

**THE SOCIAL AND THE REAL: THE IDEA OF OBJECTIVITY IN  
PEIRCE, BRANDOM, AND MCDOWELL**

by

Vitaly Kiryushchenko

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

My dissertation focuses on Robert Brandom's and John McDowell's philosophies of mind and language. Its particular emphasis is on the idea of objectivity as it is presented within the framework of Brandom's and McDowell's normative theories. There's a general agreement in the literature that the two accounts of the objectivity of norms face a set of unresolved problems. According to Brandom, on the one hand, discursive norms are rooted in our reflective capacity and are instituted by our own practical attitudes; on the other hand, the objectivity of these norms is something irreducible to social consensus. Given this, Brandom faces the challenge of explaining how what all the members of a linguistic community take to be correct differs from what is correct "objectively". In McDowell's case, the problem of the objectivity of norms forms a part of his wider ontological project. This project aims to answer the question of how experience can be conceptually framed through and through, and yet constitute an independent empirical reality, thus accommodating the idea of objective external constraint on our thought and judgments. I claim that both accounts are incomplete and that the issues raised by Brandom's and McDowell's ideas of normativity may be resolved by using some of the conceptual tools offered by Charles Peirce's semiotics and his scientific realism. According to Peirce, norms are objective neither because their authority is located in the world that stands up against our social conventions, nor because we are creatures capable of reflection, but because our inquiry is always headed forward. Taking account of our ideas about the world in terms of future consequences of our actions leads to a non-problematic identification of objective reality with the extended notion of future community which consists of beliefs about this reality attainable in the long run.

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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation presents an analysis of the idea of objectivity in Peirce, Brandom, and McDowell against a variety of backgrounds, including Kant's constructivism, Hegel's Phenomenology, and the relationship between the objective and the social. My aim is to show that within each of the three theoretical frameworks the idea of objectivity is linked, in one way or another, to the idea of a community, but that only in Peirce's case this link receives its full non-contradictory development. Peirce's pragmatism accommodates the idea of objectivity, while eschewing the pitfalls of both Brandom's phenomenalist treatment of discursive practices and McDowell's content-based realism, which results from his Hegelian reading of Kant's "Analytic of Principles".

In all three cases "objectivity" describes the quality of being correct beyond any finite number of individual interpretations and, therefore, beyond anything that is correct merely by agreement between members of an existent community, consisting of the sum total of such interpretations. Hence, in all three cases there is a need to reconcile our knowledge of outside objects and the social, or communal character of such knowledge. This reconciliation in each case presupposes a particular context within which norms and norm-governed practices are defined.

In Brandom's case, the context is provided by the idea of *discourse*. I take the way Brandom uses the term to be somewhat close to how Michelle Foucault uses it. On this view, discursive practices are not just linguistic practices; they are *recognitive structures* that organize in repeatable patterns pragmatic relations among matters of fact, subjects, and statements those subjects make about matters of fact. Norms, according to Brandom, are standards of correctness that implicitly permeate our discursive interactions, but that can be cashed out by being

inferentially articulated in our explicitly formulated judgments. Being able to act according to discursive norms is being able to engage in discursive practices by mastering some of the inferential relations of a concept to a variety of other concepts, as well as to navigate between different perspectives on states of affairs that those relations presuppose.

There is an ambiguity as to the objectivity of discursive norms, thus defined, which I address in chapter one. The ambiguity is this. According to Brandom, on the one hand, the objectivity of normative statuses is something that holds beyond the assessments of all the members of a given community, i.e., it is not reducible to the sum total of all their individual perspectives – whatever the number of those perspectives is, as long as it is finite. On the other hand, the normative structure of the world we have in common is such that it is not perspective-independent, i.e. there is no bird's eye view over and above those perspectives.

My approach to Brandom is as follows. In *Making It Explicit* (1994) and, more recently, in *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (2009) Brandom grounds his notion of the objectivity of norms in his interpretation of Kant's constructivism in light of Hegel's idea of mutual recognition. Brandom's reading of Kant's 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> *Critiques*, together with relevant sections of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, has a dual outcome. First, Kant's moral constructivism, which finds its expression in the idea of autonomy, leads Brandom to adopting a phenomenalist approach to discursive practices. According to this approach, although discursive norms are instituted by individual practical attitudes, the objectivity of these norms is something irreducible to any existent social consensus: a given community as a whole can go wrong. Second, in presenting the relation between his inferentialist semantics and his normative pragmatics in light of the relation between Kant's 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> *Critiques*, Brandom makes an attempt to adjust Hegel's idea of mutual recognition to his second-personal view on social communication. I claim that, given the

presuppositions supporting the considerable architectonic ambitions of Brandom's early theory, this attempt does not resolve all the difficulties that Brandom encounters in reinterpreting Hegel's idea of mutual recognition and in reconciling his phenomenism about discursive practices with his realist intuitions about norms.

In his (yet unpublished) *A Spirit of Trust* Brandom provides a new interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, which culminates in the idea of language as the basic framework of mutual recognition. Within this framework, the cognitive relations of confession, forgiveness, and trust find their expression. This new approach helps Brandom tackle some of the problems caused by his earlier second-personal account of communication. In particular, it leads Brandom to the formulation of the idea of self-correcting community which reconciles the social character of the game of giving and asking for reasons and the objective character of its outcomes. However, Brandom's new account faces another challenge. It seems to stand in need of a theory that would explain how the game accommodates the emergence of new facts and meanings and how it manages to keep the balance between novelty of conceptual contents and external constraint on what can be claimed.

In McDowell's case, the central notion is that of *experience*. Experience opens us to the space of norms that is objective and autonomous – in the familiar sense of being independent of what you and I might actually think of it at any given moment – and, at the same time, natural. Consequently, whereas in Brandom's case the idea of objectivity is used to reconcile his phenomenism about discursive practices and his recognition of the reality of discursive norms, in McDowell's case its primary task is to dissolve the dualism of the normative and the natural.

My view of McDowell's handling this task is as follows. McDowell's aim in *Mind and World* is to answer the question of how both our experience of the world and the world our

experience is of can be conceptually framed through and through, and yet the world can be understood as a reality independent from our empirical judgements and capable of imposing rational constraints on what we think and say. According to McDowell, it is wrong to ground the idea of such an independent reality on the claim that our experience constitutes a mediating screen between reality and thought. In veridical experience, he says, we are utterly open to manifest facts that are part and parcel of the world as it really is. But the idea of our radical openness to the world, taken together with the notion that both the world and our experience of it are conceptually framed, raise the question: How can reality that is radically open to us and available for our empirically grounded thought can at the same time be independent from this thought? McDowell's answer is to offer an account that places a rational constraint on our empirical thinking within the conceptual. This account results in a form of normative realism, according to which normative relations between mind and world constitute what McDowell calls the sphere of the conceptual. The sphere is unbounded and autonomous, i.e., it must be understood on its own terms, independently of the space of nature as construed by the natural sciences. In pursuing his project, in one of his later works, McDowell makes a rather clear distinction between the objective and the social. Namely, he claims that "we cannot make sense of discourse-governing social norms prior to and independently of objective purport" (McDowell 2002: 275). In other words, according to McDowell, our answerability to each other alone is insufficient to explain how thought is about the world. In light of this claim, it is important to determine if the social, according to McDowell, is in any way constitutive of the idea of objective conceptual content.

In the last lecture of *Mind and World* McDowell poses a highly important thesis about language as a "repository of tradition," which creates the possibility of building a link between the



social aspect of concept application and the objectivity of conceptual content. My principal claim in chapter two is that the very idea of conceptual content, as it is introduced in *Mind and World*, allows two conflicting interpretations, which cannot coexist within the framework of McDowell's account, and that, consequently, this idea cannot do the job McDowell wants it to do.

In Peirce's case, the idea of objectivity, which is understood as independence from the whims and vagaries of individual assessments, attaches to a particular *method*. I suggest that the method, as it is defined in Peirce's maxim of pragmatism, may be seen as representing a synthesis of Brandom's and McDowell's approaches. On the one hand, it helps us recognize the importance of perceptual experience; on the other hand, it provides a strong link between the objective and the social in explaining meanings of our ideas about the world as dependent on our capacity to predict practical outcomes of our using the objects which these ideas are about.

Peirce understands norms, which govern our performances, as *ideals*, or *ends* (CP 1.586; 1.591-616). These ideals, or ends represent the ultimate form of reference to the future: on Peirce's view, everything there is should be defined by the way it conforms to the idea of what it is going to ultimately become. The ideal that is central to the method in question is that of the community of inquirers. This ideal is implied in both Peirce's semiotics and his pragmatism, and I claim that once we see how the notion of such community is derived in both cases, we will be able to obtain all that is necessary to show that Peirce's conception of objectivity is satisfactory.

The problem of the relationship between Peirce's semiotics and his pragmatism has a longstanding history in Peirce studies. It is a well-known fact that through the 1900s Peirce struggled to formulate a full-fledged proof of his pragmatism, and one of the ways he thought he could do this was by reconciling his pragmatic maxim with his definition of sign. The reconciliation presupposes finding a link between two facts: first, the fact that the meaning of a

concept consists in conceivable practical outcomes of our interaction with objects that fall under this concept; and second, the fact that any sign is something that stands for something else to someone in some respect or capacity. According to Peirce, these two definitions (of meaning as the sum total of practical consequences of actions it implies, and of sign as a triadic entity) have to be freely translatable into one another (EP2: 398-433).

My approach to the problem is to treat the relationship in the manner in which the relationship between Brandom's inferentialist semantics and his normative pragmatism has been treated in chapter one; namely, as a reinterpretation of Kant's two constructivist theses as they figure in Kant's 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Critiques<sup>1</sup>. My overall claim in chapters three and four is that Peirce's notion of the community of inquirers allows us to accommodate the idea of objectivity and eschew the pitfalls of both Brandom's phenomenalism about discursive practices and McDowell's dual interpretation of conceptual content.

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<sup>1</sup> This approach is justified by certain obvious analogies between the two philosophers in their approach to Kant, as well as by the fact that the special attention to Kantian themes in Peirce has been characteristic of Peirce studies from very early on, beginning with Murray Murphey's 1968 "Kant's Children: The Cambridge Pragmatists", and up to recent works, such as J. Kaag's 2005 "Continuity and Inheritance: Kant's Critique of Judgment and the Work of C. S. Peirce", S. Rosenthal's 2002 "A Pragmatic Appropriation of Kant: Lewis and Peirce" and J. Abrams's 2004 "Peirce, Kant, and Apel on Transcendental Semiotics: The Unity of Apperception and the Deduction of the Categories of Signs".

# 1. SEMANTIC CONTENTS AND PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVES: THE IDEA OF OBJECTIVITY IN BRANDOM'S NORMATIVE PRAGMATISM

## *1.1. Introduction*

According to Brandom, norms we rely on when participating in communal discursive practices are always already *implicit* in those practices. The norms, however, can be made *explicit* by being inferentially articulated in judgments we make. The idea of an interplay between the implicit and the explicit parts of discourse is a linchpin that holds together Brandom's inferentialist semantics and his normative pragmatics. According to the former, what constitutes the content of a claim or a judgment is not a *sui generis* conscious state, but the inferential roles this claim or judgment plays in various communicative situations. According to the latter, every claim or judgment we make is a move in what Brandom, using one of David Lewis's seminal ideas, calls the "scorekeeping game" (Lewis 1979). The nature of the game may be explained by the analogy of a board game where each player has counters that can be put on/taken off the board in consequence of the player's commitment to a particular claim. Making claims is inseparable from tracking other players' moves, which is done by keeping score of the counters that other players add to/remove from the board<sup>2</sup>. As every claim or judgment always entails accepting some new practical commitments and rejecting some previously made ones, it inevitably changes the score the participants of the game keep on each other and on themselves. The trick is to see the game as a

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<sup>2</sup> For a brief description of the analogy see Wanderer 2008: 41-48.

rule-guided activity without presupposing a normative grid of explicitly stipulated rules that sits outside of actual discursive practices.

What is also important, in Lionel Shapiro's phrase, is the fact that Brandom's inferentialist semantics is an account of "how propositional content incorporates norms of application as roles that are *played*, not as roles that are *described*" (Shapiro 2004: 149). Likewise, according to Brandom's normative pragmatics, making a move in the game is *doing* something in a social environment and, in virtue of this, changing the environment – which, in Brandom's own terms, allows us to treat communication as "the social production and consumption of reasons" (MIE: 474). Brandom's attention to actions as opposed to mere descriptions is thus an overarching *pragmatist* aspect of his theory as a whole. In stressing the importance of this aspect, Brandom refers to the constructivist stance adopted by Kant in his first two *Critiques*. One of Kant's central claims in his *Critique of Pure Reason* is that whatever there is to know originates, in part, from a set of a priori concepts that secure the unity of experience. The constructivist gist of this claim is that part of what is given in experience owes its objectivity to constructive efforts of the transcendently interpreted subjectivity (KRV: A125). According to Brandom's "phenomenalist" interpretation of this thesis, the cognizing subject *makes* certain things meaningful by *taking* them to be such. Likewise, the principles of practical reason formulated in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* also have their origins in the activity of the transcendental subject. The autonomy thesis tells us that the subject must be able to introduce the principles and will them as objective laws. This, again, in Brandom's terms, presupposes that the subject must be able to *make* the laws meaningful by *taking* them to be such.

According to Brandom, this capacity of taking something (e.g. a thought, or a rule) as a representation of something it *itself* isn't (e.g. an object of the thought, or a necessary behavior

according to the rule) is a *fundamental capacity of us as humans*. On his interpretation of Kant, what makes us act is not a rule itself, be it a theoretical or a practical one, but our *acknowledgment* of it. Acting in accordance to a rule itself here means acting in accordance to a rule that does not depend on our recognition of it, which amounts to simply obeying the rule, as distinct from *taking* ourselves to be acting upon it (MIE: 31), which always amounts to taking up a normative stance (Brandom 2009: 118). Brandom and Kant are in agreement as to the fact that this intervening attitude of taking something to serve as a representation of something else, which implies a peculiar sensitivity to rules, is emphatically human and is certainly not in play in the relationship between natural objects and rules that govern them<sup>3</sup>. According to Brandom, as sensitivity to rules implies normativity, an important Kantian insight about the special way in which we humans, as opposed to creatures of the natural world, are emphatically normative creatures, is cashed out in our human capacity of *applying concepts*. It is the application of concepts of things rather than using things *themselves* that highlights the reflectivity of human consciousness as opposed to unreflective natural sentience, and the normative dimension of human action as opposed to mere natural disposition. And indeed, as we act on what we *take* rules to be rather than on the rules *themselves*, we may do so correctly or incorrectly. Consequently, Brandom's central question here is what exactly one must be able to *do* "in order to count as *taking* or *treating* a performance as correct or incorrect" (MIE: 32).

The answer to this question has two parts. The semantic interpretation of the attitude of taking something as a representation of something else is to be non-problematic. From the point of view of Brandom's inferentialist semantics, any concept is a norm that determines whether a

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., the following formulation from Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: "Everything in nature works according to laws. Only a rational being has the power to act according to the idea of laws – i.e., according to principles." (GMM: 36).

particular claim is correct or incorrect in virtue of the way it is used in a network of inferences.

What it boils down to is that I always take someone's claim as a reason to believe that some *other* claim also ought to be true<sup>4</sup>. However, when *semantic* inferential relations between judgments are reinstated in *pragmatic* terms as outputs of social interactions between our commitments and entitlements to these judgments, Brandom faces a problem. Namely, he needs to explain how to proceed from what we *take* to be the case to what *objectively is* the case.

This explanation is a complex, book-length affair, and in *Making It Explicit*<sup>5</sup> Brandom initially chooses to introduce it *ex adverso*, by displaying his disagreement with Crispin Wright's interpretation of Wittgenstein's solution of the rule following paradox. From Wright's perspective, we should try to solve this problem with the following dilemma in view. On the one hand, communitarians claim that, whatever constitutes the correctness or incorrectness of a statement, independently from how we are disposed to assess the statement on a particular occasion, is located within the speaker's linguistic community, and has to be in line with assessments of other members of the community. On the other hand, Platonists claim that shared assessments are not constitutive of the requirements they might reflect or not reflect properly. The former view makes it almost impossible to introduce any notion of objectivity, while the latter says that, even the community as a whole can go wrong on an occasion. According to Wright, the impression that there are only two options here is a false one. Wright's response is to

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<sup>4</sup> This idea of Brandom's is, in a way, an inferentialist amplification of the Wittgensteinian insight that understanding a meaning/grasping a norm is mastering a use of an expression (AR: 27). The amplification amounts to saying that norms do their *implicit* work in discourse, but can be made *explicit* when inferentially articulated in a series of judgments. It is concepts, Brandom says, that are norms that implicitly permeate our discursive interactions, but that can be cashed out by being inferentially articulated in our explicitly formulated judgments.

<sup>5</sup> Henceforth MIE.

show that Wittgenstein provides us with an opportunity to see how we can keep the objectivity requirement, and, at the same time, take into account the communal character of linguistic practices (Wright 1980; Wright 2007).

In Wright's interpretation, the solution requires a clear understanding of the relation between uses established in a given community and those that are objectively correct. Wright insists that, in order to maintain the distinction between conceptual commitments and their assessments, we need to identify an application being correct with the application being *taken* as correct, not by an individual agent, but rather by her community *as a whole*. In Wright's view, the distinction between correct and incorrect performances, while applicable to an individual, does not apply at all to communal assessments. As he claims in his *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics*, "we have understanding only of concepts of which we can distinctively manifest our understanding" (Wright 1980: 221). Endorsing this claim, according to Wright, is enough to reject as empty the idea that a community can be right or wrong in making some sort of a communal verdict based on an objective standard. The verdict *is* the standard; a community endorses applications of rules, but itself cannot be mistaken as there is no authority over it. A communal assent is an essential part of the background against which individual assessments may be acknowledged as correct or incorrect. It is, Wright says, simply not coherent to suppose that a community as a whole can go wrong. Thus, Wright wants to hold on to the contractual, or communitarian, view, but claims that the patterns of applications to which conceptual norms oblige us are independent of assessment.

This attempt to reconcile the social and the objective, according to Brandom, yields a result that he deems totally inadmissible for the reason that, contrary to Wright's allegations, it entails the total loss of the objectivity of conceptual norms:

Indeed the primary explanatory challenge to a social practice theory of discursive commitments is to show how... genuine, and therefore *objective*, conceptual norms can be elaborated. These bind the community of concept-users in such a way that it is possible not only for individuals but for the whole community to be mistaken in its assessments of what they require in particular cases.

(ME: 54)

However, having promised his own interpretation of the relation between the social character of discursive norms and their objectivity, Brandom keeps his reader in suspense as to the final solution up until the last two chapters of his *opus magnum*.

Throughout MIE Brandom defends two claims that provide the key to understanding the problem of the objectivity of discursive norms. First, he says that discursive norms are objective in the sense that they distinguish correct performances from incorrect ones, but, at the same time, are *not practice-transcendent*, in the sense that they do not belong to some noumenal world beyond the realm of everyday practices<sup>6</sup>. Second, according to Brandom, discursive norms originate from individual practical attitudes (how *I* or *you* take things to be), but are not in any way reducible to social consensus (how *all of us* take things to be). These two claims constitute what Brandom construes as his “phenomenalist” approach to discursive practices. According to this approach, practical attitudes of individual interlocutors generate norms, but, at the same time, are

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<sup>6</sup> I am briefly rephrasing a point from chapter one of Jeremy Wanderer's “Robert Brandom” here. For more detail see Wanderer 2008: 17-19. This is one of Brandom's principal theses which he refers and alludes to in numerous places throughout MIE: “Our activity institutes norms, imposes normative significances on a natural world that is intrinsically without significance for the guidance and assessment of action (MIE: 48, with the reference to Samuel von Pufendorf's *De jure naturae et gentium*. 1672). See also MIE 161-167; 623-628).



only assessments that we take as conforming to norms and proprieties of practice. In other words, on this view, the fact that something,  $x$ , is normative supervenes on the fact that we have reasons to consider  $x$  as normative. Accordingly, a practice is normative just in case it is properly taken to be such. Given these claims, the question Brandom has to answer is: How do we pass from individual practical attitudes to objective normative statuses? Alternatively, in the context of Wright's objections: How is it possible that any and all members of a given community can be mistaken in their understanding of what any given norm objectively requires?<sup>7</sup>

Brandom's short way to define the distinction between objectively correct applications and those that are only taken to be objectively correct is to say that the distinction is *perspectival*. Individual perspectives are coordinated in a way that excludes a unique irreducible community perspective above and beyond the aggregated actual perspectives of all participants. Brandom does not clarify whether his claim is that such perspective is not a real possibility, or that if there

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<sup>7</sup> Thus formulated, the question requires some clarification: "objectivity" in this case appears to be something different from what is usually called "correctness". Thus, it is sometimes held that one uses an expression *correctly* if and only if the use meets certain conditions of correctness. The conditions are defined as a platitude of the form "If 'X' means X, then it is correct to apply 'X' to any object  $x$  if and only if  $x$  is X". As has been noted above, according to Brandom, "propositional content incorporates norms of application as roles that are *played*, not as roles that are *described*" (Shapiro 2004: 149), which I take to indicate that no conditions of correctness, abstracted from particular patterns of use, are needed when we talk about the objective status of a norm. From Brandom's point of view, the formula that expresses conditions of correctness as described above should be deemed unchallengeable just as much as, both semantically and pragmatically, unilluminating. Moreover, as an abstraction from practices of use of the expression "X", such conditions of correctness are itself nothing but an explicitly formulated rule, and, therefore, need some further rule, which needs a certain further practice of its application, etc., etc. From this point of view, when Wittgenstein claims that no single feature defines what a "game" (and, for that matter, similarly, *any* other word or expression *at all*) in general is, and that similarities between different uses of "game" are best described as "family resemblances", i.e. "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (PI: 66), he means exactly that no explicitly stated condition can describe correctness of an application of the phrase "I am playing a game" *in abstracto*. The correctness will always depend on what I actually *do* in performing what I call "playing a game". No conditions of correctness, however platitudinous and seemingly obvious, are able to grasp it. If the conditions cannot grasp the meaning of what I *do* when I apply an expression, they themselves don't seem to do any useful job in helping us understand the meaning.

were such a perspective, it would still be fallible. He tells us only that we are capable of making the distinction between correct and incorrect applications not because our discourse has an omniscient Master, but because, as it will be shown below, the objectivity of the norms we apply is a *structural feature* common to each individual practitioner's perspective captured by the non-coercive authority of reasons interlocked by mutual accountability of all participants (MIE: 595).<sup>8</sup>

A number of philosophers consider this answer to be controversial – hence an extensive literature on the subject. One approach is to treat Brandom's normative pragmatics as a version of semantic eliminativism, which simply explains norms away and therefore can tell nothing instructive about their ontology. One possible consequence of Brandom's alleged eliminativism (Loeffler 2005: 58-59) is that his theory faces complete indeterminacy of meaning (Whiting 2006). This criticism of Brandom's social-perspectival account of objectivity is supplemented by arguments against the seeming circularity of the relationship between objective normative statuses and subjective practical attitudes (Kiesselbach 2012; Lauer 2009), and by the critique of Brandom's notion of sociality: if the objectivity of conceptual norms rests on the distinction between what is true and what is *taken* to be true, then the shifts in perspective that reveal this distinction can be not only *interpersonal*, but also *intrapersonal* (Gibbard 1996; Prien 2010). From this point of view, given that perspectives change in the course of time, our desire to be thorough in our analysis might cause us to abandon a clear idea of a person.

In what follows, most of these criticisms will be discussed in more detail<sup>9</sup> in the context of the problems that arise within Brandom's phenomenalist approach to discursive practices,

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<sup>8</sup> The idea of perspectival objectivity is discussed at length in section 1.3, where I show how this idea emerges from the asymmetry between undertaking and attributing commitments as two kinds of practical attitudes.

<sup>9</sup> I will not say anything about the interpersonal/intrapersonal controversy here, as it would lead the discussion too far away from my main focus.

which is the main focus of the first three sections of this chapter. By adopting this approach, on the one hand, Brandom claims that norms are generated by individual practical attitudes. In doing so, he rejects the claim that the social has an ontology of its own, apart from particular social interactions. On the other hand, Brandom claims that the norms that do their implicit work in discourse are *objective*. The central challenge for Brandom, therefore, is to explain how the objectivity thesis can be justified given his insistence on the social character of discursive practices and his phenomenalist stance towards normativity (Laurier 2005; Pippin 2005; Rödl 2000; Rosen 1997).

My aim in the first three sections of this chapter is to demonstrate that the problem of the objectivity of norms cannot be resolved within Brandom's early theory. My approach in the next section is to show that an important part of the reason why it cannot is the way Brandom reads some of the fundamentals of Kant's critical philosophy, Hegel's *Phenomenology*, and (to a lesser extent) Max Weber's theory of social action – the three big theoretical frameworks that played an important part in creating the historico-philosophical background for Brandom's normative pragmatics. I will begin by providing the Kantian context within which the problem of the objectivity of norms is established and explaining why Brandom cannot accept Kant's own *architectonic* approach to the problem. I will then show that Brandom's first attempt to accept Hegel's idea of mutual recognition in order to amend the Kantian solution fails due to his second-personal view on social communication. In the remaining two sections of this chapter I will discuss the way the new interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology* Brandom presents in his (yet unpublished) *A Spirit of Trust* helps him tackle some of the problems caused by his phenomenism about discursive practices.

## ***1.2. Kant, Hegel, Weber***

Fairly early in the first chapter of MIE, while giving the initial introduction to his idea of norms as rules implicit in discursive practices, Brandom refers to Max Weber's notion of disenchantment (MIE: 48). Weber, who borrowed the term from Friedrich Schiller, used it to describe the new secularized rationality and a variety of systems of instrumental action that emerged in late seventeenth-century Europe. According to Weber, the Enlightenment disenchanted the world in the sense of having it pictured as in itself totally devoid of meaning and values, and as something whose only real source from then onwards was recognized to lie in symbolically mediated human praxis (Weber 1946).

The difference between the meaningless world out there and the realm of meaning-conferring human action was initially introduced by Kant, the paradigmatic philosopher of the Enlightenment, in the form of the distinction between self-consciously followed norms and laws of nature. Throughout his three *Critiques*, Kant indefatigably puts emphasis on the fact that the world of nature is in itself only a *possibility* that becomes *real* through human action – the thesis that, as Brandom justly claims in the introduction to his *Reason in Philosophy*, marks a crucial point of early American reception of German idealism. In particular, the transition from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* to his *Critique of Practical Reason* cleared the way for the pragmatist shift from describing thinking as a sequence of mental events to interpreting meanings in terms of consequences of our actions. It is that transition, according to Brandom, that finally made rationality a thoroughly normative concept (RP: 2-23). In order to fully understand this claim, we need a closer look at the link between Brandom's inferentialist semantics and his normative pragmatics in light of the aforementioned Kantian transition. As I will show, while, on the one

hand, Brandom follows Kant and Weber in drawing a rather sharp line of demarcation between human freedom and dumb nature, on the other hand, he makes an opposing Hegelian move by grounding human knowledge in historically and socially based mutual recognition.

According to Kant, the gap between the theoretical self of nature and the normative self of freedom is inherent to moral consciousness, which seeks to reconcile the two selves in the imaginative reinterpretation of the schematism of understanding in *aesthetic* judgment. Although a practical agent may know how she ought to act, she cannot go any further. She doesn't know to what purpose she knows this, i.e. what the practical meaning of this knowledge is. The reason for this is that the agent is able to think of her own maxims as practical moral laws only if these latter do not contradict the categorical imperative, which provides only a purely formal foundation of the will. Accordingly, the laws should be abstracted from all sorts of subject-matter of the will in favor of their universal form (KPV: I, 1, §80). The categorical imperative, as a universal regulative principle expressed in an explicitly formulated rule, gives us the idea of freedom. But the key problem is that Kant does not explain how to proceed from belief to action, because knowledge of the rule as such does not constitute any action-guiding competence, i.e. it does not prevent a practical agent from behavior that may contradict such knowledge. However, a practical agent may resort to an *aesthetic judgment*. In KU §59 ("Of Beauty as the Symbol of Morality") Kant claims that aesthetic judgments, just like moral judgments, are characterized by universality; in both cases, the subjective principle of judging is represented as valid for every man. But unlike moral judgments, aesthetic ones are not based on knowledge of any explicitly formulated rule (in Kant's own words, they are "not cognizable through any universal concept" – KU: 252). Kant shows, however, that aesthetic judgments help the agent to work her knowledge into a finite set of practical habits in appealing to what Kant calls the "communal

sense”, a sense, he says, we are “compelled to postulate [...] to account for the agreement of men in their appreciation of beautiful objects” (KU: xxii). Although an agent cannot rationalize *why* this particular something appears beautiful to her, no one, says Kant, is able to live in an aesthetically deficient world, so the changes one makes as an aesthetic creature always conform to the law that one cannot formalize. As Hannah Ginsborg nicely summarises it, aesthetic judgment

...can function independently of the understanding in situations where the relevant rules or concepts are not already specified. To exercise judgment in this independent way is to judge particulars to be contained under rules or concepts which are, so to speak, not already in understanding, but rather made possible by those acts of judging, themselves.

(Ginsborg 2011: 253)

Accordingly, although Kant’s 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> *Critiques*, of course, make two different cases for our capacity to judge, they also represent two series of arguments, each which form integral parts of his *architectonics*: aware of the categorical imperative, I cannot work it into a finite set of practical habits; and conversely, *not* aware of the law of aesthetic judgment, I always have an idea of how to rearrange my setting. Because the normative force of the principles of practical reason may not always work in the same way as the normative force of logical forms, Kant offers a reinterpretation of logically structured knowledge into ethically sound conduct by an aesthetic symbol – a form of possibility, or an aesthetic idea, serving as a means of the moral self’s self-objectifying. It is the power of aesthetic judgment, according to Kant, that provides the possibility to correlate an object of freedom with an object of nature, thus rendering the world surrounding us a *symbol* of the moral, i.e. as something that converts my not understanding why into a symbolic experience of freedom.

Brandom, just like early pragmatist Peirce, is a Kantian only in terms of Kant’s 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> *Critiques*. He makes no use of aesthetic judgment as a mediator between the theoretical and the

practical, as it is suggested by §59 of the *Critique of Judgment*. Instead, he seeks to make the notions of the practical and the normative, as it were, immediately available. And, just like Peirce in his early writings, to accomplish this task, Brandom turns to Hegel. Kant, he writes, “punted many hard questions about the nature and origins of normativity”, whereas Hegel “brought these issues back to earth by understanding *normative* statuses as *social* statuses – by developing a view according to which [...] all transcendental constitution is social institution” (AR: 33-34).

Recall that, according to both Kant and Brandom, the distinction between the natural and the normative is the one between the capacity of acting according to a rule and the capacity of acting according to a *conception* of a rule. But, according to Brandom, in order to close the aforementioned Kantian gap between the theoretical self of nature and the normative self of freedom, instead of resorting to the mediating role of aesthetic judgment, we need to appeal to the Hegelian transition from the transcendental to the social. On this Brandomean view, by performing multiple acts of the social production and consumption of reasons, we get involved in the exchange of judgments, which cashes out the *mutual recognition* of our responsibilities towards each other (MIE: 474). It is this shift from Kant to Hegel that finally allows Brandom to put together the inferentialist-semantic and the normative-pragmatic parts of his story. On the semantic side, we can grasp the content of a concept only if we have an *implicit* knowledge of its inferential relations with a host of other concepts, as well as the circumstances and consequences of these relations. In Brandom’s own terms, “our capacity to know *that* something is the case depends on our having a certain kind of know-*how*: the ability to tell what is reason for what” (RP: 118). On the pragmatic side, our ability to place a concept in a network of inferential relations can be made *explicit* in terms of practical commitments, which an actual use of the concept implies. Conceptual contents emerge from, and are made explicit by, mutual recognition-

based rational criticisms available to us in the explicit inferential form as the scorekeeping game of giving and asking for reasons.

On this Hegelian account, we cannot, as it were, begin to be meaningful from scratch, from a certain “this”: whenever we happen to make a contentful assertion, we always find ourselves already inside the game in which our exchange of reasons is supported by our interrelated background beliefs and mutual responsibilities towards each other. Our moves in the game always involve commitments that stand in need of justification, mutual critical assessment, and acknowledgment of their inferential consequences. In making judgments, we hold each other responsible for commitments and entitlements that we attribute to one another, and acknowledge each other’s authority. And it is in doing so (that is, in performing an essentially *social* activity) that we do what we must be able to do in order to count as taking or treating a particular application of a concept as correct or incorrect. In this way, Brandom’s account of normativity combines Kant’s ideas of human action and the reflective character of human consciousness with what Brandom takes to be a Hegelian approach to social discursive practices. On this view, what is between the reflectivity of consciousness, which expresses our sapience (the Kantian self of freedom), and mere natural sentience (the Kantian self of nature), is not a gap, but a *continuity*.

That said, the historico-philosophical background of the problem of the objectivity of discursive norms in MIE cannot be complete without discussing Brandom’s overall stance towards the nature of the social. A brief reference to the basics of Weber’s theory of social action will help us here. Apart from the explicit reference to Weber’s notion of disenchantment, as discussed in the beginning of this section, with a rare exception (see Detel 2008), philosophers pay little or no attention to another, implicit reference that Brandom’s texts make to Weber’s works. Recall that, in Brandom’s theory, practical attitudes of individual agents have priority



over normative statuses in that the former *institute* the latter. To put it differently, the authority of norms derives entirely from their actual acknowledgment by someone (MIE: 50-52). And it is explaining the relationship between individual attitudes (how we *take* things to be) and statuses (how things *ought* to be objectively) that is the clue to solving the objectivity problem and the keystone of Brandom's whole theoretical edifice. Meanwhile, it was none other than Weber who first conceived of the social realm as constituted by social *actions*, as opposed to Durkheim's understanding of society as reality on its own which consists of *facts* external to any particular group of individuals and their behavior. Whereas, according to Durkheim, an individual action is contingent to the social relation and not logically prior to it, Weber insists that what an agent *does* has the primary significance. Brandom and Weber seem to be in agreement as to the fact that, on the one hand, what an individual does is always connected with some subjective intentions and purposes and, on the other hand, to a large extent depends on the agent's interpretation of the actions of other agents. But according to Weber's interpretive approach, it makes little sense to consider an action as carrying the meaning that is "correct" or "objective" by some metaphysical criterion. Different types of actions are performed in a variety of situations in which roles played by participants may yield different patterns of results depending on contexts and circumstances involved (Weber 1991: 7).

Needless to say, the account of the Weber-Durkheim controversy just given is exceedingly brief, but the very outline of the context it creates can help us properly situate Brandom's approach to the objectivity of norms. On the one hand, like Weber, Brandom emphatically denies that the social constitutes a separate ontology and that objectivity should be equalised with impersonality. On the other hand, he claims that norms "bind the community of concept-users in such a way that it is possible not only for individuals, but for the *whole*

*community* to be mistaken in its assessments of what they require in particular cases” (ME: 54, emphasis added; cf. Wanderer 2008: 19). In this context, the question is whether – and how – Brandom’s claim that normative discursive practices are necessarily *inferential* and *social* coexists with his claim that norms are *objective* in the sense that even a society of concept-users taken as a whole can go wrong. Given that the objectivity of discursive norms, says Brandom, “precipitate[s] out of the social soup of norms” (MIE: 54), how can a norm be social, inferentially articulated, and objectively valid even in a case in which *no one* in a given society gets it right? Should we simply stop at this point and be, as Robert Pippin puts it, “philosophically satisfied” with the formal claim that “the permanent possibility of a distinction between how things are and how they are taken to be [...] is built into the social articulation of concepts” (MIE: 597; Pippin 2002: 393)?

### ***1.3. Perspectival Objectivity***

Now that the appropriate context is in place, in this section I will proceed by showing in some detail how Brandom’s theory leads to the problem of the objectivity of discursive norms and how Brandom purports to solve the problem. Recall that, to mean something at all, an expression, according to Brandom, has to form a part of a network of other expressions. In his *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (2009)<sup>10</sup>, Brandom illustrates this claim by introducing the distinction between describing and mere labelling: While a parrot may learn to repeat the word “red” in the presence of red things, a three-year-old child, in responding with just the same word

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<sup>10</sup> Henceforth RP.

in the presence of just the same objects also knows that red lollipops taste like cherry and that a red traffic light means “stop.” The difference between the parrot and the child lies in the fact that the latter is not merely labelling things, but is able to practically master the inferential relations of the concept “red” to a variety of other descriptive concepts and thus to *locate* it correctly in the space of implications that those other concepts constitute (RP: 7-8). In short, a concept can be applied only as a node in an inferential network of other concepts, and its inferential articulation is a sufficient condition of its conceptual contentfulness (AR: 8). These claims of Brandom echo what Sellars wrote on the relation between meanings of expressions and practices of their application, in the context of his familiar critique of “the Given”:

<...> one can have the concept of green only by having a whole battery of concepts of which it is one element. It implies that while the process of acquiring the concept of green may ... involve a long history of acquiring *piecemeal* habits of response to various objects in various circumstances, there is an important sense in which one has *no* concept pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects ... unless one has them all.

