How to Be a Hyper-Inferentialist

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0 Introduction

An "inferentialist" semantic theory for some language L aims to account for the meanings of the sentences of L solely in terms of the inferential rules governing their use. A "hyper-inferentialist" theory admits into the semantics only "narrowly inferential" rules that normatively relate sentences of L to other sentences of L. A "strong inferentialist" theory also admits into the semantics "broadly inferential" rules that normatively relate perceptual states to sentences of L or sentences of L to intentional actions. Robert Brandom's (1994) semantic inferentialism is widely taken to be, according to these definitions, a strong inferentialist, rather than hyper-inferentialist theory. I argue here that this is not so. Made explicit, Brandom's theory is a hyper-inferentialist, rather than a strong inferentialist, theory. I argue further that this is a good thing, since strong inferentialism is viciously circular: including rules into the semantic theory that relate perceptual states to sentences of the langauge requires us to appeal, in individuating those perceptual states, to the very meanings for which we are supposed to be inferentially accounting. Hyper-inferentialism does not face this problem because it does not appeal to any non-linguistic states. Though hyper-inferentialism is widely thought to be a theoretical non-starter, I argue here that it is a genuine theoretical possibility insofar as it essentially includes *cross-perspectival* inferences, inferences along the lines of the one from sentences "The ball is in front of n," "The ball is

red," and "The lighting is good" to sentence "*n* is entitled to say 'The ball is red'." This inclusion of cross-perspectival inferences, I argue, enables hyper-inferentialism to not only be *a* genuine theoretical possibility for the inferentialist, but, indeed, the *only* theoretical possibility.

1 Brandom's Purported "Strong Inferentialism"

In *Making It Explicit*, Robert Brandom develops what he calls an "inferentialist" theory of meaning, a theory of meaning according to which the meaning of a sentence is understood not in terms of its representational adequacy conditions but in terms of the inferential relations that it bears to other sentences. Towards the end of Chapter Two, he distinguishes between three grades of inferentialism (1994, 131):

> **Weak Inferentialism:** Inferential articulation is *necessary* for specifically conceptual contentfulness.
>
> **Strong Inferentialism:** *Broadly* inferential articulation is *sufficient* for specifically conceptual contentfulness—that is, that there is nothing more to conceptual content than its broadly inferential articulation.
>
> **Hyper-Inferentialism:** *Narrowly* inferential articulation is *sufficient* for conceptual contentfulness of all sorts.

Weak inferentialism, Brandom thinks, is a basically uncontroversial thesis that nearly everyone, with the exception of some hard-core representationalists like Fodor (1998), accepts. Given the way Brandom principally uses the term "inferentialism," according to which inferentialism is incompatible with representationalism, "weak inferentialism" is not actually a form of inferentialsm, since it is compatible with thinking that inferential and representational adequacy conditions are equally explanatorily basic.[1] So, the only grades of inferentialism that are aptly called

[1] As Brandom principally uses the term, and as I will use it following this principle

"inferentialism" at all are strong inferentialism and hyper-inferentialism. According to these three definitions, the distinction between *strong* inferentialism and *hyper*-inferentialism amounts to whether the "inferences" invoked in the semantic theory are "inferences" in the *broad* sense of the term or "inferences" in the *narrow* sense of the term. Brandom then claims to be defending *strong* rather than *hyper*-inferentialism (1994, 132).

For the moment, I will leave aside what Brandom actually says in drawing the distinction between the broad and narrow sense of "inference," and consider only what commentators generally take this distinction to be. Here is the standard way in which the distinction is drawn, from Jeremy Wanderer and Bernhard Weis's (2010) introduction to the definitive anthology of critical essays on Brandom's work:

> Both hyper- and strong-inferentialist agree that spelling out both inferentially sufficient conditions for, and inferentially necessary consequences of, asserting a claim, together with the propriety of an inference from one to the other, are sufficient for determining the claim's content. They differ in how they conceive the inferential articulation, with the strong-inferentialist allowing for a more relaxed conception of the relevant notion of inferential here.
>
> One difference concerns the possible inclusion of non-inferential circumstances and consequences as part of the claim's inferential articulation. By way of illustration, consider the claim 'this traffic light is red'. The appropriate circumstances of application of this claim include the visible presence of a red-coloured traffic light. This circumstance is non-inferential, in

usage, an "inferentialist" semantic theory for some language L aims to account for the meaning of the sentences of that language in terms of the inferential rules governing their use and not, for instance, in terms of their representational adequacy conditions. According to this usage of the term, it is a minimal condition of a position's being aptly called "inferentialism" that it is incompatible with "representationalism" in virtue of taking opposite order of explanation. Whereas a representationalist approach aims to account for the meaning of a sentence in terms of its representational adequacy conditions, understanding its inferential relations as derivative, an inferentialist approach to meaning aims to account for the meaning of a sentence in terms of its inferential relations, understanding its representational adequacy conditions as derivative.

> the sense that the circumstance is not itself an act of claiming. The connection between such non-inferential circumstances of application and the inferential consequences is, according to the strong-inferentialist but not the hyper-inferentialist, an inferential connection, (9).

According to Wanderer and Weiss, inferential relations, on the broad or "relaxed" conception, can include "inferential" relations that relate non-linguistic perceptual circumstances—for instance, a red-colored traffic light's being visibly present to a speaker—to a linguistic circumstances—for instance, that speaker's making the claim "This traffic light is red." On this way of distinguishing between "strong" and "hyper-" inferentialism, whereas the hyper-inferentialist only includes in their semantic theory properly inferential relations between claims, the strong inferentialist can include in their semantic theory "inferential" relations between claims and non-claims.[2] Almost everyone who talks about Brandom's "inferentialism," sympathizers and critics alike, takes it to fall on the "strong" side of this demarcation.[3]

A sampling of all the commentaries on Brandom's "strong inferentialism" reveals a common thread: strong inferentialism is inferentialism improperly so-called. Because there are, as an essential element of the theory, rules governing entry-moves that are not rules of *inference*, properly so-called, "inferentialism" or "inferential role semantics" is a somewhat misleading name for the theory. Here's just a small sampling of this common thread. Chauncy Maher (2012), who claims that the "big idea" of Brandom's account of the content of assertions is to "expand our conception of the rational or inferential role of assertion beyond its

[2] I leave the term "claim" here ambiguous between, in Brandom's vocabulary, "claimable" and "claiming." Wanderer and Weiss speak of inferential relations obtaining between acts of claiming, but Brandom often speaks of inferential relations obtaining between claimables.

