this by being answerable to certain norms which structure rational discourse. For instance, if a person sincerely avows a claim at a given time, he or she is expected to continue to believe it, barring the emergence of new reasons to believe it false. Also, if such reasons *should* emerge, it is expected that the person should take some kind of responsibility for resolving this cognitive dissonance, given that he or she publicly avowed the claim. The capacity to grasp the existence of such norms, such that one endeavours to follow them (however imperfectly) is what separates culture from nature, Brandom claims. In other words:

My hope is that by slighting the similarities to animals which preoccupied Locke and Hume and highlighting the possibilities opened up by engaging in social practices of giving and asking for reasons, we will get closer to an account of being human that

does justice to the kinds of consciousness and self-consciousness distinctive of us as *cultural*, and not merely *natural* creatures (2000, 35).

Thus, what it is to perform “conceptual” rather than merely “responsive” classification with respect to a given concept is explicated through this wider framework.

iii) A 19th Century Representationalist-Inferentialist Debate. Brandom is right that during the nineteenth century the question between representationalism and inferentialism, which now requires a goodly amount of scholarly excavation, was ‘live’ philosophically. However, his singling out of Frege to do duty for the history of 19th century philosophy (which is unfortunately typical in the analytic philosophical tradition, when in fact Frege was in many ways an extremely singular thinker), fails to do full justice to the way in which this was the case.

One way in which the representationalist-inferentialist issue was debated in the 19th century was as part of a long-running argument concerning *intuitions*. “Intuition” is, of course, a concept inherited from Kant,⁵ meaning any kind of direct, unmediated knowledge of something.⁶ So defined, it would seem to embrace the empiricist conception of the immediate products of sensory awareness discussed above. However, unlike that conception, it is not *restricted* to the products of specifically sensory awareness. The alternatives noted above, that one might gain some sort of immediate cognisance of one’s own self, or of mathematical ideas, *were* in fact discussed as possible areas of intuition. At any rate, it would seem that the degree to which a founding or primitive role is given to intuitions by nineteenth century theories of mental content, is the degree to which those theories adopt a representationalist as opposed to an inferentialist position in Brandom’s terms.

⁵ Peirce, however, traces it all the way back to Anselm, in “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man” [henceforth QCCFCM] (1992, 11).

⁶ Interestingly, the term survives today in areas of philosophy where it is customary to talk about tapping people’s ‘intuitions’ as a methodological alternative to discursive argument for a position, for example in ethics.

By the time Peirce entered the argument, a detailed debate had been going on for several decades on this issue.⁷ On one side stood a Hamiltonian school (comprised of Sir William Hamilton, Victor Cousin, Henry Mansel and others) who sought to combine insights from Thomas Reid's 'common-sense' philosophy with elements of Kantianism to provide an epistemology and theory of mind founded squarely on intuitions. This view was opposed by a Millian school (comprised of both the younger and older Mill, Alexander Bain, and others) who held to a more classical British empiricist tradition, particularly influenced by Hume.

Contrary to what one might expect from Brandom's stark framing of the dialectic, whereby empiricism is necessarily correlated with representationalism, and rationalism with inferentialism, *their empiricism led the Millian school to take the more anti-intuitionist position*. Why was this? In short, the Millian school had the more *naturalistic* approach, arguing that some of the mental content which the Hamiltonians thought was delivered into the mind by intuition could be scientifically proven to be derived in other ways. The issue was thus at least partly a methodological one concerning to what extent we obtain a theory of mind *via* introspection and to what extent *via* scientific hypothesis.⁸

A good example here was the concept of the self. Whereas a certain rationalist tradition descending from Descartes, and inherited by the Hamiltonians, took introspection to deliver a clear, irreducible concept of one's own self, Hume's more thorough inner search famously failed to find any such object. Mill followed Hume in this, and set about "constructing the self...out of primary data that consists ultimately of sensations or impressions" (Smyth, 1997, 14), in other words explaining our concept of the self as inferred rather than intuited:

...the doctrine which forms the basis of Sir W. Hamilton's system of psychology, that Mind and Matter, an ego and a non-ego, are original data of consciousness, is deprived of its foundation. Although these two elements...are in...our

⁷ For much of the historical background in the rest of this section I am indebted to Richard A. Smyth's valuable *Reading Peirce Reading* (1997).