(Sellars 1997: 44-45)

To explain how the treatment of meanings in terms of inferential roles implies normativity, Brandom introduces what he calls “a rationalist criterion of demarcation of the linguistic.” According to Brandom, the criterion stipulates “that what distinguishes the linguistic practice in virtue of which we are sapient and not merely sentient beings is its core practices of giving and asking for reasons” (PP: 29-30). The criterion stems from what Brandom takes to be the Kantian idea that the most distinctive feature of judgments is that they represent things we are *responsible* for (PP: 31). Again, recall that, according to Brandom, it is our capacity of applying concepts that highlights the reflectivity of human consciousness as opposed to mere unreflective sentience, and the normative dimension of human action as opposed to mere natural dispositions

to act in a certain way. Given this, it is easy to see that the criterion is a linguistic extension of this maxim, with the additional proviso that judgment is the minimal unit of responsibility.

The reason for this stipulation is the shift from a Cartesian *descriptive* conception of intentionality centered on the certainty of representations, to a Kantian *normative* conception of intentionality centered on their necessity (MIE: 9-11). This Kantian intuition, as Brandom notes, was later elaborated by Frege and amounts to the claim that, if we start analyzing language in normative terms, we see right away that judgments are the smallest semantic units, to which pragmatic force can attach and to which a speaker can claim entitlement or be committed (RP: 34). Entitlement and commitment are two primitive notions which represent two forms of responsibility for a judgment and which Brandom's theory treats as cases of what he calls a "normative status". The normative status of a judgment or a claim reflects how its correctness actually stands, irrespective of what you or anyone else might think of it.

Recall that, semantically speaking, simply conforming to a rule is not enough, we must also *take* ourselves to be acting upon it. Likewise, pragmatically speaking, what makes us act is not a commitment or entitlement *per se*, but our practical stance towards it. What matters is how we *take* it to be. This intervening act of taking something as a representation of something else, which Brandom considers as an expression of Kant's constructivism and which, in his case, refers to a peculiar sapient sensitivity to rules and commitments, is certainly not in play in the relationship between natural objects and rules that govern them. In taking something as something else, we express a certain practical attitude towards our commitment or entitlement to this something. Practical attitudes come in three flavors: we can acknowledge a commitment, undertake it, or attribute it to someone else. As it has been mentioned in the previous section, relations between our practical attitudes are a pragmatic flipside of semantic inferential relations: in

making an assertion, we inevitably change the score of the game by setting a chain reaction of inferences and attitudes, both of which are kinds of scorekeeping actions<sup>11</sup>. Both semantically and pragmatically, what is shared by scorekeepers is not the *contents* they produce, but the *practices* in which they participate (MIE: 485).

Now, the social dimension is constituted *in its entirety* by practical attitudes: in communicating with each other, all we have is interrelated practical attitudes/assessments made from a variety of different social perspectives. Our perspectives are held together in light of two facts. First, our scorekeeping practices are thick: we don't use words in a vacuum; our uses are constituted by a situational interplay between language and environment, by their mutual arrangement. This arrangement constitutes a custom or a set of interrelated customs which come together as a form of life. Thus understood, the arrangement is *implicit* in the sense that it resides in practices we share, and our agreement about it cannot be expressed as a final set of explicitly formulated maxims. Second, our different perspectives are interlocked by what Brandom calls "anaphoric chains" and "substitutional commitments". In chapter 9 of MIE Brandom provides a detailed discussion of anaphoric connections and the role they play in making expressions that involve demonstratives, indexicals, and proper names into repeatable linguistic structures. As a result, these structures, as Brandom puts it, "can express conceptual contents by being governed by indirectly inferential substitutional commitments" (MIE: 592). For instance, anaphoric uses of pronouns in phrases like "It is true of the inventor of lightning rod that *he* invented bifocals" initiate referential chains that tie different perspectives together and help us direct our intentions in understanding what we are talking *about*. Using these expressions also enables us to substitute one subsentential structure for another, making it clear, for instance, that by "the inventor of the

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<sup>11</sup> For more details on this aspect of scorekeeping, see Scharp 2012: 117-122.

lightning rod” we mean “Benjamin Franklin”, etc. (AR: 178-183). In doing all these things we, as scorekeepers, correlate our perspectives and unify the contents of what we say. This unification, though, is only a partial one, as it still allows for the uniqueness of our perspectives due to the differences in our background commitments. In other words, that contents are perspectival means that they can be defined *only* relative to a set of background commitments.

Each scorekeeper keeps two sets of books, the first one containing commitments undertaken by other scorekeepers according to her, the second one containing those actually acknowledged by other scorekeepers (MIE: 646). In the former case, a scorekeeper accepts responsibility for the inferentially embedded collateral commitments which, according to her counterpart, she *should* acknowledge, but which she does not necessarily actually acknowledge. To take a well-known example of Brandom, senator McCarthy certainly believed that the specter of communism was haunting Europe, but most likely had no knowledge of the fact that this is exactly what the first sentence of the Communist Manifesto says. Consequently, had someone asked him whether he believed any of the claims of the manifesto, McCarthy would have denied it (MIE: 516). Meanwhile, McCarthy should have undertaken a commitment to this belief even though he had had no idea what the first sentence of the manifesto, in fact, says. Thus, keeping track of what a claim represents involves keeping track of how the claim shifts from perspective to perspective (Gibbard 1996: 703).

In playing the game of giving and asking for reasons, we attribute and undertake commitments in a framework consisting of individual perspectives interconnected by substitutions and anaphoric chains. An important point is that attributing a commitment has priority over being entitled to undertake one, because undertaking may be understood in terms of being entitled to attribute, but *not* vice versa. In Brandom’s own terms, “an interlocutor can count

as having undertaken a commitment [...] whenever others are entitled [...] to attribute that commitment” (MIE: 596). What we have here, again, is *taking* someone as committed – a stance, which, as has been shown in section 1.2, stems from Brandom’s inferentialist reinterpretation of the Kantian distinction between the theoretical self of nature and the normative self of freedom, and which, according to Brandom, represents a fundamental feature of sapience as opposed to mere sentience. And it is the *asymmetry* this stance results in – the one between being entitled to attribute and undertaking – that allows Brandom to finally take account of the objectivity of discursive norms.

The account is as follows. What is objectively correct is what is *taken* to be correct by a scorekeeper who is entitled to attribute a commitment – as opposed to what is acknowledged by the one to whom this commitment is attributed. And, as the game presupposes that attributions and undertakings are mutual, we can construe the difference between objective normative statuses and subjective practical attitudes as a social-perspectival distinction between practical attitudes (MIE: 597). In other words, the distinction between objectively correct applications and those that are only taken to be correct is, says Brandom, nothing but a structural feature of each individual practitioner’s perspective, a social-perspectival *form* of it. Due to the implicit agreement that individual attitudes create, they, as it were, *project beyond* the dispositions to apply them (MIE: 646). The objective outcome of communication is thus explicated in terms of individual practical attitudes only, which, in turn, leads to the collapse of *external* assessments into *internal* ones (MIE: 646). As Grönert (2005), in using one of Wittgenstein’s metaphors, claims, it might be said that Brandom’s phenomenalist approach to norms looks like “a ladder that needs to be thrown away after one has climbed up on it” (Grönert 2005: 166).

If this account is accurate, it reveals an interesting picture. Brandom is aware that, as all scorekeepers have different perspectives, there are always some possible circumstances in which any one actual application of a norm may in the future be discovered to be incorrect. At the same time, there is nothing whatsoever either about applications themselves, or about the way the game of giving and asking for reasons is generally played, that prevents some of our applications from being constantly reiterated in the future, and thus some of our beliefs supporting these applications from being final – even if they are wrong. I suggest that all these outcomes, taken together, put a Brandomean scorekeeper in a rather difficult situation. According to Brandom, a scorekeeper takes some of her applications to be correct knowing (1) that any application can be proven to be incorrect, (2) that about any norm applied all of us can go wrong, and (3) that we can hold on to some of our beliefs indefinitely long even though those beliefs are wrong. Naturally, in light of (1), (2), and (3) as they stand together, our acceptance of the distinction between correct and incorrect assessments does not amount to much. At best, we are only able to say that objectively correct conceptual contents are *somewhere* in the discourse. They are somewhere *there* in the sense that every detective story has a state of affairs with the discovery of which the suspense ends. But, according to Brandom, discourse has no Master (which is to say that there is no one who can read the story from cover to cover), and, therefore, no one knows whether the state of affairs is at all obtainable. It may seem that we at least may *hope* or *aim* for the correctness of our assessments, but if the fallibility of our current beliefs is not compensated by the possibility of our knowing, at some point in future, that some particular assessments are indeed correct, our hope for correctness is only the hope for the fact that our game of giving and asking for reasons is a structurally sustainable and a well-ordered one.

It is important to have in mind that, on this account, the idea of the objectivity of norms as a social-perspectival form shared by all scorekeepers does not always help us distinguish between



correct and incorrect applications *not* because it offers a purely coherentist view on epistemic justification. To the contrary, Brandom lays stress on the fact that, due to anaphoric chains and substitutional commitments, our beliefs are, for the most part, about the world. But my suggestion is that anaphoric chains and substitutional commitments cannot do the job. Here is why. According to Brandom, our claims being inferentially interlocked with each other entails that making a claim is always followed by some commitments being scratched off/written in the two books each player uses to keep score both on others and herself. As has been discussed above, the idea of every scorekeeper having two books implies that every scorekeeper is responsible for certain consequences of what she claims even if she does not acknowledge her commitments to those consequences (i.e., even if the commitments are absent from the book of her acknowledged commitments). What allows us to take the commitments as objectively valid is their being present in the book containing commitments undertaken by the scorekeeper *according to others*. Meanwhile, as, by Brandom's own admission, all other scorekeepers can go wrong, there is nothing at all that can prevent some of our mistaken opinions from being reiterated indefinitely long. Consequently, we have to admit that some facts about the world may never be discovered, or, in other words, that the Kantian idea of *Ding an sich* is viable. What is missing in this case, then, is an explanation of why this conclusion is inadmissible for Brandom's Hegelian account. The fact that, due to anaphoric chains and substitutional commitments, we are in agreement with others as to what we are talking *about* cannot tell us whether *what* we are talking about is not wrong. Consequently, anaphoric chains and substitutional commitments only *supplement* our recognition-based rationality, but they cannot guarantee that our current mistaken beliefs will ever be corrected.

We can try and support our distinction between correct and incorrect applications/assessments by the regulative notion of theoretically perfect intersubjective

agreement obtainable under ideal conditions – a notion similar to Peirce’s idea of a future community of inquirers. Peirce defines it in his 1868 “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” as “a community without definite limits, and capable of indefinite increase of knowledge”, where “[the] two series of cognitions – the real and the unreal – consist of those which, at a time sufficiently future, the community will always continue to reaffirm; and of those which, under the same conditions, will ever after be denied” (W2: 239). The notion of such intersubjective agreement will be discussed in detail in chapter 3. I will only say here that what it might add to Brandom’s account is that it would serve as a *form* of communication, and, at the same time, would also tell something about the *contents* of our beliefs. This idea would serve as a form of communication, because every communicative move in the scorekeeping game would necessarily have to refer to it as a state of affairs which all our errors and corrections of this move should ultimately lead to<sup>12</sup>. And this idea would say something about the objective contents of our beliefs, because, whatever our knowledge at the present moment actually is, it would be capable of providing us with a warrant that true facts about the world are necessarily discoverable in the long run.

On the one hand, according to Peirce, the future community, through pragmatic maxim, constitutes a set of principles that guide practical decisions of me and you as individual

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<sup>12</sup> It might seem that this same reference is available on Brandom’s account as well, in the sense that every move in the scorekeeping game would necessarily have to refer to that which is correct as opposed to that which is only taken to be correct. However, as I will show in chapter 3, in Peirce’s case, the reference in question is neither a lip service, nor a detail that can be detached from his theory without destroying its architecture, and attached to another theory to the same functional effect. As I will show in chapter 3, in Peirce’s case, the very difference between what we believe in at the moment (what we take to be correct) and what is correct, is incomprehensible without this reference, supported by the maxim of pragmatism – a rule of action that describes concepts we use in terms of consequences of our actions. Due to the maxim, the Peircean scorekeeper, unlike the Brandomian one, has a pretty clear idea of what to do in order to aim for correctness. According to Brandom, any assertion does have the difference between what is taken to be correct and what in fact is correct, built into it, but, as I will show later in this section, his scorekeeper has only the awareness of the norm as a certain possibility, but no guidance as to how to act.

scorekeepers. On the other hand, it is defined by Peirce as “that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you” (W2: 239). Thus, this community is, by definition, not limited by a particular set of members, and therefore is in compliance with the requirements of Brandom’s theory in that it *exceeds* any such set in its reliance on future opportunities to correct the contents of our current beliefs. On this account, an objective deontic status could be seen as an attitude made *fully explicit* in terms of its inferential consequences. An individual attitude, although it may well happen to provide a correct assessment without such full explication, as fully explained and actually found to be correct may at any given moment of the game be only a projective possibility. But in this case, it would seem to be safe to say that even if everyone in a given community goes wrong, the practices, with all their consequential implications waiting to be realized, are still there, and so we keep score, accept commitments, and assign responsibilities in view of the fact that inferential habits may (and ultimately will) tell us where we went wrong.

Brandom would obviously endorse (with some non-Peircean reservations) a link between the communal and the objective, but his normative pragmatics is certainly not quite compatible with the fact that the scorekeeping game is ultimately headed (as it is in Peirce’s case) to a predestined result. Brandom’s idea, in Steven Levine’s phrase, is to offer only “a *hygienic* notion of objectivity” that would contain no traces of foundationalism or representationalism of *any* kind (Levine 2010: 584). Meanwhile, whether the notion of objectivity will have any meaning after all the hygiene procedures are over is a question that remains open<sup>13</sup>. For Brandom, the ideas of extended community and of a conceptual content being *ultimately* correct, are not plausible ones.

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<sup>13</sup> As Levine (2010) points out, “in moving so far from how the ordinary concept of objectivity operates in our inquiries, by making objectivity something that we control, Brandom completely revises the concept rather than elucidates it. Of course this complete revision may be justified, but the burden is on Brandom to show that it is” (Levine 2010: 586).

However, in the absence of those two, it remains unclear what exactly the link is between our limited communal agreement “here and now”, on the one hand, and something objective that *exceeds* any such agreement, on the other hand. Given that Brandom’s account dismisses a possibility of any *final* objective opinion and, at the same time, allows for at least some of our incorrect opinions to be reinstated again and again for an infinitely long time, the idea of something that exceeds a limited communal agreement cannot amount to much. Provided that the resort to the Kantian unknowable is not an option, and keeping in mind that the discursive practices we are involved in are based on rational criticisms and mutual recognition of our responsibilities to each other, the idea of rational constraint on what scorekeepers think and say can be due to our discursive practices being *self-corrective*.

Of course, the self-corrective character of discourse might, for instance, mean that it is arranged in such a way that correct claims are always *discoverable*. But, as has been demonstrated above, Brandom’s inferentialism doesn’t guarantee this. Perspectival objectivity is a form that makes us mindful to each other’s reasons and lays constraint on our navigating between different participants’ perspectives. If this is all there is to this idea, all we can safely conclude in light of it is the fact that each participant, as Grönert (2005) aptly puts it, “*leaves room* for an admission of objective deontic statuses” (Grönert 2005: 169). But again, does this necessarily *require* objectivity of any kind? As, for instance, Rorty (2000) points out, it is natural for a Wittgensteinian<sup>14</sup> to answer the question “How do you know that this is red?” by simply saying “I know English”, or “I know how to use the phrase *this is red*” (Rorty 2000: 186). Given this, if we need to distinguish applications that are *taken to be* correct *at the moment* from those

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<sup>14</sup> At least for a Wittgensteinian who happen to disagree with Kripke’s reading of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*.

that *are* correct *objectively*, we need something more than the idea of objectivity as a structural feature of discourse. We need some additional criteria.

One option, in the absence of such criteria, would be to acknowledge that a given conceptual content is applied correctly simply because, as William James would put it, it *works* for now. But in this case, the corresponding normative status might be taken to be objective only due to a set of social conventions and behavioral patterns we currently agree upon. On this view, what all members of a community here and now believe in, or deem to be correct, is indistinguishable from what is correct objectively, and what is *said* to be correct objectively is what, in Rorty's terms, is represented by a *useful vocabulary* – until this vocabulary is out of use. If our conversation, like Adam Smith's market, is governed by the invisible hand that rationalizes supply and demand of reasons and lays constraints on how we go about with our commitments and entitlements, then all we need to do is to learn how to play the game, until circumstances change the game or until we decide not to play it anymore. In other words, to say that our communication is perspectival in its form is simply to say that our rationality is inherently such that it organizes our reasons in an autonomous space, within which we can understand others and hold each other responsible for what we say and do. It remains unclear, therefore, how linking the rational constraint that the space of reasons imposes on our judgments to certain states of affairs being objective – if we want to disregard both causal impacts and Kantian things in themselves exert on us and the vertical representational relation of mind to world – amounts to anything more than saying that intersubjective agreement between sapient creatures is not only the best evidence for accessibility of valid judgments, but also constitutive of their validity. But the question is: If changes in our conventions affect normative statuses, and if no normative status can hold once the appropriate behavioral patterns stop working, how can the norm it implies be projected beyond a set of individual dispositions, and thereby fulfill one of Brandom's principal

requirements for objectivity (MIE: 646)? Let us suppose, though, the norm *can* be so projected, and let us also suppose we agree that, according to Brandom, what all members of a given community believe in *at the moment* really is indistinguishable from what *is* (or will be in the long run established as) correct objectively. Although these two facts do *not* show that there is *no* conceptual distinction between what everyone deems correct and what is correct according to the norms projected from our dispositions to acknowledge our commitments – as has been noted above, it only *leaves room* for the objectivity of norms, but it doesn't show how this idea should necessarily be a part of the picture. Indeed, our practices include many things we do without recognizing these things as *required*. But whether simply *recognizing the possibility* of certain things we do as being thus required, is a sufficient condition for using the term “objectivity” in the way Brandom does, is a matter not yet entirely settled.

To conclude this section, one more familiar worry about Brandom's first attempt to deal with the objectivity problem in MIE is expressed in Loeffler (2005)<sup>15</sup>:

If our system of acknowledged assertional commitments sets in general the standard [...] of our semantic assessments of others, we can never regard others as having the better reasons. In the case of manifestly conflicting acknowledgements, we would always treat others as obliged to adjust to us.

(Loeffler 2005: 40)

On this account, there is nothing that seems to be able to give us the needed normative constraint to adopt a system of assessments that are different from our own. Indeed, we *can* do things without acknowledging these things as (objectively) required, but we *cannot* assess what is done by others without commitments that are actually acknowledged – by us and others according to

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<sup>15</sup> In his “Normative Phenomenalism: On Robert Brandom's Practice-Based Explanation of Meaning” Ronald Loeffler does not support neither this claim, nor a response to it that Brandom himself might offer. Loeffler offers his own defence of normative phenomenalism irrespective of whether this defence is acceptable for Brandom or not. However, I take the position he uses to make his own point seriously, and I think the objection he presents is uncontested by Brandom's own account.

us. This, of course, is not to say that we do not defer to others. We do. But the question is *not* how to reconcile the fact that we adopt systems of assessments that are different from our own, and the fact that what we have for the assessment of others amounts to what is actually acknowledged. Brandom's idea of the recognitive structure that characterizes the game of giving and asking for reasons down to the most basic level of "I-Thou" relationship successfully addresses this worry: before I can make any sense, I recognize the value of the other. The point is to understand clearly that any system of acknowledged assertional commitments is a *social* and *institutional* system. Developing Loeffler's formulation along this avenue, one might ask how the idea of unifying *inferential* roles of our judgments is correlated with the idea of often conflicting *institutional* roles we play as parents, citizens, etc. What is the status of the common language that supposedly allows us to come to terms with each other? Unless there's some answer to these questions that would offer a story about *social institutions*.

We might, for example, ask: Based on what story I, as someone's brother, should necessarily come to terms with Thou being a judge? You and I can agree that what my brother has done is a felony. But, even so, both beliefs that constitute our inferential networks of collateral commitments and entitlements, and the way we will, given an occasion, act on those beliefs, might still be incompatible. From my perspective, the fact that I hold the *de re* belief of my brother *that* he committed a felony, does not necessarily presuppose the legal consequences it does from your perspective, if you identify yourself primarily as a judge in a similar situation. Brandom seems to imply that, due to the inferential ties between our uses of the term, together with anaphoric chains and substitutional commitments, the mismatch between our systems of collateral beliefs can never get big enough for the meaning of "felony" *not* to be shared by us as scorekeepers. In fact, however, you and I can keep using the term without even a slight trace of disagreement on a number of occasions when my particular attitude towards my relative is not

explicitly involved, i.e. if our uses do not involve the difference in our commitments that has just been described.

True, I accept responsibility for the inferentially embedded commitments collateral to my belief *of* my brother *that* he committed a felony, because I *should* acknowledge them according to your ascriptions. Brandom, however, admits that I do not necessarily actually acknowledge what I thus take responsibility for (MIE: 646). That said, how might the fact that you count me as having undertaken a commitment because you are entitled to attribute it (MIE: 596) help if, due to my role-laden beliefs, I am not going to cooperate anyway? The problem here is not that my judgment is legally or morally unsound, but that the *normative force* that can (but not necessarily will) make me change my mind, will result not from my assessing my own beliefs in scorekeeping terms, but rather from my rethinking the meaning of an article of the criminal code – that is to say, from changing my perspective on a particular set of local – always local – *institutional practices*. Whether this change will become an adjustment to the overall cognitive structure of the game of giving and asking for reasons, or remain a conflicting characteristic for a particular form of life is an open question. And, as the result of my rethinking is uncertain, the relations between being a judge and being someone’s brother might be considerably less transparent than Brandom’s idea of scorekeeping game seems to represent.

To summarize, as I have shown in this section, the purely formal character of perspectival objectivity doesn’t add anything substantial to us having a set of common conventions. Of course, thanks to Brandom’s account, we are much better off seeing those conventions not as finite sets of explicit rules, but as sets of practices, or games, in a Wittgensteinian fashion. But again, according to Wittgenstein, there’s not one singular feature – formal or substantial – that is common to *all* games. They are related in a variety of different ways creating what Wittgenstein calls “family resemblances” (PI: 65-67). Whether this Wittgensteinian picture presupposes



objectivity of any kind is a separate question, but the fact is that the very term is quite tellingly absent from the vocabulary of *Philosophical Investigations*.

Brandom's theory connects individuals through inferential ties subject to the all-pervasive perspectival form of communication which constrains everybody and says nothing about the meaning of any particular act of communication. However, this self-regulating free market of ideas, as our common project, itself cannot but represent a certain particular institutional culture, the "We" which our statements refer to. As DeMoor (2011) puts it, "the commonness of this project ... cannot be accounted for simply in terms of the fact that I am doing it and Thou art doing it; it is something that we are embarking upon *together*" (DeMoor 2011: 413). Naturally, according to Brandom, this togetherness of the We should not be either the Orwellian Big Brother, completely separated from each and every one of us (because, by Brandom's own admission, discourse has no Master), or a sum total of shared social conventions agreed upon by a limited group of self-interested individuals (due to the recognitive character of discourse). However, what it *should* be Brandom's MIE does not tell.

#### ***1.4. "I-We": Trust and Forgiveness***

In this section, I will discuss in some further detail the transition of Brandom's normative theory from Kant's critical philosophy to Hegel's *Phenomenology* in an attempt to build the link between inferentialist semantics and normative pragmatics on Hegel's idea of mutual recognition. This transition is accomplished by Brandom in two steps: the first step is made in MIE, where Brandom gives the second-personal (or the "I-Thou") account of the recognitive structure of

discourse; the second step is made in his (yet unpublished) *A Spirit of Trust*<sup>16</sup>, where Brandom seems to have changed his mind in favor of the institutional (or the “I-We”) approach. It is highly important to understand that the difference between these two kinds of one’s relations to others is not simply in the *number* of people one is involved with. The shift from the “I-Thou” to the “I-We” marks a crucial change of perspective on the link between the most fundamental *recognitive* structure of discourse, and the *social* character of it. In the former case, the structure of mutual recognition characteristic for the relation between two *individual* wills is immediately translated to the level of a community taken as a whole. Brandom’s burden in MIE is to justify his phenomenalism, or to show how individual practical attitudes institute objective normative statuses. The latter case might be described as the transition of Brandom’s philosophy from its Kantian to its Hegelian stage. Of course, Brandom employs Hegelian ideas already in MIE, but what becomes important at this second stage is that the translation of the individual into the social is mediated by a Hegelian institutional story.

As has been discussed in the beginning of this chapter, in Kant’s 1<sup>st</sup> *Critique* objectivity is explained as originating from a set of *a priori* concepts which create the possibility for the formal unity of experience. These concepts, Kant says, introduce “order and regularity in the appearances” which “we could never find [...] in appearances, had not we ourselves, or the nature of our mind, originally set them there” (KRV: A125). In other words, an outer object cannot be simply given in the intuition alone; it has to be synthesized in accordance with the categories and recognized in a concept. Kant’s central question here is, thus, how conditions of thought that are always *subjective* (or, in Brandom’s terms, practical attitudes that are always *individual*) can acquire *objective* value (KRV: A89/B122). This self-legislative power of pure

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<sup>16</sup> Henceforth ST.

reason, is then reinterpreted in *Critique of Practical Reason* as the autonomy thesis, which tells us that the norms that a community authorises are self-binding. The thesis stipulates that the hold of practical maxims on us depends exclusively on our own endorsement. Because of the very nature of consciousness, the principles of practical reason must arise from consciousness itself and consciousness must be able to will them as laws. In this way, practical reason determines which reasons to endorse and which actions to pursue.

In *The Critique of Judgment* Kant claims that maxims of practical reason cannot be rendered efficient without a medium, but can be imagined *as if* they were rules which are capable of guiding conduct due to being symbolized in a twofold logic-aesthetic form. On the one hand, ethical behavior is discrete; it cannot be worked into continuous experience: no one can consistently and continuously adjust her behavior to an explicitly stated formal rule. However, we are able to *think* about the application of our maxims in a logically consistent way. On the other hand, the categorical imperative cannot acquire any particular practical meaning due to its formal character, but we can ascribe this meaning to our *actions* by appealing to the aesthetic idea of a general law, which is to obey without asking any “why.” Kant’s approach to the problem of normativity, as he himself insisted on many occasions, is *architectonic*; in order to solve the problem of the normative authority of practical reasons, it involves all three normative sciences: logic, ethics, and aesthetics.

Brandom cannot follow this path and therefore builds the link between his inferentialist semantics and his normative pragmatics on Hegel’s idea of mutual recognition. He believes that it is this idea that provides a necessary justification for his social-perspectival account of the objective character of discursive norms. This approach makes the link between the objective and the social quite explicit, because it allows us to derive an account of the conditions of objectivity

not from the Kantian transcendental features of consciousness, but from the social character of discourse as suggested by Hegel. To accomplish the task, Brandom provides a Hegelian account of discursive practices within which we recognise each other as free agents capable of giving and asking for reasons. However, in MIE Brandom uses the idea of recognition in a somewhat narrower sense than Hegel does in his *Phenomenology*, and my claim is that this use, at least in part, is responsible for some of the unresolved issues with the notion of the objectivity of norms as discussed in sections 1.2-1.3 above.

Recall that the asymmetry between undertaking and attributing a commitment, which allows Brandom to introduce the notion of objectivity, is grounded in his insistence on the primacy of the second-personal point of view, or what he calls the “I-Thou” relationship, as opposed to the “I-We” relationship. As Habermas sees it, Brandom “wants to grant priority to symmetric ‘I-you relations’ between first and second persons over asymmetric ‘I-we relations’ in which the individual is, so to speak, *overwhelmed by the collectivity*” (Habermas 2000: 344; emphasis added). One of Habermas’s dissatisfactions with this picture is that Brandom adheres to a somewhat idealized view of the social where the atomism of “I-Thou” communicative pairs contradicts Brandom’s semantic holism. What I want to emphasise here, however, is beside this point. The question I want to ask is whether Brandom’s second-personal point of view is compatible with the structure of recognition as it is developed by Hegel.

As Michael DeMoor claims in his *Brandom and Hegel on Objectivity, Subjectivity, and Sociality* (2011), it is the “I-We” relationship that is fundamental for Hegel’s own account. On this account, I am self-conscious only as a part of a particular social culture. I can make sense of what I think and do only in the context of a particular set of social institutions as concrete forms of the “We”. DeMoor shows that there’s an analogy between Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and his *Philosophy*

*of Right*, where the former represents theoretical reason, which results in the “We” of Spirit, and the latter describes the development of practical reason, which finds its full expression in the common will of social contract. On this perspective, neither practical, nor theoretical synthesis is, as Kant defines it, “an art concealed in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover, and to have open to our gaze” (KRV, B 180). Hegel interprets Kantian syntheses not as a pure *Selbst-Bestimmung*, but as a process of continuous development. Moreover, he rejects any clear distinction between the two kinds of synthesis – and, by the same token, Kantian architectonics with aesthetics as the keystone of Kant’s system. According to DeMoor, for Hegel, “the subject that takes himself to be experiencing a unified diversity by determining it according to a concept is the same subject that places his will in a thing and thus makes it *his*” (DeMoor 2011: 201). Just like in Kant’s case, one of this subject’s key powers is imagination, but the Hegelian imagination is not separated from reason, and mediates the theoretical and the practical in such a way that the relationship between the two is *dialectical*. Part of the pragmatist essence of Hegel’s approach is that he considers the theoretical and the practical as two moments of the same narrative, whereas, according to Kant, they are two parallel stories mediated by the transcendental schematism and aesthetic judgment respectively.

Up to this point, Brandom would agree. However, according to Hegel, recognition in the “I-Thou” master-slave dialectic is incomplete as long as it is expressed in a struggle between two independent wills in pursuit of their own individual projects. It should be mediated by Spirit, which is realized in a variety of social institutions that follow one another until turning into the Absolute “We” understood as the final shape of self-consciousness. And just as *Phenomenology* describes the journey from the unreflective sense-certainty to a particular thing to a rational self-interested agent to a religious community, *Philosophy of Right* proceeds, through a variety of institutional stages, from the family where recognition is based on sentiment, to the civil society

in the form of the rationally organized State that provides the ultimate conditions for coexistence of rational free-willing individuals.

From this point of view, what is lacking in the story that Brandom tells us in MIE is an account of *why* we, as free individuals, share the same practices that constitute the game of giving and asking for reasons, or, in Hegel's own terms, why exactly being-for-another (how I take things to be) and being-in-itself (how things ought to be) tend to coincide. This issue caused by Brandom's insistence on the primacy of the second-personal point of view is addressed in ST. Parts 1 and 5 of this text tell a story that is remarkably different from the one offered in MIE. The new interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology* that Brandom offers in ST represents an attempt to reconcile the reality of the We, or of the social order, and the "I-Thou" relationship, which Brandom previously took to be the most primitive structure of social communication. In ST this task is accomplished by means of an interpretation of the idea of objectivity through the ideas of *trust* and *forgiveness*.

Brandom begins his analysis in part 5 of ST by introducing Hegel's distinction between the notions of alienation ("Entfremdung") and "moral life" ("Sittlichkeit"), which, on his interpretation, mirrors the distinction between the subjective and the objective. Brandom claims that

[...] where the immediate Sittlichkeit Hegel takes to characterize traditional society practically construes the implicit normative structure of its practices in an one-sidedly objective way, the alienation he takes to characterize modern society practically construes the implicit normative structure of its practices in an one-sidedly subjective way. What makes them one-sided, and so ultimately inadequate, is in both cases the *immediacy* of their practical conceptions. More specifically, [...] both understand normativity in terms of *independence*, rather than *freedom*. [...] Hegel uses 'independence' (Unabhängigkeit) in two different ways, depending on whether its contextual contrary is 'dependence' or 'freedom'. In the first usage, what is independent exercises *authority* over what is dependent upon it, which is accordingly *responsible* to it. The second usage concerns a particular, defective, way of understanding those generic notions of independence and dependence, authority and responsibility. What is defective about it is that it is atomistic and immediate, by contrast to the holistic, mediated conception of *freedom*.

(ST5: 39-40)

At one extreme, authority is immediately exercised over what is totally dependent on it and responsible to it; at another extreme, the social is broken down into completely independent and self-reliant atoms. Both extremes are defective and are in need of some sort of mediation and change as to the conceptions of authority and responsibility (or, using Brandom's earlier terminology, the objectivity of normative statuses and the subjectivity of individual practical attitudes). What mediates between the two is *culture*. It is culture that makes us who we are by initiating us into a set of particular customs, and it is we who create and support a particular culture by acknowledging, through our attitudes, the bindingness of its norms. In this case, there is no neutral, ontologically intact opposition between "I" and "Thou", as Brandom seems to imply in MIE. As culture is always shaped within a particular community, the opposing extremes to be reconciled within it, in Brandom's own words, are "the authority of the community and its norms over individuals (their dependence on it), and the authority of individuals over the community and its norms (its dependence on them), respectively" (ST5: 45).

Within this new approach, Brandom reformulates his question about the possibility of the objectivity of discursive norms: "How can the *responsibility* of subjective normative attitudes (what is acknowledged as correct) to normative statuses (what really is correct) be reconciled with the *authority* of subjective normative attitudes over normative statuses?" (ST5: 46). This time around, in facing the objectivity problem, Brandom tells a full-fledged Hegelian institutional story. He presents an extensive reinterpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, which culminates in the idea of language as the basic structure of mutual recognition and the principal framework for the scorekeeping game. Language, in turn, presupposes two recognitive relations which Hegel calls "trust" and "confession".

According to Brandom, linguistic communication based on trust sublates the dichotomy between the formalism of the *Enlightenment* that cannot represent norms as both binding and contentful, and *Faith* that cannot tell us what role we play in instituting those norms. Knowledge alone is not enough to make us act, and faith alone is not enough to understand what it is that we do when we make the norms binding and contentful (ST5: 100). Brandom generalizes the disparity between the two views in the dichotomy between the modern view that sees attitudes as independent, and norms as dependent, and the traditional, premodern view that sees norms as independent and attitudes as dependent. In the second case, says Brandom, “the objective norms have authority over the subjective attitudes of individuals, which are supposed merely to reflect them, acknowledge their authority, apply them in deliberation and assessment, judgment and action” (ST5: 118). This realist, or Durkheimian, scenario, presupposes that the social has its own ontology over and above individual members of a given community. In the second, Weberian case, according to Brandom, the subjective attitudes of individuals institute norms<sup>17</sup>. Brandom’s exposition of a Hegelian reconciliation of the two extremes, and results in the idea of historically grounded, unalienated community of self-conscious individuals, where normativity and freedom are represented not as innate ideas of human mind, but as a social and a political achievement, or, in Hegel’s own words, “the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses [...]: 'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I.'” [PG 177].

Even a brief summary of almost 250 pages of ST5 would take too much space here. What is important for us here is that this new approach marks an important shift in Brandom’s theory and allows Brandom to abandon his idea of the “I-Thou” relationship as the ground for his social-

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<sup>17</sup> On Weber-Durkheim controversy see section 1.1.



perspectival account of objectivity, in favor of the *historically* and *socially* grounded relationship between the “I” and the “We”, the two ideas that come together in the notion of community where self-conscious individuals identify themselves with the norms they endorse, and – through this identification – with other members of the community. On this view, it is important that one can follow rules and share commitments with the rest of a community only if one has an idea of how this community *came to be*. A genealogical explanation of the sort Brandom presents in ST5 helps us understand how, through a set of consecutive steps, we get the ultimate institutional structure, within which the game of giving and asking for reasons is fully realized. It is only given the genealogical explanation of the sort Hegel presents in his Phenomenology, as we learn the story of how the game was formed, that we get a chance to finally answer the question of *why* we, as free individuals, share practices that constitute the game, and only in this case being-for-another (how I take things to be) and being-in-itself (how things ought to be) tend to coincide.