[3] As far as I'm aware, the only place in which Brandom's view is *not* misrepresented this way, is Jeremy Wanderer's book (2008, 189-190). Wanderer is also the only person who, by my test specified below, does not take Brandom to be a strong inferentialist. It is therefore surprising to me that the view is characterized as it is in the quote above.

relation to other linguistic acts," thereby suggests that we may speak of the "rational role" of an assertion, rather than its "inferential role," (29). Jaroslav Peregrin (2014), who tells us that, in addition to knowing how sentences "can be correctly played within the game of giving or asking for reasons in response to utterances," speakers must also know how "they are correctly used also visà-vis nonlinguistic circumstances," thus adds that, while he follows Brandom in using the name "inferentialism," he isn't fully satisfied with the word "inferentialism," since it essentially includes "inferences" that are "not really inferential in any straightforward sense of the word," (37). Timothy Williamson (2009), who says that an inferentialist who appealed only to narrowly inferential roles "could not hope to explain how many words refer to extra-linguistic objects, or how language is used in interaction with the extra-linguistic environment" (137) says that, by the inclusion of " 'language-entry' rules that connect perceptual states to moves in the language game," inferential roles are "generalized as conceptual roles" (138), suggesting that, when we understand "inference" in the "broad" sense, term "conceptual role" is really more apt than the term "inferential role." Gary Kemp (2010), in giving as an example of a "language-entry rule," one's " 'inferring' (in a certain extended sense) the propriety of 'It's red' from a certain perceptual situation," puts "inferring" in scare quotes, noting parenthetically that the term is being used "in a certain extended sense," clearly implying that what the inferentialist calls "inferring" is not inferring in the proper sense of the term. Making this shared sentiment explicit, Mark Lance (1997) writes,

> I think Brandom at times misrepresents his own position a bit by calling it inferentialist. . . . [F]ollowing Sellars, Brandom allows for language entrance and language exit moves in his account of content and these are no less basic than are inferences proper," (182 n2).

We may thus use the following test for distinguishing whether a view

is an instance of strong inferentialism or hyper-inferentialism: if one is a strong inferentialist, one's position is not very well-represented by the term "inferentialism." If one is a hyper-inferentialist, on the other hand, one's position is well-represented by the term "inferentialism."[4] Now, I have picked out a few representative examples, but I could have picked out several more; nearly everyone who discusses Brandom's view takes it to be a "strong inferentialist" rather than "hyper-inferentialist" view according to the test I have just laid out.

2 The Shape of a "Strong Inferentialist" Theory

Let me now lay out the basic shape of this "strong inferentialist" view widely attributed to Brandom. On an inferentialist picture, strong or hyper, the meaning of a declarative sentence of a given language is to be understood in terms of the rules governing its assertoric use, where particular acts of assertorically uttering it are thought of as "moves" what Brandom calls "the game of giving and asking for reasons." The basic move in the game, made by assertorically uttering a declarative sentence, is the making of an assertion, or, in Brandom's preferred terminology, the making of a claim. It is helpful to introduce the following bit of notation to talk about claims. Where we have some sentence "φ," which we can talk about by using regular quotation marks, we can talk about the claim that one makes in assertorically uttering that sentence by using angle brackets, writing $\langle\varphi\rangle$. So, the claim that one makes in assertorically uttering the sentence "This is red" is the claim ⟨This is red⟩. Since

[4] It is worth noting that the appeal to "language-entry" and "language-exit" rules, though the most common reason, is not the only reason why the term "inferentialism" is often taken to be a misreprepresentative label for Brandom's semantic theory. As Lance (1997) also points out and MacFarlane (2010) elaborates, the basic rules that figure into Brandom's semantic theory are rules for *scorekeeping* rather than rules for *inferring*. Whether or not one thinks that "inferentialism" is a misleading name for the semantic theory in virtue of this feature of it, the important point is that this is not the feature along which the "strong-" vs. "hyper-" distinction is drawn.

claims are individuated holistically in terms of their normative role in a linguistic practice in which they can be made, they are not essentially tied to the particular sentences that are used to make them. So, assertorically uttering the sentence "Das ist rot" in a German-speaking practice, one makes the same claim that one makes in assertorically uttering the sentence "This is red" in an English-speaking practice, namely, the claim ⟨This is red⟩.[5]

The meaning of an empirically significant sentence, for instance, the sentence "This is red," is understood, on the strong inferentialist picture, in terms of the rules governing three basic categories of moves that can be made in a linguistic practice:[6]

1. language-entry moves
2. language-language moves
3. language-exit moves

Members of the middle category, language-language moves, are the sim-

[5]Readers of Sellars (1963, 1974) will recognize that angle-bracketing is functioning to do essentially the same work that Sellarsian dot-quoting does. There are, however, an important differences in the use of the two notations. Dot-quotted expressions are used to speak about *expressions* of a certain type, functionally-characterized utterables, whereas angle-bracketted expressions are used to speak of *moves* of a certain type, normatively-characterized makeables. The connection between these two notations can be stated as follows: What it is for an utterance to be an utterance of a •This is red• is for that utterence to be such that, in performing it, one makes a ⟨This is red⟩. Here, in using the indefinite article with the angle bracket notation, I am following Sellars's analysis of dot-quoted expressions, thinking of the term"the claim ⟨This is red⟩" as what he calls a "distributive singular term," analyzable as shorthand for ⟨This is red⟩s, thus used to speak of particular acts of claiming of a certain functionally-characterized sort.

