

Pragmatism About Content Through Pluralism About Intentionality

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1. Introduction

Pragmatism about intentionality is the view that social linguistic practices constitute and instantiate intentional relations. Another way of putting it is to say that social linguistic practices are the home of “original intentionality”, from which flows “derived” intentional properties (Haugeland 1998[1990]; Brandom 1994, 60). Part of the point of this paper is to eschew these ways of thinking—“original” and “derived” intentionality, of intentionality as monolithic, and thus of seeing pragmatism about intentionality as a view about ‘intentionality in general’. The aims of this paper are modest, if wide-ranging. I survey some ways of thinking about intentionality, and about pragmatism, and recommend what I take to be the best ways of understanding both, together. In so doing, I advocate what I call *intentional pluralism* and *taxonomic fundamental pragmatism*.

2. Pragmatism and Intentionality

Pragmatism about intentionality has faced the objection that it begs the question: since human beings require some kind of cognition, and thus intentionality, to engage in social practices in the first place, social practices cannot be the place where intentionality is instantiated, since the pragmatist is, by appealing to social practices to explain intentional content, presupposing a pre-existing intentionality.¹ In order to avoid this, pragmatists have generally held that participation in social practices does not require intentionality in the sense of semantically or conceptually

¹ Fodor and Pylyshyn 2015, Hutto and Satne 2015, Hutto and Myin 2017 and 2013.

contentful cognition, but rather that social practices display a kind of *practical intentionality* (contrasted with the *discursive* intentionality of the conceptually contentful) which requires only skillful responsiveness.² The kind of skillful responsiveness in question can be explained in terms of reliable responsive dispositions to stimuli, responses to affordances, or similar kinds of non-content-involving know-how.

These are the themes of this paper: what I call *intentional pluralism*, on the one hand, and what Robert Brandom has called *fundamental pragmatism*, on the other. Intentional pluralism is the idea that there is more than one form of ‘directedness’ that deserves to be thought of as *intentionality*, and that no one of these kinds is primary or paramount for intentionality in general. Philosophers have already recognized that there is more than one thing picked out by ‘intentionality’, such as the difference between so-called ‘of-’ and ‘that-intentionality’: what one is *talking about* and what one is *saying about* it.³ There is also the distinction broached above, between practical (skillful goal-directed activity) and discursive (conceptual content), and there are several recent attempts to give traction to the idea that intentionality or representation is somehow “bifurcated” (Price 2013, Sachs 2014, Shapiro 2013). But the relationship between the directedness/content and practical/discursive distinctions has not been explored, nor has the question of whether a *pluralism*, rather than bifurcation, is more appropriate.

Fundamental pragmatism, on the other hand, is the view that “to know or believe *that* something is the case is parasitic on more primitive kinds of know *how*—capacities to *do* something that is not yet saying, thinking, or believing anything” (Brandom 2011a[2002], 65).

² Brandom 2011c, 9ff.

³ The original for this is probably Searle 1983; see also Fred Dretske’s distinction between ‘topic’ and ‘comment’ (1995). Brandom 2014 describes this distinction as one between the *representational* and *propositional* dimensions of intentionality; however, due to the ambiguity of ‘representation’ itself between these two senses (‘representing as’ and ‘representing’ in the sense of ‘referring to’) this way of putting the distinction is perhaps not quite felicitous.

This leads to the fundamental pragmatist order of explanation, which is that “believing or knowing that things are thus-and-so...*is to be understood in terms of* skillful knowing how to do something” (Brandom 2011b[2004], 47; emphasis mine).

With these ideas about intentionality and pragmatism in hand, we can refine the claims of pragmatism about intentionality. The pragmatist about intentionality holds that linguistic acts within social practices are the paradigmatic form of *discursive* intentionality—the kind of intentionality where we find conceptual content—and that we should understand these practices in terms of non-content-involving practical intentionality.