However, Brandom is aware that the new system of social communication based on trust also needs an idea that would explain its *continuity*, i.e. an idea that would show how this communicative system exists in time. The key role here is played by the idea of *confession*, which Brandom defines as

An extension strategy, by which self-conscious individuals identify with actual goings-on over which they exert some real, but always only partial authority, identify themselves as the seats of responsibilities that outrun their own capacity to fulfill. Confession of the need for forgiveness and trust that it will be forthcoming both acknowledge the sense in which *others* are in a distinctive way also *responsible* for what *I* have done. For the eventual significance of my performance, the content of the commitment I have adopted, practically as intention or cognitively as belief, is now left in their care.

(ST5: 223)

It is a piece of common sense that I am responsible for what I intend to do as well as for what I actually do. However, those with whom I am tied by the bonds of mutual recognition – those who, bound by my *trust* in them, will *forgive* my performance – are, in turn, responsible for finding a way to see my performance as a *successful* one (ibid.).

The concepts of forgiveness and confession play a crucial part in ST5 where Brandom tells us a Hegelian “morality tale,” in which the judged and the judging consciousness are the two main characters. The one that is judged *makes* herself responsible by applying a concept (confesses), and the judging one *takes* her to be responsible for that application (forgives). On this account, forgiveness relies on a particular institutionalized tradition, and is a form of recollection, or reconstruction, of this tradition: “What one must do in order to forgive the confessor for what is confessed is to offer a *rational reconstruction of a tradition* to which the concept-application (theoretically in judgment or practically in intention) in question belongs” (ST5: 195). The judging consciousness is to decide whether or not, given the circumstances, the use of a concept is warranted based on a set of norms implicit in the tradition of past applications of the concept. Brandom’s example here is that of a common law judge, who confesses that his decisions are, in part, dictated

...by attitudes of his that are extraneous to the facts at hand and the law he is applying, by features of his training, reading, or mood, by the cases he happens to have adjudicated recently, the political climate, and so on, [i.e.] by appeal [...] to factors that are *contingent* in the sense that they are not acknowledgments of the *necessity* that is the normative force articulated by the actual content of the concept. He confesses that one need not see his decision as suitably responsive to the content of the norm he is supposed to supply, which is what would *justify* the decision.

(ST5: 196)

Meanwhile, the later judge forgives by performing what Brandom calls “reconstructive recollection”:

For a later judge concretely to *forgive* the earlier judge is to incorporate the decision that was the subject of confession into a retrospective rational reconstruction of the tradition of applying the concept in question, as having *precedential* significance. Doing that is recharacterizing and re-presenting the content of the concept (what it really is, what it is in itself) as gradually emerging into the daylight of explicitness through a sequence of applications of it to novel cases, each of which reveals some hitherto hidden feature of it, and exhibiting the forgiven judge’s decision as having played that role.

(ST5: 197)

The *forgiven* concept application shows up as a *correct* one, even though it will become a matter of confession to a still later judge. No forgiving recollective story is final, and any application leads to some (yet undiscovered) incompatible commitments. For Brandom’s community, therefore, “there is and can be no finally adequate set of determinate concepts” (ST5: 204). There is no *regulative* belief in a final state of affairs, no force that would direct interpretation to one predestined result, and, one might add, also no *incentive* for any interpretation to move in any particular direction: correctness is a feature of the game of giving and asking for reasons *as a whole*, not of any set of circumstances or situations that constitute a particular region of it.

As we will see in more detail in chapter 3, just like in Peirce’s case, on Brandom’s account, there are always disparities in discourse. But, due to the fact that what is confessed from one perspective, is forgiven from another, together with the fact that conceptual contents mean what they do only relative to one another, the disparities get grinded between the gears of the self-corrective machinery of the game of giving and asking for reasons. For this reason, even in the absence of the regulative belief, the disparity between what the content of a concept is for a particular player (what is confessed) and what it is in itself (what is forgiven) vanishes in the state

of Spirit, which is the state of reciprocal and symmetric mutual recognition of all players. The relations between the confessed and the forgiven in ST, just as the relations between the acknowledged and the ascribed in MIE, *is* what actually constitutes the structure of recognition.

Now, on the one hand, confession that results in forgiveness is *retrospective*. The forgiving recollection holds together the past and the present in that it represents the cognitive process which reconciles the authority on the part of those in whom the confessor places her trust, and the reconstruction of what the confessor *takes* to be the objective content of the concepts she endorses while performing her confession (ST5: 225). On the other hand, the recollection of a confessor's actions is itself an activity that changes the *future consequences* of those actions,

[...] for the consequential specifications of a doing are not something simply *given*, available only for theoretical re-interpretation. Concrete practical forgiveness involves *doing* things to *change* what the consequences of the act turn out to be. [...] Something I have done should not be treated as an error or a crime, [...] because it is not yet settled *what* I have done. Subsequent actions by others can affect its consequences, and hence the content of what I have done. The hard-hearted judgment wrongly assumes that the action is a finished thing, sitting there, fully-formed, as a possible object of assessment independent of what is done later.

(ST5: 225-226)

This account stresses the notion of a community that secures the self-corrective character of the game of giving and asking for reasons: at no moment in the game what any particular move means is completely settled. This is so because, as Brandom notes, the relations between the confessed and the forgiven are not merely recollective:

[The] responsibility of the present judge to the past – to the actual content of the concept in question – is administered by future judges, who will assess in turn the precedential authority of the present judge's construal of precedent, in terms of its fidelity to the content they recollectively discern as having been all along implicitly setting the standards of correctness of applications and assessments of applications of the concept. So the cognitive authority of the present judge with respect to past judges is conditioned on its recognition in turn by future ones."

(ST5: 221)

From this, it follows that, in postulating the tradition of past applications, we also postulate that future judges *will* forgive the present one by means of recollection. Two pages later Brandom explains how this reference to the future enters the picture:

Confession and forgiveness are both at base performances that express backward-looking attitudes. Hegel's telling of his parable of recognition does not include an explicit term for the forward-looking attitude that is the recognitive *petition* for forgiveness, with its attendant institution of a corresponding recognitive *obligation* to forgive on the part of those to whom it is addressed. I propose to use the term "trust" for that purpose.

(ST5: 223)

In situating the content of a concept within the recognitive inferential network, a judge forgives the contingencies that defined past applications of the concept and trusts those who will forgive the contingencies of his own application in the future.

If this reconstruction of Brandom's view in ST5 is correct, it reveals a problem strikingly similar to the one that has been discussed in section 1.3 above in relation to the idea of perspectival objectivity as it is developed by Brandom in MIE. The problem is this. Naturally, my expectations about the future are interrelated with my recollections of the past. But it is not immediately clear how the acknowledgment of this interrelation helps me explain the fact that, in forgiving, future judges will necessarily *interpret* the present judge's confession and not simply *reiterate* it. Although Brandom emphatically denies that the idea of a final opinion can be adjusted to his account, the existence of the link between the forgiven past and the trusted future by itself can by no means prevent some of our present performances from being repeated in the future without introducing any novelty whatsoever, and some of our beliefs supporting these performances from being final. Besides, the existence of such link by itself by no means prevents novel meanings, but *does not entail* that any novelty will actually ever occur. The question is how exactly unexpected contingencies (in terms of Brandom's common law judges example, "what

the judge had for breakfast”) that accompany any new application actually enter the picture and produce novel interpretations. My suggestion here is that Brandom’s account might benefit from a model that would incorporate the conception of possible future outcomes, which, as I will show in chapter 3, presupposes an account of the novelty *within the very structure of meaning*.

Brandom does acknowledge the fact that, in addition to the institutional conceptualization, following rules and sharing commitments requires one more thing: we need to explain how exactly our game of giving and asking for reasons accommodates for the emergence of new meanings, and how it manages to keep the balance between *novelty* of content and *constraint* on what can be said. On Brandom’s view, these issues can be clarified once we agree that both producing new meanings and constraining our linguistic performances are essential features of the basic structure of mutual recognition and the principal framework for the scorekeeping game. In other words, those, he says, are essential features of *language itself*. What is interesting is that, in claiming this, Brandom refers to Chomsky’s notion of generative grammar:

Think [...] about the astonishing empirical observation with which Chomsky inaugurated modern linguistics—the observation that almost every sentence uttered by an adult native speaker is a *novel* sentence. It is new, not just in the sense that *that speaker* has never produced or heard exactly that string of words before, but in the much stronger sense that *no one* in the history of the world has ever heard exactly that string of words before. <...> So linguistic competence is the capacity to produce and understand an indefinite number of novel sentences.

(ST5: 75-76)

At the end of the day, however, Brandom’s Hegelian notion of community that embodies absolute knowing tells us only that the game of giving and asking for reasons is well-ordered, that it will go on, and that its structure secures the self-corrective character of the game. But how exactly does Brandom’s Hegelian story about the genesis of communal practices, based on a variety of irreducible social contexts, coexist with the Chomskian idea of a *context-free* universal

generative grammar? Brandom refers to this idea of Chomsky's not only in his 2009 *Reason in Philosophy* and in ST, but also in MIE, as well as in his early 1979 paper "Reason and Constraint by Norms". But, in spite of the recurrence of these references, Brandom does not give much detail as to under what conditions he endorses the idea.

True, according to Kant, as Brandom admits in "Freedom and Constraint by Norms", "one is free just insofar as he acts according to the dictates of norms or principles", which presupposes the fundamental distinction "between the Realm of Nature, governed by causes, and the Realm of Freedom, governed by norms and principles" (Brandom 1979: 187). The distinction, he continues, is questioned by Hegel, who reformulates freedom as consisting not of following explicitly formulated rules, but of self-expression through acquiescence in the norms gradually developed by an evolving community.

That said, Brandom combines the Hegelian idea of expressive freedom realised in communal discursive practices with the Chomskian idea that we humans possess the capacity for radical semantic novelty due to normative constraints: "[I]t is only by virtue of being constrained by the norms inherent in social practices that one can acquire the freedom of expression which the capacity to produce and understand novel utterances exhibits" (Brandom 1979: 194). The problem, though, is that, obviously, not every system of normative constraints entails linguistic creativity. Brandom claims, quite rightly, that atomistic causal *explanation* will lead us to infinite regress, whereas holistic, self-critical *interpretation* might actually result in proper understanding of what makes the web of our beliefs a complete, albeit ever-evolving whole (Brandom 1979: 191). But the question, again, is not only *why* the novelty, but also *how* it exactly comes about.

To summarise, I suggest that Brandom's account in ST might benefit from a theory of how the game of giving and asking for reasons makes room for linguistic creativity, and how it

manages to keep the balance between the novelty of content and objective constraints on what can be claimed. Chomsky's initial idea of the grammar implies that language has two levels of representation, where the deep, context-free structure is mapped onto the surface structure and is responsible for creating an infinite number of novel sentences through derivation trees. The linguistic capacity to generate novel utterances is acquired by the majority of human beings in a short period of time and is formed neither solely as a response to immediate environmental stimuli, nor as a result of what Brandom refers to as "discursive practices". Given the fact that, as Chomsky's theory has it, before the capacity is fully formed the stimuli are unstructured and impoverished, Chomsky claims that language acquisition and linguistic creativity should presuppose a hard-wired, or innate system of properties that are "universal", i.e. shared by all natural languages. Thus, although the idea of a universal grammar underwent in Chomsky's writings many significant changes over time, as follows from the above, in its classical early version it had important Cartesian implications which Brandom would most likely not want to take on board.

A plausible alternative would be to side with Wittgenstein who shows that neither analysing grammar structures, nor appealing to past usages can tell us anything of substance about meaning. As Erneling (1993) points out, for the reason that, on Wittgenstein's account of language acquisition, we cannot give an exact formula of how a particular rule is followed, we should accept the fact that learning and communicating, to be considered as learning and communicating, should always already be creative. Given this, instead of the Chomskian bottom-up explanation of linguistic creativity, we might want to adopt a top-down approach that pays foremost attention to "what restricts actual language use and what prevents speaking and communication from breaking down into idiosyncratic usages" (Erneling 1993: 3). However,



where exactly Brandom's Chomsky meets with Brandom's Wittgenstein is hard to decide, as Brandom does not provide sufficient details on his reading of the former.

Brandom does make it clear that *not just any* system of social normative constraints necessarily entails the capacity to generate new social practices. But again, given the fact that, according to Chomsky's model, *any* natural language, no matter what kind of social system makes use of it, necessarily entails the capacity of linguistic creativity due to its derivational relations to the deep universal grammar of the context-free language of thought, the question is how this universal linguistic creativity is related to creativity in terms of social practices, and, in particular, how it translates into creativity as an essential feature of the game of giving and asking for reasons. In other words, if general linguistic creativity underpins any social discourse, a totalitarian just as well as a liberal one, Brandom's theory might still stand in need, if not of a full-blown theory, then at least of a link between the notion of a social community and the idea of linguistic creativity.

### ***1.5. Objectivity and Modality***

In this last section of the first chapter I will discuss the relationship between objectivity and modality in Brandom's normative theory, and show how Brandom's interpretation of this relationship is related to the version of idealism he espouses in ST.

Referring to Sellars, Brandom calls the language of modality a “‘transposed’ language of norms” (BSD: 100). In MIE this claim receives two interrelated interpretations. The gist of Brandom's modal thesis is that descriptive language is not an autonomous discursive practice; one's ability to use this language means she has mastered the practical skills needed to understand modal talk. For the reason that, as has been discussed in section 1.2, our capacity to

apply concepts presupposes the mastery of every concept's possible inferential relations to other concepts, inferentialist semantics requires that every time we apply a concept we must be able to sort out what *would* and what *would not* follow in case our application of the concept brought about such and such inferential consequences.

One of Peirce's examples, to which Brandom refers in his "Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality" (2001), can be used as an illustration. If we wish to understand what it means for a diamond to be "hard", given that the diamond was crystalized in a bed of cotton-wool and then burned without ever being pressed by an edge or point, the question is "not what *did* happen, but <...> whether that diamond *would* resist an attempt to scratch it", because pragmatism, Peirce continues, "makes the ultimate intellectual purport of what you please to consist in conceived conditional resolutions" (EP2: 354). What constitutes the pragmatic meaning of the concept of hardness, therefore, is the sum total of conditional propositions describing possible results of our conceived interaction with the object, to which the concept of hardness refers. According to both Peirce, modal claims constitute the ground level of thought and action by interpreting what we *say* in terms of possible outcomes of what we *do*.

That said, according to Brandom, any descriptive use of an expression, modally speaking, also always *precludes* some other and *licences* some other uses of it. This, in Brandom's own words, means that "no concept user can be in a position of being skeptical about the in-principle intelligibility of specifically *normative* concepts, without thereby being skeptical about the in-principle intelligibility of concept use (and so meaning, content, and intentionality) generally" (Brandom 2001: 605). As Rosen points out, "Brandom's main contention is that our best reasons for regarding the unreduced modal idiom as 'clear enough' are also good reasons for regarding the unreduced normative idiom as clear enough" (Rosen 2001: 612).

According to another example Brandom provides elsewhere, *semantically* speaking, “one has not grasped the concept ‘cat’ unless one knows that it would still be possible for the cat to be on the mat if the lighting had been slightly different, but not if all life on earth had been extinguished by an asteroid strike” (BSD: 97). Thus, the meaning of an expression is defined against the network of counterfactual claims describing conditions under which the expression is compatible (or incompatible) with a set of background beliefs of a scorekeeper as well as consequences of its application in appropriate circumstances. This appeal to modality supports Brandom’s inferentialist rebuttal of the empiricist claim that empirical descriptions can constitute an autonomous language independent from counterfactuals connecting each description to other descriptions (Brandom 2001: 606). From the empiricist point of view, the autonomous intelligibility of empirical predicates is guaranteed by the fact that experience is about what *is* the case, and not about what *might* or *would be* the case, because what we may report about our experience is constrained by what is simply *given* in it. Brandom’s major point here is that the constraint is provided exclusively by the mechanics of the scorekeeping game, and, consequently, we need a mastery of a vocabulary that could cash out multiple inferential interdependencies between various claims. Using this vocabulary, we may grasp the conceptual content of an expression by sorting material inferences in which that content is involved (RP: 54).

*Pragmatically* speaking, using modal vocabulary is a way to talk explicitly about rule following in the scorekeeping game, which cannot receive a direct descriptive explanation without facing a paradox. If we agree to ascribe normativity to an expression only in view of the use of a distinctly normative term or only if it explicitly says how things ought to be, then we immediately face the Kripkean sceptic who shows that saying what the rule *is* does not help. Just as the Kantian moral agent, with her knowledge of the explicitly formulated rule, is there to act contrary to this knowledge, the Kripkean sceptic is always there to say that  $68+57=5$ . Brandom’s modal thesis seems to resolve the problem by using counterfactual claims that cash out inferential

connections between statements and express dispositional commitments to “what would happen if”, in order to tie together discursive practices and norms that govern those practices. There is a relation between alethic modal vocabulary and what I *must do* in order to be able to use descriptive language. The relation is such that conceptual connections and commitments that are implicit in our factual descriptions, are licenced by modal expressions (BSD: 98). As a result, our agreement about factual statements can be tested only against underlying counterfactuals appropriately related to those statements.

On the other hand, Brandom considers his modal thesis as a response to Hume’s scepticism about the possibility to deduce “ought” from “is,” which amounts to the claim that there is nothing in observable empirical facts that can yield an understanding of rules behind those facts. According to Brandom, in order to deal with the puzzling question of whether anything that happens actually *has* to happen, we should first acknowledge the fact that nothing is ever explicit *simpliciter*. To solve the problem, we need two things: (1) the notion of rules as *implicit* in practices and (2) a modal vocabulary that can make *explicit* what we need to *do* in order to count as *saying* something. What I am *doing* when I make an empirical statement is committing myself to a set of other statements and claiming my entitlement to a set of still other statements that are linked inferentially with the one I actually make. What I am *saying*, in order to specify what I do in so committing myself, is about what *would* follow, given that my making the statement brings about such-and-such circumstances. This is how, I believe, one of Brandom’s principal metaphor of scorekeepers being caught “between saying and doing” should be unpacked.

Now, according to Brandom’s Hegel, insofar as, in using conceptual contents in judgments, we preclude some other and licence some other uses, our uses always thereby involve two principal kinds of relations: the relation of incompatibility and the relation of consequence. *Incompatibility* is what makes conceptual contents determinate in that it contrasts them with other

contents, excludes other determinates, and defines what is impossible and what is necessary when those contents are used. In so contrasting, excluding, and defining, it induces inferential *consequences* that further determine the contents as to the functional role they play in the game of giving and asking for reasons. As realized in these two relations, conceptual contents can take two forms: subjective and objective. According to Brandom, normative vocabulary, as instituted by individual practical attitudes, constitutes the *subjective* form, whereas modal vocabulary represents the *objective* form of conceptual contents (ST1: 54-57). The question is how to coordinate the relations between the subjective and the objective conceptual articulation, i.e. how to grasp what Brandom refers to as the “*amphibiousness* of conceptual content between a subjective form articulated by deontic normative relations of incompatibility-and-consequence and an objective form articulated by alethic modal relations of incompatibility-and-consequence” (ST1: 59; emphasis added).

The possibility of such coordination constitutes what Brandom takes to be the essence of *objective idealism*. Brandom does not explicitly make this connection in ST. However, in the first few pages of ST1, 2, VI (“The Two Sides of Conceptual Content are Representationally Related”) he formulates two theses that justify the connection. First, conceptual contentfulness is a characteristic shared by representings and representeds: the structure of the world and the structure of thought are *isomorphic*. In Brandom’s own terms,

thought and being, representing and represented [...] are essentially *paired* forms that conceptual content can take. [...] Subjective practices and processes specifiable in deontic normative vocabulary and objective relations and facts specifiable in alethic modal vocabulary are two *complementary* aspects or dimensions of whatever is determinate, and hence intelligible.

(ST1: 59)

Whatever representations and what they represent determine within the sphere of the conceptual, can be specified either in normative terms, which give expression to our subjective attitudes, or in modal terms, which describe the objective facticity of the world. Whereas representings and

represented as paired forms of conceptual determination, normative and modal are two ways to express complimentary aspects of whatever is conceptually determinate. Second, normative vocabulary, according to Brandom, should be considered as a pragmatic *meta*-vocabulary, in the sense that it allows us to *say* what we must *do* in order to use modal vocabulary. In Brandom's own terms, "one cannot understand alethic modal vocabulary, cannot deploy it with understanding, unless one has mastered the normatively governed practices made explicit by deontic vocabulary" (ST1: 57). The relationship between the two vocabularies is that of *sense-dependence*. Brandom gives the following example:

[I]f we define a planet or star as "supraterranean" just in case it has a mass more than twice that of the Earth, we are not thereby committing ourselves to denying that a planet could have that property in a possible world in which the Earth did not exist. Depending on how they are specified, properties can be *sense-dependent* on other properties (as [...] supraterranean is on "has at least twice the mass of the Earth"), without being *reference-dependent* on them. That is, something can exhibit a property P that is sense-dependent, but not reference-dependent, on a property P' in a world in which nothing exhibits the property P'.

(ST1: 58)

"Supraterranean" describes the property of having at least twice the mass of the Earth, but by making this claim we do not commit ourselves to denying that the supraterranean planet could not have the property in case Earth didn't exist. By analogy, what is described in modal terms is objective and has a predetermined intelligible form, irrespective of whether there are any intelligent concept-applying subjects. Modal language marks out conceptually structured objective relations and facts that are there whether or not any concept-applying subjects exist, but those relations and facts become fully available to such subjects within the network of norm-governed discursive practices (ST1: 58). Supposing this is right, it might be said that the relationship between normative vocabulary (which constitutes the subjective form of conceptual content) and modal vocabulary (which constitutes the objective form of conceptual content) is

somewhat similar to the relationship between practical attitudes and normative statuses: just as there is no statuses before attitudes, no modal terms that specify objective relations and facts are actually available before mastering norm-governed practices.

If this analogy is correct, then Brandom's characterizing practical attitudes adopted by individual scorekeepers as recognitive, and the reference to the conceptual structure of the objective world as cognitive (ST5: 164) can be used in order to characterize the distinction between the normative and the modal. While the relations within the normative sphere are recognitive (we adopt practical attitudes *towards each other* and in so doing institute normative statuses), the relations expressed by modal talk are cognitive, as they reflect our attitudes *towards the objective world*. In building this link between modality and objectivity, Brandom tries to deal with the set of criticisms with regard to his idea of perspectival objectivity. As has been described in section 1.2, what is recognized as objectively correct is only *taken* to be correct by a scorekeeper attributing a commitment. And, as in the course of the scorekeeping game attributions and undertakings are mutual, the only way the difference between objective normative status and subjective normative attitude can be presented is as a social-perspectival distinction between normative attitudes. The modal thesis provides additional conceptual tools that enrich the idea of objectivity. Brandom uses the notion of *reference independence* to strengthen his case still further: whereas statuses are *not* reference-independent from attitudes (the latter institute the former), modality marks out the framework of objective conceptual norms that *are* reference-independent from those attitudes (ST5: 164)<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> In this case, Brandom does not talk about modality as the objective form of conceptual content, but uses the expression "objective conceptual norms" instead.

One may ask whether the property we take to be objective is in truth objective by Brandom's own standards. It seems to be hard to decide whether having at least twice the mass of the Earth, described by a set of counterfactuals, is a matter of being objectively in the world or a matter of thinking about it/describing it in a certain way. Naturally, the objective idealist's answer is that it is *both* (or, as Brandom puts it, those are "paired forms" of conceptual content), for otherwise we are trapped in the very set of dichotomies (between nature and freedom, mind and world, receptivity and spontaneity, saying and doing) the objective idealist aims to get rid of. In the opening sections of ST1 Brandom introduces the ideas of modal and conceptual realism that, he says, *entail* objective idealism. According to modal realism, some states of affairs make other necessary or impossible; according to conceptual realism, if we acknowledge necessity and impossibility as pertaining to the workings of natural laws, then we should acknowledge that the way the world objectively is is conceptually articulated. For something to be conceptually articulated is thus to stand to other things in relations of material incompatibility and consequence; and for something to be in those relations does not require anyone to *think* anything about it (ST1: 24).

Let us stop for a moment and go back once again to Brandom's supraterranean planet example. Suppose that, as a result of the next scientific revolution, the concept of mass is replaced by a new concept (or a set of new concepts), which provides an alternative explanation of the regularities previously associated with it – in the manner, say, in which Lavoisier's theory of oxygen once replaced Becher's idea of phlogiston. In the latter case, there are facts that stay the same (for instance, a loss of mass of copper carbonate when it burns – which, according to Becher, was the result of its losing phlogiston, and, according to Lavoisier, was the result of its giving out carbon dioxide gas). And there are those that lost their status as facts



(for instance, phlogiston being absorbed by air). Besides, a substantial part of the counterfactual statements relevant to the theory of phlogiston (or to a set of theories that allow to describe something as “having at least twice the mass of the Earth” in Brandom’s example) should be acknowledged as being out of use, while others as still holding. Consequently, with Brandom’s realism in mind, in both cases we need to decide (1) how big the part of counterfactuals that should be deemed irrelevant/false is, (2) whether we can still count ourselves epistemically responsible for the remaining part, and (3) whether the two theories in each example describe the same state of affairs. Based on Brandom’s account, in all three cases one guess is as good as another. As to (3) in particular, recall that, according to Brandom, there can be no finally settled opinions, or, as he prefers to put it, no “finally adequate set of determinate concepts” (ST5: 204)<sup>19</sup>. Now, if Brandom’s idealism entails that there are conceptually framed reals, but that, at the same time, every description of those reals, and every normative situation such description creates, will eventually be deemed irrelevant or corrected, then we end up admitting that there are conceptually framed objective states of affairs that *might*, but *never will be* known.

This is an uncomfortable conclusion. For instance, Brandom says that, “if Newton’s laws are true, then they held before there were thinkers, and would hold even if there never were thinkers” (ST1: 24). But, in light of the above, this is just to say that if these laws are *not* true (which, according to Brandom, is ultimately the case for every law) then they *didn’t* hold before there were thinkers, and they *wouldn’t* hold if there never were thinkers. True statements are always true. Until they are false. Of course, it might be said that rational constraint guarantees

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<sup>19</sup> As discussed in sections 1.3 and 1.4.

that we are able to understand what it is for a state of affairs to appear as it is rather than as it is not. It is quite enough that what we think is correct is, in fact, correct by our best lights, and so the fallibility of our knowledge-claims might not constitute any threat to objectivity, as far as we are able to make reasonable assessment of our human epistemic predicament. Well and good. But at least we should be aware of the abovementioned side effect the unrestrained fallibilism has within the framework of Brandom's idealism.

There is one more aspect of the link between Brandom's conceptual realism and his idealism that is important to mention. Brandom claims that discursive practices are "thick"<sup>20</sup>. As he puts it, the practices are "*not* the kind of thing that can be separated from the objects they involve" (Brandom 2008: 177). To use the familiar Peirce's example once again, modally speaking, if we want to understand what the word "hard" means in relation to a diamond, we need to take into account what *would* happen if we made an attempt to scratch it by an edge or point sharp enough. The conditional resolutions that constitute the meaning of "hard" thus involve taking account of outcomes of our possible interactions with the object to which "hard" is ascribed. But, apart from our interactions with this object, in using "hard", we also get involved in a situational interplay between language and environment at large. A variety of configurations of this interplay constitute a set of interrelated practices that come together as a form of life within which our use of "hard" makes sense. The practices are "thick" – Brandom goes as far as calling them "solid" and "corporeal" (MIE: 332) – in the sense that they include not only what we *say*, but also what we *do*, meaning our interaction with objects as well as each other, events, and facts of the world.

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<sup>20</sup> As has been discussed in relation to Brandom's idea of anaphora in the beginning of section 1.3.

If Brandom's objectivity is the objectivity of norms implicit in discursive practices thus described, then his conceptual realism does support his objective idealism: incompatibilities and consequences implied in inferential structures are interwoven with the world of facts and are constrained by and answerable to the relations of impossibility and necessity implied by natural laws. Here is a problem, though. In various sections of ST5 Brandom writes that the embedding of the concept of objectivity within inferentialist semantics enriched by the modal thesis entails the existence of the objective world including not only objective *norms*, but also objective *properties, facts, relations* and *laws* (see, e.g., ST5: 10, 15, 55). But, given that objective norms, properties, facts, relations and laws, just like any subjective thinking about them, are always already in conceptual shape, the question is: Are there any norms, properties, facts, relations or laws that are objective not (or, at least, not *only*) because they at some point have been endorsed and acknowledged as such by scorekeepers? It seems that Brandom's claim that the relations expressed by modal talk reflect our attitudes towards the objective world, suggests that the answer is "yes". However, from one perspective, even taking into account that Brandom's modal claim should always be considered together with his thesis about mind and world being conceptually shaped, at least on the face of it, it might well be said that talking about objective properties, facts, and, more generally, about objective *world* that would exist even if no thinkers were present, cannot help involving extralinguistic use of terms like "refers" – in the sense of our commitment to the existence of objects that we might actually succeed or fail in referring to (Pohl, Rosenhagen, Weber 2006: 95). And of course, Brandom's deflationary stance towards truth and reference (RP: 156-176) makes it unlikely for him to adhere to this scenario. But, even more importantly, as DeMoor, in referring to Habermas's *Truth and Justification* (2003), suggests,

[...] the conceptual relationships of the world, it appears, merely unfold discursively in our argumentations, thus finding expression in the conceptual structures of our knowledge of language and the world.” If this is the case, then the objective world itself guarantees the adequacy of our concepts and, correspondingly, the discursive community is relieved of “the burden of the *constructive* endeavor to develop its *own* concepts in terms of which it can interpret what happens in the world.” Without this burden, there is no fundamental need for discursive communities to expend the effort of reaching a *common understanding*, of constructing a shared conceptual framework for interpreting and coping with the world; the commonality of our concepts is guaranteed by the objective world, not by inter-subjective effort.

(DeMoor 2011: 344)

On this interpretation, Brandom’s conceptual realism makes his idea of *constructive* human endeavor rather weak. We institute and acknowledge the norms that govern our thought and behavior. But, at the same time, we always already have a warrant of adequacy from the world, which demotivates significantly every one of our constructive efforts.

## 2. REASONS, CONCEPTS, AND EXTERNAL CONSTRAINT: THE IDEA OF OBJECTIVITY IN MCDOWELL'S MIND AND WORLD

### **2.1. Introduction**

As McDowell points out in his introduction to *Mind and World*<sup>21</sup>, the aim of his book is to account, “in a diagnostic spirit”, for “some characteristic anxieties of modern philosophy” that arise when the relation between mind and world comes into focus (MW: xi). According to McDowell, for the most part, these anxieties result from the belief that the only way to describe the relation is to posit a chasm or a gap between the two, to be closed by some mediating phenomenal go-betweens (MW: 3-9; Gaynesford 2004: 29). McDowell’s task is to show that the existence of the gap between mind and world is an illusion that needs to be unmasked. The initial step of the unmasking is accomplished in the first three lectures of MW by defending three interconnected claims.

The first claim is that mind and world share a conceptual nature. The most concise and, at the same time, the most salient explanation of this claim is given by McDowell in the second lecture: “That things are thus and so is the conceptual content of an experience, but if the subject of the experience is not misled, that very same thing, that things are thus and so, is also a perceptible fact, an aspect of the perceptible world” (MW: 26). In other words, what I perceive when I am not misled by my experience, is the world itself. As Tim Thornton puts it, “to be a

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<sup>21</sup> Henceforth MW.

world at all is to possess the kind of intelligible structure charted [by the conceptual] in the space of reasons” (Thornton 2004: 85)<sup>22</sup>. The second claim is that the sphere of the conceptual is unbounded. The same idea is expressed by McDowell when he says later in the second lecture that facts can be embraced by thought because the world itself does not lie outside the sphere of the conceptual, and there is *nothing* at all to be found *outside* the conceptual (MW: 28). The third claim is that the unboundedness of the conceptual can be reconciled with the fact that there is a rational external constraint on our empirical thinking about the world. According to McDowell, to justify this claim is to explain how the idea of rational constraint on our empirical thinking can be reconciled, on the one hand, with Kant’s thesis about the spontaneous character of this thinking and, on the other hand, with the absence of an outer boundary to the conceptual sphere, which creates the very possibility for the thinking to be *about* the world.

The question of whether McDowell is successful in bringing the mind back into immediate contact with the world in view of these three claims has been discussed in the literature in the following three interconnected contexts: (1) McDowell’s acceptance of what he takes to be Kant’s idea of the conceptual character of sensible contents; (2) McDowell’s Hegelianism; (3) McDowell’s naturalism, which finds its support in his ideas of second nature and openness of the world.

As I will show in the next section, (1) and (2) are related in the sense that McDowell’s interpretation of Kant may be seen as a radicalization of Kant’s philosophy<sup>23</sup>, which consists in

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<sup>22</sup> In describing or referring to the idea of the conceptual in MW, McDowell associates it with the notion of some sort of *nature* much more often than with the notion of something being constituted by a specific *activity*. For this reason, I do not think there is any possibility for a disagreement with Thornton in that, in McDowell’s case, there is a strong (but not full) synonymy between “to be conceptual” and “to have an intelligible structure.”

<sup>23</sup> See also McDowell 2009a: 68-69.

his accepting Kant's constructivism (his claim that there is no experiential intake without the contribution of our conceptual capacities), while rejecting Kant's transcendental story that postulates a necessary connection between human freedom and independent noumenal reality. Just like Hegel, McDowell disagrees with Kant's making room for both freedom and the non-conceptual external constraint on our judgments and perception (Bird 1996; Koons 2004; Taggart 2008). McDowell's Kantian baseline is that he aims to reconcile rationalist and empiricist traditions by showing that our use of concepts is intimately linked with experience. However, he makes a further Hegelian step when he insists that both having experience and using concepts depend on our mastering the use of words and, hence, on our having a language (Gaynesford 2004: 26)<sup>24</sup>. The idea of having language, which is the principal subject of the last lecture of MW, in turn, provides the link to (3), i.e. to McDowell's notions of second nature and openness of the world. As McDowell shows in lectures 4 and 5, the idea of the world's not residing outside the sphere of the conceptual can be construed as fully compatible with the idea of the independence of the world from what we actually think and say about it, only if we appreciate the notion of second nature understood as a result of us humans being initiated into linguistic practices<sup>25</sup>.

This plexus of ideas brings with it three major problems. First, in introducing the notion of second nature, McDowell combines Aristotle's concept of ethical character, Hegel's *Bildung*,

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<sup>24</sup> The step is Hegelian at least in the minimal sense that, whereas for the Kantian agent language does not constitute any serious problem (the possibility of reaching an agreement between us is predetermined by the very fact that we have the schematism of understanding in common), it plays a crucial part in a variety of recognitive relations between different consciousnesses in Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

<sup>25</sup> The idea of language as a repository of tradition in the context of McDowell's defence of his version of idealism will be discussed below in section 2.4.

and Wittgenstein's idea of training as initiation into a custom, but he offers only a few very general remarks as to how these three communicate with each other within his own theoretical framework<sup>26</sup>. There are two issues related to this problem. One is that McDowell extends Aristotle's idea of the formation of ethical character to give an account of initiation into conceptual capacities in general. As shown in Forman (2008), this makes McDowell's interpretation of Aristotle inconsistent. Another issue is that, although some researchers present McDowell's defence of the second nature thesis as fully compatible with a Wittgensteinian therapeutic approach (Virvidakis 2006), McDowell's aiming at Wittgensteinian quietism may seem to be incompatible with his explicit engagement in a dialogue between different philosophical traditions, and, in particular, with his naturalistic reconstruction of reason (Friedman 1996).

The second problem is twofold. First, in rejecting Kant's transcendental idealism, McDowell follows the Hegelian reconstruction of Kant, which entails some substantial changes in the Kantian conception of experience (MW: 95), but in this reconstruction he offers neither a Hegelian institutional story, nor any discussion of the recognitive, or social elements of communication. In light of this, McDowell's reconstruction can be called Hegelian only in a restricted sense, as it prevents him from accessing some of the important conceptual tools which Brandom uses in approaching the problem of the objectivity of norms. As Peschard notes, "McDowell's project is to answer the [individual] perceiver's worry as to the objectivity of her perceptual experience, not the worry of someone who could compare the perceiver's content of experience to something else" (Peschard 2010: 154). The problem is not that according to

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<sup>26</sup> The compatibility of McDowell's approach to Aristotle's ethics with his interpretation of Wittgenstein's rule following problem is discussed in section 2.4 below.



McDowell objectivity cannot be accounted for from a sideways, or from a bird's-eye perspective, but that McDowell's perceiver is – at least for the most part in the text of MW – completely alone; communication with other minds never comes into focus. Second, McDowell's rejection of Kant's transcendental idealism (and, in particular, the idea of noumenal reality that, according to Kant, provides external constraint on our cognition) leads him to the idea of the unboundedness of the conceptual. As will be discussed in section 2.3 below, according to McDowell, accepting this idea results in empirical reality being radically open to thinking. But if so, the principal question is how what is radically open to and available in thought can be independent of it (Taggart 2008: 162).

