From the Second to the Third Person and Back Again: Habermas and Brandom on Discursive Practice

by

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Jürgen Habermas and Robert Brandom provide what are, arguably, two of the most important philosophical conceptions of language available today. Advancing in their own terms a social-pragmatic understanding of language, they each pursue an agenda with implications for epistemology, metaphysics, and moral theory that are centered in their distinctive conceptions of linguistic agency. Yet despite many similarities in their approaches, they remain divided on a key point at the heart of each of their respective theories concerning the centrality or priority of a participant perspective onto discursive practice vs. a third-person, observational perspective - an issue which is, for Habermas, decisive for his theory of communicative action as well as the uncompromisingly deontological and universalist conception of ethics he advances in its wake and, for Brandom, closely linked to the phenominalist approach to norms upon which his work is based. In this paper, I examine the dispute as it has been played out in a recent exchange between them, attempting, in particular, to explicate and defend a qualified version of Habermas’ claim regarding the priority of the participant’s perspective onto language in the light of his more developed treatment of this issue elsewhere. Once the defensible content of Habermas’ claim is clarified, I argue that Habermas’ critique of Brandom highlights an important way in which Brandom fails to adequately follow through in the development of his own understanding of language as a distinctively social practice. In the final analysis, the value of Habermas’ criticism of Brandom’s work lies not in exposing an unbridgeable gulf between their two perspectives onto language, one grounded in the perspective of the participant and the other in the detached, observational perspective of the third person, but rather in helping us to
work out more consistently the social perspective onto language which informs both their work.

**Participant vs. Observational Perspectives onto Language**

In his review of Brandom’s major work, *Making it Explicit*, Habermas raises many questions, ranging from its metaphysical commitments to its implications for our understanding of morality. Among them is a question concerning what he believes to be Brandom’s abandonment of the priority of the participant’s perspective in elucidating discursive practice in favor of an “objectivist” (Habermas 2000, 346) approach - an issue that is directly relevant to what is arguably the linchpin of Habermas’ conception of language. On first reflection, this characterization of Brandom’s theory might seem out of place as Brandom’s work is grounded in what he characterizes as an “I-Thou” relation. (Brandom 1994, 39) Language is a social practice in which the interplay of two perspectives, that of undertaking or, more specifically, acknowledging discursive commitments\(^2\) oneself and attributing them to others, is constitutive. Propositional content only arises in terms of the way expressions are used inferentially in the “game of giving and asking for reasons” in which we advance claims and assume responsibility to redeem those claims, if challenged, with reasons. (Brandom 1994, 141) Linguistic competence most essentially involves, then, the ability to keep track of the inferential connections between various commitments, both those explicitly acknowledged by the agent as well as those attributed to the agent as a consequence of acknowledged commitments.\(^3\) Understanding a speech act is, as Brandom puts it, a matter of “deontic scorekeeping” in which the content of a commitment can only be grasped in a way that is sensitive to the different perspectives from which the inferentially appropriate circumstances and consequences of the use
of that speech act can be specified: that of the one undertaking a commitment and of the other entitled to attribute commitments on the basis of those undertaken.  

The most fundamental perspective, however, is that of the one attributing commitments to someone else. As Brandom notes, “the deontic attitude of undertaking a commitment is definable in terms of attribution: undertaking a commitment is doing something that licenses or entitles others to attribute it.” In consequence, “the scorekeeping model trades in talk about the status of being committed for talk about proprieties of practical attitudes of taking to be committed.” (Brandom 1994, 196 & 194) Consistent with Brandom’s phenomenalism concerning norms, that “norms are in an important sense in the eye of the beholder,” (Brandom 1994, 25) there is simply nothing more to being committed than doing something that would entitle someone to take one as committed. Norms about proprieties of conduct do not come inscribed in nature but only emerge as a consequence of attitudes in which we hold each other accountable in particular ways. To be capable of acknowledging a commitment is, therefore, a matter of coming to understand what would entitle others to attribute such a commitment to one, of internalizing the perspective of the other onto oneself in this way.

For this reason, as Habermas explains, “the basic question of the theory of meaning: what does it mean to understand an assertion or a proposition? is replaced by the question: what does an interpreter do when she “properly” “takes or treats” a speaker as someone who raises a truth claim with his speech act.” (Habermas 2000, 324) And with this Brandom’s theory displaces the perspective of the participant in the game of giving and asking for reasons, an “I” who would be constitutively oriented to a “Thou” in a process of reciprocal exchange, in favor of the point of view of the detached interpreter: the observer of the linguistic practices of another who must
make them intelligible by assigning a range of commitments which makes sense of the content of those practices. Taking issue with Brandom’s characterization of the perspective of attribution as that of the second person, Habermas counters that, “there can be no second person at all without the attitude of a first person to a second person.” (Habermas 2000, 345) And it is precisely this orientation of reciprocal exchange with another, my interlocutor, which goes missing or, at the very least, is rendered inessential as the perspective of attribution moves to the center of Brandom’s theory.

This displacement of the perspective of the participant in favor of the third person perspective of the observer is not without consequence. In particular, Habermas argues that Brandom loses sight of the “point of linguistic communication (Verständigung)” which is to come to a mutual understanding or agreement sufficient to allow socially coordinated interaction in the pursuit of practical goals. Linguistic practices are, Habermas contends, essentially communicative in nature, only intelligible in terms of an exchange between participants who make claims with an expectation that their interlocutor will respond with a “yes” or “no” which makes a public contribution to a process of coming to a “rationally motivated agreement” between them. (Habermas 2000, 346) In losing sight of this social-pragmatic point of our linguistic practices, Brandom effectively “opts for a methodological individualism . . . (according to which) discursive practice emerges on the basis of reciprocal observation from inferences drawn by individual participants, each of them for herself.” (Habermas 2000, 347) In this way, Brandom betrays the social conception of language to which he otherwise seeks to do justice in his theory.