[6]I am following Brandom (1994, 234-235) and diverging from Sellars in speaking this way here. Sellars (1954) speaks of language-entry, language-language, and language-exit *transitions*, and he is clear that he only considers the middle category as a category of *moves*. The reason is that he regards a move as a transition from *one* position in the game to *another* position the game. He takes it, however, that transition from, say, having a red sensation to uttering "This is red," though it *terminates* in one's occupying a position in the game, does not *start* with a position in the game. This may seem to be a minor terminological difference between Brandom and Sellars, but I think it actually goes quite deep and in fact underlies much of the confusion diagnosed here.

plest to understand, and are usually the go-to examples when starting to explicate strong inferentialism. For a given claim, the language-language moves are the narrowly *inferential* moves between this claim and the other claims. The goodness of such moves are articulated in terms of *downstream* and *upstream* inferential relations. Downstream, making the claim ⟨This is red⟩ *commits one* to the claim ⟨This is colored⟩, *precludes one from being entitled* to the claim ⟨This is blue⟩, *commits one* who is also committed to claim ⟨That is pink⟩ to the claim ⟨This is darker than that⟩, and so on. Upstream, making the claim ⟨This is scarlet⟩ *commits one* to the claim ⟨This is red⟩, making the claim ⟨This is blue⟩ *precludes one from being entitled* to the claim ⟨This is red⟩, and so on. These normative relations articulate the significance of the claim ⟨This is red⟩ insofar as it is normatively related to other claims that can be made with the assertoric use of other sentences of the same language, such as "This is colored" and "This is blue." If this were all there was to it, however, then language would not be *about* anything in the world. To put things in the words of John McDowell, if all we had were language-language moves, our apparent exercises of concepts with the use of language, would be "moves in in a self-contained game," (1994, 5). In order for language to make contact with the world, there must be, in addition to language-language moves, language-*entry* moves.

Language-entry moves connect moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons, assertions, with perceptual circumstances that are not themselves moves in the game. For instance, take a look at the following red ball:

Seeing this red ball is a perceptual circumstance such that, when you're

in this circumstance, you're entitled to the claim ⟨The ball is red⟩. The move from your being in this perceptual circumstance to your making the claim ⟨The ball is red⟩ is not an *inference*, since your being in this perceptual circumstance is not a claim. Nevertheless, it is still, in an important sense, *rule-governed*. Specifically, it is governed by (something like) the following rule:[7]

> **Language-Entry Rule:** If α is in the perceptual circumstance of seeing a red ball, then α is entitled to the claim ⟨The ball is red⟩

Strong inferentialism permits such rules into the semantic theory. On a strong inferentialist theory, we have language-entry rules like the one above in addition to language-language rules such as the following:

> **Language-Language Rule:** If α is committed and entitled to ⟨The ball is red⟩ and α is committed and entitled to ⟨The cube is pink⟩, then α is entitled to ⟨The ball is darker than the cube⟩.

There is a crucial difference between this language-language rule and the language-entry rule above it. This rule relate a player's *being committed and entitled to two claims* to their being entitled to another claim. The one above it relates a player's *being in a certain perceptual circumstance* to their being entitled to a claim. On strong inferentialism, this is precisely the sort of "broadly inferential" relation that we permit in our semantic theory. The thought motivating strong inferentialism is that we *must* permit such "broadly inferential" relations into our theory in order to explain how it is that linguistic items such as the word "red" are connected to non-linguistic items, such as the above red ball. The thought is that, without such rules, we, in the words of Williamson (2009), "could not hope to explain how many words refer to extra-linguistic objects, or how

[7] I am following the simple suggestion of Wanderer and Wiess quoted above. Various other formulations of language-entry rules have been made. The specifics don't matter for our purposes.

language is used in interaction with the extra-linguistic environment." But there is a fundamental problem with any inferentialist theory that appeals to such rules.

3 The Problem

The strong inferentialist, qua inferentialist, is committed to the claim that the meaning of the sentence of the form "x is red" is to be understood in terms of the (broadly) inferential rules governing its use.[8] We have now spelled out the strong inferentialist semantic theory in such a way that it includes the rule that if one is in the perceptual circumstance of seeing something red, then one is entitled to a claim of the form $\langle x$ is red$\rangle$. Such language-entry rules, are, in the words of Lance (1997), "no less basic than are [rules governing] inferences proper." What, however, are these "red things" of which we speak here? They are, of course, the things that are *red* rather than, say, blue or yellow. But *what is it* for something to be red rather than blue or yellow, or rectangular for that matter?

One might think that this is a silly question to ask a semanticist. In fact, however, this is precisely the sort of question that inferentialism must be able to answer and, indeed, is constructed so as to be able to answer.[9] Inferentialism is a theory of semantic contents, and one way in which one can ask about the semantic content of a predicate is to ask about the property expressed by that predicate. The representationalist, of course, can say the property expressed by some predicate is some worldly thing, and it's not the business of the semantic theory to specify any further what this thing is, but, for the inferentialist, where contents are understood as inferential roles, this move is not available.[10] So, the

[8] In the discussion that follows, I keep the "(broadly) inferential" implicit in talking of "rules."

[9] It's worth noting that the initial motivation for an inferentialist theory of this sort, first systematically laid out by Sellars, was, in large part, to give an account of properties in terms of functional roles of linguistic expressions (See Sellars 1963).

[10] Simonelli (2022) argues that this move is not really available to the representation-

inferentialist, insofar as she is committed to providing an account of the contents of predicates, is committed to providing an account of the properties expressed by those predicates. Moreover, the inferentialist has a systematic way of doing this. When asked about property semantically expressed by the predicate, then the inferentialist can articulate what that property is by transposing her account of the inferential rules governing that the use of that predicate from *normative* vocabulary to *alethic modal* vocabulary.[11] Thus, she can say, for instance, that for something to be red is, necessarily, for it to be colored in a certain way, a way such that, if something's scarlet or crimson, then, necessariliy, it's colored in this way, and if something's colored in this way, then it can't possibly be blue or yellow, and so on. What she's doing in saying these things is expressing the norms governing a claim of the form $\langle x$ is red$\rangle$ but doing so in alethic modal rather than normative vocabulary. In this way, inferentialism can, in principle, yield a very satisfying account of such things as properties, states of affairs, and other kinds of worldly contents which are taken as primitive in other kinds of semantic theories. The problem for the strong inferentialist is that her "and so on" systematically excludes a crucial dimension of the property being red—namely the fact that it's a *visible* property, something that one can *see* to be instantiated when one looks at objects that instantiate (provided that one has color vision and is in good lighting). The real issue here is not just that the strong inferentialist's account along these lines is *incomplete*, but, rather, that, if she really tried to spell it out, it'd be *circular*. Let me explain.