On Brandom’s pragmatism, the practically intentional performances that comprise the right sorts of practices for instantiating content are normative attitudes of participants in the practice. We can understand these attitudes in terms of complexes of dispositions to permit or sanction performances in the practice, in particular the attribution and acknowledgement of practical commitments and entitlements.⁴ Some have argued, however, that the pragmatist cannot explain intentional content in this way, since attempting to explain content with merely non-contentful resources will result in a vicious regress or content indeterminacy and thus cannot account for determinate conceptual content (Hattiangadi [2007] and Dennett [2010]). These are the sorts of worries familiar from criticism of teleosemantics (the ‘disjunction problem’) and the literature on rule-following.

Note that this criticism, and the criticism with which this section began, are dissimilar. The first criticism depends on the idea that pragmatism seeks to explain intentionality in general, and that this will not work since participation in social practices requires intentionality already. However, once we make the distinction between practical and discursive intentionality and take

⁴ Brandom 1994 and 2000.

pragmatism to be an account that tries to understand the latter in terms of the former (in a way that does not make the former depend on the latter), this criticism is beside the point. I used it here simply to motivate the pragmatist need to reject a monolithic notion of intentionality.⁵ The criticism on the table now is about how pragmatism can possibly hope to explain discursive *content* by appeal to *non-contentful* practically intentional performances. No matter how we explain the cognitive machinery that makes practical performances possible, so long as these performances do not have discursive content of their own, the fact that those performances underdetermine specifications of discursive content haunts the pragmatist project.

An example will help. The activity of a parent who responds to a child's cry in order to rectify whatever is wrong is practically intentional: it is goal-directed, and its outcome is determined not merely instrumentally (i.e., based in desire-satisfaction), but in terms of whether or not it succeeds in achieving the end to which it is aimed, namely rectifying the child's distress. But if we try to understand this as a non-contentful sort of doing that might explain or explicate content, or on which content might supervene, we will find the task hopeless. Apart from the invocation of something with content, just what has happened here isn't determinate on its own terms. Perhaps the child cried out because it is hungry, and the parent moved to the child in order to feed it. That the cry is one of HUNGER and the response one of GOING TO FEED, we can say from our vantage point of the discursive. Further, for us the application of these concepts is *determinate*, in the sense of being particular contents with specific inferential entailments and incompatibilities, acknowledged criteria of application and normative assessment. But from

⁵ It is necessary to be clear about how practical intentionality is supposed to work. Indeed, recent work has done that by using the resources of enactive/embodied cognitive science to come up with a notion of contentless practical intentionality sufficient to get cooperative social practices off the ground. Such a view then goes on to see discursive intentionality as arising through normative linguistic social practices roughly corresponding to Brandom's treatment of the game of giving and asking for reasons (see Hutto and Satne 2015; and Hutto and Myin 2013 and 2017).

within this non-contentful practical doing, the situation is equally describable as a cry of PAIN OR HUNGER, and the response of GOING TO SOOTHE. And although some soothings might be feedings, not all are—these concepts have different content; nor does PAIN OR HUNGER have the same consequences of application as merely HUNGER. One might multiply examples. The point is, without an ‘in-game’ role for content, contentless practical doings underdetermine the content they are invoked to explain.⁶ This suggests that we need to re-think ‘fundamental pragmatism’, and at the same time get clearer about the plurality of kinds of intentionality and what the purpose, function, and/or explanatory role of each is.

3. Intentionality

So far, we’ve seen intentionality broken up into two binary distinctions: directedness and content, on the one hand, and practical and discursive on the other. We can get more fine-grained. Intentional phenomena in general can include: targeting, tracking, and indicating mechanisms (of organisms or machines); bodily senses; bodily movements; skillful goal-directed activity; and propositional contents and the meaning of the utterances which express them. Some of these are ‘subpersonal’, others exist at the personal level. Most of these are practical; only the last are discursive. We can give a classification⁷:

	Practical	Discursive
Subpersonal	- targeting, tracking, indicating processes - bodily senses	n/a

⁶ Brandom 1994 attempts to get around this by seeing things from the perspective of a Davidsonian Radical Interpreter who attributes contents to and keeps discursive score on the participants in the practices, then arguing (in the concluding chapter) for a “collapse of levels” in which we are to see that the interpreter’s scorekeeping collapses into the participants’ own score-keeping. I do not think this argument succeeds, not because Brandom is wrong that it is not *actual* normative attitudes that instantiate normative statuses but rather normative *proprieties* of attitudes that instantiate normative statuses—for this is correct—but because of his separation, in the first place, of the normative and the intentional, and his adoption of the project of trying to explicate the latter in terms of the former. See §4.2 below.