⁸ This issue is still live in philosophy of mind today with David Chalmers' 'zombie argument' arguably breathing fresh life into the introspective methodology's dying lips, enabling it to once more stalk philosophy's corridors and terrify the populace under the guise of the so-called "hard problem of consciousness" – a difficulty apparently *necessarily* irresolvable by *a posteriori* or experimental methods.

consciousness now, and are, or seem to be, inseparable from it, there is no reason for believing that the latter of them, the non-ego, was in consciousness from the beginning; since, even if it was not, we can perceive a way in which it not only might, but must have grown up. (Mill, 1979, 189).⁹

In his characterisation of empiricism as necessarily representationalist, Brandom might have paid more attention to Hume's entirely self-confessed role as a philosophical *sceptic*. This aspect of Hume's thought has in fact led him to be a great inspiration for philosophical fictionalisms of various kinds (such as the fictionalism with respect to ordinary middle-sized objects of Russell in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, and Quine in "Identity, Ostension and Hypostasis.")

Mill however thought that of course there had to be *some* basic cognitive building-blocks which were delivered by intuition. Here he pretty much followed Hume, envisaging them to be the basic 'sensations' which correspond to Hume's simple impressions.

iv) Charles Peirce as Inferentialist. Into this debate burst Peirce with the radical claim that there are no intuitions whatsoever! He thus introduced to the parties in question the first entirely thorough-going inferentialism¹⁰. Smyth suggests that, dialectically speaking, Peirce "sneaked up behind" Mill, who was so busy arguing for his more moderate inferentialism by naturalistically eliminating certain putative 'intuitions' posited by the Hamiltonian school, that his commitments to the intuitions he did accept were improperly defended:

Mill...was seeking immediate tactical advantage over an enemy that claimed more rather than fewer types of intuition than he himself did. By seizing this immediate

⁹ In the subsequent chapter Mill similarly naturalizes and 'de-intuits' the concept of *extension*, foundational to our idea of material objects. See also Martin and Barresi (2000, 165).

¹⁰ Brandom attributes the first full-blooded inferentialism in philosophical history to Hegel (cf. 1998, 92), but it is unlikely that this particular debate in the philosophy of mind was influenced by him (Hegel). Peirce himself claimed not to have read Hegel properly until late in life, at which time he did note certain key isomorphisms between their positions, claiming that it resulted from independent convergence on the real.

tactical advantage, Mill made himself vulnerable to attack from the opposite direction...(2-13).

Peirce first outlined this view in a series of papers in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, one of his earliest attempts at a systematic presentation of his thought. The first paper in the series, “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man” (henceforth: QCCFCM), presents a series of arguments against there being any intuitions, and the next two papers, “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” (henceforth: SCFI) and “Grounds of Validity of the Laws of Logic: Further Consequences of Four Incapacities”, draw out the consequences of this rejection for the philosophies of mind and language, and for logic, respectively.

Peirce defined the key term “intuition” as “a cognition not determined by a previous cognition of the same object”. What exactly is meant here by ‘determined by’? The answer is ‘inferred from’, as is shown by another of Peirce’s definitions of intuition, namely, “Premiss not itself a conclusion” (11). I will now provide a brief overview of Peirce’s answers to questions concerning intuition in QCCFCM.

Question 1 is in many ways the key question. It asks whether one’s ability to tell the difference between intuitions and other, non-intuitive, forms of cognition is itself a matter of intuition (in other words, whether one can ‘intuit’ that one is having an intuition, as opposed to a cognition that has been determined by a previous cognition, in other words, an inference). The question is phrased by Peirce as follows:

Whether by the simple contemplation of a cognition, independently of any previous knowledge and without reasoning from signs, we are enabled rightly to judge whether that cognition has been determined by a previous cognition or whether it refers immediately to its object (11).

Peirce answers “No”. His reasons are as follows. First of all, the only evidence for such a capacity is that “we seem to *feel* that we have it”. However, that such feelings are not infallible is testified to by a wealth of examples. For instance, it is notoriously difficult for trial witnesses to distinguish between what they have actually seen at a crime

scene and what they have merely inferred (13-14).. Dreaming is also highly relevant here. We think when we are dreaming that we are having immediate experiences, yet insofar as dreams reflect a working-out of thoughts and feelings had during the day, they are arguably ‘determined by previous cognitions’. Moreover, children often believe that they never learned (in other words, that they possess as intuition) things which they did in fact learn – which were therefore determined in their minds by previous cognitions – such as their own language.