Third, some researchers claim that McDowell's conceptualist approach to perception is powerless against the sceptic's attack because it fails to make sense of *perceptual error* (Echeverri 2011). Although the idea of openness to the world does tell us that in many cases, when our judgments about the world are correct, we do know things as they really are, it does not tell us under what conditions we succeed and under what conditions we fail. This objection results in attempts to interpret McDowell's position as foundationalist, and his rejection of the empiricist idea of the Given as but a disguised conceptual recast of it (Wright 1996). At the same time, in spite of McDowell's infallibilist position about perception, his idea of objectivity has been compared with Peirce's fallibilism, and some researchers place both McDowell and Peirce between the horns of the dilemma of coherentism and the myth of the Given as two kinds of response to epistemological skepticism (Cooke 2011; Bernstein 2002).

## 2.2. *Kant and the Seesaw: Spontaneity and Receptivity Revisited*

With all these criticisms in view, in this section I will begin distilling out what I take to be the pivotal issues underlying McDowell's account of objectivity. My main concern in this and the next section will be confined to analysing the way McDowell's notion of external constraint is related to his ideas of the unboundedness of the conceptual and openness of the world within his interpretation of Kant's distinction between receptivity and spontaneity. In this section, I will show how McDowell's reading of Sellars leads to the idea of reinterpreting the distinction. I will then provide a synopsis of both McDowell's and Kant's own perspectives as I see them, and will then show that McDowell's reinterpretation of Kant in the first three lectures of MW provides a basis for introducing the ideas of *Bildung* and second nature in lecture four.

McDowell's central thesis in the first three lectures is (1) that mind and world, thinking and the thinkable share the same conceptual nature, which presupposes a rational relationship between the two, and (2) that *within* the relationship the world exerts constraint on what we think and say about it. The epistemic situation described by the two parts of this thesis taken together consists in a mutual directedness of mind and world, where a judgment's or a belief's being directed on the world entails their *being answerable* to how things really are; and how things really are being directed on our beliefs means *affecting the contents* of what we think and say (MW: xi-xx)<sup>27</sup>. Given this, McDowell's burden is to introduce constraint to the picture. In other words, he needs to explain how we can reconcile the answerability of our beliefs and judgments to reality that

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<sup>27</sup> I find it useful how Maximilian de Gaynesford describes this situation as the one in which "our experience, thought and language are *directed on* the world [and] the world, in turn, *has a bearing on* our experience, thought and language" (Gaynesford 2004: 5).

is independent from them, on the one hand, and independent reality affecting our beliefs and judgments not just causally, but in terms of their contents, on the other hand.

Although it might not be obvious right away why this explanation might face any serious problems, in the very beginning of lecture one of MW McDowell admits that the idea of spontaneity that results from his reinterpretation of Kant makes it no easy task to show how the idea of rational constraint fits into the picture: “My main point in this lecture is to bring out how difficult it is to see that we can have both desiderata: both rational constraint from the world and spontaneity all the way out” MW: 8, n.7). But before it can become clear what exactly stands in the way of introducing the idea of rational constraint, one needs to understand why the reinterpretation of the Kantian relationship between receptivity and spontaneity is needed.

According to McDowell, the answerability of judgments and beliefs to how things are should be understood in terms of placing the answerable in the logical space of reasons. Making use of this Sellarsian idea, McDowell gives a twofold definition of it very early in the book. He defines it (1) positively, as a space that includes a relation of one thing being warranted, or correct in the light of another, and (2) negatively, as contrasted with what he calls “the logical space of nature”, where the answerability is a matter of simple empirical description (MW: xv-xvi).

While the positive definition of the space of reasons, which plays a central part in Brandom’s inferentialism, doesn’t do too much work in McDowell’s MW, the negative definition creates for the latter an important theoretical background. In particular, the distinction between the logical space of *reasons* and the logical space of *nature* underpins McDowell’s interpretation of the Kantian distinction between spontaneity and receptivity as two capacities enabling a cooperation between understanding and sensibility. According to McDowell, although the structure of the logical space of reasons is *sui generis*, and the idea of experience, as organized by those reasons, is

the idea of something *natural*, we see the gap between the natural and the reasonable only in case we narrowly identify “the natural” with the practices of explanation pertaining to disenchanting secularized natural sciences as described by Weber<sup>28</sup>. Likewise, although thinking is characterized exclusively by spontaneity and freedom, sensibility is not something that is exclusively receptive and entirely passive. It is wrong, says McDowell, to see thought and sensibility as opposing extremes or distinctly different capacities (MW: 9-15), just like, as the last two lectures of MW demonstrate, it is wrong to contradict distinguish the rational and the natural in general. However, before this parallel is clear, McDowell owes us an explanation of why exactly receptivity and spontaneity are often seen as opposites within certain theoretical frameworks and why exactly this is unacceptable. For the purpose of this explanation, McDowell uses the Sellarsian critique of the Given.

Whereas in Brandom’s case the explicit use of this critique is limited to the task of explaining how the treatment of meanings in terms of inferential roles implies normativity, in McDowell’s case the idea of the Given reveals a more fundamental problem. From one perspective, it seems to offer an attractive epistemological tool. The myth that supports the idea of the Given explains external constraint on the spontaneous exercises as a result of brute impacts of bare presences. As McDowell puts it, “the idea of the Given is the idea that the space of reasons [...] extends more than the conceptual sphere” (MW: 7). From the empiricist point of

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<sup>28</sup> It is important to understand that McDowell’s distinction between the two “spaces” (which will be dealt with in more detail in section 2.4) is meant not as a mere replacement of Kant’s dichotomy between nature and freedom, but rather as a distinction between two ways of explaining experience. Moreover, any belief associated with the notion of the space of *nature* should be understood, not as a position actually held by someone in particular, with whom McDowell is in disagreement, but rather as a historical epistemological position. After everything that was written during the period of over 100 years between Peirce (on the role of vagueness and error in mathematical statistics) and Bruno Latour (on the messy business of fabricating scientific facts), it is hard – in fact, nearly impossible – to find someone who would nowadays seriously think of supporting the scientific view of nature as described by Weber in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

view, there are sensations that register what is simply there, and that are, therefore, outsiders to all our concepts. The myth tells us that these sensations are self-justified and explains the necessary external constraint to the spontaneous exercises of concepts in terms of brute impacts of the bare presences registered by those sensations. In this manner, by postulating the existence of such sensations, one may hope to obtain not only external constraint, but also the necessary conditions for knowledge in general: the myth tries to assure us that it is possible to reduce all meaningful statements to inferences from what is directly given.

From another perspective, however attractive the idea of the Given might seem to be, in his *Empiricism and Philosophy of Mind* Sellars shows that it is inconsistent. From the Sellarsian perspective, if we believe that there is a gap between mind and world (representings and representeds, thoughts and objects, words and things, etc.), and try to do conceptual work to eliminate this gap, we encounter problems that are hard to solve. Namely, we either face the question of how to move from non-epistemic, non-cognitive bits of the Given to judgments that are supposed to be justified by these bits, or end up in the company of the sceptic who is eager to convince us that we have no good reasons to think that the world the judgments are supposed to be about is really there. The myth of the Given rests on the idea that the authority of our reports about certain states of affairs depends on the authority of self-authenticating non-verbal episodes which result in our immediate awareness of something being the case. In describing this immediate awareness, Sellars intentionally uses the language of the obviously nonsensical “flat earth mythology”, saying that the episodes of which we are allegedly immediately aware “constitute the tortoise on which stands the elephant on which rests the edifice of empirical knowledge” (Sellars 1997: 73). Meanwhile, whatever the inconsistencies of the myth are, we must admit that it does provide us with some sort of an idea of the necessary external constraint

on our thinking and, if we simply repudiate it, chances are that we move, by inertia, to another extreme and abandon the idea of external constraint altogether. In the latter case, all we are left with is the coherence of our beliefs that are subject to internal norms of consistency, but that cannot be said to have any bearing on external reality (MW: 24).

The choice between the extremes of the Given and the frictionless spinning of our coherent beliefs in the void represents the second metaphor that plays a highly important role in McDowell's MW: as long as we are trying to choose one or the other, we are *riding a seesaw*. This seesaw never stops because, as soon as it loses momentum at one extreme, it immediately recoils back to its opposite. What we have to do, says McDowell, is to *dismount* from the seesaw instead of *riding* it (MW: 9). According to McDowell, dismounting from the seesaw should take the form of a reinterpretation of the cooperation between the spontaneity of thought and the receptivity of perception as this cooperation is described in Kant's 1<sup>st</sup> *Critique*.

It was Kant who, by using insights of British empiricists in order to reform the German idealist tradition without radically undermining it, first attempted to reconcile early modern empiricist sense-data theories and classical Cartesian rationalism. On the one hand, empiricists believed in sense-contents as the pre-theoretical empirical basis of knowledge and theory-independent data immediately accessible to us in either outer or introspective sensation. On the other hand, rationalists relied on the pre-empirical innate knowledge that, due to its infallibility, could never betray the knower. In reconciling the two extremes, Kant treats knowledge as the result of category-constrained empirical observation: rational understanding reduces the synthesis of our empirical perceptions to concepts that provide knowledge. In this reduction, both thinking and experience presuppose unifying forms. The corresponding sections of "Transcendental Aesthetics" and "Transcendental Analytic" introduce time and space as two

pure forms of intuition, and the categories of the understanding as a set of a priori concepts which, applied in a judgment, represent intuitions as intelligible wholes. Neither of these forms can provide a basis for knowledge in separation from the other one. It is only the application of the two forms to one another that makes the process of knowledge possible: the only way any empirical judgment may be said to be true is if it corresponds to its empirical object in compliance with a set of a priori principles that structure all possible human experience.

In reconciling empiricist and rationalist traditions, Kant adds another, third dimension to the dyadic relationship between our experience and the unifying principles of understanding: the possibility of bringing the forms of intuition and the categories together requires that there is something connecting categories, on the one hand, and experiential phenomena, on the other, i.e., something that shares both the intellectual and the phenomenal natures. It appears, then, that understanding provides the unity of the manifold of experience in space and time by appealing to some third, intermediate structure that reconciles sensibility and understanding as two principal and interdependent stems of knowledge. This intermediate structure Kant calls the “transcendental scheme,” which – and this is an extremely important point of the *Critique of Pure Reason* – is always a product of the imagination. It is neither a percept, nor a concept, but something that, according to Kant, interprets one into the other. It is homogeneous with a category of the understanding on the one hand, and with the appearance on the other hand. And it is this homogeneity that makes the application of the categories of the understanding to appearances possible. (KRV: B 177).

Sensibility is characterized by receptivity; it apprehends that which is given in intuition, both pure and empirical. The understanding, on the contrary, is characterized by spontaneity; it provides concepts as instruments of thought and judgment. It is noteworthy that Kant, in claiming

that only the unity of receptivity and spontaneity may result in knowledge, does not give any preference to either of the two: “To neither of these powers may a preference be given over the other. Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (KRV: A51/B75). In the transcendental deduction Kant makes a further distinction between two kinds of imagination: productive and reproductive. The reproductive imagination creates the possibility to imagine a phenomenon when it is actually absent; it never reaches the generality of a concept and to be connected with it always needs an image. The productive imagination, through the schematism of the understanding, creates a phenomenon itself. However, the problem is that Kant simply postulates the synthesis of impressions and doesn’t explain *how* it is accomplished, i.e. what are the consecutive steps of this accomplishment: “This schematism of our understanding, in its application to appearances and their mere form, is an art concealed in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover, and to have open to our gaze” (KRV: B 180).

The fact of the logical unity between percepts and concepts, therefore, ultimately remains a mystery and thus leaves within the *Critique of Pure Reason* a gap which is filled by the notion of the transcendental scheme. A parallel gap appears in the *Critique of Practical Reason* as the ethical problem of discontinuity between rational understanding and practical manipulation.<sup>29</sup> The two gaps reflect the relationship between the two ways Kant’s constructivism figures in his 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> *Critiques*. Epistemologically speaking, whatever there is to know originates, in part, from a set of a priori concepts that secure the unity of experience (KRV: A125). Our practical

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<sup>29</sup> As has been discussed in section 1.1 in relation to Brandom’s normative pragmatism.



maxims also have their origins in the will of the transcendental subject who must be able to treat them as objective laws. However, the Kantian practical agent cannot make her own freedom an object of cognition – which leads us to the controversy between the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Critiques* that forms the central point of Kant's 3<sup>rd</sup> *Critique*: the idea of the mediating power of aesthetic judgment to reconcile the theoretical and the practical interpretations of Kant's constructivist thesis.

Just like Brandom, McDowell does not follow Kant's architectonics, and sets the task of dismounting from the seesaw without appealing to any sort of mediators between the receptivity of perception and the spontaneity of thinking. In McDowell's case, the reason is that, according to Kant, our command of concepts, being a result of the interplay between the two capacities, applies only to *phenomena*, leaving the sphere of things as they are in themselves unknowable – although, in a certain indeterminate manner, *thinkable* (KRV: B164). Objects as they are can only *cause* an appearance, but it cannot be known in the way something given in a concept is known. Meanwhile, according to McDowell, if the only connection between an object and perception is causal, we are unable to explain our conceptual grasp of the object, because, as the Sellarsian critique of the Given shows, we are unable to explain the move from non-epistemic, non-cognitive bits of the Given to conceptual contents.

Kant excludes the world as it is in itself from the sphere of possible human interest, leaving within the sphere of the transcendental subjectivity things as they appear to us *caused* by things as they are in themselves. On this account, as far as the transcendental subjectivity comprises both contents of all possible knowledge and the synthetic activity that brings this knowledge to us, the move from the non-epistemic to the conceptual becomes unnecessary. McDowell, however, poses a Hegelian requirement, insisting that the divide between how things

are *in themselves* and how they are *for us* is inadmissible. We can neither simply dismiss the corresponding part of the myth, because in this case all we are left with is frictionless coherence of our beliefs, nor simply restrict the scope of spontaneity in order to satisfy the need for external friction (MW: 11), because it would lay a constraint on our knowledge of the sort which McDowell is unwilling to accept.

One way to introduce the notion of rational constraint, which would make way for the idea of objective conceptual contents, might be to use Kant's autonomy thesis, or, as it has been defined in chapter 1, Kant's constructivist thesis as it figures in his *Critique of Practical Reason*. Recall that, according to Kant, what is distinctive about us as practical agents, as opposed to brutes, is that we have the capacity to follow our representations of laws rather than conform to the laws of nature. We can select a norm and make it work as the basis of our will. In performing this self-legislative activity, we make ourselves responsible to the norm, and thereby subject ourselves to rational criticism in light of it. As a result, according to Kant, our thinking and willing are constrained, not from *without*, but from *within* themselves. On the face of it, this doesn't seem to be an option for McDowell, however, the reason being that the regulative principles that give us the idea of freedom as a form for an outward action presuppose the idea of human being as a noumenon. Practical reason, i.e. our capacity for acting as moral agents, says Kant, makes no sense unless a *noumenal* world is postulated in which *freedom* abides. This is so because freedom, Kant claims, can only be given by means of a formal imperative abstracted from all subject-matter of the will in favor of the universal form (KPV: I, 1, §80). The categorical imperative expresses freedom by means of a specific requirement that lays constraint on our conduct. Human *freedom*, thus, is given through the idea of *constraint*, where a practical agent finds reasons for morally sound conduct *within* herself, but, as has already been discussed in sections 1.2 and 1.4, cannot make sense of her actions without symbolic reinterpretation of the

moral law in aesthetic judgment. It is for this reason that, for the practical agent, freedom as such expresses the *noumenal* part of her nature and cannot become an object of cognition. This obviously doesn't fit into McDowell's account, leaving thinking out of touch with the world as it really is. However, McDowell does insist that constraint is exerted from *within* the conceptual domain, but he needs to say something more in order to show how this idea fits into his reinterpretation of Kant.

Contrary to Kant, McDowell claims that, in empirical thinking, our *total* freedom finds its expression<sup>30</sup> (MW: 5). There's no distance between the impact of external reality and conceptual contents that respond to it. As McDowell puts it, "when we enjoy experience, conceptual capacities are drawn on *in* receptivity, not exercised *on* some supposedly prior deliverances of receptivity" (MW: 10). McDowell's thesis is that spontaneity is operational all the way out to the conceptual contents that (and here McDowell's own phrasing is important for our purposes later on) "*sit closest* to the impacts of the world on our sensibility" (MW: 11; *emphasis added*). Judgments that register experience as it makes itself available are accepted or rejected and, in so far as acceptance or rejection is an activity, these judgments are active at least in this minimal

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<sup>30</sup> Curiously enough, from very early on in *Mind and World* McDowell conflates spontaneity and freedom and on some occasions uses the two terms interchangeably. Meanwhile, in Kant's 1<sup>st</sup> *Critique* (and in "Analytic of Concepts" in particular) spontaneity refers only to the capacity of the mind to produce representations from itself, the capacity Kant calls "understanding". McDowell does not provide any reason for this peculiar use of the Kantian concepts, and, when later on he introduces the idea of second nature that, as will be shown in section 1.3, justifies the freedom of our empirical thinking, he does so with the reference not to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, but to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (MW: 80-81). Moreover, in his "Hegel's Idealism as Radicalization of Kant" he claims that the fact that things are knowable to us under certain conditions (subjective *a priori* conditions, in Kant's case) does not prevent us from knowing things as they are objectively. He calls this claim "a truism" (McDowell 2009a: 7). Given this, McDowell owes us at least some sort of a minimal explanation of his use of "freedom". On the one hand, if we choose to follow Kant, as an outcome of Kant's autonomy thesis, the term "freedom" necessarily presupposes that there's a noumenal part to the nature of every moral agent. On the other hand, if we neglect one of the essentials in Kant's theory (as McDowell certainly does), we lose our chance to use relevant terms in the way they are used in Kant's original theory.

sense. According to McDowell, spontaneity is already there because, in order for us to be able to accept or reject those judgments, we must be able to use concepts in them. And, as Sellars's critique of the Given has it, we would not be able to use the concepts in these judgments were we not able to use them in *other* contexts to express *other* judgeable contents. In a similar manner, McDowell also claims that even the most *immediately observational* concepts are defined as such in part by their *role* in what he (rather vaguely) defines as "something that is indeed appropriately conceived in terms of spontaneity" (MW: 13).

To sum up, according to McDowell, we need to navigate between two strong but contrary intuitions. One of them is "frictionless" coherentism, which, in laying stress on the purely causal connection to the world, seems to leave the mind completely out of conceptual touch with it. Alternatively, we need to accept as a fact that justification for our beliefs is simply *given* in experience, and that, therefore, we have to subject ourselves to the mythologeme which alienates empirical data from cognition. Experience can neither be just a matter of causal impact, nor be reduced to the passive processing of the non-conceptual sensory given. In order to dismount from the seesaw, or avoid the oscillation between mere coherence of our beliefs and an appeal to the merely given, we need to recognize that experiences *cannot* be considered as deliverances of pure receptivity to which spontaneity makes no contribution, and that conceptual capacities that presuppose spontaneity are at work, not just in judgments based on those experiences, but in the *experiences themselves*.

The relationship between receptivity and spontaneity, as presented by McDowell, is a dialectical one. The former cannot be conceived independently from the latter. As he puts it in one of his later works,

[w]hen we conceive the operations of sensory receptivity as prior to and independent of any involvement of conceptual capacities, we debar them from intelligibly standing in rational relations to cases of conceptual activity. We ensure that they could at best be triggers or promptings to bits of conceptual activity, not justifications of them. In thus excluding the supposed immediate gettings of the given from rational relatedness to a world view, we in fact make it impossible to understand them as *cognitions* at all.

(McDowell 2009a: 93)

The dialectics of receptivity and spontaneity reveals three important facts about the nature of perceptual experience. First, as there is no reality that is exterior to what is conceptual<sup>31</sup>, our experience does not need to involve private objects of any kind that mediate between the perceiver and the world: the former is *open* to the latter. Consequently, how the conceptual is tied down to an independent reality, and how its being so tied down results in any kind of knowledge of this reality, is not the kind of questions we should, according to McDowell, be even remotely interested in answering (Bernstein 2002: 13). Second, experience is constituted by conceptual capacities, and these capacities are not exercised on extraconceptual deliverances of receptivity, but are always already drawn on *in* receptivity. Third, experience does not just retrieve information from the world out there, but, due to the workings of spontaneity, enables the world to offer reasons for what we think and say (Gaynesford 2004: 89).

The third fact, as it stands alone, might be read as a reiteration of Kant's constructivist thesis. However, as has been mentioned, McDowell rejects Kant's transcendental story as a part of this thesis and, consequently, taken with the other two facts, this thesis becomes a *realist* one<sup>32</sup>: on McDowell's view, the space of reasons (and, by the same token, of norms and

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<sup>31</sup> As will be shown in the next section, this claim of McDowell's is supported by his version of idealism, which entails neither that external physical objects and events are conceptual, nor that there is no reality outside our minds. On the contrary, it acknowledges that (and explains how exactly) reality is independent of our thinking. As will be shown, McDowell's idealism only claims that how things are may be *both* a matter of fact *and* something available in an *act* of thinking. It does *not* claim that an act of thinking is identical with the fact that is available in the act.

<sup>32</sup> Some (see, e.g. Echeverri 2009) prefer to use the term "strong conceptualist" instead.

meanings) is autonomous and self-standing – in the sense of being independent of what you and I might actually think at any given moment of time. McDowell’s principal question here is how reality that shares its conceptual nature with an experience of it can be independent of this experience. The answer to this question is given by means of introducing the idea of second nature which helps us dissolve the dualism of the normative and the natural. McDowell believes that the introduction of this idea creates the ultimate condition for a successful defence of his realism<sup>33</sup>. But in order to set the stage for the defence, McDowell first has to justify the idea of rational constraint while dealing with two problems: he has to answer the challenge of the sceptic and to meet the charge of idealism.

### ***2.3. Openness to the World and Rational Constraint***

Although our experiential openness to the world is one of the central metaphors of MW<sup>34</sup>, McDowell does not give us too much detail on what the openness actually consists in. His overall strategy is to reject any sort of systematic *theory* of the relationship between mind, world, and conceptual content, and instead to propose a *therapy* capable of disavowing theories that are, for a variety of reasons, unsatisfactory (Brandom 2002: 104). However, McDowell does make it clear that the notion of openness is meant to defy the old vocabulary that described different ways of building a mediating screen between reality and the perceiver, and that this notion is conceived as fully compatible with the idea of external constraint on our thought about the world.

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<sup>33</sup> As I will show later, McDowell’s accepting both realism and idealism involves no contradiction.

<sup>34</sup> Sometimes referred to as “the Default” (see, e.g., Gaynesford 2004: 4-9).

McDowell's using the idea of openness of the experiencing subject to the world may be traced as far back as his "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge" (McDowell 1983: 455-479). This early paper already stresses the fact that, as Gaynesford aptly puts it, the openness "is not a stark responsibility, a helpless exposure to the bright obvious" (Gaynesford 2004: 5). Neither has it anything to do with us being attentive or inattentive to some particular happenings in the world out there. The openness has also very little to do with the fact that, apart from many things I have explicit knowledge about, there are many things and facts, of which I am *not* aware (faint noises, perceptions of my body, things knowledge of which forms contents of my background beliefs, etc., etc.). The idea of openness to the world amounts to the claim that it is the world itself that is transparently and directly open to us in veridical perception and, in its transparency, provides guidance for our thought. It also is a *default* situation in which we find ourselves as humans: whatever is there is warranted as available for our cognition.

As has been shown in the previous section, the thesis about availability of the world as it is for empirical thought emerges directly from McDowell's idea of the joint involvement of receptivity and spontaneity in perceptual experience: if we agree that experiences are always already equipped with conceptual content, we should conclude that in veridical experiences I know how things really are (MW: 25). When we see an object, what we perceive is *the object itself*, and not its intermediate mental proxy, as the myth of the Given seems to suggest. The notion of the openness to the world, in Brandom's precise phrase, suggests that "when the perception is veridical, the content of perceptual experience just is the fact perceived" (Brandom 2002: 94). McDowell is careful to stipulate that the identity between facts and contents, which expresses the gist of his direct realism, should *not* be understood in the sense that he does not care to distinguish between the fact that, say, I'm sitting on a chair now and my thinking or

perceiving that I'm sitting on a chair now. In this case, although the *fact* of the world really is also the *content* of my experience<sup>35</sup>, what is precisely *not* identical, even in veridical experience, is the *fact* of the world and my *act* of thinking, in which the fact is being revealed to me<sup>36</sup> (MW: 28). This stipulation, however, does not mean that our experience represents the world exactly as it is *at every instance* – which seems to be all that is needed for the skeptic to launch his attack.

The very distinction between the facts and acts of thinking about those facts presupposes that there might be something wrong with the latter – hence the possibility of a mismatch between what one might take to be the content of her thinking and what really is the case. Openness to the world and McDowell's direct realism do not tell us how exactly veridical and non-veridical kinds of perceptual awareness are to be distinguished. The only thing they tell us is what happens when our experience is, in fact, veridical (Butchvarov 1998: 24-29). In response to this claim, McDowell's account seems to suggest two facts. First, in the case of the first-personal present experience an account of the possibility of mistake should not be expected, because, from this perspective, it seems to be enough to say that, what I *reasonably* take to be correct is, in fact, correct. It is hard to deny that a perceiver, in her first-personal present experience, does not seem

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<sup>35</sup> In claiming that facts are contents, McDowell does not imply that facts are cognizable because there is some sort of *form* of correspondence between facts and cognitions. He only says that how things are is open to us in experience, and that this openness establishes the rational responsiveness of experiences to how things are. What this *does* imply is that there is a *constitutive relationship* between how things are and our conceptual capacities, and that those capacities are characterized by the spontaneity that, in McDowell's own terms, "extends all the way out to the conceptual contents that sit closest to the impacts of the world on our sensibility" (MW: 11). However, what the constitutive relationship between the how things are and our conceptual capacities (and with it, the full meaning of facts-contents equation) actually consists in is made clear only later in the text of MW when McDowell introduces the idea of second nature.

<sup>36</sup> It will be shown later in this section that the distinction between acts of thinking and thinkable contents is crucial for McDowell's clarification of the idea of external constraint.



to need others to triangulate with in order to introduce the ideas of objectivity and constraint<sup>37</sup>. This, though, raises the question of whether first-personal present experience is enough for the two ideas to make any sense. Second, according to McDowell, our openness to the world does not in any way imply infallibility of our beliefs. In this case, the question is how, in light of this relationship between our openness to the world and infallibility of our beliefs, the fact that, in cases when our judgments about the world are correct, we do know things as they really are, helps us define under what conditions we succeed or fail.

It might be asked, of course, whether any kind of full-blooded account of such conditions is at all needed. But, given that, according to McDowell, in veridical experiences one knows how things really are, it might be desirable to establish some sort of minimal criteria, which would ground at least our *awareness* of the possibility of being wrong, as well as our *hope* for being correct. For instance, in Brandom's case, one might be *aware* of being wrong when someone else who is entitled to attribute a commitment to her does, in fact, attribute the commitment, irrespective of whether she acknowledges it or not. And, in Peirce's case, we have a maxim that tells us what we need to do if we *hope* for arriving at true beliefs rather than at false ones. Although, in Brandom's case, we still need an account of what "being entitled" means, and, in Peirce's case, we need a more or less detailed definition of what the maxim actually requires, both Brandom and Peirce provide at least a minimal account of being mistaken. If such an account is not in place, we do not admit mistakes at all and, consequently, seem to end up having an unrealistic conception of experience (Christensen 2008: 184). If this is correct, McDowell's idea of our openness to the world is unable to deal with scepticism about the possibility of knowledge, and we have no reason to hold on both to the idea of the openness to the world and to

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<sup>37</sup> Whether first-personal present experiences is actually all we need for the two ideas to make any sense is a separate question, which, for the time being, will be left unanswered.

the idea of perceptual content it entails. As Echeverri (2009) claims, we might simply refuse to accept McDowell's metaphor of openness to the world and deny that there is a prejudgmental perceptual content somehow endowed with semantic properties, if we can make a good argument for the claim that only propositional states like judgments can actually represent the world (Echeverri 2009: 3).

It is also interesting that, in the very beginning of lecture one of MW McDowell acknowledges that a perceiver *can* be misled into believing that she knows that things are thus and so when things are, in fact, not thus and so. However, a bit later he claims that "it does not matter much that one can be misled" (MW: 9). McDowell does not say much about why, in his opinion, an account of possibly misleading experiences is not important. He does claim though that both mistakes and veridical experiences form a part of the conceptual domain, but just how much it helps to resolve the problem also remains unclear. He repeats his point again towards the end of MW in lecture six:

It is true that we could not establish that we are open to facts in any given case; at any rate not to the satisfaction of a determined sceptic, who can always insist on exploiting fallibility to give bite to the question how we know the present case is one of the non-misleading ones. But that is beside the point. It would matter if it showed that the very idea of openness to facts is unintelligible, and it does not show that. For my present purposes, the sheer intelligibility of the idea is enough. If the idea is intelligible, the sceptical questions lack a kind of urgency [...] that derives from their seeming to point up an unnerving fact: that however good a subject's cognitive position is, it cannot constitute her having a state of affairs directly manifest to her. There is no such fact.

(MW: 113)

This quietist argument says too much and too little at the same time. If anything, the sceptic's task is to point at the lack of evidence in an argument rather than to seek the facts that would support her own position. We cannot explain how we know (or at least explain what gives us reasons to hope to know) the *present* case is non-misleading for the same reason we cannot explain how *any* case is non-misleading; namely, we have no criteria which would ground our

awareness of the possibility of being wrong, as well as our hope to be correct. Given this, it might be said that, by pointing at the sheer intelligibility of our openness to the world, McDowell simply tells the sceptic to get lost rather than resolves the problem.

As pointed out in Echeverri (2009), to soothe the sceptic, by the very end of MW McDowell claims that, as far as we deal with the actualization of concepts on the level of perceptual content, the source of skepticism about the external world is essentially the same as the source of scepticism about the very possibility of content (Echeverri 2009: 4; MW: 146<sup>38</sup>). Now it might be claimed that this conclusion is no more than a truism which is fully elucidated by McDowell's earlier disjunctivist account of perception (McDowell 1983; Dennis 2014). On this account, if I see such and such an object, either there is such an object, or there isn't. If the object is, in fact, there, I am in a direct contact with the world, and the content of my experience is, in fact, the content of the world. If the object is not there, what I deal with is *not* a mental proxy (which, as the highest common factor assumption tells us, is the same in the case of a real experience and an illusion), but rather another content which differs from the veridical one. This line of argument does not dismiss just any doubt about the identity of perceptual contents and perceived facts, but it provides a theoretical framework in which, given that the idea of experience vis-à-vis some sort of inner space that stands independently of external reality is not a tenable option, the difference between "good" and "bad" disjuncts is there even if it cannot be distinguished by the subject of experience. McDowell does not pretend to provide a full-blooded proof of this fact, because, as he puts it, the idea of openness is nothing else but "a rejection of the traditional predicament, not an attempt to respond to it" (MW: 112). McDowell, therefore,

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<sup>38</sup> "I also assume that philosophical concerns about the possibility of knowledge express at root the same anxiety as philosophical concerns about how content is possible, an anxiety about a felt distance between mind and world".

can only *suggest* his approach, but this suggestion, as it stands, cannot dismiss the fact that, even if we accept McDowell's disjunctivism and the distinction between instances of mere appearances and instances where the subject perceives what the case is, the openness can by no means be conceived as a *direct consequence* of this distinction (Glendinning and Gaynesford 1998: 22).

If the above is correct, McDowell leaves the sceptic at least somewhat unsatisfied. However, his response to the skeptic is closely related to his objection on the score of idealism. As I will show in the next section, this objection is actually completed only when McDowell introduces the idea of second nature and links this idea to language use – as a part of what Gaynesford describes as the thesis of “interdependence between experience and our capacities to conceive and use words” (Gaynesford 2004: 29). What is important for the present discussion is that this objection, even before language is defined in the last paragraph of lecture six, provides some additional support to McDowell's anti-skeptical arguments by introducing the idea of *rational constraint*.

As McDowell claims in the beginning of lecture two of MW, “we seem to need rational constraints on thinking and judging, from a reality external to them, if we are to make sense of them as bearing on a reality outside thought at all” (MW: 25). The principal question for McDowell is how the idea of constraint can be reconciled with the idea of openness to the world, or, to put it in different terms, how the rational relationship between mind and world can accommodate the idea of the independence of reality from what can be thought about it. McDowell's goal is to offer a theory that does not locate reality outside the boundary that encloses the conceptual, but that, at the same time, does not neglect the independence of reality and, as McDowell puts it, “is not offensive to common sense” (MW: 44). As has been shown in section 2.2, the predicament is that the constraint can be neither merely causal (because, in this

case, as McDowell insists, we are likely to lose the world altogether<sup>39</sup>), nor purely extraconceptual (because, in this case, we lose *immediate* connection to the world and stand in need of introducing some sort of mediating screen of appearances). As McDowell himself admits, “it can seem that this refusal to locate perceptible reality outside the conceptual sphere must be a sort of idealism, in the sense in which to call a position ‘idealism’ is to protest that it does not genuinely acknowledge how reality is independent of our thinking” (MW: 26).

When it comes to rational constraint, McDowell not so much argues for his position, as he tries to present it as a truism that cannot entail anything “metaphysically contentious” (MW: 27). There is nothing in the very idea of thought that might suggest that it is something *distanced* from the world. True, when Wittgenstein in §1 of his *Tractatus* tells us that “the world is everything that is the case” (T: 7), “all the point comes to is that one can think, for instance, *that spring has begun*, and that very same thing, *that spring has begun*, can be the case” (MW: 27). The phobia of idealism arises when, in unpacking this formula, one says that the world is made of the same

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<sup>39</sup> Although MW does not offer any elaborate criticism of Davidson’s coherentism, it might be safely concluded that, from McDowell’s point of view, by claiming that only a belief can justify another belief, Davidson denies any justificatory role to experience. For instance, Davidson’s triangulation argument shows that thoughts can be attributed and meanings of utterances fixed, only on the basis of a triangular structure that presupposes an interaction between at least two creatures and a set of external objects in the world which cause the interaction. This triangular structure helps us disambiguate external causes which, according to Davidson, *both* initiate intersubjective interaction *and* locate the causes in a public space, thus providing participants with the concept of objectivity. Although McDowell, to my best knowledge, never discussed Davidson’s triangulation argument in any of his papers, he must think that, as summarized above, it results only in our interaction having common external causes, but not in our meanings being fixed. And if the only role that experience can play in acquiring and fixing beliefs is a causal one, then, according to McDowell, we do not recognize the importance of an appeal to experience and, consequently, cannot explain how our thoughts have any content. According to Davidson, beliefs always already have content, and our task in each case is to determine them through interpretation. Therefore, the Kantian threat of beliefs being contentless, or *empty* (and, likewise, contents without beliefs being *blind*) for Davidson is no threat at all. (For McDowell’s arguments against Davidson’s approach to the scheme-content dualism, as well as for the discussion of those arguments see McDowell 2009b: 115-133; Mármol 2007.)

stuff as the stuff one can think – which seems to lead directly to the conclusion that what one calls the world is “a shadow of our thinking” consisting of a mental stuff. But the phobia does *not* arise when one reads the formula the other way around and says that the sort of thing one can think is, in fact, the same sort of thing that can be the case. As it seems to be quite obvious that we have no particular need to look for a priority in either direction, the reason for the phobia resides in nothing but our established linguistic habits (MW: 28)<sup>40</sup>.

The middle part of the second lecture is probably the richest and most intense part of the whole book. What follows after the discussion of the phobia of idealism comes thick and fast. McDowell is aware that, although priority in direction might not be an issue, “thinking” or “thought” are ambiguous in the way “fact” or “world” are not. To disambiguate the term, he uses the distinction between individual *acts* of thinking and particular *contents* that are thought – the very same distinction that invited the skeptical attack. And it is this disambiguation that finally yields the idea of rational constraint in the clearest form.