The strong inferentialist, qua inferentialist, is committed accounting for the property of being red (the content of the predicate "red") in terms of the rules governing the use of the expression "red" in a discursive practice in which it is used. But, for the strong inferentialist, these rules essentially involve language-entry rules of the sort just specified, which

alist either, but we can put that issue aside for our purpose of targeting the (strong) inferentialist.

[11]This is the account I extract from Brandom (2019).

make reference to such worldly things as "the perceptual circumstance of seeing something red." It is being in this circumstance, on the strong inferentialist picture, that is supposed to entitle one to a perceptual report of the form "x is red." But to be in this circumstance is to be related to something that visibly instantiates the property of being red. Thus, if we tried to invoke rules of this sort in order to account for the property of being red, we would be appealing to the very property we're supposed to be accounting for in attempting to give our account. The account we'd give would thus be circular. That's a problem.

What are the strong inferentialist's options in response to this problem? Insofar as she wishes to be a strong inferentialist, they are not good. The strong inferentialist must, on pain of circularity, reject one of the following two claims:

1. The conceptual content of the expression "red" is to be accounted for solely in terms of the rules governing its use.

2. The rules governing the use of the expression "red" essentially include the rule that the expression "red" is correctly applied in perceptual response to red things.

This leads to dilmma for understanding the rules that are invoked in the "inferentialist" semantic theory. Opting for the first horn, rejecting (1), amounts to endorsing weak inferentialism. Opting for the second horn, rejecting (2), amounts to endorsing hyper-inferentialism. Let us consider each of these horns in turn.

The first horn is to reject (1), saying the rules governing the use of the expression "red" essentially include the rule that the expression "red" is correctly applied in perceptual response to red things, but the conceptual content of "red things" here is not to be accounted for solely in terms of the rules governing the use of the expression "red." To say this is to reject strong inferentialism for "weak inferentialism," a view which, as noted above, is not aptly called "inferentialism" at all. This is what Michael

Kremer (2010) thinks we ought to do. On Kremer's account, understanding the conceptual content of the sentence "This is red" requires taking into account both the *inferential* dimension of its correct use—how the correct use of the sentence is connected to the correct use of other sentences such as "This is colored" and "This is green"—but also taking into account the *repesentational* dimesnion of its correct use—how the correct use of the sentence is connected to its application to particular objects in experience, such as the red ball above. The red ball above is something that can be *given to us in experience*, and given to us *as red*. This puts us in position to correctly say "This is red." On this picture, no attempt is made to explain, solely in terms of the rules governing the use of "red," what it is for the ball to be red, and one can say that it is in virtue of one's *experience* of ball, and one's experience of it as *red* that one is entitled to to say "This is red." Kremer's view is "weakly inferentialist," since he maintains that recognizing the ball *as* red, in experience, is recognizing it as exemplifying a *concept*, one that essentially stands in inferential relations to other concepts, such as *colored* and *green*, but that these inferential relations don't exhaust the content of the concept. Modifying Kant's (1998) dictum, Kremer tells us that, though representation without inference is blind, inference without representation is empty. Inferential and representational relations, according to Kremer, "are interdependent in the sense that only in concert do they give rise to cognition at all; yet they are independent in that neither can be reduced to the other," (230).[12]

Now, perhaps, at the end of the day, Kremer's Kantian picture of conceptual content is the one we ought to accept. My point here is not to say that it's wrong. My point is just to that it is incompatible with inferentialism. The aspiration of inferentialism is to account for the conceptual content of "red" in terms of the rules governing its use. If one of the rules that one must appeal to in order to give this account is that "red" is cor-

[12]Kremer says the following of concepts and intuitions, but he clearly implies that is also to be said of inference and representation.

rectly applied to things that one sees to be red, any such account would be viciously circular. Kremer acknowledges this, and thinks that we should give up the aspiration for such an account. He thinks the proper thing to do in response to the recognition of the failure of representationalism, wich aims to account for the meaning of a sentence in terms of its representational adequacy conditions and understanding its inferential articulation as derivative, is not to "invert the order of explanation" and be an inferentialist, but to give up the attempt for a reductive explanation of either the representational or inferential demension of conceptual content, in one direction or the other. To go this route, opting for horn (1), and accepting "weak inferentialsm," is to reject inferentialism.

The second horn is to reject (2), saying that the conceptual content of the expression "red" is to be accounted for solely in terms of the rules governing its use, and these norms *do not* include the rule that the expression "red" is correctly applied in perceptual response to red things. This, however, is precisely the sort of rule in virtue of which this view was a version of *strong* inferentialism rather than *hyper*-inferentialism. Thus, to say this is to abandon strong inferentialism for hyper-inferentialism, a view that is unanimously regarded as a theoretical non-starter. Perigrin (2014), for instance, says Brandom "rejects [hyper-inferentialism] as clearly untenable for a language containing empirical vocabulary," (7). Ironically, this view that Perigin claims Brandom "rejects as clearly untenable" is Brandom's own.

4 Brandom's Multi-Perspectival Hyper-Inferentialism

Let us now turn to the words that Brandom (1994) himself uses to characterize what he calls the "broad conception" of inference, in virtue of which he takes his theory to be "strong" rather than "hyper-" inferentialism:

> [T]he broad conception includes the possibility of noninferential circumstances and consequences of application. In this

> way [. . .] the specifically empirical conceptual content that concepts exhibit in virtue of their connection to language entries in perception [. . .] are incorporated into the inferentialist picture. The use of concepts with contents of these sorts can still be understood in terms of the material inferential commitment one who uses them undertakes: the commitment to the propriety or correctness of the inference from their circumstances to their consequences of application. Conceiving such inferences broadly means conceiving them as involving those circumstances and consequences, as well as the connection between them, (131).