Finally, a particularly sharp naturalistic refutation to Question 1 is delivered by the blind spot on the retina. A small part of every sighted person’s perceptual field, corresponding to the place on the retina where the optical nerve goes out to the brain and which is therefore devoid of rods and cones, is not delivered by sense-perception but is filled in by inference from the surrounding perceptual field and (barring carefully-designed experiments) the sighted person has no idea which part of their perceptual field is so confabulated (15).

Having settled this first question in the negative, Peirce is in a much stronger dialectical position. He has now effectively banished introspection as a methodology for deciding questions concerning mental content. The only reason now to admit of a mental faculty, is that it affords us a scientific explanation of facts which we would be unable to explain otherwise. Question 2, then, concerns the self, or as Peirce puts it, “whether we have an intuitive self-consciousness” (by which is meant not the perception of some extensionless point ego, or of consciousness itself, but consciousness of a “personal self”). Following Hume, Peirce answers “No”, again on empirical evidence, such as that very young children demonstrably do not have a self-concept and yet they demonstrably reason. He concludes that our consciousness of a self is the result of inference on the basis of our interaction with the world. In fact he concludes that the concept of the self comes precisely from the experience of *error* – for our forming an expectation of the way the world will behave, which is then frustrated by the way the world actually behaves, is the only way in which we get any sense of ourselves as distinct from the world at all. An infallible believer would have no self-concept. (“Ignorance and error are all that

distinguish our private selves from the absolute *ego* of pure apperception.”(20).) Thus Peirce disposes of one of intuition’s most important traditional strongholds.

Question 3, then, asks, “Whether we have an intuitive power of distinguishing between the subjective elements of different kinds of cognitions”. This question concerns whether we can tell directly, or whether we only infer, that particular mental content is dreamed, imagined, believed...and so on. Unsurprisingly, Peirce claims that we cannot tell that by intuition either. Peirce’s argument here is somewhat subtle. He concedes that we usually do know the difference between these cognitive modalities with considerable certainty, but claims that it is not known by intuition. (Rather, it is known by the fact that, for instance, dream-thoughts and waking-thoughts are very different when we compare them to one another.)

In his responses to the rest of the questions, Peirce essentially draws out corollaries of points already made by answers to earlier questions. He concludes that we have no power of introspection, but our whole knowledge of our internal world is derived from external facts (Question 4), that we cannot think without signs (Question 5), and that a sign has no meaning if by its definition it refers to something absolutely incognisable (Question 6).

The most important claim Peirce draws from all this is that *every thought is an inference*. (It’s worth noting that, even more ambitiously, Peirce claims that every thought is a *valid* inference, but here he is construing ‘valid’ more broadly than is customary today – to cover inductive and abductive, as well as deductive argument forms – and space does not permit me to go further into this claim here.) Thus, whilst we saw that for Brandom a thought such as, “This ball is red” might constitute a “noninferential report”, for Peirce even such a thought is necessarily inferential.

v) *Peirce’s Reply to the Qualia Objection to Inferentialism*. So what does Peirce say about the apparent raw unmediatedness of *qualia*? Don’t we get a direct representation of something indefinable (and thus, surely, unferrable) when we see the colour red, namely, *redness* – what Black and White Mary saw when she came out of her black and white ‘bubble’¹¹? Well, do we? Peirce attacks such a claim on a number of fronts.

¹¹ This popular and evocative thought-experiment is of course, taken from Jackson (1982).

First of all, Peirce makes a striking anticipation of the ‘quining qualia’ move made, for example by the later Wittgenstein in his ‘beetle in the box’ argument to banish talk of entirely private sensations in philosophy:

If it be objected that the peculiar character of red is not determined by any previous cognition, I reply that that character is not a character of red as a cognition; for if there be a man to whom red things look as blue ones do to me, and vice versa, that man’s eyes teach him the same facts that they would if he were like me (26).

Imagine that someone makes all the right red-identification moves in a public ‘red language-game’. This is true of Mary when she is given access to the requisite scientific instruments. To claim that there exists some special feeling in the person (what red ‘really looks like’) over and above their classificatory capacity, which is inaccessible in principle, is to explain nothing in principle. And as naturalistic enquirers why would we wish to adopt such a hypothesis?