In response, Brandom readily accepts Habermas’ claim concerning the place of an
observational, third person perspective in his theory. He hedges somewhat in reminding us of the significant role played by non-observational elements in other parts of his theory, in particular, “the fundamental notion of a *challenge*, which supports the characterization of discursive practice as a ‘game of giving and asking for reasons’” and the symmetry that is maintained between the perspective of acknowledging and attributing commitments in his social perspectival account of propositional content. He also notes that he believes his theory provides the “conceptual raw materials” to make sense of the specifically *communicative* form of linguistic practice that Habermas privileges in his work. But in the end he grants that, as he puts it, “nothing is made of the notion of *face to face, reciprocal* communicative interaction aimed at the sort of understanding that consists in the *convergence* of the contents of commitments as specified *de re*, from one participant’s perspective, and *de dicto*, from that of the other.”

(Brandom 2000b, 362)

Brandom makes two basic points to justify his neglect of this specific sense of communicative interaction in his work. First, he denies that “mutual understanding in the strong sense Habermas is insisting upon is . . . required for the undertaking of joint projects” or the achievement of “a genuinely shared aim, like that of a genuinely shared belief or concept . . .” (Brandom 2000b, 363) Here the point seems to be that the kind of mutual understanding that Habermas makes essential for communicative action is unnecessarily strong. In his review of Brandom’s work, Habermas develops the sense of mutual understanding with which he is concerned in terms of the concept of a “rationally motivated agreement,” what Brandom attempts to capture in his preferred idiom as a “*convergence* of the contents of commitments as specified *de re*, from one participant’s perspective, and *de dicto*, from that of the other.”
Drawing on the image of dancing partners who share a dance without doing the very same thing, Brandom suggests, to the contrary, that a shared idea or joint project need not presuppose that everyone is believing the very same things, that everyone is in complete agreement regarding the validity claims that are being raised in their interaction. I can come to a shared understanding with someone without necessarily agreeing with them in this sense as long as I can coordinate our divergent points of view. This is what the distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* attributions of commitment makes possible. I can recognize a commitment as you have acknowledged it by attributing a commitment *de dicto* to you - (to borrow one of Brandom’s examples) “You believe that the inventor of bifocals did not invent the lightning rod.” - while also acknowledging my lack of agreement with you by attributing a different commitment *de re* to you - “You believe of the inventor of the lightening rod that he did not invent the lightening rod.” (Brandom 1994, 502) Despite our lack of agreement concerning Benjamin Franklin as the inventor of both the lightening rod and bifocals, we can still understand each other and, indeed, on the basis of that mutual understanding proceed with the joint project of attempting to rationally resolve our disagreement, if we so choose.

More significantly, though, Brandom challenges Habermas’ most fundamental contention that mutual understanding is the “point of linguistic communication,” which is not to say, as Brandom is careful to stress, that he believes it has some other point, but rather that “it is a mistake to think of it as having a point at all.” Linguistic practice has many functions. It may be that some functions which preceded the acquisition of language have a “causal, evolutionary sense” of priority insofar as they are indispensable for an explanation as to how we came to acquire our linguistic abilities. But once we came to acquire this unique ability, Brandom
stresses that “our transformation into discursive creatures swept all such considerations aside. For discursive practice is a mighty engine for the envisaging and engendering of new ends - thereby transforming the very concept of an end or goal, giving it for the first time its proper, practical-rational, sense.” (Brandom 2000b, 363-334) And so, it may be that achieving mutual understanding is a pervasive aim of our linguistic practices. It may even be plausible that the practical goal of coordinating social interaction has a causal, evolutionary sense of priority as a function without which our capacity for language might not have come to be in the first place. But this is still not to concede that either aim is the “point” of our linguistic practices, as it is possible to do other things with this practice beyond what we usually do with it or what we had to be able to do with it in order to acquire it.

“Reaching Understanding is the Inherent Telos of Human Speech”

As the crux of the disagreement between Habermas and Brandom lies in Habermas’ claim that “the point of linguistic communication” is “rationally motivated agreement” in the service of socially coordinated, goal-oriented action, it is important to be as clear as possible about what is meant with this claim. In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas gives a more developed version of at least one crucial dimension of his thesis. As he puts his point there, “reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech,” “an original mode of language use” in relation to which any other uses are “parasitic.” (Habermas 1984, 287 & 288) In making this point, he draws heavily on J. L. Austin’s speech act theory, in particular his distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary uses of language. With an illocutionary use of language I aim at securing an understanding of the meaning of what I am saying or the particular force of my locution, say, whether I am making an assertion or a warning when I note
the presence of a charging bull. Illocutionary uses of language are, for Habermas, communicative uses insofar as they aim at achieving mutual understanding between persons. With a perlocutionary use of language, I do not primarily aim at the communicative goal of achieving an understanding of what I have said, but rather at bringing about some state of affairs in the world which is extrinsic to linguistic understanding. For example, if I were to insult you, my primary intent would be to make you feel bad, not secure an understanding regarding the meaning or force of my insult. (See Austin 1962, 117) Though granting that perlocutionary uses of language, such as an insult, do not primarily aim at the illocutionary goal of securing mutual understanding, Habermas argues that perlocutionary objectives with language can only be achieved on the basis of successfully realized illocutionary aims. One cannot have perlocutionary aims with language without also taking for granted illocutionary aims that concern securing an understanding of one’s speech. If I seek to make you feel bad about yourself on the basis of an insult I am not, of course, aiming at achieving a shared understanding of the meaning of the insult. But I must take such a successfully secured understanding for granted as the necessary means to achieve my perlocutionary aim, as you will not be motivated to feel bad about yourself if you fail to understand the insult. (Habermas 1984, 293)