Brandom speaks here of an inference from the non-inferential circumstances of the application of the concept "red" to the consequence of application. He does not hedge or put inference in scarequotes as the authors discussed above do. On the strong inferentialist conception that we've been considering, he ought to, since the sort of "inference" he's talking about is the move from, say, having a visibly red thing in front of one to saying "This is red," and this is not an "inference" properly so-called. But I take it that this cannot be correct. Brandom doesn't just say "inference" here; he says *material inference,* and the "move" from having a visibly red thing in front of one to saying "This is red," while it might called an "inference" with some strain, surely can't be called a "material inference." That's a technical term, and it is something that obtains between *claims*, or conceptual contents more generally. What then, is Brandom talking about when he is speaking of the "broad conception" of inference here? Here is a hint:

> [W]hat an interpreter *takes* to be the circumstances under which an expression can appropriately be used in noninferential reports [. . .] is an important feature of the empirical content the interpreter associates with that expression [my italics], (213).

Now, officially, for an interpreter *take* a player to be in the circumstance under which an expression can be non-inferentially used is for that inter-

preter to be *committed to the claim* that the player is in such a circumstance. I take it, then, that the "broad conception" of inference, on Brandom's way of using the term (and no one else's), is a conception that includes *inferences* from *claims* that say that players are in non-inferential circumstances of application to *claims* that say that they bear the consequences of applying the concept. For instance, it includes the inference from the *claim* that someone has a visibly red ball directly in their field of view to the *claim* that they are committed or entitled to the claim ⟨The ball is red⟩. In the sense at issue here, this is regular old material inference, not categorically distinct from the inference from the claim that the ball is red to the claim that it is colored. It is, of course, distinct from that more standard case of a material inference—it is a material inference that involves the attribution of a normative status to another player. Still, it an inference, properly so-called. Including such inferences in the semantic theory is compatible with hyperinferentialism, as I am using the term here.

On this reading, Brandom's semantic theory does *not* appeal to rules connecting perceptual states or circumstances to moves in the language game. What the theory appeals to in order to link language to the world are *reliability inferences*, and reliability inferences are *inferences* in the proper sense of the term, inferences *from* claims *to* claims. If these inferences are *inferences*, in the proper sense of the term, why does Brandom call them "broadly" inferential? I take it because they are inferences *across* scorekeeping perspectives, such that the one *doing the inferring* is not the one *making the claim*. Here is what he says on why observation reports can be counted as "broadly inferential" on his theory:

> [T]he sort of authority that observation reports exhibit counts as broadly inferential because of the reliability inference it involves on the part of the attributor of such authority. Although it sounds paradoxical, for this reason the role of a sentence in noninferential reporting should also be understood as falling under the rubric "(broadly) inferential role," (188-189).

Here, it is clear that what Brandom means in saying that we can understand a non-inferential reporting use of a sentence as "(broadly) inferential" is *not* that it involves, on the part of the reporter, an "inference," in some broad sense of the term, from a perceptual circumstance to its non-inferential use. Rather, Brandom means that it involves an *inference*, in the proper sense of the term, just not one by the reporter. Tautologically, the person who *makes* the non-inferential report is not doing so inferentially. Still, Brandom says, the non-inferential *authority* that the report has, and thus, its status *as* a non-inferential report, *is* derived inferentially. It's not the *maker* of the report who makes the inference, but the *attributor*, who infers from report's being made and reporter's being a reliable maker of such reports that the report is *authoritative*. It is only in virtue of being underwritten by such inferences that the reports can be counted as having non-inferential authority. The stronger claim that Brandom makes is that *all there is* to a report's having non-inferential authority is its being underwritten by these cross-perspectival inferences.

5 A Hyper-Inferentialist Semantics

To make things more concrete, let me give a simple example of the sort of rules that I take it *would* belong to a semantic theory of the sort Brandom proposes.[13] Suppose we're trying to inferentially account for the mean-

[13]Since the rules disucssed are simply inferential rules between sentences, they can be integrated into many existing inferentialist formal semantic frameworks. Of particular note is the sequent-based formal framework developed by the ROLE working group led by Brandom and Hlobil (See Brandom 2018) and the complementary implication space semantics developed by Kaplan (2022). One benefit of this sort of framework is that it straightfowardly permits the inclusion of defeasible rules of the sort proposed here. See Simonelli (2022, Appendix) for a schema for transposing the normative pragmatic inferential rules of the sort spelled out here into the sequents that figure in that formal framework and vice versa. It should also be noted that these rules are proposed only an example of the sort of rules that would figure into a hyper-inferentialist theory, and not as a serious proposal for the rules that the final semantic theory would actually have. It seems to me that language-entry moves are essentially tied to the use of demonstrative expressions. Even if a given move does not actually involve the use of

ings of set of sentences that contains, for instance, "The ball is red," "The cube is green," "The pyramid is scarlet," "The octahedreon is gray," and so on. We've gotten to the point in our theory where it seems that we need to consider the connection between, for instance, "The ball is red" and the circumstance in which one is able to non-inferentially deploy this sentence. There is no need to appeal to any relations between anything other than claims here. We just need to consider a wider class of claims than the ones with which we've concerned ourselves thus far.[14]

To spell this out, let X be a place holder for any of the common nouns belonging to these sentences, such as "ball," "cube," or "prism," let F be a place-holder for any of the color predicates belonging to these sentences, such as "red," "green," or "scarlet," and let n be a placeholder for any of the names of the speakers of the language who might use this vocabulary. Schematizing in this way, we can articulate rules such as the following:

> If α is committed and entitled to ⟨The X is scarlet⟩, then α is entitled to ⟨The X is red⟩.