...we must put aside all prejudices derived from a philosophy which bases our knowledge of the external world on our self-consciousness. We can admit no statement concerning what passes within us except as a hypothesis necessary to explain what takes place in what we commonly call the external world (30).

Peirce places considerable blame for introducing this error into modern philosophy at the feet of Descartes, for teaching, “that the ultimate test of certainty is to be found in the individual consciousness.” Against such an approach to philosophy Peirce argues:

...thus to make single individuals absolute judges of truth is most pernicious. The result is that metaphysicians will all agree that metaphysics has reached a pitch of certainty far beyond that of the physical sciences;—only they can agree on nothing else (29).

Secondly, again in a naturalistic spirit, Peirce suggests that we try an actual experiment. He asks that we look at a bright red book, then look away. The anti-inferentialist would have it that we possess some kind of primitive representation of the

particular red colour of the book in our minds, which we then call back before our minds when we wish to remember it. However, if that is the case, one might ask how we tell the difference between remembering a colour and actually seeing it? Hume's answer to this question was, famously, that when we remember we perceive the same idea, only with less 'force' and 'vivacity'. But Peirce questions whether this is really the phenomenology of remembering colours:

If this were a correct statement of the difference, we should remember the book being less red than it is; whereas, in fact, we remember the color with very great precision for a few moments...although we do not see anything like it. We carry away absolutely nothing of the color except the *consciousness that we could recognise it* (47-48).

Thirdly, he points out that any visual impression is the result of innumerable retinal neurons firing in concert with one another and whether a given piece of information is transmitted to the brain *via* some identical stimulus on every neuron or is in fact deduced by the brain from the interrelationship of different stimuli hitting different neurons is something which is quite below the threshold of our awareness. (Once again, we cannot intuit whether we are intuiting this matter, as is implied by Peirce's reply to the first question.)

It remains to discuss one (last-ditch) argument in defense of 'qualia-representationalism', which occurs to many people¹². If every cognition is determined by a previous cognition, where do concepts such as redness come from in the first place? Surely they must enter the mind at some point? It is axiomatic in the Black and White Mary story that there was a time when Mary, despite possessing a complete knowledge of colour-physics, did not have the concept of red *qua* distinctive phenomenal experience. She did not know what red looked like. Later on, there was a time when she did have that concept. Therefore *surely it is obvious* that she must have had a first thought of red? And that first thought must surely have been a brand-new, pure perception of red,

¹² Brandom does not actually raise this as a reason for his position, but given the extreme prevalence and apparently common-sensical nature of the objection, it would not be surprising if it plays some background motivating role.

undetermined by any previous red-cognition? Here Peirce's mathematico-logical acuity comes to the fore, to spot a fallacy missed by many philosophers.

Peirce makes an analogy. Imagine an inverted triangle gradually dipped in water, point first, with each horizontal line where the triangle meets the water representing a 'cognition', and where the width of the horizontal line represents the 'liveliness' of the cognition. Let a finite distance between one line and another represent that they are two different cognitions, and let the fact that one line lies below another on the triangle (and thus hit the water before the other) represent that it 'determined' the upper line. Let a line of zero length represent that the cognition is quite out of consciousness. To say, then, that "there must be a first" (cognition of a given object):

...is to say that when that triangle is dipped into the water there must be a sectional line made by the surface of the water lower than which no surface line had been made...But draw the horizontal line where you will, as many horizontal lines as you please can be assigned at finite distances below it and below one another. For any such section is at some distance above the apex, or it is not a line. Let this distance be a . Then there have been similar sections at the distances $1/2a$, $1/4a$, $1/8a$...and so on as far as you please. So it is not true that there must be a first (27).

The moral of this mathematical analogy, Peirce claims, is just that it is quite possible that "cognition arises by a process of beginning, as any other change comes to pass." Thus there can be a time when Black and White Mary did not have the concept of red, and a time when she did, *and it be the case that* she had no first thought of red.