In specifying understanding as “the inherent telos of human speech,” Habermas does not intend, therefore, to deny that there are other aims one can have with language. But he does claim a form of priority for communicative uses of language which goes beyond the “causal, evolutionary” sense of priority Brandom is willing to grant to some of our purposes with language. His point is not just that perlocutionary uses of language are parasitic upon illocutionary uses in that the former could not be acquired without first having acquired the
latter. It is, rather, that there can be no perlocutionary use of language that can be completely abstracted from its communicative, illocutionary use. It is not as if having learned a communicative use of language we are then prepared to learn a perlocutionary use that would enable us, at times, to leave its communicative use behind. It is, rather, that even as we use language in a perlocutionary way we must also implicitly draw on our competence with its illocutionary use, if only as a necessary condition for accomplishing our perlocutionary goals. In insulting you I may be aiming only at the perlocutionary goal of making you feel bad. But I cannot pursue that goal without presupposing my discursive competence with securing a mutual understanding concerning the meaning and force of my words.9

There is, therefore, what we could call a functional10 priority to the communicative use of language oriented to achieving mutual understanding, for Habermas, that goes beyond a “causal, evolutionary” sense of priority. But in order to make this point in a way that is applicable to his critical concerns with Brandom, Habermas must show how the observational perspective of attribution, which is at the heart of Brandom’s account of language, is also parasitic in this sense - that interpreting the linguistic practices of another is an act that must implicitly draw on one’s competence with communicative uses of language oriented to achieving mutual understanding. Happily, this is also a point Habermas has considered extensively in The Theory of Communicative Action where he centers his attention on the way the interpretation of meaning can never be wholly observational, but must involve, if only implicitly, the adoption of the perspective of a participant in a process of reaching mutual understanding.

To begin, Habermas readily grants that the interpreter need not share any practical goals
This point, taken on its own, already seems to substantially qualify the claim he makes in his review of Brandom’s work regarding the social coordination of goal-directed action as “the point of linguistic communication.” In that essay he stresses a sociological conception of communicative action as action in service to the goal of a practical form of “social integration.” (Habermas 2000, 346) This sociological sense of communicative action might enjoy a causal or evolutionary sense of priority, in that we may never have acquired a capacity for language if this distinctively adaptive use had not been available. But it does not appear to enjoy a functional sense of priority in the sense that it is a practical competence with language on which every other use of language must implicitly draw - a point Habermas effectively acknowledges elsewhere with his consideration of conversation as a form of communicative action in which “the process of reaching understanding is detached from the instrumental role of serving as a mechanism for coordinating individual actions . . . .” (Habermas 1984, 327) More directly relevant to our concerns, however, is the way in which the act of interpretation may also become detached from that instrumental role of communicative action. As significant as my competence with communicative action in this sociological sense is, I can lay it aside when I seek to interpret the utterances of another person, aiming only at achieving an understanding of the other and, not even implicitly, at some form of socially coordinated practical plan of action.

Still, a wholly observational perspective is impossible to sustain in interpretive activity. Drawing from Michael Dummett’s theory of meaning in a way that dovetails with Brandom’s inferentialism, Habermas stresses that understanding the utterances of another must involve understanding the reasons s/he would give for the validity of those utterances. (Habermas 1984,
115) But I cannot understand something as a reason for an utterance in a purely observational attitude. I must also evaluate the soundness of the reason. “For,” as Habermas argues, “reasons are of such a nature that they cannot be described in the attitude of a third person . . . . One can understand reasons only to the extent that one understands why they are or are not sound, or why in a given case a decision as to whether reasons are good or bad is not (yet) possible.”

(Habermas 1984, 115 & 116) In grasping the reasons someone could give for the validity of her/his speech act, I must, if only implicitly, take an evaluative position in relation to those reasons, assessing, at the very least, to what extent they could serve as good reasons for such a speech act. I may, of course, disagree that they do, in fact, serve as good reasons. But I can only grasp how they could function as reasons for someone else through an assessment of how they could be sound in the context of a different set of beliefs. I can understand how you might take your belief that you have an appointment with me on April 9th as a good reason to believe you should meet with me today, April 8th, only because I see how it would be a good reason for believing that should one erroneously believe that today is April 9th. If you had told me that your reason for believing you should meet with me today was your belief that monounsaturated fats are healthier for people than saturated and polyunsaturated fats, I would not have a clue what you were talking about. I could not see how that belief could serve as a reason for your belief regarding our meeting today as I could not even begin to see how it could serve, in some context or other, as a good reason for that belief. I cannot, therefore, simply register the presence of reasons apart from an evaluative attitude that assesses the soundness or potential soundness of those reasons.

To adopt such an evaluative attitude toward the validity of a reason is to take a position
on its validity, to make a claim regarding its validity. I can see how your belief that you have an appointment with me on April 9th can serve as a reason for believing you should meet with me today only because I assess it as a sound reason, if I believe today is April 9th, or an unsound reason, if I believe otherwise. I could, of course, be uncertain as to its soundness if I am not certain of today’s date. In that case I will assume a merely hypothetical position: if today is April 9th, then your belief is a sound reason for meeting me today. But even with this hypothetical position I anticipate coming to a decision regarding the validity of the claim and only defer the decision because I do not yet have all of the information I need. In any case, I have done more than merely attribute a reason to you in a purely observational attitude. I have committed myself to a position that either directly challenges or confirms the validity of that reason or, at the very least, is defined in terms of the possibilities of challenging or confirming it and, as such, is open to challenge or confirmation itself. In taking an evaluative perspective onto the validity claims of the one I am interpreting, I implicitly adopt, therefore, the perspective of someone engaged to a reciprocal examination of validity claims in a practice of giving and asking for reasons. Such an exchange need never take place, of course. But I cannot understand the meaning of another’s speech acts without taking the perspective of someone engaged to such an exchange, of someone who can attribute validity claims to another only by virtue of assessing those claims by making claims or being prepared to make claims oneself that are themselves open to challenge and in need of defense. Making or being prepared to make claims in this way draws on my competence as a participant in the game of giving and asking for reasons, as the very act of making a claim only makes sense as the undertaking of commitment which is, in principle, open to challenge and which I am obliged to defend. As Brandom notes, a claim “is propositionally contentful in
that it can be the offering of a reason, and reasons can be demanded for it.” (Brandom 1994, 141)