We'll say that a player's "scorecard" *conforms* to a rule of this form just in case, if it contains an attribution of the statuses in the antecedent to some player, with any actual expressions of the right types substituted for the place-holders, then it contains an attribution of the status in the consequent to that player, with the same expressions substituted

any demonstrative expression it is essentially that, whenever one makes such a move, one is *able* to use a demonstrative expression, tokening a "This" that picks out an object to which one is non-inferentially applying a concept. One of the unfortunate features of *Making It Explicit* is that the account of perception, offered in Chapter Four, is offered in Chapter Four. That is, we don't get an account of what these reliability inferences that underwrite non-inferential authority that incorporates the full semantic machinery developed in the second part of the book. As my main task here is a conceptual one, I leave the full technical development of the theory to future projects.

[14] As Sellars (1956) says, "there is an important sense in which one has *no* concept pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects in Space and Time unless one has them all," (275). I'm not sure I'm prepared to make a claim that's quite that radical, but one certainly needs more than the set of concepts pertaining to color and shapes to have any of the concepts of color or shape.

for those place-holders. This sort of scorekeeping framework can be laid out completely formally, and one can officially define discursive roles as determined by scorekeeping rules of this sort, but this informal characterization will be sufficient for our purposes. I'll now show how we can articulate scorekeeping rules relating nothing other than commitments and entitlements to *claims* that allow us to inferentially account for the fact that expressions like "red" are essentially such that they can be non-inferentially used in perceptual reports.

The first set of rules we consider are classic language-language moves, material scorekeeping principles of permissive and preclusive consequence, such as the following:

> If α is committed and entitled to to ⟨It is day⟩, and ⟨We are outside⟩, then α is (defeasibly) entitled to ⟨The lighting is good.⟩
>
> If α is committed to ⟨The lighting is good⟩, then α is precluded from being entitled to ⟨It is completely dark.⟩
>
> If α is committed to ⟨The X is in front of n⟩, then α is precluded from being entitled too ⟨The X is behind n⟩.
>
> And so on . . .

Let us now conjunctively define a predicate "is positioned to see that" by way of the following inferential rules:

> If α is committed to ⟨The X is F⟩, α is committed to ⟨The lighting is good⟩, and α is committed to ⟨The X is in front of n⟩, then α is committed to ⟨n is positioned to see that the X is F⟩
>
> If α is committed to ⟨n is positioned to see that the X is F⟩, then α is committed to ⟨The X is F⟩, ⟨The lighting is good⟩, and ⟨The X is in front of n⟩.

Note that, given the way in which I have inferentially defined the predicate "positioned to see," one's being *positioned* to see that the ball is red does not mean that one is *able* to see that the ball is red. For instance,

if n is completely color-blind, then n might be positioned to see that the ball is red—having the red ball in front of them in good lighting—and yet not be able to see that the ball is red because they are incapable of seeing the colors of anything. In order to actually *see* that the ball is red, it is not enough that be one positioned to see that the ball is red. One must also be a "capable perceiver of the colors of things." This expression has material inferential content, as defined by rules like the following:

> If α is committed and entitled to $\langle n$ is an adult human being$\rangle$, α is (defeasibly) entitled to $\langle n$ is a capable perciever of the colors of things$\rangle$
>
> If α is committed to $\langle n$ is color blind$\rangle$, α is precluded from being entitled to $\langle n$ is a capable perciever of the colors of things $\rangle$.

It is also, however, a *reliability operator* that functions in conjunction with a corresponding *circumstance for response predicate*, "is positioned to see that," in enabling the inferential attribution of non-inferential entitlement, given the following rule:

> **RI:** If α is committed to $\langle n$ is a capable perceiver of the colors of things$\rangle$, and α is committed to $\langle n$ is positioned to see that the X is F$\rangle$, α is entitled to $\langle n$ sees that the X is F$\rangle$.

To return to our example now, and consider how it comes out on the hyperinferentialist picture just sketched, let us consider the following substitution instance of RI:

> **RI':** (X = the ball, F = red): If α is committed and entitled to $\langle n$ is a capable perceiver of the colors of things$\rangle$, and α is committed and entitled to $\langle n$ is positioned to see that the ball is red$\rangle$, then α is entitled to $\langle n$ sees that the ball is red$\rangle$

This rule is an *inferential* rule, properly so-called. It is a rule of permissive consequence, relating commitment and entitlement to two claims to entitlement to a third claim. As far as the discussion here is concerned, it

belongs to the same basic category of rules as the following rule, which is a paradigm of a properly inferential rule:

> If α is committed and entitled to $\langle$The ball is red$\rangle$ and α is committed and entitled to $\langle$The cube is pink$\rangle$, then α is entitled to $\langle$The ball is darker than the cube$\rangle$.

The key difference between this rule and the rule above it is that the first rule is one that normatively relates claims involving the attribution of reliability and the attribution of normative statuses to another player. Still, *both* of these rules normatively relate nothing other than *claims*. *Neither* of these rules normatively relates non-linguistic circumstances to a claim. Of course, the *claims* that are related are *about* non-linguistic circumstances. But, once again, that's true of *both* of these rules. The circumstance consisting in n's being positioned to see that the ball is red *is* a non-linguistic circumstance, but *so is the circumstance consisting in the ball's being red*. Just as having the second rule in our semantics does not require that the non-linguistic circumstance consisting in the ball's being red figure directly into our semantic theory (in the way that such a circumstance would figure in, say, a truth-maker semantics), having the first rule in our semantics does not require that the non-linguistic circumstance consisting in n's being positioned to see that the ball is red figure directly into our semantic theory. If the only sort of rules that figure into our semantics are rules like these, our theory is, in the sense of the term under discussion here, a form of hyper-inferentialism.

One final step is needed in order for this account to be complete. Note that the discursive significance of commitment to a claim of the form $\langle n$ sees that $p\rangle$ must be understood in the context of the fact that seeing is a way of knowing. To see that p is to know, through visual perception, that p. So, we have the following inferential rule:

> If α is committed to $\langle n$ sees that $p\rangle$, then α is committed to $\langle n$ knows that $p\rangle$

Finally, now, note Brandom's (1994, 201-204) account of what a knowledge attribution actually amounts to. To take someone to have knowledge that p, on Brandom's account, is to take them to be *committed* to p, to take them to be *entitled* to p, and to undertake commitment to p oneself. Putting this in terms of scorekeeing rules, we have the following:

> If α is committed to $\langle n$ knows that $p\rangle$, then α scores n as *committed* to p, α scores n as *entitled* to p, and α is committed to p.