⁷ A pragmatist-friendly one, to be sure: e.g., someone like Fodor will disagree that there cannot be subpersonal states with discursive content.

Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - bodily movements - goal-directed skillful coping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - propositional attitudes - propositional content - linguistic meaning
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It should be clear that none of these need conflict. Indeed, it makes sense to think that various subpersonal intentional mechanisms are required to explain our personal-level practical intentional abilities and capabilities. Also, discursive intentionality presupposes the existence of practically intentional organismal abilities. Thirdly, we can understand the practically intentional in terms of ‘worldly success’—that is, whether or not the system actually does what it is supposed to do, or achieves its goal (does the missile hit the target, does the hawk catch the squirrel, do I succeed in grasping the cup, etc.)—but in order to understand the discursive we must understand a *content*, which is not a spatiotemporal particular but rather an abstract, linguo-conceptual item in the ‘space of reasons’.

The pragmatist point of all this is that there are two sorts of mistake one might make: to try to explain the discursive in terms of the subpersonal, or to try to explain personal-level practically intentional doings in terms of explicit, discursively intentional contents.⁸ That is to say, the pragmatist holds that the direction of explanation should not be from explicit representation to practical doing—rejecting that order of explanation is, after all, the basic tenet of fundamental pragmatism—and also that it is hopeless to try to locate intentionality at the subpersonal level, because nothing at that level is capable, on its own terms, of having inferentially-articulated conceptual content.

While I agree with both of these pragmatist theses my point in this paper is to stress a flaw in the way the first of these—fundamental pragmatism about discursive intentionality—has generally been developed to this point: as strategy that seeks to *explain or explicate* discursive intentionality *in terms of* personal-level practical intentionality. That is the topic to which I now

⁸ Cf. Brandom 2011c, 9-13.

turn.

4. Pragmatism

There are a few ways we might think of the fundamental pragmatist claim that “saying-, believing-, or knowing-that should be understood in terms of know-how.” Call these the *explanatory*, *explicative*, and *taxonomic* strategies. The first two are, I argue, the heretofore common ways of understanding the project. The latter has been broached, but not followed up on—but I believe it is the only way to make pragmatism about discursive intentionality workable.

Explanatory. This type of fundamental pragmatism has a form typical of analytic philosophical theories, and seeks to understand ‘contents-that’ in terms of ‘doings-how’ by reducing the former to the latter, defining the former in terms of the latter, or trying to show that the latter supervene on the former. This is one way of understanding Brandom’s project in *Making It Explicit*; though not, I think, the correct one, it is encouraged by some things he says in that book.⁹ This is the purest example of a strategy that falls to the indeterminacy criticism: in seeking to take ‘that-contents’ and reduce them to, define them in terms of, or show how they supervene on ‘doings-how’, this species of fundamental pragmatism faces an unbridgeable chasm between the practical and discursive, with discursive intentionality and conceptual content going missing in the process.

Explicative. This is another way of seeing Brandom’s project; the correct one, I believe, and one potentially less obviously problematic than the explanatory strategy. The goal here is to re-phrase everything in a different vocabulary to achieve an analytic understanding of discursive

⁹ See e.g. Brandom 1994, xiv, 9, 35, 37, 296f.

intentionality without the desire to reduce, define, or make any strong supervenience claims. In the terms he has developed more recently, the goal is to use the vocabulary of normative practical attitudes as a ‘pragmatic metavocabulary’ which is sufficient to describe what participants in a practice must do to count as using intentional vocabulary.¹⁰