In adopting an evaluative attitude toward validity claims, however, Habermas is careful to stress that we need not come to any evaluative conclusions. Sometimes the most we can ascertain is, as Habermas puts it, “why in a given case a decision as to whether reasons are good or bad is not (yet) possible.” In such cases we suspend our judgement between “yes” and “no”. I may not know if your reason for meeting me today is sound if, as with the previous example, I am uncertain regarding today’s date. As such, I am not necessarily bound to agree or disagree with you and can even indefinitely defer coming to such a conclusion, leaving a decisive assessment of the claim’s validity an open question. For this reason Habermas readily grants that “The role of interpreter and actor are not identical. Understanding does not of course mean agreement.” (Habermas 1991, 230) This is an important point. The concepts of understanding and agreement sometimes run together in Habermas’ work and just as it is not always clear in what sense we should take his emphasis on reaching understanding (verstândigung) (see Cooke 1994, 9), so it is not always clear in what sense Habermas himself should intend it. In this case, what Habermas has in fact established is that an interpretive or observational attribution of validity claims to a speaker is impossible apart from an evaluative attitude toward them. In a more careful statement of his basic thesis than we get in his review of Brandom’s work, he puts the point this way: “The orientation toward validity claims is among the pragmatic conditions for a possible understanding being reached, i.e. of understanding language per se.” (Habermas 1991, 238) But as it is possible to understand a speech act without coming to an agreement concerning its validity, it is not clear in what way our capacity to understand the meaning of the
speech acts of others is parasitic on a competence with reaching rationally motivated agreements.

Indeed, as Habermas has come to recognize, there are some speech acts for which the goal of agreement is completely irrelevant. In particular, he cites “the one-sided announcement of an action based on arbitrary free choice (‘I will leave tomorrow’) or . . . simple imperatives (‘Sit down’).” To understand your announcement that you will leave tomorrow, I must still take an evaluative stance toward the validity claims raised by your announcement. For example, in order to evaluate its sincerity as an expression of your intentions, I must be able to see how you have good reasons to make such an announcement. Perhaps you have responsibilities elsewhere which entail cutting your visit short. But I understand the validity of such reasons as relative to your interests and projects. Given your concerns with your responsibilities elsewhere it is rational for you to leave tomorrow. I do not have to accept such reasons as valid for myself and agree with them in the sense of seeing how they can serve as valid reasons for me to leave as well. Agreement, in this sense, is never even in question. A “weaker sense of ‘mutual understanding’” is all that is sought in which my evaluative stance is focused on how “the reasons supporting the sincerity of the actor’s intention can qualify as good reasons only according to premises that are valid for the actor but not for his addressee.” (Habermas 1998, 321 & 322)

Habermas’ tendency to understand rationally motivated agreement as the point of communicative action makes sense within the broader context of his social theory and its interest in understanding the variety of ways a social bond is established between individuals: through systemic mechanisms such as the exercise of power in the state and the medium of
money in the market or through communicative mechanisms which secure and maintain shared understandings in the life-world. (See, in particular, Habermas 1987, 349-357 and 1984, 10-13.) In this context, the role communicative action plays in overcoming rifts in our shared life-world through rationally motivated agreements is of decisive sociological significance. But, as with the sociologically significant aim of securing socially coordinated interaction in the service of goal-oriented action, we are still some distance from the functional sense of priority which Habermas seeks for his understanding of communicative action. Just because rationally motivated agreements can play a decisive role in the maintenance of shared life-worlds, it does not follow that every use of language must functionally presuppose a competence with achieving that particular communicative goal.

For these reasons, Habermas would be well-served to more rigorously distinguish understanding and agreement in his dispute with Brandom and accept Brandom’s criticisms of the “strong” sense of mutual understanding which Habermas prioritizes as the point of linguistic communication. But if we relax our conception of mutual understanding, endorsing the “weaker sense of ‘mutual understanding’” which is at work even in understanding the expression of intentions and simple imperatives and distinguish, in this way, mutual understanding from rationally motivated agreement, Habermas’ thesis becomes more defensible. For mutual understanding in this weaker sense is an unavoidable aim in our linguistic practices, a use of language which every other use functionally presupposes. Though I need not seek agreement between myself and my interlocutor who expresses her/his intention to leave tomorrow, I still cannot understand this speech act as a sincere expression of an intent to leave without an evaluative orientation to the validity claims raised by it, assessing the validity of the sorts of
reasons my interlocutor might have for intending to leave. I understand her/his expression as a sincere intention precisely because I see how s/he could, in principle, have good reasons for leaving, reasons I would consider good myself if I were in her/his place. Seeking mutual understanding in this weak sense does not involve seeking agreement but it does involve a reciprocal, evaluative orientation toward the validity claims of my interlocutor, one in which I unavoidably make claims myself (as to the soundness of my interlocutor’s reasons) which are reciprocally open to challenge and in need of defense. It is a competence with a properly communicative orientation to language that I presuppose in every other use of language, be it a perlocutionary use such as an insult or an interpretive-observational use in which I, as Brandom would have it, keep score of the commitments I attribute to others. Communicative action, understood in this weakened sense, is a use of language upon which every other is, as Habermas has it, parasitic.

Brandom is right to make nothing in his work of “the sort of understanding that consists in the convergence of the contents of commitments as specified de re, from one participant’s perspective, and de dicto, from that of the other.” This strong sense of understanding, implying rationally motivated agreement, is not, as we have seen, “the inherent telos of human speech” and, therefore, does not deserve a central place in his account of discursive practice. But even the sort of mutual coordination of intersubjective commitments which Brandom illustrates with the image of dancing partners who share a dance without doing the very same thing presupposes an orientation to understanding in the weaker sense we have been delimiting. Keeping track of someone’s commitments presupposes evaluating their potential validity, seeing how other commitments also attributed could serve, in principle at least, as good reasons for them. In this
way, I make a claim myself concerning the validity of the commitments I attribute, a claim which is reciprocally open to challenge and need of defense.

