

## On the Role of Explanatory Relations in Inferentialist Semantics

While the normative-inferentialist pragmatics of Brandom's *Making it explicit* sees the paradigmatic role of inferential relations in the *justificatory* function they can perform, Sellars's version of an inferentialist view of language grants almost equal importance to the *explanatory* aspects of rational discourse. For Sellars, the material inference rules that fix the meanings of our concepts must enable us not only to state, and to argue for our statements of, matters of facts, but also to explain such facts. Brandom has recently taken up this strand in Sellars's inferentialism by assigning, within the framework of his own normative-inferentialist view of conceptual content, a central theoretical function to alethic modal properties of concepts and inferences, such as the counterfactual robustness of material inferences. In this paper, I discuss the role of explanatory relations within a normative-inferentialist theory of conceptual content. I will first examine some key remarks of Sellars's and Brandom's (1). Subsequently, I will argue for a related but different view of the role of explanation in inferentialist semantics (2). I will conclude by suggesting a way of modifying Brandom's position accordingly (3).

(1) *Sellars* treats explaining and justifying as two very similar species of "reason-giving". This is mainly because in the relevant contexts, Sellars is thinking specifically of *scientific* explanation, whose logical core is, on his account, deductive argument (even though Sellars rejects the particular model of deductive explanation favoured by the positivist tradition).

Explanation, on this view, contributes to the meaning of concepts since by adopting a particular explanation, we introduce a new, or employ an established, material inference rule which connects the conceptual content on the side of the explanans with the conceptual content on the side of the explanandum, and which can be expressed in an alethic modally qualified sentence.

– While *Brandom* does not focus explicitly on the notion of explanation, he agrees, in recent writings, with Sellars about the semantic impact of explanatorily relevant alethic modal properties and relations, such as nomological connections: we incorporate explanations into the content of our concepts by adopting the relevant inference rules. Contrary to Sellars, however, the main significance of this connection lies, for Brandom, not in relating conceptual content to a theory of scientific reasoning. Instead, what he regards as crucial about this connection are certain implications with regard to modal logic and metaphysics. In particular, Brandom thinks that by starting from a concept of incompatibility that has both a deontic modal and an, isomorphically structured, alethic modal application, we can spell out the idea that not only rational discourse, but also reality itself is conceptually articulated. Alethic modal relations articulate, on this view, the world of objective facts in the same way in which deontic modal, justificatory relations articulate the logical space of reasons; by incorporating explanatorily relevant rules of inference into our concept use in the way mentioned above, we let our language approach objective reality.

(2) In order to determine the precise discursive significance of explanation, it is argued contra Sellars and Brandom that we can imagine a descriptive language in which no explanations can be formulated. Sellars and Brandom think that such a language is not possible as, they believe, it would lack the alethic modal background required for all concept-use (Brandom's "modal Kant-Sellars-thesis"). But first, not all material alethic modal relations have an explanatory value. Second, it is implausible that even those material alethic modal relations that actually are employed in explanations are *by themselves* able to explain anything. If, for instance, it is true in all possible worlds that A does not occur without B, it does not follow that the occurrence of A explains the occurrence of B, or vice versa. There may be a further factor, C, that necessarily co-occurs with A and that provides the real explanation for B. So something's having explanatory significance can neither be guaranteed by its being a material alethic modal relation in general, nor by its having any particular alethic modal properties. Rather, we must additionally assign the modal relation, or its constituents, an explanatory status: for instance, that it is a *causal* relation, or that a general proposition involved in it is a *law of nature*, etc. If this is true, someone can have sufficient mastery of counterfactually robust inference-rules to be capable of describing facts, without thereby being able to explain any of the relevant facts. – Therefore, the specific contribution of explanation to rational discourse should be distinguished from the role of counterfactually robust connections in general. Explanation enables us, in principle, to develop a coherent grasp of reality. It is only through explanation that we understand the connection of otherwise isolated and unconnected facts; and it is only through explanation that we even adequately understand the otherwise unintelligible individual facts in the first place, as explanation enables us to craft concepts whose use is governed by the right material inference rules.

(3) Brandom's inferentialist account of the mind-world-nexus as outlined in (1) can be accommodated to the view of explanation set out in (2) if it is granted that the world-side of the nexus consists not only of matters of facts articulated by alethic modal relations of material incompatibility, but also of irreducible causal and similar relations. (These can correspond to different types of explanation, including intentional explanation: Sellars's restriction to scientific explanation is unwarranted). If such a view is adopted, we can identify a particular way in which explanation contributes semantically to the content of our concepts, in addition to the modal rules of inference which follow from the explanations we adopt. The more specific contribution consists in a range of particular explanatory moves that are warranted by the content of the concept and that must at least in part be mastered by a competent user. Someone who grasps our concept of "fire" must not only know that under a certain range of circumstances, the application of that concept warrants the application of the concept "smoke"; she must also understand that fire is, under those circumstances, the natural *cause* of the smoke.