The constraint, McDowell insists, is from outside any particular *act* of thinking, but it need not be from outside thinkable *contents* that our acts of thinking embrace. In order to understand how the constraint works, we need to go back in our reasoning far enough to reach the

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<sup>40</sup> A familiar historical example that, in this case, suggests itself right away is Berkeley’s conception of the material world, or Berkeley’s so-called “immaterialism”. Berkeley’s ideas were, especially in his time, often misunderstood. His *esse est percipi*, of course, entails not that matter does not exist at all, but that there cannot be any existence whatsoever that is not immediately perceptual. According to Berkeley, our immediate perception represents a unity of necessarily connected elements (following one of Peirce’s examples, we can imagine a man without a head, but not a sound without a pitch: these latter two things represent a necessary unity in perception). From this point of view, the world consists of tightly fitting interrelated parts that are organised in a sort of language to the use of which the perceiver is “open” in a sense similar to that which McDowell seems to attach to the term. As a number of commentators suggest, what Berkeley intended to offer in terms of his “immaterialism” was not a fanciful speculation of a skeptic, but, quite on the contrary, a form of radical empiricism, or even “downright hard-headed common-sense realism that any Irishmen could believe” (Pepper 1957: 10). This parallel with Berkeley is important because some researchers (see, e.g., Haddock 2008) claim that one of McDowell’s principal goals in *Mind and World* is to secure a coincidence between idealism and realism.

contents that are, as McDowell puts it, “ultimate in the order of justification” (MW: 29). He stresses that these are still thinkables, not something that is revealed by a mere pointing to a bit of the Given. Alluding to “Sense-certainty, or This and meaning”, the first chapter of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, McDowell then adds that we should “reject the idea that tracing back the ground for a judgment can terminate in pointing to a bare presence” (MW: 39). The thinkables McDowell has in mind, in short, are contents of our experience to which we are open and which present manifest facts that impress themselves on our sensibility.

At this point, McDowell links the notion of openness to the claim that every impression and every concept are understood only as forming a part in a larger networks: the claim which later on will lead him to introducing the ideas of second nature and initiation into a custom. Impressions always come in conceptual bundles (MW: 37). Just like Sellars and Brandom, McDowell claims that, for instance, a color concept cannot be grasped autonomously, without understanding how it fits in to a perceiver’s worldview which rationally links our capacities into a network. This sort of understanding always requires taking into account certain implications of a particular cognitive and social situation; and any judgment that endorses experiences framed by a concept becomes intelligible only in a variety of interrelated social and cognitive contexts.

This, of course, is a familiar Sellarsian idea, which both Brandom and McDowell endorse, but McDowell’s novel point here is that he uses the inferentialist explanatory framework to elucidate the relationship between “inner” and “outer” experiences – the problem that, in Brandom’s own case, can never arise<sup>41</sup>. He intentionally preserves this Kantian distinction and uses it in order to strengthen his objection on the score of idealism. According to his example, a

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<sup>41</sup> McDowell ultimately urges the answerability of knowledge to experience, whereas Brandom keeps repeating, “experience is not one of my words,” and insists that using this word implies succumbing to the Myth of the Given (MIE: 197; Levine 2012).

person cannot learn how to use the concept of pain as related to our inner experiences without any knowledge of larger circumstances; for instance, without knowledge of the more general case of *someone's* being in pain (MW: 37). It is quite clear that the roles this concept might play in English language cannot be restricted to judgments of inner experience, or first-person accounts, because every role is a cluster of uses that refer to other clusters and relates to them through what Wittgenstein called "family resemblances"<sup>42</sup>.

To sum up the results of the second lecture, we are open to the world as the sum total of thinkable contents; our acts of empirical thinking are answerable to and rationally constrained by these contents, which are available to us and, provided that the experiences are veridical, present things as they really are. As McDowell succinctly puts it, "we have to understand the experienceable world as a subject matter for active thinking, rationally constrained by what experience reveals" (MW: 32-33). What is thus revealed is not bits of the Given, but thinkable contents, no matter how far we trace our justifications back. What is within the constraint is particular acts of thinking, not thinkable contents. McDowell never tells us just how far we can trace our justifications, but, as has been pointed earlier, he does tell us that there are thinkables put into place in operations of receptivity, and that, in appealing to them, we establish rational constraint on thinking from a reality external to it (MW: 29).

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<sup>42</sup> There is an ambiguity here that is related to what Wittgenstein had to say about pain in *Philosophical Investigations*. On the one hand, it seems to be intuitively true that in the case of pain the appearance/reality distinction collapses: if a person *seems* to herself to be in pain, she *must* be so. On the other hand, given that "being in pain" is a linguistic description, the question is: Can a creature, if it doesn't have the capacity of giving first-person reports in the inferentialist context McDowell has in mind, "be in pain"? It is not quite clear why McDowell uses this ambiguous example as an illustration of his point here, as, before the introduction of his anthropocentric idea of second nature, it creates some troubles for his rebuttal of "bad" idealism. However, those who are inclined to disregard this disquotational sophistication (as McDowell himself, I believe, certainly would), might simply admit that one can be in pain but fail to have the concept of pain.



Recall that, according to McDowell, thinkables form conceptual networks. In this way, McDowell tries to make sure that “ultimate contents” is not interpreted in the absolute sense, but only “in the order of justification”. The introduction of the idea of ultimate thinkables is followed almost immediately by the claim that the thinkables are *linguistically available* and constitute *ultimate points of agreement* regardless of possible differences in perception, cultural and social background, etc. He adds that “it may take work to make the conceptual contents of someone else’s engagements with the world available to us, ... [but] the world she engages with is surely already within our view” (MW: 34).

It is important to keep in mind that the agreement McDowell has in mind is about *contents*, not about the perspectival *form*, as in Brandom’s case. McDowell doesn’t offer any further justifications of this liberal hope for the ultimate agreement<sup>43</sup>. We are told only (1) that there are no extra-conceptual links between the medium within which we think and some extra-conceptual elements out there, and (2) that the agreement is possible *not* because the dynamic system of our thinking is somehow *adjusted* to the world. Any experienced state of affairs is a part of a whole world, thinkable as it is, and the whole is, in some sense, independent of any particular experience. (MW: 36).

There are three major theoretical backgrounds that may be used to support such agreement. The first one is exemplified by Davidson’s idea of radical interpretation, where we find ourselves in a situation in which we know neither the meanings of (empirical) claims made by an alien speaker that we need to interpret, nor which (empirical) beliefs the alien speaker holds. Conceived in this way, the process of interpretation is based on the technique of the

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<sup>43</sup> Of course, according to McDowell, we still live in the same world. Apart from the same physical objects we all stumble upon, the world we actually live in as humans is essentially defined by McDowell in terms of conceptual contents, and it is these contents, or linguistically available thinkables, not anything else, that constitute ultimate points of agreement.

Davidsonian optimizing agreement: we have to act on the assumption that the set of beliefs of the speaker we intend to interpret is, by and large, consistent and true according to our own standards” (Davidson 1984: 137). There will always remain a possibility for something Davidson refers to as “the trade-offs between the beliefs we attribute to a speaker and the interpretations we give his words” (Davidson 1984: 139), so that interpretation will not rely on any kind of ultimate contents and will always remain incomplete and indeterminate in the Quinian sense. As has been shown in section 2.2, this option is unpalatable for McDowell who believes that what he calls Davidsonian coherentism is the extreme point to which the seesaw takes us once we reject the myth of the Given. True, although McDowell rejects Davidson's insistence on the purely causal role of sensations, he cannot help accepting part of Davidson's interpretation story. According to McDowell, every chunk of experience always forms a part of a larger conceptual network and, as expressed in a judgment, becomes intelligible only in a variety of interrelated social contexts. However, as has been mentioned above, McDowell points out that for the idea of an agreement between us to work we need a new, refurbished conception of experience, whereas Davidson doesn't think any such conception is needed for the purpose. It is also important to be aware that each of the conceptual contents that, according to McDowell, constitute points of an agreement, is precisely what it is – a *content*, i.e. something that is always there as some particular “thus-and-so-ness.” As the content of veridical experiences, it is a fact, something *that is the case*, i.e. a constituent of the world in a way meanings that result from the Davidsonian radical interpretation are most definitely not.

The second theoretical background is exemplified by the familiar neo-Kantian approach to communication (e.g. Habermas's theory of communicative action). According to this approach, rationality is a universal capacity inherent in language, and rational agreement is available to every language user through argumentation. The belief that supports this approach is

that there is a level of self-reflection and cooperation, at which public structures of argumentative speech are totally devoid of coercive force and lead to mutual understanding. The possibility of such understanding is based on our being capable of something that might be called “straight talk”, or an absolutely non-instrumental and non-manipulative use of speech, irrespective of social and cultural differences. On this approach, an individual agent’s own motives that express her self-interest, unlike her public reasons, are never fully and utterly transparent to her, and the transparency of her personal reasons is achievable only in specifically organized communication with others. This theory of communication, however, is based on shared competences, normative presuppositions, practices, and background resources for the consensual resolution of conflicts, rather than on shared conceptually framed thinkables, or the “world” in McDowell’s sense of the word. McDowell cannot make use of this account because shared competences, normative presuppositions, practices, and background resources are precisely more or less flexible situational adjustments to the environment, not something forming a part of the world thinkable as it is.

The third background is exemplified by Peirce’s idea of a future community of inquirers as it has been described above in section 1.3 in relation to Brandom’s notion of perspectival objectivity. This idea pictures reality as the ultimate agreement in opinions of future inquirers and presupposes a method of fixing those opinions. In the end of lecture II of MW McDowell alludes to this idea when he writes:

Ensuring that our empirical concepts and conceptions pass muster is ongoing and arduous work for the understanding. It requires patience and something like humility. There’s no guarantee that the world is completely within the reach of a system of concepts and conceptions as it stands at some particular moment in its historical development.

(MW: 40)

The next paragraph in the text actually mentions the regulative notion of the end of inquiry implied in Peirce's idea of an extended future community as it is defined in his "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." In a footnote to the paragraph, McDowell quotes Peirce on the convergence between truth and reality as one of the consequences on this notion: "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real" (W3: 273). However, he does so only to reject the idea a moment later, stating that it is no part of the position he is recommends (MW: 40). Meanwhile, Peirce's idea of a future community of inquirers, as will be shown below in chapter 3, secures constraint on our thinking and, as an integral part of Peirce's theory of signs, provides justification for the generative aspect of language.

With the three explanatory opportunities unused, there is no link between McDowell's holistic stance, according to which any single state of affairs reveals itself in experience only as a part of the world as a whole, with this whole being independent of any particular experience of it, on the one hand, and the idea of contents, each of which is particular "thus-and-so", on the other hand. In one of his later works, McDowell tries to create the link by claiming that every act of perception involves not just one, but necessarily *multiple* conceptual capacities that are active in experience *together* (McDowell 2009a: 7-11). To make his point, he refers to §16 of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, where Sellars argues for an analogy between visual experiences and linguistic acts: in seeing something, I am having a conceptual episode that, in a non-overt form, contains a number of overt claims. Making claims is the primary way to actualize conceptual capacities, and these actualizations constitute an inferentially organized network. That said, McDowell still does not make it clear either what makes a conceptual content "ultimate" in the order of justification, or why is it at all possible for ultimate contents to be shared by

interlocutors. The only thing we know so far is that there's an analogy between concepts and language. Recall that, while discussing the phobia of idealism, McDowell refers to §1 of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and suggests that the *fact* that such-and-such is the case is the *content* of the thought that such-and-such is the case. One page earlier McDowell adds: "That things are thus and so is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgment" (MW: 26), which seems to imply that every perceptual experience already has a propositional form. However, just like Brandom, McDowell enjoys keeping his readers in suspense as to the key issue of MW until the very end of the last lecture, and the resolution comes only after the link is built between the idea of second nature and the way language functions.

#### ***2.4. Second Nature***

On the one hand, McDowell seems to believe that openness to the world is an outcome of a universal rational capacity inherent in language and available to every language user through argumentation. His important proviso to this view, however, is that it is *perceptual experience* that underpins any judgment or argument. It is perceptions, and not cultural and normative competences, that form the shared basis for understanding. On the other hand, McDowell places rational constraint within the sphere of the conceptual – which leads him to the conclusion that reality is independent of individual *acts* of thinking based on perceptual experience, but that our acknowledgment of the independence of reality does not come from outside of thinkable *contents* that veridical experience reveals.

This rejection of a reality outside the sphere of the conceptual (and, therefore, of the sensible) is very much in line with Peirce's version of what McDowell calls *consistent* idealism

(MW: 44) as opposed to the idealism that considers the world as only “a shadow of our thinking” consisting of a “mental stuff”. But having shown, in the first three lectures of MW, why conceptual capacities *should* be domesticated within nature and what this picture would entail, McDowell now needs to show how this domestication actually works. His approach is to start with the following principal question: What is the relationship between the thinkable, or the conceptual nature shared by our human empirical thinking and the world, on the one hand, and the features that we share with other natural creatures, such as dumb animals, on the other hand? Like other animal species, we are perceptually sensitive to our environment, and we obviously share similar sensory systems with many other natural species. We are undeniably natural in this respect. Given this, how is it possible that all the arguments in favor of the conceptual character of perceptual experience do not entail a familiar Kantian gap between dumb nature and freedom as a human achievement? According to McDowell, to answer this question, all we need to do is disambiguate the word “nature”.

One way to understand the word is closely related to what McDowell calls “the realm of law”; namely, a scientific conception of nature, which began to form with the rise of modern philosophy and which Weber described using the term “disenchantment.”<sup>44</sup> Initially aimed at purging our ideas about reality from prejudices based on previous appeals to mystery and magic, it ultimately gave birth to a mechanistic picture of nature entirely stripped of meaning and purpose.

According to McDowell, it would be wrong to try and solve the problem by construing the space of reasons, within which human, conceptually framed sensibility is actualized, as strictly *opposed* to this natural world totally devoid of meaning and normativity. But it would be equally

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<sup>44</sup> See section 1.2.

wrong to construe the former as a *mere addition* to the latter. If we simply oppose the space of reasons to the realm of law, says McDowell, we will face the fact that the former is entirely separated from the world as pictured by the latter. As a result, reason appears to represent something entirely super-natural.

McDowell calls this latter conception “rampant platonism”. He defines rampant platonism as a position that construes the space of reasons as an autonomous structure independent from anything specifically human, as far as what is specifically *human* is also considered as *natural* (MW: 77). On this construal, we preserve the autonomy of the space of reasons at the expense of losing the conceptual contact with the world. Alternatively, if we want to reconstruct the space of reasons using only the resources the realm of law provides us with, we end up with what McDowell calls “bald naturalism.” He defines it as a doctrine which tells us that we should attempt to reconstruct our conception of ourselves using only the conceptual equipment that is non-problematically naturalistic (MW: 76). It tells us, in other words, that the only way to save the elements that are essential to our conception of ourselves is to ground our self-explanation in phenomena which science can observe and verify. This view immediately raises a question about the status of spontaneity: any attempt to derive it from something that is non-problematically natural from the “disenchanted” point of view would result in some sort of “human, all too human” residue which would always resist the ultimate reduction.

McDowell’s idea is to render the space of reasons autonomous, but not separated from nature, i.e. not exhausted by the realm of law, on the one hand, and, at the same time, not something rampantly supernatural. What McDowell wants is naturalized platonism that would help us avoid riding the refurbished seesaw that used to take us from the extreme of coherentism to the extreme of the Given, and that now takes us from the extreme of bald naturalism emphasising brute external world, to the extreme of rampant platonism laying stress on the autonomous rationality of

mind. As Crispin Wright puts it rather succinctly, in MW McDowell aims at “‘humanized’ or ‘naturalized’ platonism [...] without reductive hankerings” (Wright 2002: 152). What McDowell needs in order to accomplish his task is to have conceptual capacities fully integrated into the natural world in a notion that is not reducible to any elements of nature intelligible apart from conceptual capacities and spontaneity; a notion that would accommodate the autonomy of the conceptual and the idea of rational constraint on our empirical thinking, i.e., incorporate reason into nature and salvage Kant’s autonomy thesis.

With all the preliminary work of reconciling receptivity and spontaneity done in the first three lectures of MW, in lecture four McDowell introduces the notion of “second nature”. In essence, the second nature argument has two objectives: to put the discussion about the relationship between receptivity and spontaneity into a wider focus, and to provide some additional support to his arguments against scepticism and “bad” idealism.

McDowell first derives the notion from Aristotle’s account of moral character, and then extrapolates it to his own theoretical account of initiation into custom and, more broadly, into human conceptual capacities in general, including responsiveness to rational demands beyond those of ethics (Bernstein 2002: 17). In brief, the idea of second nature is that we are not born with conceptualized perceptual capacities and that we have to learn to see and hear the world by mastering the use of words and participating in social discursive practices. However, having learned to see and hear the world by mastering the use of words, says McDowell, what we see and hear is precisely this: *the world* (MW: 27).

McDowell’s central thesis here is that our learning history, which constitutes our second nature, is not the history of building a mediating screen of appearances between us and the world, or some sort of conceptual scheme that provides us with access to the world by means of organizing sense data. The openness of the world for us as partaking in this nature is unmediated,



and so there's no ontological chasm between world and thought, because *second* nature, which is acquired in our upbringing, does not add anything to our *first* one, but simply – in the distinctly Hegelian sense – sublates it. As a Wittgensteinian, McDowell certainly believes that, just as a practice cannot be reduced to a set of explicitly formulated rules, but is a habituated *modus operandi* which matches a type of response to an appropriate type of circumstances, what language acquisition results in is not just a finite set of particular skills, but a new, second nature that “discovers” the world as it really is and predetermines possible outcomes of our actions and perceptions.

By sublating first nature, second nature provides us with the possibility of rational response and, therefore, with the very possibility of *outer experience*. As McDowell puts it,

We cannot construe [mere animals] as continually reshaping the world-view in rational response to the deliverances of experience; not if the idea of rational response requires subjects who are in charge of their thinking, standing ready to reassess what is a reason for what, and to change their responsive propensities accordingly. It follows that mere animals cannot enjoy “outer experience”, on the conception of “outer experience” I have recommended.

(MW: 114)

Referring to Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, McDowell writes that brutes cannot transcend beyond their immediate needs, that their existence is restricted by immediate biological imperatives which always predetermine particular successions of problems, and that, as he puts it, “the life structured in that way is led *not in the world*, but only *in an environment*” (MW: 115; *emphasis added*). There isn't much *out there* for a creature that lives, as it were, within itself, affected only by the immediate challenges, by “here and now” of the environment. The *outer* as a description of experience, in turn, refers to the reflective stance specific to human consciousness, which expresses our sapience that cannot be derived from mere first-natural sentience. This stance makes us capable of deliberating and choosing between different incentives and, therefore, of

*having reasons* to act one way rather than another. The sense of externality here is the sense of a reflective *distance* that allows us to live, not in an immediate environment, but in the world. But although, in light of the above, there is a strong connection between *being out there* in the world and *having reasons*<sup>45</sup>, the world is entirely open to us, because it contains nothing extraconceptual. At the same time, the world lays constraints on our empirical thinking. The constraints are due to the fact that what we reflect on is our second-natural experience, and this experience is through and through conceptual and propositionally contentful, i.e. it is always an experience *that* things are thus and so, independently of what a particular reflective creature might make of it. On this interpretation, the ideas of second nature and Bildung can help McDowell deal with bad idealism. By means of associating the world as it really is with what becomes available through habituation and initiation into human customs, we meet with the world *and* with ourselves as a proper second-natural part of it. Unlike other animals, we are *out there* in the world itself, and we can access the facts in making judgments. As, thanks to second nature, we find ourselves in the world that is open to us as it really is, the idea of second nature seems to be an extended recapitulation of the idea of perceptual *contents* of our experience as identical with the *facts* of the world.

For many researchers, the main worry about McDowell's account of second nature, briefly summarised above, is that it doesn't offer any developed theory of second nature. All it does is remind us that the idea of second nature is available to us in principle and that, if sufficiently developed, it can be helpful in dealing with a variety of philosophical anxieties (Forman 2008: 567; See also Price 1997; Wright 1996). Forman (2008) also shows that, in

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<sup>45</sup> Although MW contains no explicit reference to Heidegger's *Being and Time*, it is tempting to suppose that, in building this connection – which is obviously used to strengthen the Sellarsian metaphor of the *space of reasons* – McDowell draws on Heidegger's idea of Dasein (literally “being there”) and his interpretation of Greek ἀλήθεια as “disclosure,” or ἀ-λήθεια, something that is radically open, not hidden in any way.

explicating the idea of second nature, McDowell's use of Aristotle might not do justice to Aristotle's own account. Forman's objection, although a little short-sighted, is useful in that it does a great job in helping us better grasp the development of McDowell's argument in support of second nature.

Forman's worry about McDowell's interpretation of Aristotle is that he uses the formation of ethical character as a model for initiation into conceptual capacities in general. Aristotle makes an explicit point that our perceptions and irrational impulses form a part of human nature just as much as our reasoning does. The passionate/perceptive part is transformed by deliberation into choices, and so both the rational and the passionate/perceptive parts of the soul together take part in the formation of moral character through acquiring habits. And acquiring good habits in the course of normal human upbringing, says Aristotle, is the right way to ethical virtue. Forman's claim is that, due to an intricate dialectics between potentiality, or capacity to do something habitually, and activity, which Aristotle develops in *Nicomachean Ethics*, the way consecutive steps of habituation are described by Aristotle cannot serve as a model for a broader theory of how our basic conceptual abilities are acquired (Forman 2008: 575). According to Aristotle, habituation that results in acquiring a virtuous skill (playing the lyre, or building a house) *begins* by things we actually repeatedly do in order to build a house or play the lyre, whereas in the case of sensual perception, we first acquire the capacity to see or hear, and only then exhibit the activity. The unwelcome result, according to Forman, is that, "if we possess the conceptual ability before we have the habit, then the habit cannot itself be what distinguishes a conceptually informed perception from a merely natural response to the environment" (Forman 2008: 575). So it appears that, for Forman's Aristotle, an attempt to model perceptual habits on habits that constitute virtuous behavior lead to an impasse: we seem to need to have conceptual capacities before habituation can result in acquiring them. Our first and second natures, therefore, work quite differently and the second one is actually a "nature" by weak analogy only. Besides,

McDowell, who, in the first three lectures of MW treats perceptual judgment as a model for all judgments, upon the introduction of the idea of second nature changes his strategy and begins to treat Aristotelian moral judgments as a model for perceptual judgments. No explanation for this change in priorities is provided.

However, some sort of a justification for this change may be found in McDowell's earlier works; in particular, in his early article "Virtue and Reason" (McDowell 1979), where McDowell lays stress on Aristotle's *holistic* approach to virtues: "We do not fully understand a virtuous person's actions – we do not see the consistency in them – unless we can supplement the core explanations with a grasp of his conception of how to live" (McDowell 1979: 346). According to Aristotle, virtues are interconnected, and no single virtue can be enacted unless a person possesses all of them. A virtuous person has an overall conception of how to live, and this conception can be reduced neither to separate virtues, nor to a particular set of explicit rules of conduct. It seems obvious that this early text of McDowell's provides a link that is actually missing in MW; namely, the link between McDowell's Aristotle and Wittgenstein's thesis that we gradually acquire understanding of language as a whole rather than acquiring a complete and clear understanding of certain parts of it, or particular situations a language game may put us in.

For example, in "On Certainty" Wittgenstein says: "When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole)" (OC: §141). Thus, Aristotle's notions of habituation and human upbringing appear to be interwoven with Wittgenstein's idea of initiation into a custom. According to Aristotle, I cannot express how to live in a maxim, but I have habits and a capacity to get involved in certain practices. Likewise, according to Wittgenstein, following a rule is a public practice and, in following this practice, I simply act as I have been trained to. The middle course between a performance understood as a blind reaction to a situation, on the one hand, and

interpreting a rule by an explicitly stated formula, on the other hand, is initiation into a certain custom, or institution. Given this, the discrepancy between virtues and perceptual experience in McDowell's Aristotle, as pointed out in Forman (2008), seems to be dissolved by McDowell's Wittgenstein. Even if we agree with Forman in that McDowell's reading of Aristotle leads to inconsistencies in terms of the relationship between conceptual capacities and the process of habituation, Wittgenstein's idea of initiation into a custom resolves all the difficulties: not only having virtues, but also having perceptual experience – which is indissolubly related to having the capacity to use correctly appropriate linguistic expressions – is a matter of habituation. Just like learning to play the lyre presupposes the transition from a complex activity that involves thinking about particular notes and choosing which string to pluck, having the concept of green and knowing what it is for something to be green, in Wilfrid Sellars's phrase, "involve[s] a long history of acquiring *piecemeal* habits of response to various objects in various circumstances" (Sellars 1997: 44-45).

In lecture 5 of MW McDowell finally introduces the concept of *Bildung* – the concept which I take to express the result of fusing together the ideas of proper human upbringing and initiation into a custom, and which thus is the keystone in McDowell's overall reinterpretation of the idea of nature. Whereas Aristotle's idea of proper ethical upbringing describes to us an autonomous space of ethical reasons, and Wittgenstein's idea of initiation into a custom allows us to understand perception within the framework of language games, *Bildung* reveals the autonomous space of reasons in the most general sense.

Characteristically, McDowell keeps his readers in the dark as to what particular part of the rather long history of the notion he refers to<sup>46</sup>. Besides, McDowell's ideas of second nature and *Bildung* are seen by some researchers as undetailed and ambiguous. As Wright (2002) notes,

The root idea seems merely to be that we can free ourselves of the temptations of (bald) naturalistic reconstruction of the subject matters and epistemology of normative discourses and of a contrasting platonistic mythologizing of them if only we remind ourselves often enough, with the appropriate Aristotelian and German texts open, that these express forms of thought into which it comes naturally to us to be educable. But it is simply not explained how that is supposed to help.

(Wright 2002: 154)

True, McDowell successfully uses the two ideas to support the non-contradictory relationship between his version of idealism and his direct realism. Merely having the ideas of *Bildung* and second nature in view, however vaguely defined, helps us refute *bad* idealism by showing that the world is not a mere shadow of our thinking. The world presupposes human practices and licenses a strong link between the capacity to have reasons and the sense of externality, of being out there in the world. However, Wright's criticism is justified at least by the fact that, unlike Hegel in his *Phenomenology* (as well as Humboldt in his *Bildungstheorie* and Brandom in his *A Spirit of Trust*), McDowell doesn't tell us any story which would show *Bildung*, not as a fact that is simply *postulated*, in a Kantian fashion, but as a product of a certain institutional change. In the case of Hegel, we walk the concrete path from sense-certainty to the master-slave dialectics to the Christian community. Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust* shows us the

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<sup>46</sup> The term was first applied in a systematic way by Jacob Böhme and Leibniz, who meant by it the realization of potentialities inborn in an organism. Later, in the works of Johann Gottfried Herder, the term referred to some of the fundamental ideas about the dependence of thought on language – the ideas that are taken for granted by the majority of philosophers today. This, in turn, inspired the works by Wilhelm von Humboldt. In using the term, Humboldt went beyond the sense of individual formation to the formation of peoples and cultures, and the works in which he used it are nowadays widely viewed as the foundation of modern linguistics.

development from his earlier idea of atomistic “I-Thou” relationship to the holistic “I-We” relationship through a variety of institutional forms based on trust and forgiveness. In the case of Humboldt’s romanticist reinterpretation of Kant, the *fact* that Bildung primarily referred to the idea of general knowledge (*Allgemeinbildung*) was supported by a concrete program of holistic liberal education that presupposed certain institutional reforms. And in McDowell’s case, as Wright points out, Bildung and second nature represent a cluster of ideas that are only vaguely defined, and initiation into a custom sounds more like a magical transformation of sorts. McDowell only tells us that Bildung signifies the transformation of human beings, who are born mere animals, into “thinkers and intentional agents in the course of coming to maturity”, adding that Bildung also represents “a central element in the normal maturation of human beings”, of which practices of language acquisition are the most important part (MW: 125). In this context, Bildung, as a result of education, becomes a lifelong process of human *development* broadly understood, rather than mere *training* and gaining a particular external knowledge or a skill. In contrast to the latter, McDowell presumably understands Bildung as a set of educational techniques wherein an individual’s perceptual and cultural sensitivity, as well as personal and social skills are in the process of continual expansion and growth.

### **2.5. Objectivity**

Recall that, according to McDowell, mind and world partake in the sphere of the conceptual, and that, although the conceptual is unbounded or, as McDowell puts it, has no outer boundary (MW: 44), the world exerts rational constraint on what we think and say about it. These two facts together bring about an interesting twist to the very idea of constraint: reality, says McDowell, is

independent from our *acts* of thinking, but not from thinkable *contents*, which themselves are also external to the acts and of which we cannot say that there is something external to them: the *fact* that Descartes is sitting in a chair in front of his fireplace differs from Descartes' *act* of thinking in which the fact of his sitting in the chair is revealed. This conclusion later on leads McDowell to introducing the idea of contents "ultimate in the order of justification": in order to appreciate the way the constraint actually works, we have to go as far *back* in our reasoning as is necessary to reach those contents:

When we trace justifications *back*, the last thing we come to is still thinkable content; not something more ultimate than that, a bare pointing to a bit of the Given. The thinkable contents that are ultimate in the order of justification are contents of experiences, and in enjoying an experience one is open to manifest facts.

(MW: 29; *emphasis added*)

According to Maher (2012), what McDowell is trying to do in this passage is not to stop the regress of knowledge, which supposedly can be terminated only by something that is simply given, but rather to undermine the basic assumption that leads to the regress (and that the myth of the Given prevents us to disclose). This is the assumption that no intentional state can put a perceiver directly in contact with reality (Maher 2012: 100). But even if this is correct, does it really help McDowell to dispel the myth of the given?

According to McDowell, in tracing our justifications back, what we have at every step in the order of those justifications is a set of contents as some particular *thus-and-so-nesses*. Those are nothing like Brandomean conceptual contents that are nodes in inferential networks defined entirely in terms of material incompatibilities and consequences of judgments in which they are used. They are something we are *open* to – in the way one cannot be open to Brandomean inferential networks. The reason is that what particular instances of using an expression reveal



within such networks is based on the interplay between the explicit and the implicit. We can go back and forth changing the configuration of our commitments and entitlements, but we cannot play it all back to the contents that, as McDowell has it, can “sit closest to the impacts of the world on our sensibility” (MW: 11). On Brandom’s account, there is absolutely nothing that can sit to the impacts of the world in this way<sup>47</sup>. The McDowellian conceptual content opens us to something that is stated, something that is factual, qualitative, and has certain *haecceity*. At the same time, it is also something that comes in bundles and is always organized in networks of reasons, something we perpetually reflect upon and change our minds about (MW: 40) – although it is important that what is changed in this reflection is changed not by an interplay between a variety of perspectives grounded in interrelated individual practical attitudes, as it is in Brandom’s case, but by something far less dynamic and situational, something more fundamental, namely, by what McDowell calls *tradition*.

Each of these two ways to characterize content – the one that stresses matters of fact, and the other that emphasises historical change – has a corresponding idea of language. On the one hand, as has been discussed in section 2.3, McDowell insists that there is a strong structural analogy between language and experience. Perceptions, just like judgments, are always already shaped by meaning (MW: 95), which implies that there is a structure shared by experiences and

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<sup>47</sup> Brandom is quite explicit about his disagreement with McDowell on this score. In spite of the analogy between experience and language, he says, there is a rather clear difference between the two:

“No one, I suppose, denies that non-inferentially elicited perceptual judgments are the first tribunal rendering verdicts on our empirical thought – verdicts, to be sure, that can be appealed to a higher court, perhaps ultimately the court of overall explanatory power of our total belief system. But McDowell’s view is more specific and more contentious. He thinks we need a notion of *conscious experience* that is prejudgmental, but nonetheless through and through *conceptually* contentful, and so capable not merely of *prompting* perceptual judgments, but actually of *pronouncing* on them” (Brandom 1995: 242).

judgments, and that, therefore, every perceptual experience already has a propositional form. Due to this, perceptions may trick us in just the same way judgments may trick us. And when we have veridical experiences and make corresponding correct judgments, we have knowledge about what is the case. To rephrase slightly one of McDowell's examples already mentioned, I may *think that* spring has begun, and *report that* spring has begun, and it also may *be that* spring has begun.

On the other hand, in the very last paragraph of MW McDowell offers a *historical reconceptualization* of this outcome of his theory when he describes the principal function of language as “a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what” (MW: 126). He also adds later that during each generation that inherits the tradition the tradition, as a sum total of conceptual material, undergoes reflective modification and that “a standing obligation to engage in critical reflection is itself part of the inheritance” (ibid.). On this interpretation, given the aforementioned link between the ideas of second nature and the conceptual realm, it seems that *that things are thus and so*, at least to some extent, is due to the way it is related to other contents/facts and stored by our tradition-preserving language. If this were not so, we would have to conclude that our human, second-natural way of having the world *as it really is* in view would be independent from what we *do* in maintaining and modifying our tradition. Meanwhile, on this account, we cannot get to be open to the world without being initiated into a tradition, as well as without maintaining and modifying it. Keeping in mind that being initiated into a tradition, as well as maintaining and modifying it amounts to participating in a set of practices, the claim that we are capable of having the world in view independently of what we do as second-natural, tradition-driven creatures doesn't seem to fit into the picture.

Now the question is whether these two ways to link language and experience – essentialist and historical – can coexist within the framework of one theory. It might seem that they can. McDowell postulates a strong connection between the sphere of the conceptual and second nature: the former, as expressed in conceptual contents, becomes available through human upbringing as prerequisite for partaking in the latter. The sum total of contents (which are always already conceptualized, and which represent the second nature), as distinct from acts of thinking, are open to our gaze and, by being revised by tradition, allow us to establish rational constraint on thinking from a reality external to it (MW: 29). But it might be worth to have a closer look.

From the factual perspective, the ideas of openness to the world and conceptual contents that are ultimate in the order of justification, together with the aforementioned analogy between experiences and judgments, support McDowell's attempt to integrate the *normative* and the *factual*. Naturally, there are *facts*, as well as *norms* for making claims about those facts, which are independent of what any finite number of people might think about them. To use one of the examples McDowell brings forth in his debate with Rorty over the idea of objectivity, there undoubtedly are norms for using the expression "cold fusion has not occurred" (McDowell 2000: 118). This characteristically scientific example rightfully implies that there are facts available in veridical experience that represent something more than a mere consensus between members of a given community. Whatever I, you, or even *all of us* might think, there is a hard *fact* cold fusion has *not* yet occurred. There is a difference, says McDowell, between having the world in view and "merely aspiring to vocalise in step with one another" (McDowell 2000: 119). Referring to Putnam's idea that any use of expressions like "truth" and "reference" should be internal to our worldview, he then clarifies his position:

Putnam's insight is that we must not succumb to the illusion that we need to climb outside our own minds, the illusion that though we aim our thought and speech at the world from a standpoint constituted by our present practices and competences, we must be able to conceive the conformity of our thought and speech to the world from outside any such standpoint. But to unmask that as an illusion is not to say, with Rorty, that the norms that govern claim-making can only be norms of consensus, norms that would be fully met by earning the endorsement of our peers for our claims. We must indeed avoid the illusion of transcendence that Putnam's insight rejects, but we do not put our capacity to do so at risk if we insist that in claim-making we make ourselves answerable not just to the verdicts of our fellows but to the facts themselves. That is, if you like, to say that norms of inquiry transcend consensus.

(ibid.)

This brings us to the historical perspective on the link between language and experience. What McDowell claims here is that the idea of constraint makes sense only from the human standpoint, and that Rorty's appeal to consensus doesn't do the job in terms of supporting this claim against the illusion of transcendence. McDowell's objection represents a misunderstanding of Rorty's position, and it is this misunderstanding that we need to have a closer look at in order to see a mismatch between the two perspectives as they are described in MW.