It is the indispensability of this now qualified and weakened, but still distinctively communicative perspective onto language that drives Habermas’ claim regarding the centrality of the participant’s perspective onto language. We cannot aim at the sort of “one-sided understanding of another” which Brandom privileges in his scorekeeping account of linguistic practice, without also, if only implicitly, being oriented toward the sort of “mutual understanding of each other”¹³ that is, as Habermas has it, “the inherent telos of human speech.” I cannot undertake the task of interpreting the claims of others, of attributing commitments to them, without drawing on my competence with undertaking commitments as well and assuming responsibility for defending them as a participant in a communicatively oriented practice which, in the final analysis, just is Brandom’s game of giving and asking for reasons, now articulated in such a way that the participant perspectives of an “I” and a “Thou,” reciprocally oriented toward each other’s validity claims, is in clear view. For the practice of giving and asking for reasons is an inherently reciprocal endeavor in which attributing claims to another is impossible without making claims ourselves regarding the validity of those claims we attribute. And in making those claims we expose ourselves to the challenges of the other and stand in need of defending ourselves before those challenges. This is the upshot of Habermas’ insight that “reasons are of such a nature that they cannot be described in the attitude of a third person . . .” but can only be understood from an evaluative perspective that takes a position on their (potential) validity that is open to challenge and in need of defense. The perspectives of the first and the second person, in reciprocal orientation to each other’s validity claims, are absolutely indispensable, therefore,
to making sense of the game of giving and asking for reasons. In the final analysis, the third-
person, observational perspective onto language characteristic of the act of interpretation, which
Brandom privileges in his work, is an abstract moment of the reciprocal exchange of the game of
giving and asking for reasons, and is unintelligible apart from it.

Attribution is an Abstract Moment of the Game of Giving and Asking for Reasons

Phrased in these terms, this is a point that does not seem obviously inconsistent with the
general framework of Brandom’s conception of language. It is, most essentially, an insight into
the functional priority of the game of giving and asking for reasons for our linguistic practices - a
point which is, at the very least, convergent with the significance Brandom attributes to the game
of giving and asking for reasons in his work as the basis of the inferential articulation of our
linguistic acts and so also of their propositional content.\(^1\) For both Habermas and Brandom,
discursive competence presupposes competence in the game of giving and asking for reasons. But Habermas draws our attention to the way in which the perspective of attribution is
unintelligible apart from the reciprocal, communicative dimensions of that practice. It is, as I
have put it, an abstract moment in the game of giving and asking for reasons. And this point
seems to be at odds with Brandom’s own insistence on the priority of the perspective of
 attribution in his work.

In explaining why attribution is “the fundamental concept” in his theoretical explanation
of discursive practice, Brandom appeals to the way in which “the deontic attitude of
acknowledging a commitment is definable in terms of attribution.” (Brandom 1994, 196) To
acknowledge a commitment is to do something that entitles others to take one as committed.
Norms only exist for Brandom “in the eye of the beholder,” in the practical attitudes of a
community whose members take each other as responsible in particular ways. Taking this point in the functional sense that is important for Habermas’ thesis, Brandom is claiming that a practical competence with acknowledging normative commitments presupposes a competence with attributing them, with taking the point of view of the other onto oneself, in effect. But this is not a point Habermas denies. His point is just that in order to make the perspective of attribution intelligible one must also appeal to the perspective of acknowledging a commitment. Neither perspective is wholly intelligible apart from the other and apart from the “I-thou” orientation of the practice of giving and asking for reasons in which they arise. We can still accept, with Brandom, that normative commitments only exist “in the eye of the beholder” and that the perspective of attribution has an indispensable role to play in a theory of language that would respect this phenomenalist point. All Habermas denies is that attribution can be made the fundamental concept of such a theory of language, as if this observational-interpretive moment could be abstracted from the interplay of perspectives involved in the game of giving and asking for reasons and made sufficient for our understanding of that practice. Or, to return to Brandom’s way of putting the point, if we are to define the perspective of acknowledging commitments in terms of that of attributing them we must also be careful to see how the latter perspective can only be itself defined in reference to the former. This is, I believe, the only significant complication of Brandom’s account of discursive practice which a recognition of Habermas’ thesis of the functional priority of communicative action brings to it.

Normative commitments only exist in relation to the practical attitudes of the members of a community who take each other as committed in particular ways. But our capacity to take each other as committed is parasitic on our capacity to undertake commitments ourselves.
Neither perspective is intelligible apart from the other and apart from the roles they play in a practice of giving and asking for reasons. For the practice in which a community takes each other as committed is a social practice through and through, in which the perspective of the observer or interpreter is not that of a detached third person, but of the “thou,” a participant in a reciprocal relationship to an “I,” in which both perspectives are essential. When Brandom accepts Habermas’ characterization of the perspective of attribution in his work as a third-person, observational perspective, he is, I think, allowing himself to be misled by his basically valid, though inadequately developed, insight regarding the foundational status of the perspective of attribution for a phenomenalist understanding of norms into abandoning the social perspective onto language which otherwise informs his work. In accepting that attribution is carried out from the perspective of a third, rather than a second person, discursive competence ceases to be something that is intelligible only in terms of the game of giving and asking for reasons and becomes instead a capacity for observing that game from afar, the capacity of an individual disengaged from the practices of a community. The “methodological individualism” which Habermas sees in Brandom’s work emerges here and Habermas is correct to draw our attention to it. But it is an individualism which is not essential to Brandom’s theory of language as it is not a necessary consequence of that theory, but rather a product of Brandom’s failure to adequately follow through on the social perspective that otherwise informs his work. Only by stressing the mutual interdependence of the perspectives of attributing and acknowledging commitments as abstract moments of a reciprocal practice of giving and asking for reasons can we develop that social perspective in a way that does not ultimately betray it.