At this point one might be impressed by the new logical possibility (of an infinite quantity of intermediate inferences, none of which can properly said to be 'the first') which is opened up by Peirce's argument, yet still wish to know what the intermediate inferences might actually *be* in a given case – in particular, in the case of seeing red cited above. A great deal could be said here. However one key dimension along which such analysis could very plausibly take place is *identity over time*.¹³ Imagine that John views a red object for 1 second before looking away, then endorses the following argument, "The

¹³ At this point I am indebted to Robert Brandom for a helpful discussion.

object gives me sensation R at t_0 . The object gives me sensation R at $t_{0.1}$. The object gives me sensation R at $t_{0.2}$ [...etc] Therefore the object is red". This argument is very strictly speaking enthymematic, relying on a series of missing premises stating that the object referred to by the first statement is identical to the object referred to by the second statement, which is identical to the object referred to by the third statement...and so on. In this way, *representation* of a given object beyond an infinitesimal time point (which latter form of reference is in fact no use at all) must already be understood as a form of *inference*. This insight will be further explored in the conclusion to the paper.

vi) *Charles Peirce as 'Hyper-Inferentialist'*. We saw that Brandom claimed that, "the conceptual content of a concept such as red has as a crucial element its noninferential circumstances of appropriate application" (2000, 21). Thus his inferential account of content stops short at certain kinds of pure unmediated observations. At least part of our concept of red is a primitive *quale*, of which we're conscious and which under the right circumstances we 'report on'. Brandom claims that this concession to representationalism renders his position 'strong' rather than 'hyper-' inferentialism (28-9).

However, this concession is not necessary. *What are sensations*, for which colour is the paradigm beloved of epistemologists? They are usually thought to be the ultimate logical atoms: Locke's 'simple ideas'. How could they not be? How could redness be further analysed? Peirce however, offers an alternative picture according to which sensations *do* have logical structure:

The sensation of a particular kind of sound arises in consequence of impressions upon the various nerves of the ear being combined in a particular way, and following one another with a certain rapidity. A sensation of color depends upon impressions upon the eye following one another in a regular manner and with a certain rapidity. The sensation of beauty arises upon a manifold of other impressions...Accordingly, a sensation is a simple predicate taken in place of a complex predicate; in other words, it fulfils the function of a hypothesis (42).

Of course sensations feel simple to us, he acknowledges – but this (the simplicity or otherwise of our ideas) once again is something we cannot ‘intuit’, following his answer to Question 1. The apparent simplicity of sounds and color-concepts exists, he claims, just because these particular hypotheses happen to be hard-wired into our natures by evolution.

Peirce does acknowledge that every sign (including thoughts such as “This apple is red”) has a ‘*material dimension*’. He defines the material dimension of a sign as, “characters which belong to it in itself and have nothing to do with its representative function” (40). This includes such matters as the color of the letters which make up a word, and the pitch of the voice which pronounces it. In the case of a thought such as, “This ball is red”, the material dimension includes the way red feels to the thinker – what would normally be thought of as the red *quale*. In fact Peirce claims that all thoughts, if attended to closely, may be perceived to possess distinctive (and *sui generis*) *qualia*.¹⁴ However he is adamant that a thought’s *quale* is not part of its conceptual content, and his reason for this is the thoroughness of his inferentialism:

no present actual thought (which is a mere feeling) has any meaning, any intellectual value; for this lies not in what is actually thought, but in what this thought may be connected with in representation by subsequent thoughts; so that the meaning of a thought is altogether something virtual (42).

He acknowledges that the above might seem to court paradox, for doesn’t it follow that, “if no thought has any meaning, all thought must be without meaning”? Surely meaning must ‘bottom out’ somewhere (in logical atoms)? Once again, what appears contradictory to common-sense is found, on closer logical analysis, not to be. Just as motion consists in the relation of a series of positions occupied by an object to one another while at the same time no single position is ‘in motion’, so meaning consists in the relation of a series of thought-signs to one another while at the same time no single thought-sign has meaning. This is inferentialism in its purest form.

¹⁴ This idea is explored in Legg (2003).

vii) *Brandom's Hegelianism and Inferentialism: Are They in Tension?* We saw that Brandom holds that what separates humans from other animals in a quantum leap is a “special kind of consciousness”, which leads to “a special kind of self-consciousness”, and that Hegel is a big influence here (2000, 35)). Following Hegel, Brandom seeks to separate Culture from Nature in a manner that is cheerfully antinaturalistic:

the [view] presented here is opposed to *naturalism*, at least as that term is usually understood. For it emphasizes what distinguishes discursive creatures, as subject to distinctively conceptual norms, from their non-concept-using ancestors and cousins...Products of *social* interactions...are not studied by the *natural* sciences – though they are not for that reason to be treated as spooky and supernatural (2000, 26).