According to Rorty, it is precisely for the reason that we *cannot* climb outside our minds, that it is not immediately clear how a person, as Rorty puts it in response to McDowell, "can tell a world constituted by linguistic *practices* from a world constituted by *facts* – facts which somehow (despite the sentence-like appearance) are not themselves 'constituted' by any such practices" (Rorty 2000: 126; *emphasis added*). McDowell is right that the fact that cold fusion has not yet occurred is distinct from any and all individual acts of thinking about it. But although independent from what any and all of us think about it at any particular moment, this fact is certainly not independent from the language we use and the practices we are involved in. To say that the fact that cold fusion has not yet occurred does not in any way depend on practices related to electrochemistry and nanoscale nuclear reactions in general, and experiments involving electrolysis of heavy water in particular, is to say that it does not depend on the tradition

constituted by those practices – which is not what McDowell wants to claim. Rorty’s point criticized by McDowell in the passage above is certainly not that sheer consensus-based linguistic exchange is all that matters. What he means is that it makes little sense to look for a clear-cut divide between what we take to be the independent fact that cold fusion has not occurred, on the one hand, and how what happens when we learn about the fact, and what we are prepared to *do* when we use the expression “cold fusion” is integrated into other practices and conceptual frameworks. One might object that cold fusion is simply not there, whatever language one might use in order to tell someone else about it. It is independent as a *fact*, as something that happens as a result of our practices. But Rorty’s point is that, in any case, the human standpoint requires at least *some* language and *some* set of practices, as, without *any* of those, the fact that XYZ is no fact at all. When we subtract everything that is related to what the fact is *for us*, it becomes simply *something*, devoid of any determinations, of which, after Kant, we can only tell that, in some indeterminate sense, it *is*<sup>48</sup>. Conversely, as long as we are capable of using our language to describe *what* has not occurred, as well as of taking note of related matters and doing what our knowledge about the fact might require, as a *fact*, it remains attached to the system of concepts currently in use within our community. It is simply wrong – especially in view of McDowell’s analogy between experiences and language (or between facts and judgments) – to see the relation

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<sup>48</sup> I believe, Rorty’s argument in this case might go as follows. “Cold fusion” refers to a lot of things, including our general knowledge of nuclear reaction, practical skills that we needed in order to conduct experiments involving electrolysis of heavy water, our expectations of its possible uses and of how cold fusion, were it to occur, might change our very idea of matter and the laws of thermodynamics. If we take our time peeling off whatever “cold fusion” might mean for us in terms of all those things, and if we are thorough and honest in this undertaking, we will see before very long that, unless we want to hold on to the idea of *something* out there that cannot be described in terms of our expectations, our practices, and our know-hows, there is *nothing* left. Rorty’s point here (on which he is often misunderstood) is *neither* that the world consists of our practices, *nor* that “mere” consensus of opinions can replace the objectivity of facts.

between “being constituted by practices” and “being constituted by facts” as a matter of choice between two different things.

From this point of view, what is properly external to *individual* acts of empirical thinking is not a collection of objective facts or contents, but the *social* understood as the interrelation between communal practices and environment. There is no social practice or language game that is “mere words” in this sense. As every object and fact of the world is linked to potential human action and loaded with, and in many ways constituted by, human values, we almost never *merely* say something. When I, for instance, act irresponsibly, make a mistake, lie, or report a result of a research which has already proven to be wrong, I neither perform brute acts, nor make up a convention that has nothing to do with my immediate environment and my real practical goals. I thereby take responsibility, but not before facts or contents, but before the way my community, which will correct me if I am wrong, defines those facts and contents as such. In light of this, it seems to be simply wrong to say, as McDowell does in his debate with Rorty, that there are sheer conventions different from customs and practices, where rational constraint based on the distinction between acts of thinking and conceptual contents is at work (McDowell 2000: 109-122). From this perspective, As Barry Allen points out, Rorty is much closer to Wittgenstein’s later thought than McDowell, because, just like Wittgenstein, he claims that any “epistemic constraint” or “normative friction” is a matter of answerability to a way of life rather than to facts or contents (Allen 2005: 21-22).

It might still be objected that, given that we speak different languages and come from different cultures, there should be some sort of guarantee that our linguistic practices store the same contents, or that in our critical reassessments of the stored contents we are open to the same regions of the conceptual. True, one of McDowell’s central theses is that we live in the same

world, and – since he believes in the possibility of an agreement regardless of possible differences in perception and cultural background<sup>49</sup> – what the repository of tradition contains is available in *any* language. But since, as has already been pointed out, the human standpoint requires that there is at least *some* language (and let us suppose that the aforementioned analogy between language and experience holds), to use Richard Gaskin’s metaphor, the world, in this case, should be able to speak its own language (Gaskin 2006). Again, McDowell’s claim seems to be that we are ultimately capable of achieving an agreement between each other based on shared *contents*. It’s not enough to share either a *form* of communication, or normative presuppositions, social practices, or a charitable disposition toward others. And if every natural language is attuned to the standpoint that reveals the way the world really is, or the ultimate inferential conceptual structure whose every element can be retrieved from the repository by going sufficiently far back in an appropriate line of reasoning, then there should, in principle, be one universal language, in which the sphere of the conceptual finds its ultimate expression.

To summarize, on the one hand, we have contents, which always come in conceptual bundles, but which are something more than simply nodes in inferential networks. They are grounded in experience and are not defined *exclusively* in terms of the roles they play in defining what is a reason for what. They allow us to travel back and forth along the order of justification and ground our agreement in the way our social practices, interlocked individual perspectives, charitable attitudes, and shared competences are unable to ground it. Whereas both in Hegel’s and in Brandom’s case any agreement between different consciousnesses/scorekeepers is clearly formed in a recognitive and communal context, McDowell’s concern, according to Brandom, is mind, whose “cooperation with its fellow minds is simply not in the picture” (Brandom 1995: 256).

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<sup>49</sup> Although what the basis of this agreement is remains unclear, as none of the three theoretical backgrounds discussed in section 2.3 seems to fit McDowell’s purposes.

On the other hand, we have what McDowell calls “tradition”. On this account, our openness to the world is an outcome of the coherence of different *stories* of personal upbringing and initiation into customs, as well as of the *history*, throughout which tradition as a whole is developed and critically reassessed. But, whereas Hegel’s self-consciousness and Brandom’s trust are each formed by a distinct institutional story, McDowell (just like Brandom before he introduced his new approach in ST) doesn’t provide any details on how tradition actually comes about. Besides, from this historical perspective, McDowell’s understanding of the role of the social is also rather restrictive. In lecture five of MW McDowell makes a rather clear distinction between the objective and the social. He acknowledges that the social as a category is important, and that the very idea of *Bildung* would make little sense if that were not so. But he stipulates right away that “the point is *not* that the social constitutes the framework for a construction of the very idea of meaning” (MW: 95). It appears, then, that, while second nature opens us to the world, communal practices, by virtue of which tradition preserves our second-natural view, are not constitutive of how we mean what we mean<sup>50</sup>.

As a result, what we have is two new extremes. On the one hand, it is what might be characterized as experience-based foundationalism without the Given (Williams 1999: 197), where conceptual contents play the role of unexplained explainers. On the other hand, it is a sort of coherentism, where some constraining friction with the world is secured by the self-corrective

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<sup>50</sup> Characteristically, in his debate with Dreyfus, McDowell claims that there is a level at which our skillful, but unreflective bodily practices that are performed “in flow” and easily interrupted by reflection (the ones we are involved in when playing chess, driving a car, etc.), are not part of our rational nature. In making this claim, McDowell doesn’t take into account the social background of these bodily skills, and misses the intimate connection between learning, coping with environment, unreflective implicit social norms, and conceptuality, which is emphasised greatly in the works of some of the classical American pragmatists (see, e.g., Levine 2015).



discourse of tradition, within which conceptual resources are stored and reassessed. In light of this, it seems like, instead of dismounting from the seesaw, we are still riding it, experiencing oscillations of somewhat reduced amplitude.

To conclude, it might indeed seem that, whatever counterarguments we might offer, intuitively we are still going to need the world of *hard facts* as something distinct from *mere words* – at least every time things our current social practices force us to affirm are proven wrong (imagine, for instance, that, while I was writing this, cold fusion actually *did* occur). Meanwhile, as I will show in the next chapter, there is an option available that, on the one hand, allows us to salvage the idea of experience-based objectivity and, on the other hand, enables us to take a proper account of the social character of knowledge without falling prey to Rorty's cultural relativism. In choosing this option, we will try and relate the notion of objectivity, not to the idea of the *world* that lays constraints on what we may learn from experience, but to a somewhat extended notion of a *community*. This notion would give way for an account of language not only as a repository of past experience and as a critical reassessment of *the past*, but also as a creative adaptational device capable of generating new meanings in *the future*. It will be shown that by appealing, not to perceptual *experience*, but to increasingly more and more elaborate and self-critical, even if ever fallible, human *practices*, we can manage to keep the idea of objectivity intact and preserve every bit of the epistemological friction between thought and world that McDowell might deem necessary.

### 3. THE SOCIAL AND THE REAL:

#### THE IDEAS OF REALITY AND OBJECTIVITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEIRCE'S SEMIOTICS AND HIS PRAGMATISM

##### *3.1. Introduction*

According to Kant, what experience delivers is always a product not only of the world, but also of certain features of human constitution. The subject's sensibility is affected by the world. As a result, by using fundamental in-built cognitive principles, or categories, the subject organizes experience and produces knowledge as an outcome of the category-constrained observation. Kant's account of the nature of moral normativity is also based only on the features of the subject's own rational agency. Reasons for being morally sound are rooted in the subject's nature as a rational agent; they can neither be purely instrumental, nor originate from the subject's egotistical interests, sympathies, or desires.

Just like Brandom, Peirce, although he praised Kant on numerous occasions for the decisive emphasis he laid on the idea of architectonics (Nordmann 2006; Parker 1998: 2-59), does not follow Kant step by step, but aims to prove that each of the two theses, which represent the theoretical and the practical sides of Kant's architectonics, can be consistently interpreted in terms of another without the resort to aesthetic mediation<sup>51</sup>. In Peirce's case, this interpretation

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<sup>51</sup> In the period of time between the reformulation of his maxim of pragmatism in 1903 and the proof of pragmatism in MS 318 (1907), Peirce had actually proposed a view on aesthetics and made an attempt to build it in the framework of his own architectonics. In his attempt to incorporate aesthetics, Peirce aimed to connect his normative theory with his evolutionary metaphysics and his doctrine of categories (Potter 1967, 3-71). However, this late view of Peirce's on aesthetics is sketchy, undeveloped, and has no bearing on arguments in MS 318.

takes the form of an explanation of the relationship between his pragmatism and his semiotics or, more precisely, between his pragmatic maxim and his definition of a sign – an explanation Peirce himself saw as one of the ways to *prove* his version of pragmatism. The hints about how the relationship between pragmatism and semiotics works are scattered in various definitions Peirce gives of the pragmatic maxim through the 1900s, and in MS 318, which represents one of Peirce’s famous proofs of pragmatism, in particular<sup>52</sup>. Hookway (2005) lays special stress on the following three of Peirce’s formulations of the maxim:

1. The initial formulation in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878): “Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object” (W3: 266).

2. The formulation from “Issues of Pragmaticism” (1905): “The entire intellectual purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct which, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of the symbol” (1905, EP2: 346).

3. The formulation from the first of Peirce’s Harvard Lectures (1903): “Pragmatism is the principle that every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in the indicative mood is a confused form of thought whose only meaning, if it has any, lies in its tendency to enforce a

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<sup>52</sup> MS 318 (EP2: 398-433). For my present purposes I will also neglect the attempt to prove the pragmatist doctrine presented by Peirce in his 1903 Harvard Lectures (see Turrisi 1992; McCarthy 1990). Besides, by claiming that in his attempt to integrate his pragmatism with his semiotics, Peirce was inspired by Kant’s analysis of the relationship between logic and ethics, I, of course, do not mean to imply that one should treat semiotics as a logical side of Peirce’s theory, and pragmatism as an ethical side of it. I only mean to imply that there is a strong similarity between the two *relationships*. In what follows, this similarity will help us see the structural analogy between two arguments of Peirce’s in favor of his idea of a future community, on the one hand, and Brandom and McDowell’s ways to defend their notions of objectivity, on the other hand.

corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional sentence having its apodosis in the imperative mood” (CP 5: 18; EP2: 354).

The first formulation gives a *pragmatist* explanation of the meaning of a concept in terms of possible consequences of our actions involving an object to which the concept applies. According to this formulation, the meaning of a concept depends on our capacity to predict practical outcomes of our interaction with the object – which is to say that what concepts *mean* is relative to what we *do* with their objects. Meanings do not lie in what either rationalists or empiricists called “ideas”, but they are grounded solely in outcomes of a purposeful human behavior. Our interactions with the object of a concept result in certain *effects*; these latter have practical bearings on us, and our account of them is the principal ingredient of the meaning of the appropriate concept. For example, our knowledge of certain properties of a vinegar amounts to our knowledge of what to expect when we perform a variety of actions involving a portion of it. Were we, say, to dip a piece of litmus paper into it, the paper would turn red; were we to put foods into it, these foods would eventually get pickled; were we to decide to make more vinegar, we would have to initiate the fermentation of ethanol by acetic acid bacteria; etc.

The second formulation uses a *semiotic* vocabulary in explaining meaning. It tells us that the meaning of what Peirce calls a “symbol” consists in our conditional resolutions to act in case we believe that what the symbol conveys is true. Believing that “vinegar is an acidic liquid” is true amounts to acquiring a habit of action, i.e. being prepared, given the appropriate circumstances, to use a litmus paper, to pickle foods, to perform the fermentation of ethanol by acetic acid bacteria, etc. The third formulation reconciles the other two by saying that, if we endorsed the expression “vinegar is an acidic liquid”, we would acquire a habit of using a variety of conditionals the expression entails, each of which would be a maxim of action that entails

practical consequences if acted upon: “Were you to dip a piece of litmus paper into this liquid, the paper would turn red”; “Were you to put foods into it, these foods would eventually get pickled”; “Were you to decide to make more vinegar, you would have to initiate the fermentation of ethanol by acetic acid bacteria”; etc.<sup>53</sup>

In this chapter, I will deal with the relationship between pragmatism and semiotics implied in the three versions of the maxim quoted above. I will not follow the way Peirce explains this relationship in his proof of pragmatism in MS 318, but I will simply show that the idea of this relationship may be traced back to Peirce’s early writings and that it is grounded in Peirce’s early Hegelian reinterpretation of Kant’s constructivism. My claim is that once we unpack this relationship, we will see that the notion of future community of inquirers that will emerge will be able to provide all the necessary justification for the idea of objectivity.

### ***3.2. Peirce’s transcendental deduction: “On a New List of Categories” and beyond***

“On a New List of Categories”<sup>54</sup> is an early paper presented by Peirce to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1867. In this paper, Peirce brings himself into a dialogue with Kant and responds to issues scrutinized in Kant’s 1<sup>st</sup> *Critique*. In spite of its small size, the paper represents

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<sup>53</sup> To rephrase those conditionals more in the spirit of the third formulation, which requires apodoses to be in the imperative mood, “If a piece of litmus paper is to turn red, dip it into this liquid,” “If more vinegar is to be produced, initiate the fermentation of ethanol by acetic acid bacteria,” etc. All these formulations vary in wording, but not in essence. All of them lay stress on the fact that the meanings of descriptions consist of sets of conditional propositions appropriately indicating what to expect from interactions with objects to which these descriptions apply. All of them suggest that to mean something is to think over possible practical effects of what we do in order to adapt to our environment and to pursue our goals in a variety of relevant hypothetical situations.

<sup>54</sup> Henceforth NL.

a highly significant achievement for Peirce, who confessed that the text was his “one contribution to philosophy” (CP 8.213), although “perhaps the least unsatisfactory, from a logical point of view, that I ever succeeded in producing; and for a long time most of the modifications I attempted of it only led me further wrong” (CP 2.340). As Murray Murphey claims, “certainly of all Peirce's published papers there is none which is so cryptic in its statement of essentials, so ambiguous in its definition of terms, so obscure in its formulation of the central doctrine, or so important in its content.” (Murphey 1961: 66). Short (2007) suggests that Peirce’s main goal in the paper was to demonstrate the necessity of his categories a priori – the project that was later abandoned by Peirce and that “has, indeed, been a stumbling block to those who have tried to understand his later thought in its terms.” (Short 2007: 32). But whatever the approaches to and opinions about NL are, this paper is the first published statement of Peirce’s ideas that allowed him to amplify De Morgan’s logic of relations (Kremer-Marietti 1994), and later helped him develop his ontological doctrine of categories, which he called firstness, secondness, and thirdness, and thus reinvent Kant’s transcendental philosophy in a pragmatic context (Gava 2014: 154). It is the categories that provide the underlying unity to Peirce's thought and embody the triadic structure, which, at least in Peirce’s early works, exemplifies a Hegelian dialectic – the fact that Esposito (1980) takes to be the key to Peirce’s entire system.

Peirce’s line of argument in NL is as follows. In dealing with sensuous experience, in Kantian terms, all that we have is a manifold of impressions which cannot be gathered into an immediately perceived totality. This manifold is given in a pure sensible intuition which is based on the receptivity of consciousness, but, according to Kant, “the *combination* of a manifold in general can never come to us through the senses, and cannot, therefore, be already contained in the pure form of sensible intuition” (KRV: B 130). The combination is only possible due to a set of universal concepts that help us make the sensual manifold into unity, so that the unity could be

expressed in a propositional form<sup>55</sup>. These universal concepts have to be *deduced* – in the sense that Peirce, just like Kant, wants to show that the universal concepts, or categories, are *necessary*, and that there can be neither experience, nor understanding without the application of the categories to the manifold of experience. However, for Kant, without the application of the categories, as *a priori* elements necessary for the unity of understanding, there could *also* be no self-identical subject of knowledge. As we will see, Peirce’s deduction has radically different implications in this respect.

Although the effort Peirce makes in NL is based on the acceptance of Kant’s method of deduction, he is obviously not convinced by the results of the deduction. Kant’s own table consists of four triads: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Modality. As Buzzelli (1972) notes, “Peirce discovered that each of these triads was intrinsically related to some other part of the table. In other words, the four classes of categories were not independent of one another, but rather depended on some more fundamental structure that Kant had not observed” (Buzzelli 1972: 64). Peirce, therefore, sets to deduce a new list of conceptions that would be both *elementary* and *universal* – in the sense of being inevitably involved in *any* experience, whether actual or possible. Just as, in Kant’s case, these universal concepts are used in order to reduce the manifold of sensuous impressions to a unity expressible in a propositional form, in Peirce’s case, they are used in order to bring substance (what is, in the most general sense, present) to the unity of being. It is important to note that Peirce’s list represents a *logical continuity* between the manifold of impressions and concepts, and that concepts, therefore, are not self-standing abstract

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<sup>55</sup> Or, as Peirce prefers to put it, make a sensual manifold into the unity of a proposition: “The unity to which the understanding reduces impressions is the unity of a proposition. This unity consists in the connection of the predicate with the subject; and, therefore, that which is implied in the copula, or the conception of *being*, is that which completes the work of conceptions of reducing the manifold to unity” (W2: 49).

entities independent from the sensuous manifold provided by experience. By the end of NL three elementary conceptions are deduced – quality, relation, and representation – in addition to being and substance, which are not derived but are simply postulated in NL as marking the beginning and end of Peirce’s deduction. The text makes it clear that the deduction works both ways (from being to substance and vice versa). The results of the deduction are ordered in the following manner (W 2: 54-55):

BEING (What is)

Quality

Relation

Representation

SUBSTANCE (it)

As has been noted, substance and being are not derived. They simply mark the beginning and the end of the analysis and in Peirce’s later works are dropped altogether. In §3 of NL Peirce introduces the concept of substance:

That universal conception which is nearest to sense is that of *the present, in general*. This is a conception, because it is universal. But as the act of *attention* has no connotation at all, but is the pure denotative power of the mind, that is to say, the power which directs the mind to an object, in contradistinction to the power of thinking any predicate of that object, – so the conception of *what is present in general*, which is nothing but the general recognition of what is contained in attention, has no connotation, and therefore no proper unity. This conception of the present in general, of IT in general, is rendered in philosophical language by the word "substance" in one of its meanings. Before any comparison or discrimination can be made between what is present, what is present must have been recognized as such, as *it*, and subsequently the metaphysical parts which are recognized by abstraction are attributed to this *it*, but the *it* cannot itself be made a predicate. This *it* is thus neither predicated of a subject, nor in a subject, and accordingly is identical with the conception of substance.

(W2: 49)



Substance marks the beginning of the deduction. It is the conception of that which is “nearest to sense” – or, as McDowell puts it, the contents which “sit closest to the impacts of the world on our sensibility” (MW: 11). It refers to “the present, in general,” to that which is merely recognized as some indeterminate contents of an act of attention, an “it”, or “this”. Peirce’s “substance” is, no doubt, reminiscent of Hegel’s “sense-certainty”, the chapter on which ends up with the unity of consciousness and its object being reduced to a set of universals referring to an inexpressible manifold of “this”. §4 of NL introduces the concept of being:

The unity to which the understanding reduces impressions is the unity of a proposition. This unity consist in the connection of the predicate with the subject; and, therefore, that which is implied in the copula, or the conception of *being*, is that which completes the work of conceptions of reducing the manifold to unity.

(ibid.)

With the concept of being obtained the deduction of the manifold to unity is complete and the transcendental apperception, which signifies the unity of consciousness, is achieved (KRV: A106). The first conception that mediates between the two is that of Quality:

A proposition always has, besides a term to express the substance, another to express the quality of that substance; and the function of the conception of being is to unite the quality to the substance. Quality, therefore, in its very widest sense, is the first conception in order in passing from being to substance.

(W2: 52)

In the proposition “this stove is black” “this stove” is a more immediate concept (that of substance), and “black” is a more mediate one (that of a quality). Since the proposition asserts the applicability of the latter to the former, “the more mediate conception is clearly regarded independently of this circumstance, for otherwise the two conceptions would not be distinguished, but one would be thought through the other, without this latter being an object of

thought, at all” (W2: 52). In other words, in bringing some one thing into correlation with some other thing, we can comprehend the correlation (say, a contrast or an agreement) as a correlation of two things in some *respect*. We need to draw upon a qualitative aspect (e.g. “blackness”) which should first be considered, not as applied to an object, but as it is *in itself*. As considered in this way, it can be nothing but an abstraction, a universal, or “ground”. Quality, therefore, is something only possible, or potential, i.e. it is something we think about only *in abstracto*: blackness *as such* is not something that can be actualized in an object, but a concrete manifestation of it.

Reference to a ground cannot do all the work necessary to bring the manifold of sense-impressions to unity, because we can predicate a quality only by means of contrasting it with (or recognizing its analogy to) something else, its correlate. Reference to a correlate (or *relation* of some one thing to some other) is in place on some concrete occasion of reference to a ground. By actually claiming that “this stove is black”, we recognize the fact that a quality is actually integrated into the constitution of an object. Thus formulated, it reminds us of Brandom’s inferentialist stance in semantics: whenever we comprehend some one thing, we comprehend its relation to some other thing. For example, whenever we think about a murderer, we think of him in relation to a murdered person, and whenever we think of an equivalent of “man” in French, we find “homme” appropriate – with all *further* implications involving likenesses and contrasts presupposed by those correlates. Whereas quality is something potential and abstract, relation is always about some actual matter of fact. Relation is a conception that accounts for externality, it refers to something other, i.e., something external to a quality taken as such.

In addition to quality and relation, on every occasion of reference to a correlate we also conceive a third element that mediates between the other two. Looking for the word “homme” in a French dictionary, for instance, will lead us to the word “man” “which, so placed, represents

*homme* as representing the same two-legged creature which *man* itself represents” (W2: 53). Peirce calls this mediating representation an interpretant, “because it fulfills the office of an interpreter, who says that a foreigner says the same thing which he himself says” (W2: 54). Just like an interpreter is a middle-man, who says something (for instance, “this stove is black”) and, in doing so, also *says that* he says the same thing as does a foreigner, Peirce’s interpretant is defined as “a mediating representation which represents the relate to be a representation of the same correlate which this mediating representation itself represents” (W2: 53).

The example with an interpreter of a foreigner is an interesting one. On the face of it, it is not intuitively clear why interpreting *one* sign into *another* should represent a paradigm case here. Can a dictionary entry, as representing a relationship between *two* signs, be considered as belonging to a general class, which includes the case of *one* sign in its relation to what it designates? Although the answer to this question is not in the text of “On a New List”, it can be found in “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities<sup>56</sup>,” a paper which Peirce published less than a year after NL, in 1868, and which contains Peirce’s outline of the anti-Cartesian project he actively pursued throughout 1860s. In SC Peirce rejects Kant’s reference to human “capacities” in explanation of the conditions of the possibility of knowledge, and proposes his own list of four *in*-capacities that he considered as four necessary constituents of human condition<sup>57</sup>. According to Peirce, we are incapable of 1) introspection, 2) intuition, 3) thinking without signs, and 4) making any use of the idea of the absolutely incognizable. All these incapacities are related to

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<sup>56</sup> Henceforth SC.

<sup>57</sup> Interestingly enough, 18 years after Peirce’s publication similar terminological critique was used by Nietzsche. In his *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche ridicules the Kantian explanation of the possibility of synthetic judgments *a priori* by the reference to “capacities”, or “faculties” (*Vermögen*), when he famously quotes the doctor from Moliere’s *The Imaginary Invalid*: “How does opium induce sleep?” “By means of *virtus dormitiva*, or its *capacity* to do so” (Nietzsche 2008: I, 11).

each other, but the central part of the project is the denial of intuitions, which Peirce takes to be a key assumption of Cartesian philosophy. Peirce defines intuition as “a cognition not determined by a previous cognition of the same object” (W2. 193). If we accept the second incapacity, according to which our cognition does not presuppose anything simply given in intuition, then, since, according to the third incapacity, all cognition is in signs, the object Peirce mentions in the quote above itself should be (or should be capable of functioning as) a sign. If we do not accept it, we should acknowledge that the object is not an object of cognition, which contradicts the fourth incapacity. Finally, since every sign, even if it is not actually interpreted, should be capable of being interpreted (should be interpret-able), it should have its interpretant, so that the interpretant could address it to some interpretation in the future. Now the question above can receive its answer: As cognition is always a relation between signs, a relation of *one* sign to what it designates is always, in the end, a relation between *many* signs.

The last step of Peirce’s deduction may be best presented by the comparison between the following well-known paragraphs from Kant’s “Transcendental Analytic” and NL:

(Kant): For the empirical consciousness which accompanies different representations is in itself diverse and without relation to the identity of the subject. That relation comes about, not simply through my accompanying each representation with consciousness, but only in so far as I *conjoin* one representation with another, and am conscious of the synthesis of them. Only in so far, therefore, as I can unite a manifold of given representations in *one consciousness*, is it possible for me to represent to myself the *identity of the consciousness in these representations*. In other words, the *analytic* unity of apperception is possible only under the presupposition of a certain *synthetic* unity. The thought that the representations given in intuition one and all *belong to me*, is therefore equivalent to the thought that I unite them in one self-consciousness, or can at least so unite them; and although this thought is not itself the consciousness of the *synthesis* of the representations, it presupposes the *possibility* of that synthesis. In other words, only in so far as I can grasp the manifold of the representations in one consciousness, do I call them one and all *mine*. For otherwise I should have as many-colored and diverse a self as I have representations of which I am conscious to myself.

(KRV: B133)

(*Peirce*): If we had but one impression, it would not require to be reduced to unity, and would therefore not need to be thought of as referred to an interpretant, and the conception of reference to an interpretant would not arise. But since there is a manifold of impressions, we have a feeling of complication or confusion, which leads us to differentiate this impression from that, and then, having been differentiated, they require to be brought to unity. Now they are not brought to unity until we conceive them together as being *ours*, that is, until we refer them to a conception as their interpretant. Thus, the reference to an interpretant arises upon the holding together of diverse impressions, and therefore it does not join a conception to the substance, as the other two references do, but unites directly the manifold of the substance itself. It is, therefore, the last conception in order in passing from being to substance.

(W2: 54)

As the first passage from Kant's "Analytic of Concepts" indicates, for Kant self-consciousness implies that the notion "I think" must accompany all other notions for them to be comprehensible. What I need, according to Kant, is a thought of some special kind which, although it does not amount to the consciousness of the synthesis itself, should be there for the synthesis to be possible: I need to be able to grasp the manifold of impressions as *mine*. The second passage describes Peirce's interpretant, which, unlike the Kantian self-consciousness, preserves "as many-colored and diverse a self" as there are representations. If we combine what Peirce says in the passage with his comparison of an interpretant with an interpreter, we will arrive at the following conclusion. An interpretant unites the manifold of impressions not in one consciousness identified by the Kantian "I think", but in a general idea of interpretation by correlating those impressions to each other in such a way as to give rise to something the correlation of which to something else is the only guarantee of its comprehensiveness. And it is in so correlating various parts of the manifold to each other that the impressions are grasped as *ours*. By allowing us to so grasp the impressions, the interpretant replaces the Kantian synthesis of apperception in a single self-consciousness with the idea of an intersubjective synthesis of meaning addressed to future interpretation. As Apel (1980) puts it,

Peirce re-describes the conditions of the possibility of knowledge by shifting attention from the domain of the Kantian pure consciousness to the domain of the consciousness that is linguistically and intersubjectively constituted (Apel 1980: Ch. 3). Like Brandom, Peirce tries to get rid of any kind of *subjectivist* approach to understanding and interpretation.

To sum up, there are two points that are important to keep in mind as to the idea of interpretant. First, NL describes the synthesis of impressions not as an “art concealed in the depths of the human soul” (KRV, B 180), but as a continuous act of correlation. In reinterpreting Kant, Peirce, just like Hegel, makes the possibility of knowledge depend on the synthesis taken as a process of continuous development. According to Peirce, the synthesis acquires cognitive value through a set of modes of reference – quality, relation, and representation – which constitute three consecutive steps to cover what might be called “a logical distance” between the manifold of impressions and their conceptual unity. The last mediating reference, which is embodied in an interpretant, Peirce claims, “does not join a conception to the substance, as the other two references do, but unites directly the manifold of the substance itself” in the recognition of this unity as *ours* (W2: 54).

Second, the fact that Peirce, contrary to Kant, insists that we should consider understanding not as the capacity to grasp the manifold of impressions in one consciousness, but as a result of the correlation to something else, entails that understanding is a function of the reference to the future. What is important is not that I grasp the impressions as *mine*, but that representations resulting from the synthesis of those impressions are, in principle, interpretable by *others*. As the process of interpretation, conceived in this manner, is necessarily an open-ended one, the “We,” the proper subject of the synthesis, cannot be limited to any finite

community existing at some particular moment of time. It can only be a *future* community, a community “without definite limits, and capable of definite increase in knowledge” (W2: 239). In Kant’s case, for any set of representations to mean something to me, the “I think” must be able to accompany all these representations (KRV B131-32) so that I could grasp them all as mine. In Peirce’s case, for any set of representations to mean something to me, an interpretant addressing future interpretations of those representations must be able to accompany them in order for them to be interpretable by others.

The way Peirce defines a future *community* in SC is closely related to the idea of *reality*:

And what do we mean by the real? It is a conception which we must first have had when we discovered that there was an unreal, an illusion; that is, when we first corrected ourselves. Now the distinction for which alone this fact logically called, was between an *ens* relative to private inward determinations, to the negations belonging to idiosyncrasy, and an *ens* such as would stand in the long run. The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a *community*, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge. And so those two series of cognition – the real and the unreal – consist of those which, at a time sufficiently future, the community will always continue to re-affirm; and of those which, under the same conditions, will ever after be denied. Now, a proposition whose falsity can never be discovered, and the error of which therefore is absolutely incognizable, contains, upon our principle, absolutely no error. Consequently, that which is thought in these cognitions is the real, as it really is. There is nothing, then, to prevent our knowing outward things as they really are, and it is most likely that we do thus know them in numberless cases, although we can never be absolutely certain of doing so in any special case.

(W2: 239)

There is a lot packed into this passage. As Peirce suggests here, reality initially gives itself through the discovery of the fact that some of our beliefs are erroneous or have objects that are illusory, unreal. But errors made by *individuals* are distinguished from, and corrected by, a *communal* inquiry which is destined to result, sooner or later, in the state of complete information, the latter being the final goal towards which every inquiry should be ultimately

directed<sup>58</sup>. In correcting errors, the inquiry results in two sets of beliefs: ones that it will reaffirm and ones that it will deny until sometime sufficiently far into the future. Another important implication of the passage is that the notion of an extended community guarantees that we *will* have knowledge about things as they really are in the long run, and that it *does not prevent* us from having such knowledge on numerous occasions at any given moment of time – whereas, for instance, according to Brandom, we have no guarantee that we will ever be capable of having a full grip on what is ultimately the case. Moreover, it is highly important for Brandom to acknowledge that what is ultimately the case is plainly and clearly out of our expressive reach, being only *implicit* in our discursive practices. Of course, having objective normative statuses implicit in discourse, just as having the future community in view, affects our current decisions. That much is true in both cases. But, in Brandom’s case, in the absence of the method that could tell us how our beliefs are to be fixed, all we can hope for is perspectival objectivity understood as some sort of *interpretative equilibrium* – an equilibrium which Brandom defines as the situation in which “external interpretation collapses into internal scorekeeping” (MIE: 644)<sup>59</sup>. Meanwhile, in Peirce’s case, although the reference to the future community cannot make us absolutely certain about actually having objective knowledge on any particular occasion, given that we follow the maxim (i.e., if we approach the meaning of every concept we use as a sum total of outcomes of our possible interactions with the objects to which the concept applies), it

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<sup>58</sup> On implications of this idea with regard to Peirce’s notion of final causation see Short 2007: 117-150.

<sup>59</sup> As discussed in section 1.3.



makes us justified in holding our beliefs and treat them as true in terms of their contents, not just their perspectival form<sup>60</sup>.

As Peirce indicates further in the text of NL, his list of the universal concepts, or categories, which constitute his account of the most basic structure of experience, leads directly to his first classification of signs, or, as he puts it in NL, “modes of representation”. Thus, Peirce’s reinterpreting Kant’s idea of the synthesis of impressions is, at the same time, an introduction to a rudimentary idea of a sign. The classification in NL is the least developed one and comprises what Peirce calls *likenesses*, *indices*, and *symbols* – the three elements each of which receives in NL only a brief sentence-long definition, likenesses being “those whose relation to their objects is a mere community in some quality”, indices – “those whose relation to their objects consists in a correspondence in fact” and symbols, or general signs – “those the ground of whose relation to their objects is an imputed character” (W2: 56).

It is to be remembered that NL is an early paper that treats the categories as a set of basic concepts that help us make the sensual manifold into the unity of a *proposition*. In other words, Peirce first approaches his new list from a logical, or nominalist, not an ontological, or realist point of view. However, an overwhelming consensus among Peirce scholars is that there is an

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<sup>60</sup> It is also noteworthy that Peirce defines reality, on the one hand, as that which is thought in cognitions, and, on the other hand, as that which is independent from what you or I might think about it. This definition, on the face of it, seems to be similar to that of McDowell. According to McDowell, on the one hand, reality is located within the boundary of the conceptual (i.e. it is not independent from thinkable *contents* – simply because there is nothing at all utterly external to them), and, on the other hand, it is independent from our *acts* of thinking (MW: 28). However, as I will show in the next section, Peirce’s pragmatism, which approaches the ideas of reality and objective knowledge in terms of habitual action, combines McDowell’s realism about conceptual content and Brandom’s phenomenalism about interpretive practices, and thus eschews the above-discussed problems both of these approaches face with regard to the idea of objectivity.

unbroken continuity in the development of Peirce's thought<sup>61</sup>. Besides, for instance, Lane (2004) provides an elaborate account showing that Peirce's thought reveals some strong realist intuitions as early as 1868, the year SC was published in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. In any case, the development of Peirce's theory of signs over time is a vast research area that is far beyond the scope of the present account. All that matters for the present case is that Peirce's thought is continuous and that its connection with Kant at any given point of its development, by Peirce's own admission, should not be questioned. Peirce did divert gradually from the strictly Kantian way, but, in his late recollections, he noted that, in the years following NL, his "Kantism got whittled down to small dimensions. It was little more than a wire, – an *iron* wire, however." (MS 317).

With all this in mind, we can use some of the elements of Peirce's *late* semiotics in order to describe how exactly the results of Peirce's *early* interpretation of Kant's transcendental deduction of categories lead to the basic ideas of his theory of signs and, in particular, how Peirce's early notion of interpretant as the unity of impressions in recognition of those impressions as being "ours" is related to Peirce's seeking to ground the objectivity of knowledge in the social nature of inquiry and thus emphasising the role played by the future community of inquirers. That said, Peirce's early trichotomy of categories (quality, relation, and representation) may be restated in more general terms as comprising *abstractions*, *experiences*, and *signs*, or, in different terms, firstness, secondness, and thirdness.

1) An *abstraction*, or a universal is a quality that is a one predicable of many. It equals itself, refers to nothing but itself, and is never present in experience in its entirety (to say "this

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<sup>61</sup> But see Goudge 1950.

stove is black” is not to say that blackness *itself* is in the stove). A universal, or a quality is not an actual object; it is an absolute “here and now”. Like in the case of Hegel’s sense-certainty, we are incapable of actually saying *what* in this sense-certainty we really mean due to the immediacy by which it is characterised. In his later writings Peirce calls this immediacy “firstness”. According to his own description,

[...] there are certain qualities of feeling, such as the color of magenta, the odor of attar, the sound of a railway whistle, the taste of quinine, the quality of the emotion upon contemplating a fine mathematical demonstration, the quality of feeling of love, etc. I do not mean the sense of actually experiencing these feelings, whether primarily or in any memory or imagination. That is something that involves these qualities as an element of it. But I mean the qualities themselves which, in themselves, are mere may-bes, not necessarily realized.