The value of Habermas’ thesis concerning the communicative nature of language lies in
the way it enables us to do just that: not develop a perspective onto language at odds with
Brandom’s but more consistently develop his own insights concerning language as a
distinctively social practice. Stressing the centrality of the participant’s perspective onto
language does not, as such, bring anything fundamentally new to Brandom’s account of
discursive practice as the game of giving and asking for reasons, which is at the heart of his
account, is already an inherently reciprocal orientation to validity claims. What Habermas brings
to the table is merely a more articulate recognition of this point. But the significance of this
recognition should not be downplayed. For apart from the first and second person perspectives of
the “I-Thou” relation, the game of giving and asking for reasons is unintelligible. The centrality
which Brandom gives to the third-person perspective of the scorekeeper is, therefore, at odds
with the centrality he gives to the game of giving and asking for reasons. If, as Habermas argues,
“reasons are of such a nature that they cannot be described in the attitude of a third person . . .”
then we cannot keep score on one another except as participants in the game of giving and
asking for reasons. In this way, the centrality which Brandom gives to the scorekeeper must give
way to the centrality he affords to the game of giving and asking for reasons. Habermas’
conception of communicative action enables us to see both the tension between these two
aspects of Brandom’s work and a way to resolve this tension which, as I have suggested, leaves
the basic apparatus of Brandom’s account of discursive practice fundamentally intact.

Two Remaining Considerations:
Brandom’s Conceptual Realism and Phenomenalism

There are two remaining questions that ought to be addressed in considering the cogency
of my suggestion that Brandom can (and should) accommodate Habermas’ conception of the
functional priority of communicative action (suitably qualified, of course, as I have done here) in his conception of language - considerations which, on the face of it, suggest that Brandom could only accept my suggestion at the cost of two other commitments which are significant, if not definitive, for his conception of language and its relation to the world. To begin, there is Habermas’ understanding of the connection between Brandom’s objectivism and his conceptual realism. Habermas characterizes Brandom’s objectivism as a “consequence” of his conceptual realism. (See Habermas 2000, 343) His idea is that Brandom’s metaphysical commitment to a conceptually structured rather than nominalistically conceived reality renders superfluous “the orientation of a ‘community of justification’ towards the goal of a discursively achieved agreement because (all assume that) the objectivity of the contents is guaranteed by the conceptual structure of the world, which is discursively merely unfolded and articulated in the human mind.” (Habermas 2000, 347) As reality already contains the conceptual contents we seek to articulate in our discourses about it, knowledge need not be conceived as a social practice of actively constructing conceptual interpretations of the world which are to be tested by way of their utility in guiding effective instrumental interventions in the world. It need only be conceived passively, as a kind of sensitivity to reality which does not require the justificatory efforts of an epistemic community to construct. Knowledge, as Brandom puts it characterizing Habermas’ charge, becomes a matter of “just letting the world wash over us, as it were.” (Brandom 2000b, 357) In this way, Brandom’s conceptual realism sets him up for the methodological individualism we have already noticed in which “the distinction between truth and ‘holding to be true’ can remain the affair of each individual participant in discourse” (Habermas 2000, 347) and the understanding of language can be a process of mutual observation
and attribution of claims based on each individual’s autonomous sensitivity to the conceptual contents of the world.

Habermas is not as clear as one might like as to the precise sense in which he believes Brandom’s objectivism is a “consequence” of his conceptual realism. He comments, at one point though, that exposing the inadequacies of objectivism “also casts a problematic light on the conceptual realist picture of the universe in which this conception has its roots.” (Habermas 2000, 347) And this suggests that Brandom could only accept Habermas’ criticisms of his objectivism, as I have recommended, at the cost of undermining his commitment to conceptual realism. A reasonably adequate discussion of Brandom’s conceptual realism is well beyond the limited scope of this paper. But it is important to note that Brandom himself sees no connection at all between his conceptual realism and the sort of passive individualism regarding knowledge which Habermas imputes to him. “We make our commitments,” Brandom stresses, “in the sense that we undertake them; we commit ourselves; apart from our activity, there are no claimings or inferrings. But in doing that we find ourselves bound beyond our ken, by how things actually are and what actually follows from what.” (Brandom 2000b, 360) In other words, as Brandom conceives it, it is precisely through our own efforts of actively constructing conceptions of the world that we find ourselves involved, in ways “beyond our ken,” with a sense of reality to which we can be answerable because of its conceptual structure. Or, as he also puts it, the authority the world comes to have over our claims regarding it is a socially instituted authority which we grant to the world in our discursive practices. (Brandom 2000b, 360)

Viewed in the light of such comments as these, it is, at least, arguable that Habermas has misunderstood the type of conceptual realism that Brandom is attempting to advance. Brandom
is not retreating behind the insights of philosophy from Kant to the present to a pre-critical form of metaphysical realism in which our knowledge of the world can only be construed as a form of passive sensitivity to it. His conceptual realism builds on insights regarding the socially constructive nature of knowledge, of knowledge as a product of the collective enterprise of giving and asking for reasons. As Brandom stresses, “the recognition of an independent, conceptually structured reality is a product of the social (intersubjective) account of objectivity” in which he attempts to explicate our conception of objectivity in terms of our practical need to negotiate the difference between attributing commitments to others and undertaking them ourselves.\(^{15}\) (Brandom 2000b, 360) This intersubjective account of objectivity has also come in for criticism from Habermas, as well as others. But the point here is that Brandom constructs his account of conceptual realism on the basis of his conception of objectivity as a product of exigencies inherent in our discursive practices. As such, our conception of reality as conceptually structured is equally, on his view, a product of our practices rather than a passive effect of “letting the world wash over us” and his conceptual realism provides no obstacle to his rejection of the sort of methodological individualism which Habermas attributes to him. There is no implication from his conceptual realism to a passive form of individualism in which we let “the world wash over us,” and so no implication to an objectivist approach to language that would be underwritten by that form of individualism. There is, therefore, ample room in Brandom’s work, for both a commitment to conceptual realism and, as I have recommended, an acceptance of a qualified form of Habermas’ thesis regarding the functional priority of communicative action in our linguistic practices.