So, by giving inferential rules through which a player can commit herself to a claim of the form $\langle n$ sees that $p\rangle$ we have, in so doing, given rules through which a player can score another player n as entitled to p. In this way, RI inferentially underwrites the attribution of non-inferential entitlement.

Anything that was good in what we said earlier, on the strong inferentialist model, we can now translate into properly inferential terms on the hyper-inferentialist model. The content of the phrase "in the perceptual circumstance of seeing something red," deployed in the specification of the language-entry move, can now be inferentially spelled out in terms of the above inferences. What it is to be in the perceptual circumstance of seeing something red is to be a capable perceiver of the color of things (as adult human beings who aren't color blind generally are), to be in a position to actualize that capacity (so, looking at something that is red in good lighting), and to actually actualize it (seeing, and thereby knowing, that something is red). We can have all of this in the theory, appealing to nothing other than inference rules, properly so-called, rules that normatively relate nothing other than claims. Though we can say everything that was good in what we said earlier on the strong inferentialist model, we do not have the same problem that we had there. Crucially, in the *meta-language* in which we officially articulate the semantic theory, there is *no mention* of red things or perceptual responses to them. The only mention of such things is in *claims* in the *object language*, claims whose

significance claims is understood *inferentially*, in terms of their normative relations to *other claims* of in object language.[15] The key move that makes hyper-inferentialism a genuine theoretical possibility here is that the object language essentially, and not accidentally, includes vocabulary for *attributing* commitments and entitlements to claims to other players. The hyper-inferentialism here is thus an essentially *multi-perspectival* hyper-inferentialism. Insofar as hyper-inferentialism essentially includes these multi-perspectival inferences, there is nothing precluding us from taking it to be a genuine theoretical possibility. Indeed, insofar as one is really an inferentialist, it is the only theoretical possibility there is.

6 Appreciating the Scope of Inferentialist Semantics

I have laid out, in broad outline, a hyper-inferentialist theory of meaning. In conclusion, it is worth briefly providing a diagnosis for why a hyper-inferentialist theory has seemed so implausible to those who've considered it.[16] Of course, one reason is that no one has seriously tried to work it out in the detail that I have here. Perhaps once one sees an actual hyper-inferentialist semantic proposal worked out in some detail, one will no longer dismiss such theories as untenable. Though some

[15]In this way, the hyper-inferentialist strategy, though a "full-blooded" theory of meaning in Dummett's (1993) sense in attempting to account for "the concepts expressed by [a language's] primitive expressions," deploys the *exact opposite* strategy to Dummett himself. Dummet's strategy is influentially characterized (and then criticized) by McDowell (1998) as requiring that the words for which we aim to be semantically accountered are used "only in first intention—that is, never inside a content-specifying 'that' clause" (91). By contrast, the hyper-inferentialist strategy pursued here requires that the words we accounted for be used *never* in first intention—that is, *only* inside a content-specifying "that" clause.

[16]The one exception in the literature of someone who has not dismissed hyper-inferentialism outright is Legg (2008, 2018). Legg argues that Peirce actually endorsed a form of hyper-inferentialism, aiming to account for the content of even sensory terms in entirely (narrowly) inferential terms. Legg doesn't say, however, exactly *which* inferences are supposed to go into the inferential articulation of this content, and so, after reading Legg's work, one is likely to still be left puzzling over how such a view could be made to work. I hope the present paper goes some way to resolving that puzzlement.

might be swayed in this way, I suspect that many of the above quoted commentators will still look at the sort of semantics I've presented with serious suspicion. Accordingly, to proactively respond to the sorts of criticisms this proposal is likely to get, let me conclude by diagnosing the deeper reason that commentators have dismissed hyper-inferentialism out of hand: they have, I take it, systematically misunderstood the scope of inferentialist semantics. In particular, there are two important distinctions that commentators have consistently failed to properly draw: the distinction between semantics and epistemology, on the one hand, and the distinction between semantics and metasemantics, on the other. Once these two distinctions are drawn, hyper-inferentialist semantics no longer has any intuitive implausibility.

The first distinction that commentators have failed to properly draw is between the *semantic* theory for a language L, which articulates the conceptual contents expressed by the sentences and sub-sentential expressions of L, including those that may function to express perceptual judgments, such as the sentence "The ball is red," and an *epistemological* theory pertaining to the speakers of L, which articulates how it is that a speaker comes to be entitled to make perceptual judgments that may be expressed by a certain subset of the sentences of L, such as that expressed by the sentence "The ball is red." Even given everything we've said here, there is nothing stopping us from saying, in the context of our *epistemological* theory, that the way one comes to be perceptually entitled to the claim that the ball is red is, in the paradigm case, by *seeing* that the ball is red.[17] The hyper-inferentialist view proposed here as a *semantic* theory only commits us to the claim that, if we want an account of the conceptual content expressed, for instance, by the sentence "The ball is red" or the sentence "n sees that the ball is red," the way we are to do this is by articulating the inferential relations that these sentences bear to other sentences of the language to which they belong. Insofar as these are sentences that

[17]See, for instance, McDowell (2009b, 238-239) for an expression of this view.

can function to express perceptual entitlement, this involves prioritizing the *inferential attribution* of this non-inferential entitlement rather than the *non-inferential possession* of such an entitlement. This prioritization of the perspective of the *attributor* in the *semantic* theory is perfectly compatible with the prioritization of the perspective of the *agent* in the *epistemological* theory.