However, though this strategy is more sophisticated than the previous one, it too falls to the indeterminacy problem, since it supposes that it might be possible to describe what participants in a practice must do to count as being discursively intentional in terms that are not themselves discursively intentional. It is not clear that, even using normative vocabulary, one can fully describe what participants must do to count as instantiating determinate discursive contents, since normative descriptions, to be themselves determinate, require intentional vocabulary.¹¹

Taxonomic. There is another way to understand fundamental pragmatism, however, and Brandom himself has broached it, though has not yet followed up on it. He has more recently been clear that he opposes a “strong, reductive form” of fundamental pragmatism and supports a more modest form, one that sees “discursive activity, from everyday thought to the cogitations of the theoretical physicist, [as] *a species of practical intentionality* (2011c, 10; emphasis mine). He does not hold out hope of “resolving essentially discursive knowing- (or believing-) *that* without remainder into non-discursive knowing-*how*...specifying in a non-intentional, non-semantic vocabulary what it is one must *do* in order to count as deploying some vocabulary to say something, hence as making intentional and semantic vocabulary applicable to the performances

¹⁰ See Brandom 2008. Brandom admits that in *Making It Explicit* he was ambiguous about this, with earlier incarnations of the work leaning more towards the explanatory, and the later towards the explicative, leading the final product to contain some inconsistencies. He would today prefer to see the project in explicative terms (personal communication; see also Brandom 2010a).

¹¹ See Rödl 2010 for this argument. Brandom’s response (Brandom 2010c) correctly identifies some errors in Rödl’s reading but does not address the point about the interconnectedness of normative and intentional vocabulary.

one produces” (2008, 78-79).¹²

This is a better way—to see discursive intentionality as *itself* a form of know-how, not a different thing, explainable *in terms of* know-how. As Brandom puts it in another context, the idea is that “specifically semantic intentionality displayed in language-use, engaging in discursive practices...should be understood *both as a development of and as a special case of* the sort of basic practical intentionality exhibited already” by ‘doings-how’ (2008, 179; emphasis altered). Brandom has, I think, formulated the right way to think about fundamental pragmatism, but it is not yet clear how this affects the pragmatist account of discursive intentionality. How can we understand discursive intentionality as *a form of* practical intentionality? Wouldn’t that be to understand content as a form of something non-contentful? Furthermore, how can such an account avoid circularity, and retain its reasonable naturalistic bona fides?¹³

I think that to answer these questions it will serve us well to ensure that this version of fundamental pragmatism avoids any non-pragmatist assumptions. One way of seeing what was amiss with the explanatory and explicative versions of fundamental pragmatism is that they did not abide by the pragmatist suspicion of dichotomies—essential to those strategies were two bifurcations: between explicit content and mere practical engagement; and between the merely normative and the determinately intentional. Now that we have, rightly, collapsed that dichotomy and see that it might be possible to see discursive intentionality as a species of practical intentionality, we should make sure that there are no non-pragmatist assumptions left in these conceptions. We need get rid of *all* the ‘Intellectualist’ residue that might infect our

¹² He thinks that we can find this strong form of pragmatism in the ‘pragmatist project of artificial intelligence’, and argues, using the example of doxastic updating, that this species of pragmatism will not work because it runs afoul of considerations similar to the Frame Problem (see Brandom 2008, chapter 3). How this argument relates to what I argue in this essay is not something I have space for, though I hope to address this in future work.

¹³ Assuming, of course, that naturalistic bona fides are a worthy goal; I will not touch this issue here.

understanding of intentionality. One of the great virtues of pragmatism was its rejection of the Cartesian explanatory strategy of explaining all thought, action, and practice in terms of inner explicit representations. The trouble, of course, is how to understand intelligent human activity in another way but which does not collapse into a crude behaviourism or instrumentalism. After all, to deny the Cartesian view looks at first glance to deny that intelligent human activity is *cognitive* at all. Which, as 20th century psychology showed, was a mistake.¹⁴

We can see the troubles into which pragmatism falls by looking at two different ways of rejecting Intellectualism. Dewey's (1925) rejection of Intellectualism, for example, is hindered by the fact that he thought that such a view was the only way of understanding robust conceptual content, and so thought he had to get rid of it and build his philosophy without it, seeing it as an only occasional achievement that exists in the most rarefied scientific and technical contexts, but not as fundamental to human mindedness in general. Brandom, for his part, *does* think that robust conceptual content is fundamental to human mindedness in general (2011, 26ff.); but because he also shares some of Dewey's assumptions of what content would have to be like—something radically different from the practical—he took another path, and tried to show how we could build content out of, or explicate it in terms of, non-content-involving but irreducibly normative practical doings.