(CP 1.304)

2) A *thing* or a matter of fact is something the existence of which follows from *experience*. It never equals itself, because, unlike a quality, it cannot be simply *given*. The existence of a thing or a matter of fact is always known only through one’s acquaintance with some *other* thing or fact with which the former is causally connected. In other words, the existence of a thing or a matter of fact can become an object of knowledge only in view of its relation to some other thing or fact. Thus, for instance, a weathervane is causally connected with the direction of the wind, or the mercury stem in a thermometer is causally connected with the temperature). Peirce calls this kind of mutual relatedness “secondness”. According to Peirce,

[There is a category] which the rough and tumble of life renders most familiarly prominent. We are continually bumping up against hard fact. [...] You get this kind of consciousness in some approach to purity when you put your shoulder against a door and try to force it open. You have a sense of resistance and at the same time a sense of effort. [...] It is a double consciousness. We become aware of our self in becoming aware of the not-self.

CP 1.324

Whenever we have a perception of something, there is secondness at play. In a muscular effort, in an act of attention, in hearing the sound of a train whistle, in having one memory interrupted

another, etc. – in all those cases we experience a kind of forcefulness characteristic of the double consciousness Peirce called secondness. Secondness is not something extraneous to firstness: as a possibility is an element of actuality, and actuality is a possibility actualized, secondness incorporates firstness.

3) A *sign* is something that connects *abstractions* and *experience* and shares the characteristics of both. Like a quality, it is a one predicable of many, and, like a thing, it never equals itself because it always stands for something that it itself isn't. A sign's identity, in other words, is in its reference to something else: whenever there is a sign, there is a reference to some other quality, thing, or fact. However, unlike something that is "merely" a thing as defined in 2), it refers to its object not through causal connection (an outcome that McDowell regarded as a highly unwelcome one), but through a connection by means of *habits*. Thus, a phrase, an expression of sentiment, or a theatre ticket are all examples of a sign. Each of these is a concrete occurrence, (a fact, or an object) which is characterised by some quality (a *loud* phrase, a *joyful* expression, a *paper* ticket), refers to something it itself is not (a norm prescribing how to understand the phrase, react to the expression, use the ticket) by means of expected habitual behavior, and in virtue of this provides some ground for its future interpretation by someone: I use "How are you doing?" to greet a friend, a ticket ensures my access to a theatre performance, and I express joy when I win a lottery. In these examples, a sign brings together (or, in Kant's terms, performs a synthesis of) the concept of a thing, the concept of a quality that grounds the relation of this thing to something else, and a concept of behavioral outcomes that the use of this sign implies for an interpreter. This relational structure mediating between things, thoughts about those things, and habits of action entailed by those thoughts Peirce calls "thirdness".

In his later writings Peirce often stressed the dependence of logic on phenomenology<sup>62</sup>, which “ascertains and studies the kinds of elements universally present in the phenomenon”, where the phenomenon is defined as “whatever is *present* at any time *to the mind* in any way” (CP 2.186; *emphasis added*). Consequently, in Peirce’s late semiotics, firstness, secondness, and thirdness do not just describe what is required to achieve the unity of a proposition, but become the three indispensable general characteristics, or elements that can be found in experience of all kinds by observation. However, besides *phenomenological* interpretation, Peirce also suggests an *ontological* one, which, in turn, is closely related to the *modal* understanding of the three categories as possibility, actuality, and necessity<sup>63</sup>. If, phenomenologically speaking, the categories are what is observed by the mind, from the ontological standpoint, they are also *modes of being*. Here is Peirce’s descriptions of the first two modes of being:

Firstness is the mode of being which consists in its subject’s being positively such as it is regardless of anything else. That can only be a possibility. For as long as things do not act upon one another, there is no sense or meaning in saying that they have any being, unless it be that they are such in themselves that they may perhaps come into relation with others. The mode of being a *redness*, before anything in the universe was yet red, was nevertheless a positive qualitative possibility.

(CP 1.25)

If I ask you what the actuality of an event consists in, you will tell me that it consists in its happening *then* and *there*. The specifications *then* and *there* involve all its relations to other existents. The actuality of the event seems to lie in its relations to the universe of existents. A court may issue *injunctions* and *judgments* against me and I not care a snap of my finger for them. I may think them idle vapor. But when I feel the sheriff’s hand on my shoulder, I shall begin to have a sense of actuality. Actuality is something *brute*. There is no reason in it. [...] On the whole, I think we have here a mode of being of one thing which consists in how a second object is.

(CP 1.24)

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<sup>62</sup> See, e.g. CP 1.191, 2.120, 5.39, 8.297.

<sup>63</sup> See Short 2007: 60-90.

But the most important is the ontological interpretation of the third category. To begin with, Peirce makes a rather clear distinction between *actuality* as a characteristic of secondness, which pertains to the universe of facts and things that exist here and now, and *reality* as a characteristic of thirdness, which pertains to would-bes always expressed in a set of conditional expectations. Reality is also something that consists in laws and regularities, where the laws being real means appropriate counterfactuals being true. This *realist* understanding of the nature of laws Peirce contradistinguishes with the *nominalist* interpretation of laws as mere words:

If the prediction has a tendency to be fulfilled, it must be that future events have a tendency to conform to a general rule. “Oh,” but say the nominalists, “this general rule is nothing but a mere word or couple of words!” I reply, “Nobody ever dreamed of denying that what is general is of the nature of a general sign; but the question is whether future events will conform to it or not. If they will, your adjective ‘mere’ seems to be ill-placed.” A rule to which future events have a tendency to conform is *ipso facto* an important thing, an important element in the happening of those events. This mode of being which *consists* [...] in the fact that future facts of Secondness will take on a determinate general character, I call Thirdness.

(CP 1.26)

Whereas actual objects, facts, or events, as concrete realizations of would-bes, belong to the second category and their relation to each other is characterized by the brute causal force, would-bes and would-dos are “thirdnesses” and are *real* as far as they lay constraint on our thought and conduct<sup>64</sup>. Moreover, would-bes represent law-like regularities and therefore, according to Peirce, cannot be reduced to any finite collection of facts or events: “No collection of facts can constitute a law; for the law goes beyond any accomplished facts and determines how facts that *may be*, but *all* of which never can have happened, shall be characterized” (CP 1.420)<sup>65</sup>. Reality, which characterizes general objects, cannot be exhausted by actuality – any more than

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<sup>64</sup> See also Hausman 1993: 167-168.

<sup>65</sup> Elsewhere, Peirce also makes the following statement: “No agglomeration of actual happenings can ever completely fill the meaning of a ‘would-be’” (CP 5.467).

the Greek language, when we talk or think *about* it, can be reduced to such Greek words as we happen to use at the time we do so (CP 5.504). A law is, of course, always present in the way actual events interact in appropriate circumstances, but it cannot be exhausted by all events that did, or ever will, exemplify it. If reality could be exhausted by actuality, no normativity would be even remotely possible: we would be able to talk only about what there *is*, and would not be able to tell anything at all about what there *ought* to be.

There is nothing either mysterious or excessively metaphysical about this kind of realism. First, taking the possible future thought into consideration (i.e. conceptualizing possible outcomes of actions one is prepared to perform) obviously affects what one does here and now. It is real in this respect. It does so not simply causally (in the way *actual* objects affect each other), but in terms of conforming to or correcting one's habits – not just actions, but modes of conduct. Thus, the possible future in affecting and correcting our habits, introduces an element of *self-control* both to our thought and to our conduct. For instance, if our study of the relationship of temperature and pressure of an ideal gas heated in a closed container showed that the ideal equation  $pV = nRT$  doesn't hold, we would have to seek what might have introduced an error. This would entail making changes to the initial setting, checking the equipment, reevaluating some of our basic assumptions about residual properties, and then repeating the experiment.

From this, ontological perspective, categories are not just Kantian basic *a priori* concepts that, applied to the forms of intuition, allow us to form judgments about the phenomenal world. They are essential features of the world itself. To be, therefore, is to partake in the nature of the categories and, ultimately, to be is to be a sign. As Max Fisch notes, at this point "Peirce's general theory of signs [becomes] so general as to entail that, whatever else anything may be, it is also a sign" (Fisch 1986: 357).

By a “sign” in his late writings Peirce broadly means anything (a thought, an emotion, a fantasy, an existent physical object, a natural kind, an instrument, the word “instrument,” a legislative representative, a musical concerto, an action, a game rule, a law of nature – anything at all) capable of standing *for* something else *in* some respect *to* something or someone which or who can interpret it. Thus, “Santiago” in “Charles Santiago Sanders Peirce” stands for “Saint James” to a scholar who can interpret it further as an expression of Peirce’s gratitude to his friend William James; “Rg6+ Rg7” stands for the inevitability of checkmate in game six of the 1972 Spassky-Fischer World Chess Championship, to Spassky who, while thinking over his next move, was prepared to resign; Malevich’s “Black Square” stands for an application of the rules explaining the basic relations between form and color in suprematism to an art critic who is planning to use it in the book on the theory of avant-garde he is writing; “Porgy and Bess” stands for the commercial failure which made George Gershwin move to Hollywood; a law of nature stands for a matter of dispute between the Humeans and the necessitarians; “10” stands for “impossible to be scratched by a piece of corundum” when taken as a description of diamond’s hardness according to Mohs’ scale; etc., etc. There is thus an irreducibly triadic relation among a sign, its object, and an interpretant. Now since everything there is is a sign, and every sign, as an outcome of an intelligent synthesizing activity (as described in Kant’s “Analytic of Principles” and in Peirce’s NL) is an object of cognition, there is nothing beyond signs as objects that are in principle cognizable – or, as McDowell would put it, the world is open to us, and the sphere of the conceptual has no outer boundary<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>66</sup> In Peirce’s case, this openness necessarily presupposes fallibilism about knowledge, which, as I will show in the next section, helps Peirce make sense of the idea of objectivity.



As it might seem, given that everything is a sign, and that every sign is addressed to his future interpretation, any future interpretation cannot result in anything but the creation of a *new sign*, which inevitably leads to the creation of another new sign, etc. *ad infinitum*. But this is not quite so. On the one hand, any and every interpretation has a long-term goal defined by its reference to the idea of extended community. According to the passage from “Some Consequences” quoted above, no matter where different members of a community may begin, as long as they follow the method, the results of their research should eventually converge toward the same outcome. On the other hand, any and every interpretation has a short-term goal. As has been pointed out above, according to Peirce, believing a proposition (say, “vinegar is an acidic liquid”) is true amounts to being prepared to habitually act on this belief when the occasion presents itself (say, being prepared to use a litmus paper, to pickle foods, to perform the fermentation of ethanol by acetic acid bacteria, etc.). Besides, the maxim of pragmatism tells us that the meaning of whatever we say (or, more broadly, the meaning of any sign we use) consists in practical effects of such habitual actions in the form of experiences to be expected (a piece of litmus turning red, the foods acquiring a sour taste, glucose being converted into ethanol, etc.). Now given the fact that believing something consists in being prepared to act on the belief according to a habit, together with the fact that meaning something by using a sign amounts to the sum total of practical effects of conduct based on the habit, we may, after Peirce, conclude that the short-term goal of every new sign is the formation of a habit of action. Signs bring habits about and, at the same time, they are also catalysts that cause those habits to be reinforced or changed. This presupposes that, although semiosis is – theoretically – unlimited, it is, according to Peirce, *short-circuited* by our practices of habitually using signs.

### 3.3. *Fixation of belief and the method of science*

In 1877–1878 Peirce published his second series of articles, known as *Illustrations of the Logic of Science* in Appleton’s *Popular Science Monthly*. The first two of them, “The Fixation of Belief” and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,”<sup>67</sup> are commonly taken to be based upon a nameless paper read by Peirce before the Metaphysical Club in November 1872, just about the time Peirce’s Kantism “got whittled down to small dimensions” (MS 317). FB, apart from the fact that it includes preliminary notes to what in the next article of the series would appear as the maxim of pragmatism, is also very remarkable on account of its composition. Namely, it presents the argument that seems to give a consistent *pragmatic* reinterpretation of the *logical* steps made by Peirce in NL.

As has been shown in 3.2, Peirce’s NL rests on the Hegelian assumption that there’s a logical distance between being and substance. This distance is covered by a set of consecutive media – quality, relation, and representation – that are needed to get the process of interpretation started. An interpretant, the last general term in the sequence, makes us conceive the impressions together as being ours and thereby allows us to grasp the manifold of impressions in a propositional form. Furthermore, in allowing us to so grasp the manifold, it addresses any given expression to its further interpretation. These early semiotic intuitions inspired by Kant’s table of categories proved to be of crucial importance in the developments of Peirce’s theory which followed NL. In particular, the conceptual amalgam brought forth by the notion of an interpretant already contained the germ of Peirce’s idea of a community of inquirers, the regulative future *us* which any interpretation guided by the appropriate method is inevitably aimed at.

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<sup>67</sup> Henceforth FB and HMIC.

It is my hypothesis that there is an analogy between NL and FB, where the latter may be understood as resting on the assumption that there is a *practical* distance between *doubt*, which Peirce defines as “an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves” and *belief* described as “a calm and satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid, or to change to a belief in anything else” (W3: 247). The passage from a doubt that irritates us and initiates a struggle to cease it, to a belief or a set of beliefs that “guide our desires and shape our actions” Peirce calls “inquiry” (ibid.). Doubt is an immediate cause of inquiry and its starting point, whereas settling doubt and fixing belief is its sole purpose. Just as the passage from being to substance is accomplished by means of a logical synthesis that brings the manifold of impressions to unity, the passage from doubt to belief might be understood as accomplished by a practical synthesis that results in a certain mode of action. The practical distance between doubt and belief can only be passed by fixing our beliefs in one way or another, and the role of consecutive media here is played by four different methods of fixing beliefs, those of tenacity, authority, *a priori*, and practical science. That said, a brief summary of the four methods is in order to justify the hypothesis about the structural concordance between NL and FB.

The method of tenacity is applied when a man holds a self-satisfied opinion so that “the pleasure he derives from his calm faith overbalances any inconveniencies resulting from its deceptive character” (W3: 249). In terms of NL, at this first step, any belief is nothing more than a quality in itself. For, like a self-satisfied and self-contained opinion held by an individual, a quality, which Peirce himself compared with the Kantian “manifold in intuition,” or, with reservations, with Hegelian “sense-certainty” (Stern 2005: 67) is,

...an instance of that kind of consciousness which involves no analysis, comparison or any process whatsoever, nor consists in whole or in part of any act by which one stretch of consciousness is distinguished from another, which has its own positive quality which

consists in nothing else, and which is of itself all that it is, however it may have been brought about; so that if this feeling is present during a lapse of time, it is wholly and equally present at every moment of that time. To reduce this description to a simple definition, I will say that by a feeling I mean an instance of that sort of element of consciousness which is all that it is positively, in itself, regardless of anything else.

(CP 1.306)

Tenacity, intellectual inelasticity is a feature of any individual mind as far as it equals itself, is considered as it is in itself “regardless of anything else” and presupposes no distinction or comparison. In this case, an individual mind is confined to an immediate experience of a self-satisfactory feeling of assurance, a kind of Hegelian *sinnliche Gewißheit*, a naïve and immediate unity of subject and object, an abstraction of “here and now”<sup>68</sup>.

The second method represents an opinion enforced by certain authority, be it an individual or some sort of political or religious institution. Here, a belief is in the form of action-reaction or, in Hegelian terms, “negative unity,” and is therefore of relational character:

This conception, that another man’s thought or sentiment may be equivalent to one’s own, is a distinctly new step, and a highly important one. It arises from an impulse too strong in man to be suppressed, without danger of destroying the human species. Unless we make ourselves hermits, we shall necessarily influence each other’s opinions.

(W3: 1872-1878, 250)

So it appears that the collision between the social and a blind tenacity in following some belief gives rise to a first objectified form of rationality for an individual: an idea of the existence of the other, or an idea of a law as a general expression for a set of opinions held by a certain social group “here and now”. In this case, an opinion cannot be considered simply in itself anymore and

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<sup>68</sup> By comparing the method of tenacity with the category of quality as a first step in Peirce’s deduction, I am aware that what I ascribe to the method is true of tenacity itself. A tenacious *belief*, however, has a content which is something structured and which, therefore, is something more than a mere quality in the Peircean sense. But I do insist on the analogy between the role the method of tenacity plays in what might be called Peirce’s “practical” deduction in FB, and the role of the concept of quality in what might be called Peirce’s “theoretical” deduction in NL.

is confronted by another opinion with which it enters in a certain *relation*. The immediacy of tenacity is replaced by a direct experience of the other.

However, sooner or later in any given society, Peirce says, “some individuals will be found who [...] possess a *wider sort of social feeling*” (W3: 252; emphasis added). This wider social feeling allows those individuals to see most of the laws of a certain cultural, political, or religious tradition as historical accidents and products of public opinion manipulation. The individuals then propose the new *a priori* method of fixing beliefs which excludes the possibility for a belief to depend on the idiosyncratic whim of an individual or a law-like power of society. This method predetermines the choice of opinion by bringing it, as philosophers of the *a priori* themselves believe, into harmony with natural causes. Peirce claims that “this method is far more intellectual and respectable from the point of view of reason than either of the others which we have noticed” but that the principal downside of it is that

...it makes of inquiry something similar to the development of taste; but taste, unfortunately, is always more or less a matter of fashion, and accordingly metaphysicians have never come to any fixed agreement, but the pendulum has swung backward and forward between a more material and a more spiritual philosophy, from the earliest times to the latest.

(W3: 253)

Indeed, every person, says Peirce, is a truth-seeker by nature. All we need is to acquire a method that would put this natural disposition to work in the most effective way. And it is science, according to Peirce, that is the source of the next and final method of fixing beliefs, because science, in its pragmatist understanding, is nothing but a more logically complex and sophisticated expression of our natural disposition to seek the truth. Only scientific method is capable of fixing our beliefs in such a way that they are “determined by nothing human, but by some *external permanency* – by something upon which our thinking has no effect” (W3: 253; emphasis added). A bit later in the text Peirce adds that “our external permanency would not be external, in our sense, if it was restricted in its influence to one individual. It must be something

which affects, or might affect, every man” (W3: 253-254). Still later Peirce also refers to “real things whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them” (W3: 254), but the text of FB does not provide any clear arguments as to whether those things shall be considered as anything different from Kantian-like things-in-themselves (Short 2007, 46-48<sup>69</sup>). The meaning of the term “external” as applied to reality is clarified only in HMIC, the next paper in the series:

Different minds may set out with the most antagonistic views, but the progress of investigation carries them by a *force* outside of themselves to one and the same conclusion. This activity of thought by which we are carried, not where we wish, but to a foreordained goal, is like the operation of destiny. [...] The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real<sup>70</sup>.

(W3: 273; *emphasis added*)

If the object of the final opinion is the real, the truth of a belief, as described in HMIC, just like the unity of substance in NL, is defined as the ultimate agreement of the community of “all who

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<sup>69</sup> Peirce’s notion of external permanency as “something upon which our thinking has no effect” may also be read as a terminological allusion to the concept of “something permanent” (*etwas Beharrliches*) which occurs at the end of Kant’s “Analytic of Principles”. Kant needs it for the refutation of Descartes’ problematic idealism according to which the reality of things outside me is ultimately indemonstrable, the only ultimately irrevocable claim being that “I am”. Kant uses this concept to show that, as far as there’s nothing permanent in self-perception (I always think of myself as a subject, while I can experience myself only as an immanent object) the very continuity of experience, as well as my inner experience as such are necessarily bound up with the existence of some sort of external permanency (KRV, B 275-276).

<sup>70</sup> There is nothing mystical in the mechanism of “destiny” and “foreordained goal” Peirce mentions in the passage. What underlies those ideas is the character of statistical reasoning. As Peirce explains, “judging of the statistical composition of a whole lot from a sample is judging by a method which will be right on the average in the long run” (CP 1.93). So if we are persistent enough in following the maxim of pragmatism as a method of reasoning and acting, our results will present a distribution of statistical errors. These errors will converge to an approximation which we will be able to use for our further purposes. The implied statistical reasoning here is understood as a way to deal with the fact that, although the world displays order, it would be a mistake to treat this order deterministically. Among other things, this reasoning, for instance, opens us to the fact that there is a large spectrum between law-like behavior of large objects, predictable with high probability, and almost complete spontaneity on the quantum level. The idea of the agreement achievable in the long run helps us navigate between the degrees of lawfulness and obtain results which can tell us how particular regularities work.

investigate”. And it is this ultimate agreement that, according to Peirce, marks the external permanency upon which individual thinking has no effect.

Referring to the method of science, Peirce supplements the notion of external permanency by the metaphor of *force* operating outside individual minds<sup>71</sup>. Right after the quoted passage he explains how the idea of such force is to be brought into compliance with his earlier definition of reality as independent from what is thought of about it:

... reality is independent, not necessarily of thought in general, but only of what you or I or any finite number of men may think about it; and [...] though the object of the final opinion depends on what that opinion is, yet what that opinion is does not depend on what you or I or any man thinks. [...] Our perversity and that of others may indefinitely postpone the settlement of opinion. [...] Yet even that would not change the nature of the belief, which alone could be the result of investigation carried sufficiently far.

(W3: 273)

Reality, towards which individual opinions are forced, or even, as Peirce puts it, *destined* to converge, is independent of what any finite number of individuals might believe about it. But it is not independent of “thought in general”. The challenge here is to understand what “thought in general” is, given that Peirce was most certainly not a realist of the Platonic stripe and held that beliefs fixed by an appropriate method are always shared by a finite number of individuals. A related puzzling fact is that there’s no direct indication of the distinction between having a belief and having a *true* belief in the text of either FB or HMIC. On the contrary, in the very beginning

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<sup>71</sup> The choice of the term here is hardly a random one. Peirce, whose early works were in many ways inspired by Hegel, undoubtedly knew that in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* the notion of force represents an important point of transition from consciousness to self-consciousness. Besides, the term “force” marks the distinction between the nominalist and the realist readings of the maxim of pragmatism. If we choose a nominalist reading, then the accent will be on the “force,” which constrains our opinions and shapes them towards the “foreordained goal.” If we construe the maxim realistically, then the accent is on the object of the final opinion.

of FB, before setting about to describe the four methods, Peirce stipulates that fixing beliefs does *not* presuppose any epistemologically legitimate difference between the two:

With the doubt, therefore, the struggle begins, and with the cessation of doubt it ends. Hence, the sole object of inquiry is the settlement of opinion. We may fancy that this is not enough for us, and that we seek, not merely an opinion, but a true opinion. But put this fancy to the test, and it proves groundless; for as soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief be true or false. [...] The most that can be maintained is, that we seek for a belief that we shall think to be true. But we think each one of our beliefs to be true, and, indeed, it is mere tautology to say so.

(W3: 1872-1878, 247-248)

As far as there are different sorts of social practices that yield appropriate methods of reaching firm beliefs, one may choose the method which would bring the satisfaction. But even though, as far as a belief is firm, we are satisfied no matter what method of fixing beliefs we follow, it is the scientific method that Peirce characterizes by the end of FB as “the only one of the four methods which presents a *distinction of a right and a wrong way*” (W3: 1872-1878, 254; *emphasis added*). There must be, then, a solid criterion which would help us understand why only scientific method is capable of fixing our beliefs in such a way that they are determined by external reality.

Naturally, anybody may accept false premises and come to false conclusions. Science, as Peirce sees it, does not offer a way to get rid of this problem in any given “here and now,” but offers a mode of action, a method which ascribes practical meaning to our natural inclination towards making right decisions in the long run. In HMIC Peirce gives the following formulation of the method of science as the fourth and final method of fixing beliefs: “Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then, your conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object” (W3: 266).



As has already been discussed in 3.1, according to this formula, what makes a conception contentful is neither a mental proxy of its object, nor a conception of the object's qualities directly perceived, but a set of conceivable effects which our experiments with the object may bring about. It is crucial to interpret the maxim as saying *not* that our conception of an object actually consists in a set of particular effects our experimentation with the object may bring about, but that it consists in our *conception* of those effects. Just like Brandom, who makes it the starting point of his inferentialist semantics, Peirce acknowledges that the normative finds its expression in our capacity of acting according to a *conception* of a rule as opposed to the capacity of acting according to a rule<sup>72</sup>. It follows, then, that meanings of our ideas about the world depend on our capacity to predict practical outcomes of our using the objects which these ideas are about. To put it differently, ideas *mean* something to us humans only relative to a purposeful human behavior. The conception of "practical bearings" is expressed in a set of conditional expectations, or conditional statements about what *would* happen, given that such-and-such reasonable experimental conditions are in place. In Christopher Hookway's wording, the meaning of a concept or proposition "spells out how acceptance of the proposition would affect conduct, and indicates what circumstances are relevant to evaluating an assertion of the proposition" (Hookway 1985: 240).

Summing up, the method of science is seen by Peirce as an extension and a correction of the *a priori* method by applying it to experience, so the two methods together may be taken to form the third and last step in the practical synthesis, as analogous to the logical one described in NL. In the use of scientific method, reality is no longer determined by individual will, social

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<sup>72</sup> See section 1.2.

contract, or any *a priori* rules, but only by a maxim that guarantees its cognizability. In NL, the three categories are necessary steps in the process of reducing the manifold of impressions to unity, which is accomplished by the reference to an interpretant. Likewise, in FB, each method of fixing beliefs is a necessary step in understanding the advantages of scientific inquiry. It is only the reference to the scientific method that shows the way to formation of general opinions we are fated to obtain in the long run – provided our investigation according to this method is carried sufficiently far. While in the case of the first three methods the dependence of what the beliefs *are* on things beliefs *are about* on is taken uncritically, it is only the proper use of the fourth method of fixing beliefs that makes this dependence to be a matter of fact, thus representing truth and reality as coordinate concepts – with their practical synthesis gradually achieved in the process of inquiry. An interpretant unites my diverse impressions not by joining any other concept to the diversity, but by appealing to its further interpretation by another interpretant. Likewise, in Peirce’s maxim certain conceivable practical results of actions and perceptions are united into a concept, where “the test of whether I am truly following the method is not an immediate appeal to my feelings and purposes, but, on the contrary, itself involves the application of the method” (W3: 255). Give all these analogies between NL and FB, as it has already been suggested, what we allegedly have in FB is a *practical* synthesis analogous to the *logical* one displayed in NL.

Peirce thus deliberately preserves the structure of Kantian argumentation which shows the structural unity of logical and practical problems. From 1867, the year of Peirce first presented NL to the Academy of Arts and Sciences, to 1877, the year his *Illustrations* were published by Appleton, Peirce makes an important move similar to that which Kant made from the 1<sup>st</sup> *Critique* to the 2<sup>nd</sup>. In making this conclusion, I by no means wish to suggest that FB contains any sort of

ethical doctrine. On the contrary, in concluding paragraphs of it Peirce concedes that the first three methods of fixing beliefs have their merits and advantages and he is careful enough not to claim unquestionable ethical superiority of scientific method over them: *practical* consequences are not necessarily *moral* ones (W3: 255-257). However, it is perfectly justifiable to say that it is this paper that displays Peirce's decisive move from questions of logical representation to those of practical agency. And it is quite remarkable that this move was marked by the compositional symmetry between the two papers in question, which symmetry has its analogy in Kant's critical arguments.

As has been discussed in section 1.2, throughout his three *Critiques*, Kant lays decisive emphasis on the fact that the world of nature is something only possible, which becomes real through human action. Peirce takes this Kantian claim seriously and represents the idea of reality as the idea of practically significant outcomes of our interaction with the environment. In the example above, all our predictions of such practically significant outcomes are not external to our conception of an ideal gas, but, on the contrary, are essential constituents of it. Moreover, the fact that future experiments may change it, as well as any other conception we happen to form and act upon, entails that any idea, rule, or law, unlike Plato's unchanged and eternal "forms," is a general object that is subject to constant change and growth (Hausman 1993; Pihlström 2010: 55).

I will conclude this section with a clarification as to one more important way in which the idea of rules and laws as reals that are capable of growth and development is intimately related to the notion of the final opinion. It seems reasonable to suppose that, if rules and laws cannot be exhausted by their instances, then inquiry cannot terminate in an ideal state of complete

information. On the one hand, it appears, then, that the notion of a future community refers to something that is positively impossible to achieve. On the other hand, though, Peirce formulates what might be called *the principle of an intellectual hope*:

[L]ogic forbids us to assume in regard to any given fact of that sort that it is of its own nature absolutely inexplicable. This is what Kant calls a regulative principle, that is to say, an intellectual hope. The sole immediate purpose of thinking is to render things intelligible; and to think and yet in that very act to think a thing unintelligible is a self-stultification. It is as though a man furnished with a pistol to defend himself against an enemy were, on finding that enemy very redoubtable, to use his pistol to blow his own brains out to escape being killed by his enemy. Despair is insanity. True, there may be facts that will never get explained; but that any given fact is of the number, is what experience can never give us reason to think.

(CP 1.405)

According to this principle, although any particular achievement in science is fallible, and an inquiry can undermine any of them in the course of time, it cannot undermine all of them at once. The application of the method of science presupposes converging to a limit (and, therefore, presupposes the idea of such limit), and yet at any point in time in the process of actual inquiry we always find ourselves only in a provisional stage of knowledge, being unable to ascertain how far off we actually are from the limit. We need the idea of the end of inquiry, however, in order to go on, because reference to the future (which as NL demonstrates, is Peirce's intersubjective interpretation of the Kantian idea of the synthesis of impressions in one consciousness) is necessary for *any* proposition to be comprehensible. As Pihlström (2012) notes, the final opinion, thus, "is an ideal, regulative, normative notion, providing a reason – an irreducibly normative reason – for continuing inquiry (Pihlström 2012: 243). Cognizability of reality, understood as a set of opinions which a community will arrive at as a result of investigation carried sufficiently far, is a condition of the possibility of human knowledge, whereas the fallibility and incompleteness of this knowledge is the price human reason pays for its ambition to have it.

## 4. CONCLUSION

### *4.1. Brandom: the social*

My approach to Brandom was to interpret the relationship between his inferentialist semantics and his normative pragmatics against the background of Kant's architectonics. It is this approach, in my view, that helps elucidate the problem of the objectivity of discursive norms in Brandom's MIE. For Kant of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, human knowledge has two principal sources: the experiential manifold and a set of *a priori* concepts, which have their origins in the subject and secure the unity of experience. For Kant of the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, human agents are capable of introducing practical maxims and will them as if they were objective laws. As has been discussed in section 1.2, according to Brandom, each of these theses represents the emphatically human capacity of taking something as a representation of something else. The paradigmatic example Brandom uses to illustrate this capacity is the fact that, in thought and action, we do not just conform to a rule but have to *acknowledge* it first: in order to think the rule and act upon it, we must *take* ourselves to do so (MIE: 31; GMM: 31). Defining the capacity in this way, Brandom cashes out his aversion to making any strong ontological claims. His idea of objectivity is a "hygienic" one (Levine 2010: 584) and is based on his phenomenalist approach to normativity: the objective outcomes of saying and doing (what *ought to be* the case) are fully explained in terms of what someone *takes to be* the case.

As I show in section 1.3, the semantic interpretation of the capacity of taking something as an expression of something is non-problematic: I take someone's claim as a reason to believe

that some other claim also ought to be true. But the pragmatic interpretation reveals a problem. According to Brandom, practical attitudes of individual agents have priority over normative statuses in that the former *institute* the latter. What this means is that the authority of norms derives entirely from their actual acknowledgment by someone. And it is explaining the relationship between individual attitudes (how we take things to be) and statuses (how things ought to be objectively) that, according to Brandom, is the clue to solving the objectivity problem and the keystone of his whole theoretical edifice.

In making a claim or producing a judgment, we make a move in the game of giving and asking for reasons, which always amounts to attributing and/or undertaking certain commitments. In order to solve the problem of the objectivity of discursive norms, Brandom introduces an *asymmetric* relationship between the attitudes of attributing and undertaking, where attributing a commitment is given priority over undertaking one. Whenever others are entitled to attribute a commitment to a player, she cannot but count as having this undertaken commitment. Thus, attributing a commitment by a scorekeeper has priority over undertaking it by a player, and, as everyone who plays the game of giving and asking for reasons is involved both in attributing and undertaking commitments, the objectivity of norms governing our discursive practices, according to Brandom, is seen as a perspectival feature of the game of giving and asking for reasons as a whole. Our perspectives produce discursive practices that mean something only relative to each other and are interlocked by the mutual recognition of our responsibilities towards each other. These responsibilities are cashed out, or made explicit in the process of our exchange of judgments.

This line of arguments reveals three major interrelated issues. First, given the fact that Brandom's objectivity is purely formal and has nothing to do with the character of conceptual

contents *qua* contents, Brandom's normative pragmatics, as it is developed in MIE, seems to face a criterion problem. In the absence of any maxim eliciting the relationship between conceptual contents and the mode of action that leads to the acknowledgement of those contents<sup>73</sup>, it remains to be seen based on what criterion we might be inclined to abandon our own opinions and not to treat others as obliged to adjust to us, in case our acknowledgements are at variance with each other. As has been discussed in section 1.3 (in brother vs. judge example), even though our commitments are linked with those of others inferentially, and the self-corrective discourse seems to be able to take care of any misapplications, together those commitments always form a variety of *local* systems of beliefs that usually contradict each other in a number of ways. As I have shown, a mismatch between my inferential commitments as a player and a scorekeeper and my commitments as a relative can be more significant than Brandom seems to be ready to admit – in spite of the fact that you and I can keep using the term “felony” indefinitely long without the slightest trace of disagreement. In short, Brandom's inferential approach might seem too holistic and broad to be able to take this locality of language games into account.

The worry about the local character of any system of beliefs entails the second issue. On the one hand, the game of giving and asking for reasons as a whole is characterised by inferential links between assertions. On the other hand, every assertion is tied to a variety of social roles. But being a father presupposes a number of commitments to be undertaken/attributed that might conflict with being a citizen. The question, therefore, is whether the game of giving and asking for reasons can offer a way to negotiate between the two and to make them come to terms with one another. In other words, the correlation of *inferential* roles of judgments and assertions with local *institutional* roles we play by making those judgments and assertions presupposes some

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<sup>73</sup> That is, in the absence of what Peirce calls a method of belief fixation.

kind of story about social institutions. Unlike Wittgenstein, who insisted on the absence of one singular feature or practice that is central, or common to all games, Brandom claims that language has an assertional core, or a “downtown” – “the region around which all the rest of discourse is arrayed as dependent suburbs” (RP: 120). However, it is not immediately clear how the existence of such a core might help us find a missing link between social roles and the inferential form of the game of giving and asking for reasons.

In MIE this problem is reflected in the clear distinction between the "I-Thou" and "I-We" kinds of relationship (MIE: 598-601). Brandom grants priority to symmetric interactions between first and second persons over asymmetric interactions between the first person and a collective body – a community, or an institution. It is the former kind of interactions, not the latter, that is the smallest atom of social communication and the basic structure of mutual recognition. Meanwhile, considering “I-Thou” as the basic cognitive relation means disregarding one of the core ideas of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Hegel develops Kant's theoretical and practical syntheses as a set of consecutive stories, in which the conceptual evolution of consciousness from sense-certainty to Spirit is illustrated by concrete *institutional* "I-We" forms. This approach makes the interpretation of Hegel's idea of recognition in MIE essentially limited to the master-slave dialectics, i.e. to the relationship between two individual wills, I and Thou.

In ST (chapters 1 and 5 in particular) Brandom changes his mind and tells an institutional story culminating in language as the most fundamental structure of mutual recognition. In chapter 5 of ST Brandom ultimately arrives at the idea of a community. This community is unalienated and historically grounded. For Brandom, it means that the community consists of self-conscious individuals who know where they came from and who are fully aware of the fact that the norms that determine their communion and ground their freedom do not originate in some inner recesses



of the human mind, but are a hard won result of a long social and political evolution.

Consequently, inferentialism of the core language game is now grounded in the historical development of a particular set of social institutions.

It is important for Brandom to establish a relationship between the external constraint on our performances exerted by the scorekeeping game as a sum total of all individual perspectives, on the one hand, and the emergence of new meanings, or the creative character of our performances, on the other hand. An attempt to establish this relationship is recurrent in a number of Brandom's writings since his 1979 "Freedom and Constraint by Norms." In section 1.4 I suggested that the reason for this is that the idea of the scorekeeping game itself does not explain how it happens that communal practices do not just reiterate established truths, but produce new meanings, i.e. how the communicative system Brandom envisages exists in time, grows and gets reinterpreted.