The other point we need to consider concerns Brandom’s phenomenalism and whether
Habermas’ emphasis on the sense of communicative reciprocity at the heart of our linguistic practices is genuinely consistent with it, as I have suggested. I have, thus far, taken Brandom’s phenomenalism in a distinctively weak sense, implying no more than that norms “do not exist independent of the human practices which institute them . . . .” (Lafont 2001, 5. Also see note 14.) But it is possible to construe it in a stronger sense. Habermas, in particular, following up on Brandom’s use of “a contractualist model of establishing positive rights” to elaborate his idea, takes it as inconsistent with the Kantian insight that “the model of self-legislation . . . already presupposes that the legislator is guided by the very norms of rationality that supposedly first have to be ‘conferred’ . . . .” If norms only exist as a function of our recognition of them as binding, then it would appear that there could be no norms to guide our recognition of them, no basic sense of rationality to enable our self-legislation of such norms to take a rational form. This runs directly against what is perhaps Habermas’ must fundamental insight that “before the participants in discourse come on stage as ‘legislators’ of norms of action they ‘always already’ feed on the conceptual normativity internal to the structure of speech.” (Habermas 2000, 327 & 328) This basic communicative sense of rationality is, in turn, inseparable from the sense of communicative reciprocity that is essential to Habermas’ thesis concerning the priority of the participant’s perspective in understanding language: the way in which an understanding of our linguistic practices requires that we evaluate the validity of claims raised in speech, taking positions that are inherently open to challenge and in need of defense. Taking the participant’s perspective onto language, I find myself unavoidably bound to others, bound to a practice of giving and asking for reasons that is only intelligible as a practice of reciprocity. If Brandom’s phenomenalism is inconsistent with Habermas’ insight regarding the “conceptual normativity
internal to the structure of speech,” and this insight is essentially bound up with the sense of communicative reciprocity that must be taken on board if one is to accept Habermas’ thesis of the priority of the participant’s perspective onto our linguistic practices, then it would appear that Brandom can accommodate Habermas’ challenge to his objectivism only at the cost of abandoning his phenomenalism.

Habermas’ understanding of Brandom’s phenomenalism here certainly marks one possible way in which it could be developed. But it is questionable whether Brandom has in fact developed it in that way. Habermas’ argument is based on his understanding of how “a contractualist model of establishing positive rights” lies at the basis of Brandom’s conception of phenomenalism. But, in fact, Brandom only alludes to contractualist models as a “species of (the) genus” of the view that “valuing is the source of values.” (Brandom 1994, 49) It is, thus, only one of the ways in which the phenomenalist orientation is elaborated and cannot serve as the key to our understanding of it. In fact, Brandom underscores its inadequacy as a model for understanding his position by noting its complicity with the “regulism” which he, following Wittgenstein, rejects. The contractualist model falls short of an adequate understanding of normativity in the way it accepts that “explicit rules and principles are not simply one form among others that the normative might assume. Rules are the form of the norm as such.” Brandom, however, follows Wittgenstein in arguing for the primacy of norms that are implicit in practice. “Norms that are explicit in the form of rules presupposes norms implicit in practices.” (Brandom 1994, 19 & 20) Though this orientation is certainly not equivalent to everything Habermas means in speaking of a “conceptual normativity internal to the structure of speech,” it not opposed to the possibility, in principle. Indeed, at the end of his response to Habermas,
Brandom entertains the possibility of grounding morality, much as Habermas does, in
“commitments that turn out to be implicit in engaging in discursive practices at all.” (Brandom
2000b, 372) If Brandom’s phenomenalism is consistent with uncovering the grounds of moral
reasoning in the very structure of speech itself, it is hard to see how it renders the idea of a
“conceptual normativity internal to the structure of speech” inaccessible. As such, it does not
appear to be an obstacle to Brandom’s acceptance of Habermas’ conception of the functional
priority of communicative action in his account of discursive practice.

In conclusion, it should be stressed that this suggested *rapprochement* between Habermas
and Brandom is limited to a definite, though significant range of issues. There still remain
questions that sharply divide their work, in particular, Brandom’s conception of objectivity in
both its intersubjective and conceptually realist dimensions which, for Habermas, suffers from
the curious defect of being both too weak and too impossibly strong. But I believe Brandom is
right in drawing attention to some fundamental affinities between his work and Habermas’ and,
in particular, how his work offers the opportunity to deepen our insight into many aspects of
Habermas’ theory of language “which have not been universally appreciated or accepted.”
(Brandom 2000b, 361) Recognizing the mutual interdependence of the perspectives of
attributing and acknowledging commitments as abstract moments of a reciprocal practice of
giving and asking for reasons is a significant step, I believe, in being able to draw on Brandom’s
work in a way which enables us to see it as a different, though critically supportive mode of
articulating the same fundamental phenomena of communicative action and communicative
rationality which form the center of Habermas’ work. Getting past the misconceptions that form
the basis for their arguments regarding the role of the second and third person perspectives in our understanding of discursive practice, we find a significant domain of common theoretical ground between them capable of facilitating collaborative development of our understanding of language as a distinctively social practice as well as a more constructive debate regarding the implications of that view of language for our understanding of our relation to the objective world and ourselves as moral agents.

**Endnotes**

1. Owing generally to their shared social-pragmatic orientation and, more specifically, to a shared indebtedness to Michael Dummett’s theory of meaning.