Peirce on the other hand is more ambitious. He wants to mediate and (thus) explain the evolution from animal to human thought, and in his paper “A Guess at the Riddle” he goes to great lengths (unfortunately found obscure to the point of mysticism by his contemporaries) to try to identify the proto-mind in the protoplasm. So far, however, all I have done is to state a difference between Brandom and Peirce on the question of naturalism with respect to mental content. Is there a reason to prefer Peirce's more through-going naturalism from the perspective of inferentialism? I think there is.

The key question to ask here is the following: from the inferentialist perspective, what has the consciousness with which a thought is formed have to do with its meaning? If the meaning of a thought is articulated *via* its inferential relations, mightn't others end up drawing inferences which are other than (or even contrary to) what the authors of those thoughts consciously anticipate or intend? This is what Peirce means by saying that the meaning of a thought is ‘altogether virtual’. Following such an insight to its logical conclusion, Peirce even goes so far as to decouple signification from (specifically) human mentality altogether. (The fact that this has not been clearly apprehended in the literature is due to Peirce's own felt need to obscure the radical degree to which he took his theory,

in order that it not be dismissed out of hand. He referred to this as his “sop to Cerberus”.¹⁵)

In the case of a ‘non-inferential-report’, Brandom’s hybrid theory of mental content attempts to serve two masters – the consciousness with which a concept is formed (and which, in some circumstances, it reports on), and the inferential relations in which it is embedded. He gives this bipartisanship a temporal twist in terms of antecedent assertibility conditions¹⁶ and subsequent normative commitments. However these two content-determining criteria can arguably be teased apart. Might we imagine a being who lacked the right consciousness but performed all the right inferences with respect to a given concept? Would such a being not then have a correct ‘conceptual’, not just a ‘responsive’, classification of the concept in question, despite this lack? What if a thermostat were capable not only of reporting on temperature but of saying such things as, “I said yesterday that it was a cold day but I was wrong, sorry, it was only cold in the morning”?

In defense of his bipartisanship Brandom might make the empirical claim that (contrived thought-experiments concerning articulate thermostats notwithstanding) one just *could not* perform inferences and negotiate social intercourse of such complexity without possessing a form of consciousness which is at least very like what humans have. Thus the two criteria are not in tension with one another. However it is worth noting that such a claim would be a *naturalistic hypothesis* concerning the relationship between a certain set of discursive practices and a certain form of consciousness. Would Brandom really be able to help himself to such a hypothesis given his explicit disdain of naturalistic understandings of ‘discursive creatures’?

In early statements of his pragmatism, Peirce famously advised that in order to make the meanings of our concepts *clear*, we should ask what hypotheses with “conceivable practical bearings” we might “conceivably” form using those concepts – in other words,

¹⁵ “I define a Sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former. My insertion of “upon a person” is a sop to Cerberus, because I despair of making my own broader conception understood” (letter to Lady Welby from 1908: Peirce, 1977, 80-81.)

what would be those concepts' inferential articulation. Crucially, he then claimed that *there is nothing else that we mean* (1992, 132). One might argue with Brandom for "strong" inferentialism by corralling instances of purely representational content to a much more limited domain than was previously imagined. Alternatively, one might argue with Peirce for "hyper-" inferentialism by reconceiving representation *itself* as a form of inference. If the latter can be made to work, is it not more general and powerful position? Brandom puts forward a powerful new framework for understanding mental content. Why not reason it through it its full logical conclusion? Why not take the full consequences of such a view and make them explicit?¹⁷

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¹⁶ It should be noted however that Brandom is in no way committed to *all* antecedent assertibility conditions consisting in conscious experiences. In fact only a specialized subset do solely – the sensations 'justifying' the so-called 'non-inferential reports'.

¹⁷ For helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, I'm indebted to Anne Freadman, David Lumsden, Tracy Howell, Paul Flood, Bill Fish, Andrew Jorgensen, Huw Price, Cristina Corredor, Hilan Bensusan, and Robert Brandom.

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