Brandom's institutional story ends up with language itself as the primary basis for mutual recognition. Brandom claims that it is language, the very grammatical structure of it, which possesses generative powers. At some point in MIE, and still later in RP, when tackling the idea of linguistic creativity, Brandom refers to Chomsky's generative grammar. According to Chomsky's model, any natural language presupposes the capacity to produce and interpret sentences that have never been encountered before. When we speak, we combine a finite number of elements to create a potentially infinite number of larger structures. In section 1.4 I argued that there is a twofold problem with this reference. First, early Chomsky's attack on physicalism in understanding language acquisition takes him too far in the opposite direction and has Cartesian connotations that does not seem to have any place within Brandom's theory. Second, according to Chomsky, due to the derivational relations any natural language has with the deep universal

grammar of the context-free language of thought, linguistic creativity coexists with any social discourse. But the fact that such creativity underpins any social discourse, a totalitarian just as well as a liberal one, is inadmissible for Brandom, who ties it to his particular idea of a community of scorekeepers. Given this, Brandom's theory might still stand in need for a link between the notion of the scorekeeping game and the idea of linguistic creativity.

I do not want to say that the problem with Brandom's referring to Chomsky is that Brandom has to hold that the creativity of human language is dependent on democratic relations among scorekeepers. What I do want to say is that Brandom certainly needs a link between freedom/creativity and constraint that is *not* Kantian. First, according to Kant, one is free as long as one acts in accordance with norms. But those norms – and this is absolutely crucial – are not linguistic. Second, Kant's conception of freedom presupposes the idea of the incognizable, which Brandom, as a Hegelian, cannot accept. Of course, even being a slave or a serf, I can create an indefinitely large number of grammatically correct combinations of my words. I sure do. But how does that explain the link between this capacity of mine and the idea of constraint? To repeat one of Brandom's claims, "it is only by virtue of being constrained by the norms inherent in social practices that one can acquire the freedom of expression which the capacity to produce and understand novel utterances exhibits" (Brandom 1979: 194). He refers to Chomsky on this account, but this is most obviously *not* what a Chomskian theorist would ever be even remotely considering to admit. According to Chomsky, semantic novelty does not depend on social norms in any imaginable way. The question is, therefore: What the Chomskian *semantically* grounded novelty has to do with the Brandomian socially and *pragmatically* grounded constraint?

In chapter 5 of ST Brandom tells the story about common law judges. In this story, a judge forgives past performances of other judges and trusts in future forgiveness of her own

performances by those who will judge them in the future. In the end of section 1.4 I argued that the existence of the link between the forgiven past and the trusted future by itself does not entail that any novelty will actually ever occur. As an alternative, Brandom could follow Wittgenstein who shows that neither grammatical analysis, nor appealing to past usages tells us anything substantial about meanings. As, according to Wittgenstein, we cannot explain how exactly a particular rule is followed, we simply have to assume that learning and communicating are always creative. But, as I further suggest, for the reason that Brandom refers to Chomsky without providing any details on his reading of Chomsky's theory, it is hard to see where exactly Brandom's take on generative grammar meets with Brandom's Wittgenstein.

#### ***4.2. McDowell: the real***

In MW McDowell demonstrates a different approach to Kant. He reworks Kant's constructivism into three claims that constitute his direct realism: (1) mind and world share their conceptual nature; (2) the sphere of the conceptual has no outer boundary; and (3) the fact that the sphere of the conceptual has no outer boundary can be reconciled with the fact that there is a rational external constraint on what we think about the world. These claims rest on McDowell's reinterpretation of the relationship between receptivity and spontaneity as presented by Kant in his "Analytic of Principles."

As McDowell demonstrates in the first two lectures of MW, we are tempted to choose between two contrary intuitions. At one extreme, we are inclined to lay stress on spontaneity. Taken in separation from receptivity, it amounts to a network of thoughts, which stand in rational

relations only to each other and which, therefore, cannot say anything about the world. At another extreme, we tend to adhere to receptivity and end up being confined to passive processing of the non-conceptual sensory given. McDowell's reinterpretation aims to show that receptivity and spontaneity form a package and that, as McDowell claims in MW from the very beginning, "spontaneity extends all the way out to the conceptual contents that sit closest to the impacts of the world on our sensibility" (MW: 11).

Granting that spontaneity is a key characteristic of concept use, McDowell concludes that our experience is always conceptual and that it does not need to involve private objects of any kind that mediate between the perceiver and the world: the former is fundamentally and immediately *open* to the latter. This conclusion, in turn, leads McDowell to two major suggestions that create the transition point from his direct realism to his version of idealism. The first suggestion amounts to the idea of the mutual directedness of experiencing mind and experienced world: our experience is directed on the world, and the world bears on our experience. The second suggestion, which McDowell cashes out in the beginning of lecture two, is that the mutual directedness of mind and world does not require that there is a *distance* between the two, which might presuppose some sort of intermediary Given. As McDowell seems to imply, our acceptance of both suggestions, together with the thesis about mind and world sharing conceptual nature, makes his idealism fully compatible with his direct realist stance. Whereas the claim that the world is made of a mental stuff, taken as it stands alone, may give raise to the wrong conclusion that the former is a mere shadow of the latter, when considering mind and world as mutually directed on one another (i.e. when claiming that what is thought and what is thinkable are, as McDowell puts it, "the same sort of thing"), we don't have to worry about such an

unwelcome result (MW: 28). This, according to McDowell, shows that giving priority to one direction and not the other is justified by nothing except our established linguistic habits.

McDowell's next task is to justify the link between the thesis about our openness to the world and the requirement that there must be a rational constraint on our empirical thought from outside it – the constraint that would “ensure a proper acknowledgment of the independence of reality” (MW: 28). At this point, McDowell faces a principal question of how reality, which shares its (conceptual) nature with an experience of it, can be independent from this experience. In order to answer this question, McDowell makes an important distinction. He concludes that reality revealed in empirical judgments is independent from our *acts* of empirical thinking, but not from the conceptual *contents* that are thought. The constraint is from outside of the *act* of my thinking that I am sitting on a chair now, not from outside of the *fact* that I am sitting on a chair now. And, as I am open to the world in my empirical thinking, the fact that I am sitting on a chair now is precisely what I directly experience, given that my experience is veridical.

To sharpen the distinction, McDowell stresses the fact that a proper understanding of the rational constraint necessarily presupposes the idea of contents that are “ultimate in the order of justification” (MW: 28). Moreover, he seems to claim that these contents, or thinkables become available in our linguistic exchanges and constitute points of agreement between us, no matter how different we might be in terms of our perception, our cultural and social background, etc. McDowell insists on our capacity to reach agreement based on contents, and rejects both Davidsonian coherentism, because it leads to the purely causal connection to the world, and Habermas's agreement based on the belief in the availability of totally transparent, non-coercive public structures of argumentative speech. That said, McDowell does not clarify whether by

speaking of contents shared in linguistic exchange he means that the contents are by necessity available through argumentation in *any* natural language.

In lecture four McDowell introduces the ideas of second nature and Bildung (MW: 66-86). These ideas fulfill several key objectives in MW. First, in representing a naturalized form of platonism, they mediate between two extremes: on the one hand, a purely mechanical, or “disenchanted” understanding of nature, and, on the other hand, what McDowell calls “rampant platonism,” a standpoint from which the structure of the space of reasons is independent from anything “merely human,” and which, therefore, “makes our capacity to respond to reasons look like an occult power, something extra to our being the kind of animals we are” (MW: 83). In thus situating his naturalized form of platonism, McDowell aims to render rationality autonomous, but, at the same time, fully integrated into nature. McDowell’s second objective is to put his earlier discussion of the relationship between receptivity and spontaneity into a wider context. Namely, he uses the ideas of Bildung and second nature to create a link between Aristotle’s account of moral character and Wittgenstein’s idea of initiation into a custom, on the one hand, and language, on the other hand.

With the idea of Bildung in play, McDowell makes some changes in his interpretation of the idea of conceptual content. In the last lecture of MW McDowell discusses language as a “repository of tradition” (MW: 184), where “tradition” is understood as a set of customs, being initiated into which means being initiated into second nature. And, by virtue of this initiation, being open to the world as it really is: our access to the space of reasons that constitute our second nature is part of the lives we live as the kind of natural creatures that we are. On the one hand, language stores conceptual contents and, as stored by language, the contents are recognizable as such and traceable back from the judgments we exchange. But, on the other hand,

according to McDowell, language not only preserves tradition and makes it available as an inheritance of the past, but also performs its reflective modification, because “a standing obligation to engage in critical reflection is itself part of the inheritance” (MW: 126).

My claim is that the changes McDowell makes to the idea of conceptual content as expressed in language understood as a repository of tradition is incompatible with the idea of conceptual contents as a ground of agreement traceable back from our judgments. On the one hand, according to McDowell, conceptual contents open us to something that is thus-and-so and that possess certain *haecceity*. These conceptual *thus-and-so-nesses*, as strictly distinct from *acts* of thinking, become available in our linguistic exchanges and constitute points of agreement between us, no matter how different we might be in terms of our perception, as well as our cultural and social background. All we need to do, as McDowell suggests, is to go back in our reasoning far enough to reach the contents that sit closest to the impacts of the world on our sensibility. On this account, there is a structural analogy between thoughts, experiences and judgments, in describing which McDowell makes a direct reference to the very first paragraph of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*: one may *think that* spring has begun, and *report that* spring has begun, and it also may *be that* spring has begun.

On the other hand, as a good Sellarsian, McDowell claims that conceptual contents always come in bundles, any single state of affairs ultimately reveals itself in experience only as a part of the world as a whole. Likewise, my making a claim about something presupposes, in a non-overt form, a number of other related overt claims. In making a claim, I actualize certain conceptual capacities, and these actualizations constitute an inferentially organized network. On this account, contents are something we perpetually reflect upon and change our minds about. We change our minds in the course of *Bildung* – a process defined by McDowell as the

transformation of human beings, who are born mere animals, into thinkers and intentional agents who partake in second nature. As second-natural creatures, we are initiated into our conceptual capacities within the framework of a particular communal tradition, where conceptual material undergoes perpetual reassessment.

From this perspective, meaning something is not so much being open to factuality, as it is *doing* something; and what is properly external to individual acts of empirical thinking, therefore, is not objective factuality, but the social understood as patterns of interrelation between communal practices and environment. Thus understood, conceptual contents form inferential networks which we can never be open to in the way we are, according to McDowell, open to the factual. The reason is that what particular instances of using language reveal within such networks is based on the interplay between explicit statements and norms implicit in discursive practices. We can go back and forth changing the configuration of our commitments to the norms, but there is no way we can play it all back to the contents that sit closest to the impacts of the world on our sensibility. On this account, as there is nothing between discursive practices and the world that might be called “experience”, there is nothing that can relate to the impacts of the world in such way.

From the factual perspective, given that institutional, cultural, and normative presuppositions framing uses of different languages vary, McDowell owes us an account of how we can come to an agreement with each other based on contents that are constitutive of second nature and, as McDowell seems to imply, that appeal to *any* natural language. If an agreement is based on our openness to matters of facts, we do need to know how we confirm that we are open to the same regions of the conceptual. At the same time, from the second, social-historical perspective, this sort of account is not needed, as the normative force pushing us towards an agreement, and the conditions that are necessary for it originate from and are wired in



recognition-based pragmatic know-hows implicit in discourse, which do not presuppose the strong direct realist commitments that McDowell's factual perspective on conceptual contents seems to require.

Given the conflict between the two interpretations of the idea of conceptual content, I suggest that, in order to accommodate both of them within his theory, it seems to make little sense for McDowell to try to give an account of how *Bildung*, a process that is essentially social, can possibly open us to the sphere of the conceptual that, according to McDowell, is self-standing and expressly independent of social matters<sup>74</sup>. Instead, McDowell needs to offer us an account of how norms and regularities of second nature *emerge* from first-natural laws. In other words, we need a theory that would explain the relationship between social acts and objective contents and, *in so doing*, would provide some sort of a genealogy of the normative<sup>75</sup>. Until such a theory is in place, McDowell's appeal to second nature can only restate the problems he ascribed to the idea of the "first" one in new terms.

#### ***4.3. Peirce: The social as the real. Between Brandom's inferentialism and McDowell's realism***

It is often believed that the view of language that considers what we *mean* in terms of what we *do* may run the risk of ruling out realism. It seems to be intuitively obvious that, when meanings are construed entirely in terms of social practices, it becomes unclear how, in what manner, and under what conditions this takes into account the world the expressions conveying those

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<sup>74</sup> "Of course the category of the social is important. *Bildung* could not have its place in the picture if that were not so. But the point is *not* that the social constitutes the framework for a construction of the very idea of meaning" (MW: 95).

<sup>75</sup> See also Gaskin 2006: 36-39

meanings are *about*. The central idea of this allegedly pragmatist construal is believed to be that the fundamental communicative relationship is not the one between an individual mind and the world, but between an individual and her community, where opinions the community supports are always privileged, in the sense that whatever the community deems to be correct is considered correct. On this account, whereas any judgment of an individual is falsifiable, there is no point of view from which the community as a whole can go wrong. It is often argued that such an account makes connection to the world problematic, if not downright unintelligible.

One of the solutions to this problem is to begin, not with the relationship between the individual “I” and the communal “We”, but with the relationship between “I” and “Thou”. This approach cancels the privilege of the community because it presupposes that there is no bird’s eye view over and above individual communicative perspectives, and that objectivity is a feature inherent in every such perspective due to the way it is related to other perspectives. But this phenomenalist position has two challenges to meet. The first one is to explain how, given that individual beliefs are all there is to communication, these beliefs acquire objective status. The second one is to resolve the discrepancy between judgments that express the aforementioned shared feature and those that express particular institutional roles and social positions, and often do enter into various conflicts with each other. These conflicts are usually resolved not by appealing to the normativity that is somehow inherent in our rational capacities as such, or in some sort of global communicative game we allegedly play, but locally, by reconsidering the meaning of particular institutional practices we share.

Another way to approach the idea of the objectivity of what we think and say about the world, which have been discussed here, is through the appeal, not to discursive practices, but to experience. On this view, the goal is to construe occurrences of experience not as proxies of

objects or facts mediating between the experiencing subject and the world, but as exercises of the subject's capacity to be open to the world as it really is. In this case, language enters the picture not so much as something that explains how communication actually works, but as something that explains how the capacity in question is being acquired and maintained. Although language is thus viewed as a repository of conceptual material accumulated by tradition, and a primary instrument of human upbringing accomplished through the critical reassessment of the tradition, the social character of the upbringing, accumulation, and reassessment within this approach is acknowledged, but not in any way problematized. Overall, this character is simplistically described as mere communal agreement, or consensus, which by itself is not enough to guarantee objectivity of any kind. What we need is *the world*, whereas the social as such, from this point of view, plays an important, but not in any way decisive or crucial part in constructing the idea of meaning. On this account, the social, of course, is not entirely separated from the worldly. What actually does the job of constructing the idea of meaning is a *nature* that is specifically adjusted to humans and that opens for them the world as it really is. The principal problem of this approach is that, while it brings mind into direct contact with the world, it puts the communal and institutional character of human knowledge almost entirely out of sight, and has nothing to say about *how* communication between knowers actually works.

If this description is correct, the two approaches to objectivity seem to complement one another, one laying stress on the social, another aspiring to keep the world in view. But these approaches cannot be made into one whole in which their downsides would be mutually corrected. The challenge, therefore, is to offer a middle ground account where a denial of the distinction between objective assessment and communal consensus would *not* amount to an antirealist position. My overall claim is that such an account is provided by Peirce's pragmatism

and his semiotics, which mediate between Brandom's normative pragmatics and McDowell's direct realism. Peirce's theory has resources that might be used in dealing with the issues of Brandom's and McDowell's accounts as outlined in sections 4.1-4.2. I will conclude by offering a summary of those resources and the ways in which they might be used.

### *1. I, Thou, and We*

Just like Brandom, Peirce recognizes the "I-Thou" relationship – in the restricted sense that, according to Peirce, the first definition of reality is negative: initially reality reveals itself through the discovery of the fact that some of *my* beliefs are erroneous as compared to *yours*. Peirce, by using the notion of the awareness of error as an outcome of this relationship, provides a strong link between objective opinions and the social character of knowledge: errors made by individuals are ultimately corrected by a communal inquiry carried out sufficiently far. But, whereas Brandom makes the "I-Thou" relationship the basic atom of the global social-cognitive web of discursive practices he calls "the game of giving and asking for reasons," for Peirce the tension between *ego* and *non-ego* by itself amounts only to the recognition of the brute force of "the other," which needs an additional link to the "We" of a community provided in the notion of an interpretant. Brandom's take on the "I-Thou" relationship results in a phenomenalist approach to discursive practices, which Brandom then tries to reconcile with his realism about discursive norms. Peirce's interpretation of the relationship seems to be more in line with Hegel, who describes recognition in the "I-Thou" master-slave dialectic in the beginning of the second chapter of his *Phenomenology* as a struggle between two independent wills in pursuit of their individual projects. According to Hegel, the structure of mutual recognition that the struggle between the two self-consciousnesses results in is by no means complete. Further on in the text of

*Phenomenology* it is reinterpreted as a moment in the development of a variety of social institutions that succeed one another until finally turning into the absolute knowing understood as the final shape of self-consciousness.

## 2. *Realism, idealism, and modality*

The second similarity between the two approaches is that both Peirce and Brandom insist on the link between objectivity and modality. Brandom's modal thesis tells us that descriptive language does not constitute an autonomous discursive practice, and that the prerequisite for one's ability to use this language is the mastery of the practical skills needed to understand modal talk. The meaning of an expression, according to Brandom, is always defined against two different sets: a set of counterfactual claims describing conditions of compatibility of the expression with a speaker's background beliefs, and a set of consequences of the expression's applications in such-and-such circumstances. In a similar manner, according to Peirce, what constitutes the meaning of my statement "this diamond is hard," is the sum total of conditional propositions that describe possible results of my interactions with the object, to which the concept of hardness is ascribed.

Brandom uses his modal realism, as it is discussed in ST, as a tool devised to enrich the idea of perspectival objectivity. In presenting modal vocabulary as capable of specifying not only discursive norms, but also objective facts, relations, and laws, Brandom attempts to show how our *recognitive* attitudes towards each other are interwoven with our *cognitive* stance towards the world. There is a problem, however. On the one hand, Brandom insists that scorekeeping is only possible if there is an implicit normative residue in every act of giving and asking for reasons, i.e.

that what is *ultimately* the case is definitely out of our expressive reach. Brandom's idealism presupposes that "there are no finally adequate set of determinate concepts" (ST5: 204), and that the unrestrained fallibility of our knowledge does not constitute any threat to perspectively construed objectivity. Perspectival objectivity requires only that what we think is correct is correct *by our best lights*. On the other hand, his modal realism requires that "having conceptual content, standing in relations of material incompatibility and consequence, does not require anyone to *think* or *believe* anything" and that, "if Newton's laws are true, then they held before there were thinkers, and would hold even if there never were thinkers" (ST1: 24). As the Becher-Lavoisier example shows, holding on to both of these positions is likely to constitute a problem.

Peirce's realism is based on the distinction between the *reality* of would-bes, or thirdnesses, which are expressible in series of conditionals and related to each other by means of habits, and the *actuality* of things, facts, and events, which are concrete realizations of those would-bes and related to each other by the brute causal force. Reality, thus, is a characteristic only of laws and regularities, none of which can be reduced to any finite collection of facts or events here and now. Their reality consists in their capacity to affect our actual conduct – not just causally, but in terms of creating the possibility to make predictions of future events and to correct our habits in adjusting to possible results of those predictions. Thus, possible future, as it were, affects our present, thereby introducing an element of self-control to our thought and conduct. As a result, there is no conflict between Peirce's realism about general objects and his objective idealism, which Peirce defined as

[...] the doctrine of F.W.J. Schelling, that the relation between the subject and the object of thought is one of absolute identity. It supposes that all things exist in the absolute reason, that matter is extinct mind, and that the laws of physics are the same as those of mental representations. (W8:391).

### 3. *Linguistic novelty and rational constraint*

In both MIE and in ST Brandom faces the question of how the game of giving and asking for reasons accommodates linguistic creativity. The rationale behind raising this question is that the scorekeeping game presupposes the idea of interpretative equilibrium, which neither guarantees nor even suggests that, in playing the game, we will perform *interpretations* and not simply *reiterations*. In answering this question, Brandom refers to Chomsky's generative grammar and Kant's 2<sup>nd</sup> *Critique*. As a Kantian, Brandom postulates the link between novelty and constraint<sup>76</sup>: according to Kant, freedom can receive a positive definition only in the form of a regulative principle that lays constraints on our behavior<sup>77</sup>. In referring to Chomsky, Brandom lays stress on the fact that any natural language has novelty of expression as one of its essential features. At the same time, he makes the claim a Chomskian would not be willing to endorse; namely, that the freedom of expression is acquired by virtue of norms inherent in social practices. I suggest that Brandom's theory stands in need of explaining how Chomskian *linguistic* novelty translates into a particular set of *social* practices.

As Peirce shows in NL, there is an irreducibly triadic relation among a sign, its object, and an interpreting unit, where the sign always stands to this unit in the relation of future interpretation. As the latter always leads to the creation of a *new* sign, novelty appears to be a necessary inherent characteristic of every act of interpretation, linguistic as well as non-linguistic. As has been discussed in section 3.3, according to Peirce's description of different methods of belief fixation, this general interpretive creativity does not accompany just *any* kind of social discourse (recall that Brandom sets the task of finding a way to reconcile novelty and constraint

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<sup>76</sup> See, e.g., Brandom 1979.

<sup>77</sup> See section 1.2.

within the framework of the game of giving and asking for reasons as the communicative structure, which underlies discourse as a whole). According to Peirce, the one particular kind of social discourse that it does accompany is described by Peirce in FB as the fourth method of fixing beliefs, or the method of science.

#### *4. Habits vs. contents*

Peirce, like McDowell, recognizes the importance of experience, the notion of which supports his realist intuitions. It is the conceivable experiential outcomes of our interactions with the environment that define what we mean when we use language. Just like McDowell, Peirce agrees with Kant in that there is no experiential intake without the contribution of our conceptual capacities, but rejects Kant's transcendental story. Peirce's notion of sign, just like McDowell's notion of the conceptual, grows out of a reinterpretation of Kant's transcendental deduction of categories, but, as a result of this reinterpretation, acquires an ontological meaning Kant's transcendental idealism cannot accommodate. According to McDowell, there is nothing beyond the sphere of the conceptual, and for anything at all to be an object of cognition is to be a conceptual content. Similarly, in post-NL Peirce, categories receive ontological interpretation which suggests that there is nothing beyond the sphere of signs, and for anything at all to be an object of cognition is to be a sign.

Along with this similarity, there is a substantial difference. As has been shown in section 3.2, Peirce's reinterpretation of Kant's deduction of the categories led Peirce to formulating three kinds of reference that, taken together, formed the basis of his theory of signs: a sign is a mediating representation capable of standing *for* something else *in* some respect *to* something or



someone who can interpret it. Peirce emphatically denies that, as McDowell puts it, experiencing something is being directly *open* to the world, and insists that a sign's identity is always in its reference to something that this sign itself isn't. And yet Peirce's deduction yields the same result, which McDowell's introduction of the idea of openness to the world is initially aimed at: as Peirce's deduction shows, it is exactly *because* of the opaqueness of signs' structure that signs are capable of referring *not* exclusively through causal connection. An important advantage of Peirce's approach is that, in yielding this result, Peirce appeals not to the troublesome idea of *contents*, but to the idea of *habits*. According to both Peirce's maxim and his definition of a sign, it is what we habitually *do* in order to obtain knowledge about the world that is constitutive of the way the world really is.

##### *5. Community and the end of inquiry*

Peirce defines reality as the object of the ultimate agreement in opinions of inquirers attainable in the long run. This idea of the future community of inquirers is *regulative* in the Kantian sense of the term: while by itself it neither constitutes nor supports any empirical knowledge, it serves the heuristic purpose of regulating the ideas that constitute and support such knowledge as well as actions guided by those ideas. Being thus incapable of referring to any actual state of affairs, it does not tell us whether any particular belief is, in fact, true. But in establishing the ideal state of knowledge, what it does tell us, as a regulative idea, is that before we achieve that state, the meaning of any and every sign will consist in its future interpretability (or in what habits of conduct it is going to bring about), and that, therefore, no current state of knowledge is final.

The idea of ultimate communal agreement in the form of reference to a future interpretation is first expressed by Peirce in NL and SC. On this early Peirce's view, the content of any sign lies in its interpretability by some further sign. Eleven years later, in HMIC, Peirce formulates his maxim of pragmatism, which explains what this future interpretation consists in<sup>78</sup>. The maxim says that whatever there is to know about an object or a fact amounts to practical outcomes of what we are prepared to do given that we accept certain statements about this object or fact as true, and some other statements as false. Consequently, a statement expressing the content of an appropriate concept is considered to be correct or incorrect depending on how we would act on it, i.e., only in relation to patterns of possible human behavior. On this view, the link between what we mean and reality cannot be reduced to a mere agreement here and now. But neither can it result – as it does in McDowell's case – from the all-encompassing *nature* responsible for the immediate feeling of externality available to humans and unavailable to other species. Rather, it results from our interaction with and adjustment to the ever-changing environment. On this view, any experience is an experience of nothing else but this interaction, and there are no *contents* that can be independent from *acts* of the interactive experience.

The idea of ultimate communal agreement in the form of reference to a future interpretation *does not* entail that we don't know what any sign means presently. What a sign means here and now amounts to our current account of habitual actions, which involve our interactions with the sign's object, which we currently deem possible, and which we are prepared to perform given that circumstances are such-and-such. The idea of ultimate communal agreement *does* entail, however, that any one of our beliefs is fallible, which is to say that inquiry

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<sup>78</sup> See sections 3.2 and 3.3 respectively.

may undermine any one of our beliefs in the course of time (although not all of them at once). As has been discussed in section 3.2, Peirce's suggestion here is that, if we accept his notion of an extended community, we should agree that in many cases we do have objectively true knowledge, but that, nevertheless, we cannot be absolutely certain about this fact in any particular case.

This suggestion partly recalls McDowell's idea of our openness to the world, which, likewise, does tell us that in many cases, when we consider our judgments about the world as correct, we do, in fact, know things as they really are. The principal difference between the two views, however, is that, whereas for McDowell "it does not matter much that one can be misled" (MW: 9) and "the sheer intelligibility of the idea [of our openness to the world] is enough" (MW: 113), Peirce's maxim at least tells us something important about the role (statistically interpreted) errors play in our obtaining reliable knowledge about the world. In referring to the full account of meaning as the sum total of practical effects, the maxim of pragmatism represents the method, about which we know that it will be right on average in the long run. According to the statistical construal of the maxim (briefly discussed in section 3.3), it is rational to act only if the single case we are dealing with presently is considered as a member of the infinite series of similar, or comparable cases. Meanwhile, neither I, nor you or any finite number of researchers can actually confront the sequence. Therefore, neither I nor you are being rational unless here and now, in every decision we make, we identify ourselves with the unlimited community of future decision makers. It is this community, not any limited historical one or a particular member of it, that is, as a matter of fact, a proper subject of knowledge.

Kaplan (2009) stresses the fact that this sort of reasoning makes any *logical* choice also an *ethical* one: "It is this ethical principle – making our own the interests of the whole of mankind –

which Peirce insisted was basic for the logic of probability” (Kaplan 2009: 254). From this perspective, first, there can be no sharp distinction between facts and values: any decision made on the basis of the method of science, which presupposes an individual’s identification with the extended community, is immediately connected with an ethical choice. Second, as neither an individual can represent a proper epistemic subject, nor the world can mean anything without a communal research effort, there can be no sharp distinction between final opinion and the object of such opinion. Thus, Peirce’s notion of a community supports Peirce’s Schellingean idealism, according to which “the relation between the subject and the object of thought is one of absolute identity” (W8: 391). McDowell also, just like Peirce, defines reality as that which is thought in cognitions. But the problem with his account is that he defines the contents of thoughts as, on the one hand, open to us as real matters of fact available through practices of human upbringing and initiation into a custom, and, on the other hand, a result of communal practices that challenge and reassess those contents. This is not to say that these two ways to define contents are utterly incompatible with one another. But in MW McDowell does not give any detail on how it exactly works, in which sense conceptual contents that we are opened to are independent of those practices, and how our being in possession of a second nature can be reconciled with our cultural and linguistic differences.

In order to make his point about the objectivity of conceptual contents stronger, McDowell uses an example about cold fusion. On his view, in claiming that “cold fusion has not occurred,” we state a hard fact that will hold no matter what. But, as I claimed in section 2.5, from another perspective, given that the very idea of fusion at some point may (and most likely will) be radically reframed in the way the theory of phlogiston was reframed by the idea of oxidation, the question about the truth or falsity of the claim “Cold fusion has not yet occurred”

would be as irrelevant as the question of the truth or falsity of the claim “no phlogiston has ever been released”. The conceptual framework, within which the idea of phlogiston made sense, underwent a drastic change after Lavoisier discovered that the loss of mass of copper carbonate was the result of its giving out not phlogiston, but carbon dioxide gas. An important point is that the difference between what is given away in each of the two cases is not the difference in name only. What is given out does not represent the same stuff differently named, but rather signals a change in experimental practices as well as expected outcomes of those practices. Of course, “no phlogiston has ever been released” still has a truth-value – just as, for instance, “no yahoo has ever learned English” or “no snark has ever been caught” have truth-values – but whether, in light of what the idea of oxidation implies, it represents something in the world to which we are open in the way McDowell suggests, is an open question.

This situation can be avoided if what we place above our limited selves is neither a self-regulating game, where the mutual distribution of commitments says nothing about what is actually at stake in every particular move, nor the self-standing structure of experiential matters of fact, but the rule of action that fuses reasons and reality into the method-driven human effort addressed to the future. Consequently, what makes knowledge objective, in Peirce’s case, is our fixing beliefs according to such a rule of action as it is formulated in the maxim of pragmatism. The maxim implies the idea of a future community, because, in defining the meaning of a sign as the sum total of habits it would produce, it thereby defines the ultimate aim of inquiry, which, to use Peirce’s own words, it is

to get a settlement of opinion in some conclusion which shall be independent of all individual limitations, independent of caprice, of tyranny, of accidents of situation, of initial conditions [...] a conclusion to which every man would come who should pursue the same method and push it far enough. (W 3:19)

Science, according to Peirce, deserves our allegiance because it shows the most powerful way to transcend subjective beliefs and, in aiming at those beliefs that survive inquiry, latches on in a systematic way to reality. Peirce's account treats the truth or falsity of a belief as independent of what any actual inquirer or *limited group* of inquirers happens to think, and thus fulfills quite successfully the requirement that both Brandom and McDowell consider to be of crucial importance in their arguments against Wright's position (as described in section 1.1 above). Consequently, for Peirce, just as for both Brandom and McDowell, objectivity is something more than a mere agreement here and now. But, from a Peircean perspective, to make this point, we don't have to worry either about how to proceed from individual ascriptions to objective assessments, or about tackling the relationship between the contents of our experience and the language we use to store and reassess those contents. If this is correct, Peirce's pragmatism, in approaching the idea of objective knowledge in terms of practical effects of habitual action, may be represented as a middle ground account that mediates between McDowell's realism about conceptual content and Brandom's phenomenalism about discursive practices.

#### *6. Scientific community and the role of error*

I will conclude by discussing one last, *historico-institutional* aspect of Peirce's idea of extended community, which is important for a proper understanding of how objectivity fits into Peirce's version of pragmatism, and which can explain the difference between Peirce and Brandom. As has just been discussed, in Peirce's case, what stands in opposition to the individual and subjective is a peculiar interpretation of the social understood as representing objective knowledge. This interpretation is embodied in a set of institutional practices according to the method of science that helps us fix our beliefs more effectively than the other three methods

described by Peirce in FB. Throughout this paper, Peirce indefatigably lays stress on the fact that, although each of the four methods has its merits, only the method of science succeeds in developing the conception of truth as something *public* and supports the system of institutions that are best suited for yielding truth as a result. The idea of extended community appears to have a particular institutional form, within which the notion of error plays a highly important role. Peirce lays stress on the capacity to err as on essentially human capacity and links it to the evolutionary idea of fortuitous variation:

Inanimate things do not err at all; and the lower animals very little. Instinct is all but unerring; but reason in all vitally important matters is a treacherous guide. This tendency to error, when you put it under the microscope of reflection, is seen to consist of fortuitous variations of our actions in time. But it is apt to escape our attention that on such fortuitous variation our intellect is nourished and grows. For without such fortuitous variation, habit-taking would be impossible; and intellect consists in a plasticity of habit (CP 6.86).

There is a further link between the evolutionary role of errors and the institutional framework in which the capacity to err finds its best possible expression. Both Charles Peirce and his father Benjamin had been very explicit in their general statement that any good university (and, more broadly, any good research institution) had to nourish its scientific elite, and that the elite, in return, was to take the entire responsibility for science both as a field of practical experiments and as a social institution. On this view, science isn't supposed to be under any *immediate* social obligation<sup>79</sup>. The meaning of science proper, according to both Peirces, depends on two crucial conditions. First, science should be as far as possible from any kind of considerations of immediate practical application of its results: The Peirces saw it as an activity valuable and worth pursuing for its own sake. Second, only science can be considered a domain of human effort where there's absolutely no contradiction between belief and action.

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<sup>79</sup> Among many other sources on the subject, see Lenzen 1968; Peterson 1955; Menand 2001: 177-200; Struick 1968: 413-419.

Here is how these conditions are justified. By the end of the 1850s, within the short period of time between Laplace's *Celestial Mechanics* and Darwin's *The Origin of Species* science had been imbued with statistical methods, for which a concept of error was one of the essentials that supported the living thread between nature and the researcher. By applying probability theory and mathematical statistics to discrepancies of observation, a nineteenth-century scientist not only knew that her calculations contained a certain amount of errors; she actually *needed* these errors in order to build her explanatory model. By studying the distributions of her errors, she could retrieve the truth about nature by using the errors as tools for arriving at true beliefs. As Louis Menand puts it in *The Metaphysical Club*, statistical methods, in showing that every belief is falsifiable, "conquered uncertainty by embracing it" (Menand 2001: 182).

Given this role of error, together with Peirce's perspective on the responsibilities of science before the wider social world, the scientific community can be viewed as representing an ideal pattern of social life: whereas other social contexts often presuppose the need to conceal errors, statistically approached, errors themselves appear to be the principal building blocks of scientific practice. Keeping in mind the fact that, in the case of science, errors become an important *public asset*, accepting the idea of scientific community necessarily involves the defiance of any kind of pre-established unifying forms and conventions – including those "here and now" social ones, which cannot be tested and falsified. In other words, scientific logic tends to deny any possibility of non-reflective actions dictated by some beliefs fixed once and for all. Moreover, this logic insists on following a certain method that entails the rules for achieving a concrete result – the truth – and *not*, the norms of conduct (which would be exactly the case, for instance, for Kant's categorical imperative). The method is a master formula from which norms are to follow unambiguously.



Now to the aforementioned second condition, which states that science constitutes an exclusive domain of human effort where there's no contradiction between belief and action. According to Peirce's maxim of pragmatism, my ideas about reality consist in conceived conditional resolutions about my possible behavior. In following the maxim, therefore, I *always act on my beliefs*. Otherwise I am simply not doing science. For a researcher, knowing always involves doing, and, therefore, there can be no agreement *in words only*: every agreement between me and you presupposes us getting involved in a shared communal practice.

That said, on Peirce's view, only scientific community, a community without definite limits, offers a method of fixing beliefs whose application can ground a claim for objectivity. The reason for this is that, in the use of the method of science, reality is no longer determined by individual will (as it is in following the method of tenacity), social contract (as the method of authority has it), or *a priori* rules (as prescribed by the *a priori* method). According to Peirce, only the method of science succeeds in defining knowledge as a live communal practice, where the meaning of every concept should presuppose an account of the practical consequences of its possible applications<sup>80</sup>. And the needed constraint, in this case, is a necessary consequence of the self-corrective character of scientific practices.

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<sup>80</sup> One of the concerns that is usually raised about this approach to objectivity is the relationship between scientific research and democratic values. For instance, Kitcher (2011) sees this relationship as highly problematic and standing in need of close scrutiny and revision. Kitcher's view is that science should be made accountable to society, and it is strongly opposed to the theories that claim the relationship between science and democracy to be inherently harmonious simply by virtue of some natural affinity between the two (science as an unbiased research and a free exchange of information, and democracy as a necessary basis for open society and freedom of speech). A detailed analysis of Kitcher's view is, of course, well beyond the scope of the present research. But, even if Kitcher is right, whether the appeal to a particular institution is *not* the ultimate price for any kind of objectivity talk is a question that is yet to be answered.

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