The key insight of what I am calling the 'taxonomic' version of fundamental pragmatism, however, is that it *rejects the Intellectualist understanding of discursive content* and seeks to *pragmatize content itself*. It is a way of rejecting Intellectualism different from both Dewey and Brandom—rejecting it by ceasing to accept its rules, rather than accepting them but refusing to play the game or accepting them but finding a better way to play.

¹⁴ See Bruner 1990.

5. Recommendations

The taxonomic version of fundamental pragmatism avoids the problem of indeterminacy because it does not try to find a way to theorize the discursively contentful in terms of the practically normative but non-contentful. Rather, the aim is to understand the practices that instantiate content as being *sui generis*—as irreducibly discursively intentional. It is not that human beings engage in normative social practices which are themselves non-contentful but from which content arises; nor that all one has to know how to do to be discursively intentional is to know how to navigate non-contentful normative practical attitudes; but rather that discursive practices are intrinsically contentful ‘at ground level’, by virtue of being linguistic practices that have the structure of rule-following.

This involves the rejection of another Intellectualist idea, one which we’ve seen already in regard to practical intentionality: that if content is to play a fundamental role in discursive intentionality, it must be that the key role of content is in causally *bringing about* the discursive performance. Kant said that what makes human beings rational is that we can act by endorsing a representation of a rule, as contrasted with acting in unknowing conformity with some rule. The mistake of some pragmatists was to think that this couldn’t be correct, or that it is correct but needed pragmatist machinery underneath. Dewey, speaking for the former, gets into trouble with this when it comes to accounting for determinate content, as we saw. Wilfrid Sellars, speaking for the latter, understands a performance as being one of rule-following when an *explicit* rule plays a suitable *causal* role in bringing about the performance (Sellars 1949). Brandom tried to weld the two together, but inherited the flaws of both while progressing in other ways.

What all parties overlooked was that the *normative* role of the rule is not the same as whatever *causal* influence it might have. The rule, qua norm, *justifies* the agent’s doing as they

did, and helps us *understand* the agent in terms of their beliefs, desires, emotions, life projects, and so on—but it does not do this *by* its causal role, but by its normative role in governing the practice.¹⁵ This is a pragmatization of content, rather than trying to link non-contentful practices to content. Now content and norms need no longer be merely *implicit*, and thus indeterminate. They have an explicit role that allows determinate content, they just do not play the kind of explicit role which it was supposed that a content would have to if it was to be explicit—namely, being a conscious cause of a performance.

Finally, embracing the taxonomic form of fundamental pragmatism allows us to make sense of the explanatory relationships between subpersonal practical, personal practical, and discursive intentionality. Subpersonal practical intentional mechanisms causally underwrite the bodily capacities and abilities of organisms to get information from the environment and engage in the goal-directed activities of personal-level practical intentionality. Finally, once language comes on the scene, and mere social conformity can become determinate rule-following activity, a new kind of practical intentionality is possible, in which the norm-governed *use* of words, gestures, and symbols can take on determinate content according to the norms of the practices in which they are used. But this does not, and need not, suggest an Intellectualism whereby explicit rational deliberation and propositional contents are causally involved in practical performances. Just that these performances are done for the sake of, and are subject to, certain norms.

This paper has been an inventory of varieties, some recommendations of which varieties to choose, and a sketch of a way to develop the chosen variety. It does not aspire to anything more, and much work remains to be done. But I hope to have provided, if not the content of the view to which pragmatists should aspire, then at least the target at which we should be directed.

¹⁵ Which is not to say it can't also have a causal role.

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