2. Acknowledging a commitment is one of two ways in which a commitment may be undertaken, for Brandom. See Brandom 2000a, 174: “Undertaking a commitment is doing something that makes it appropriate for others to attribute it. This can happen in two different ways. First, one may acknowledge the commitment, paradigmatically by being disposed to avow it by an overt assertion. Or one may acknowledge it by employing it as a premise in one’s theoretical or practical reasoning. This latter includes being disposed to act on it practically - taking account of it as a premise in the practical reasoning that stands behind one’s intentional actions. Second, one may undertake the commitment consequentially, that is, as a conclusion one is committed to as an inferential consequence entailed by what one does acknowledge. These correspond to two sense of “believe” that are often not distinguished: the sense in which one believes only what one takes oneself to believe, and the sense in which one believes willy-nilly whatever one’s beliefs commit one to.” Also see Brandom 1994, 194.
3. Because what one believes oneself to be inferentially committed to in making an assertion is not always the same as that to which one is really committed or that to which others believe one is committed.

4. See Brandom 1994, 197: “The fact that the proprieties of inference a claim is involved in can be assessed from either of two social perspectives - that of the one attributing commitment to the claim or that of the one undertaking that commitment - is fundamental to the very notion of a propriety of inference. And since propositional and so conceptual contents of all sorts are constituted by the broadly inferential proprieties of practice in which they are caught up, such contents are essentially social and perspectival in nature.”

5. See Brandom 1994, 196 where he writes, “The attitude of acknowledging a commitment is in effect that of attributing it to oneself.”

6. In his commentary on a version of this paper I presented at the 2000 meeting of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association, James Bohman suggested that the dispute between Habermas and Brandom is better understood as one that centers on differing interpretations of the second person perspective required for discursive practice rather than one between a second and third person perspective. This way of characterizing the dispute has the virtue of avoiding the misleading suggestion that Habermas is accusing Brandom of stepping outside the sphere of normative assessment into some kind of naturalistic frame of reference with his characterization of his view as involving a third person perspective. But as Brandom accepts Habermas’ characterization of his position, including the characterization of the perspective of attribution as involving the observational perspective of a third person (see Brandom 2000b, 362) where he begins his response to Habermas’ charges by noting, “I think
this on the whole a fair characterization.”) I will continue to employ their way of characterizing the issues.

7. Brandom’s use of *de dicto* and *de re* commitments refers to two ways in which propositional attitudes may be ascribed to someone. “Ascriptions *de dicto* attribute belief in (commitment to) a *dictum* or saying, while ascriptions *de re* attribute belief about *res* or thing.” (Brandom 1994, 500) And so, to use one of Brandom’s example, to say, “He believes that the inventor of the lightning rod is not the inventor of bifocals,” is to make a *de dicto* ascription of belief, specifying the saying that would be endorsed by the one to whom we are ascribing the belief. To say, “He believes of Benjamin Franklin that he is not the inventor of bifocals,” is to make a *de re* ascription, specifying what the belief is about (Benjamin Franklin) even though the person to whom we are ascribing the belief may not know that Benjamin Franklin is the inventor of the lightning rod.

8. Habermas appears to have a more ambitious aim in his review of Brandom than in the passages I examine in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. In the earlier work, he puts his thesis in this way: “reaching understanding (*verstandigung*) is the inherent telos of human speech.” In his review of Brandom his point is that “rationally motivated agreement” in service to socially coordinated practical forms of action is the “point of linguistic communication (*verstandigung*).” Given the play on “*verstandigung*,” which “refers both to linguistic understanding and to the process of reaching agreement,” (Cooke 1994, 9) it appears that Habermas is aiming, with the latter thesis, to establish communicative action in a fully developed social-theoretical sense as the point of language, going beyond the more modest aims of his earlier thesis which was focused on the narrower goal of establishing communicative uses
of language as the telos of speech. My main reason for returning to Habermas’ earlier and more restrained thesis is that I believe that his more ambitious, social-theoretical thesis blurs distinctions which are crucial in his criticism of Brandom’s work and, frankly, is less defensible than the more modest version he pursues in his earlier work.

9. See Cooke 1994, 25 for a contrasting point of view. Cooke argues that Habermas merely succeeds in establishing the “conceptual” dependence of a communicative use of language on its perlocutionary or strategic use, which refers to the way one must be learned prior to the former, and not a “functional” dependence that would concern its use. Cooke is right that Habermas’ argument does not entail “what proportion” of a communicative use of language is necessary to “the functioning of a given linguistic community.” But this is not to say that there is no functional point entailed about the way a strategic use of language depends (not merely genetically, but structurally) on a communicative use.

10. I take my use of this term from Cooke. See Cooke 1994, 25.

11. For Habermas’ understanding and appropriation of Dummett’s work, see Habermas 1992, 68 & 77. The most important text of Dummett for Habermas is Dummett 1976.

12. In “From Kant to Hegel,” Habermas appears to attribute this point of view to Brandom as well. In describing Brandom’s position, he writes, “reasons cannot be understood unless their ‘weight’ is estimated at the same time. This explains, second, why the interpreter in turn takes a position with regard to the validity claim she attributed to the speaker. She weighs up whether ‘p’ is correct from her own point of view also.” (Habermas 2000, 325)

13. See Brandom 2000b, 363: “Be that as it may, Habermas will insist, there is still all the difference in the world between what I just called ‘one-sided understanding of another’ and
‘mutual understanding of each other’. And his claim is that the whole ‘point of linguistic communication [Verständigung]’ is to achieve the latter. But I deny this . . .”

14. I am taking Brandom’s phenomenalism in a weak sense here involving, as Cristina Lafont has characterized it, no more than the claim that norms “do not exist independent of the human practices which institute them . . .” Lafont complains that Brandom is not as clear as one would like about the implications of his phenomenalism and proposes that Making it Explicit suggests a stronger meaning for phenomenalism than the one I have assumed here. (Lafont 2001, 5) I will consider one possible stronger sense of that term that is particularly relevant to Habermas in a moment. But for the time being I want to simply discuss phenomenalism in this weak sense that would be no problem for Habermas to accept.

15. There is more to Brandom’s account of objectivity than the intersubjective story he stresses here, but it is this dimension of his account which is crucial in the point he is trying to make here with respect to Habermas. For Brandom’s intersubjective account of objectivity, see Brandom 1994, 584-607 and 2000a, 157-184.

Bibliography