On the epistemological theory that is the natural compliment of the semantic theory put forth here, if one is a capable perceiver of the colors of things, then one can come to be perceptually entitled to the claim that the ball through the act of *seeing* that the ball is red. For such a subject, the right way to answer the question "How do you know that the ball is red?" is to say "I see that it is." This expresses the grounds that one has for the one's application of the concept expressed by "red" to the object picked out by "The ball," and so this is the right way to answer a question asking for these grounds. Crucially, however, to ask for the grounds one has for one's *application* of a certain concept in a particular case is distinct from asking for an account of the *content* of that concept in general. To say *why it is* that one thinks that something is red in a particular is distinct from saying *what it is* to think that something is red in general. The epistemological theory that enables one to answer questions of the first sort may be distinct in form from the semantic theory that enables one to answer questions of the second sort. Of course, the two theories must be *compatible*, and there must be a way of articulating their *connection*, but they shouldn't be *conflated.* The compatibility of the two theories requires that the contents of the concepts one deploys in articulating the epistemological theory be accounted for through the deployment of the semantic theory. So, for instance, insofar as the concept of a capable perceiver of the colors of things figures in the epistemology theory, we must be able to deploy the semantic theory to give an account of that concept. I have sketched here how it is that an inferentialist, properly so-called, is able to do just that.

The second distinction that commentators have failed to properly draw is between the *semantic* theory for a language L and various aspects of (what is nowadays referred to as) the *metasemantic* theory for L.[18] Now, one must be careful wielding this distinction here, because, as Murzi and Steinberger have made clear (and as Brandom himself proposes, though not quite in these terms), inferentialism can itself be put forward as a metasemantic theory, relative to traditional representationalist semantics. For instance, one can use an inferentialist semantics to explain how it is that standard representationalist semantic contents such as sets of possible worlds are really to be understood as codifying inferential roles.[19] In this way, a semantic theory of one sort may serve as a kind of metasematnic theory for a semantic theory of another sort. Nevertheless, an inferentialist semantics, at least as I am understanding it here, is still a *semantic* theory in the sense of a theory of meanings.[20] To provide an inferentialist semantics for a language L is to provide a *constitutive* account of *what* the semantic contents of the expressions of L are rather than an *explanatory* account of *why* the semantic contents of the expressions of L are what they are or *how* they come to be what they are. In the context of an inferentialist semantics, the semantic content of an expression is understood in terms of the inferential rules governing that expression's use, and so one task of the metasemantic theory for an inferentialist semantics will be to explain why the rules have the structure that they do. Thus, for instance, the inferentialist semantic will account for the semantic content of "red" in terms of such inferential facts as that commitment to a claim of the form $\langle x$ is red$\rangle$ precludes one from being

[18] See Burgess and Sherman (2018) for a helpful discussion of this distinction and its applications in more mainstream semantic (and metasemantic) theories.

[19] For a detailed spelling-out of just how it is that an inferentialist semantics can do this, see Simonelli (2022).

[20] Given the way that I have spelled out inferentialism here, this is very clearly the case, though some proponents of inferentialism have explicitly denied this (hence the confusion surrounding the application of this distinction here). For interesting discussion see Stanley (2006), comments 19 (Block) and 21 (Stanley).

entitled to a claim of the form ⟨*x* is green⟩, but explaining *why it is* that this fact obtains is simply not part of the task. Of course, endorsing an inferentialist semantics commits one to the claim that there is *some* such explanatory story to be told, but it's not the job of the inferentialist semanticist, qua semanticist, to tell it. Now, telling the *metasemantic* story that explains why it is that the inferential rules are structured as they are and how it is that they come to be structured that way will, of course, involve referring to things in the world other than claims—things like red and green balls, but also such things as light waves, brain states, and so on—but that doesn't mean that our inferentialist *semantics* must relate anything other than claims.

To clarify this distinction, note that it is perfectly possible to tell a metasemantic story in which the properties that we're *actually responsive* in using some vocabulary (where this responsiveness partially explains why the norms structuring the use of that vocabulary are what they are) are very different than the properties to which we *take ourselves to be responsive* in using that vocabulary. Indeed, I take it that, as a matter of fact, this is just what is the case with the vocabulary that has been our primary example here: color vocabulary. We take it that, when look at a red ball and say of it that it's red, the property that we're responding to in saying this is the property of being red, a property that things visibly instantiate in certain lighting conditions and which is such that, if something instantiates it, it must be colored, it cannot be green (all over), and so on. Inferential semantics yields an account of this property: it is an alethic modal reification of the inferential norms governing the use of "red," "rot," "rojo," or any other predicate that plays the same functional role. I take it, however, that, as a matter of fact the property of being red is *uninstantiated*.[21] Things in the world like raspberries and stop signs don't actually instantiate the structure that we take them to when we ascribe to

[21] This claim has, to my mind, been argued most convincingly by Adam Pautz (2006a, 2006b), though see also Sellars (1962) for an influential argument.

them the property of being red. Rather, there is a complex set of properties that they and we instantiate (none of which are the property of being red) that together partly explain why we have the inferential norms that we do which constitute the fact that the word "red," as we use it, expresses the property of being red. Now, you don't need to agree with me about the metaphysics of color to appreciate the general philosophical point here. The point is just that there can be a radical discontinuity between, on the one hand, the properties we appeal in our metasemantic theory to in order to explain the norms and, on the other hand, the properties we inferentially articulate in our semantic theory that are conferred as contents by those norms.[22] Thus, from the perspective developed here, to think that one must refer to red things to which one stands in perceptual relations in the world in order to explain the conceptual content of "red" is to conflate two fundamentally distinct levels of explanation.

Insofar as the scope of inferentialist semantics is properly understood—that is, once we have properly drawn the distinctions between semantics, on the one hand, and epistemology and metasemantics, on the other—I see no reason to think that hyper-inferentialism is not a genuine theoretical possibility. Indeed, to reiterate, given the fundamental problem with so-called "strong inferentialism" articulated above, it seems to me that hyper-inferentialism is really the *only* genuine candidate for an inferentialist theory of meaning. Accordingly, I propose we drop the "hyper-" and simply call it "inferentialism." After all, as I hope I've made clear, it's the only kind of theory that properly bears that name.

[22]Now, if one is globally inferentialist (as one should be if one's an inferentialist at all), one should think that the scientific properties appealed to in the metasemantic theory—things like reflectance properties and brain states—must also be accounted for inferentially, and the metasemantic story that explains the norms of the scientific language that confer those properties as contents will be quite different than the metasemantic theory of ordinary language, belonging to general philosophy of science rather than standard philosophy of language.

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