Objects, objectivity and idealism

Robert Brandom's analytic Hegelianism
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1 Introduction: Analytic Hegelianism and Pittsburgh Hermeneutics

At the turn of the 20th century, Russell's *Principles of Mathematics* (2010 [1903]) and Moore's *Principia Ethica* (2004 [1903]) laid the foundation for the movement that was to grow into analytic philosophy. The philosophical outlooks the two Cambridge philosophers expressed in these works – Moore's early Platonism, Russell's realism about relations – were deeply antagonistic to the prevailing philosophy of their day. Russell and Moore were rebelling against what they thought to be the stifling dogmatism of British Idealism, which Russell (1993 [1952]) blamed for divorcing philosophy from common sense and assimilating it to theology. Ostensibly seeking to treat the problem at its source, Russell launched a wave of attacks directed against Hegel, tracing the metaphysical extravagance of idealism back to a reliance on Aristotelian logic, which he took Frege's innovations to have rendered obsolete.¹ Russell's critiques have become legendary, and were taken almost universally by a generation of analytic philosophers to reveal such deep flaws in Hegel's thought as to warrant abandoning of the old German thinker in favour of newer, more fertile pastures. Even long after analytic philosophy had moved on from Russell, Hegel's idealism continued to be dismissed as a laughable philosophical position. As a result, for the better part of the twentieth century no effort was made within analytic philosophy to separate Hegel's idealism from its more familiar Berkeleyan counterpart, and the “idealist” tended either to denote a nondescript philosophical bogeyman, or else to be used as a term of mockery and derision.²

A wave of careful scholarship into the foundations of analytic philosophy, succinctly brought together by Redding (2007, pp.1–20), has however revealed that the figure Russell and those following him took themselves to be rebelling against bears little resemblance to the historical Hegel. Rather, as Watson (1993, pp.98–100) argues, Russell's target is best viewed as a mythical “shadow” figure, a character invented to demarcate and reinforce the identity of analytic philosophy. Hylton's (1990) careful study of early analytic philosophy comes to a similar conclusion. While Hylton endorses Russell and Moore's rejection of Idealism, he admits that “for every argument that Moore or Russell could mount against Idealism, there is an idealist reply which points out a distinction that is being neglected, or one that is drawn erroneously; an assumption smuggled in, or the sense of a term distorted” (Hylton 1990, p.105). At best, Russell and Moore's break with Idealism represented a Kuhnian revolution, a gestalt switch motivated by an enticing alternative rather than a frank engagement with and conclusive refutation of

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¹ See, especially, Russell's critique of “the axiom of internal relations”, as recounted in Russell (1975, pp.42–50).
idealism.\textsuperscript{3}

It is unsurprising, then, that as scholars in the English speaking world regained interest in Hegel during the 1970s, what emerged was a new and largely unexplored thinker. In place of the doctrines of ontological pantheism and immaterialism once taken to make up the core of Hegel's thinking, Robert B. Pippin (1989) sees Hegel fundamentally concerned to think through the consequences of Kant's critical project, while Terry Pinkard (1994) lays stress on the social-recognitive account of reason that Hegel develops in \textit{The Phenomenology of Spirit}.\textsuperscript{4} This new wave of so-called “non-metaphysical” readings has begun to facilitate a rehabilitation of Hegel into contemporary debates within analytic philosophy. One philosopher who, ambitiously, seeks to set Hegel centre stage in such debates is Robert Brandom.

Brandom had secured his reputation within analytic philosophy before substantially publishing on Hegel. An unusual analytic philosopher, both for the breadth of his influences\textsuperscript{5} and his systemic ambition, Brandom seeks to offer a unified and historically sensitive account of language, rationality, logic and action. Characteristic of his approach is his pragmatist denial that we can give an adequate account of language based on a relation of reference between words and parts of the world (AR 47–55; MIE 67–94). Rather, Brandom takes the central feature of rational discursive practice to be inference, which he in turn explains in terms of norms of commitment, entitlement and responsibility. This amounts to what he calls a “top-down” rather than “bottom-up” semantic explanation (AR 13). Instead of explaining truth in terms of reference, and inference in terms of truth preservation, Brandom takes the norms which govern inferences to be first in the order of explanation, and attempts to give an account of truth and finally representation in terms of these norms. His most detailed and systematic working out of this project remains his monumental \textit{Making It Explicit} (MIE). Even this early work contains a number of scattered references to Hegel, but Brandom's most substantial engagement with Hegel occurs in his more recent work, which fills out the historical underpinnings of his thought (RP; TMD).

Brandom, however, goes further than the even most non-traditional new-wave scholars in the use that he makes of Hegel. Not only is Brandom happy to read Hegel in light of modern thinkers such as Quine and Wittgenstein (to whom he sees Hegel’s thought as complimentary; see RP 78–108), he portrays many of Hegel's ideas as anticipations of his own. Brandom's Hegel is a pragmatist (PTHI), a conceptual holist (HIHP) and, at times, even an inferentialist (HIHP 181). Moreover, Brandom has no scruples

\textsuperscript{3} See also Horstmann (1984) for a thorough treatment of Russell's critique of Hegel, and how it misses its mark.

\textsuperscript{4} Henrich (2003) and Hartmann (1972) laid much of the groundwork for this revival of Hegelianism. While Pippin and Pinkard are notable early examples, “non-metaphysical” readings of Hegel are now becoming ubiquitous. See Deligiorgi (2006) and Hammer (2007) for an overview of the terrain.

\textsuperscript{5} Brandom's influences encompass the German Idealists, the American Pragmatists, Frege, the early Heidegger, Sellars, and Habermas. See TMD for his debt to Frege, Sellars, Heidegger and the idealists. Brandom (2011a) reveals his relationship to the classical pragmatists, while Brandom (2011b) acknowledges Habermas.
ignoring central elements of Hegel's thought that he does not find amenable to his project. His interpretation is furthermore textually liberal, based for the most part on overarching structural features of Hegel's work rather than specific textual evidence.

This has lead many critics, such as Rockmore (2001), de Laurentiis (2007) and Falkenroth et al. (2008), to write off Brandom's Hegel as something of an American fantasy, a testament to the Anglophone world's inability to penetrate classical German philosophy. These critics have for the most part been content to show that Brandom fails to faithfully reproduce Hegel's ideas, and leave it at that. The core of de Laurentiis's criticisms is encapsulated in his accusation that “conceptual pragmatism attributes to Hegel some of its own fundamental theses despite their absence from (and sometimes incompatibility with) Hegel’s work” (de Laurentiis 2007, p.91), while Falkenroth et al. (2008, pp.108–111) explain that Brandom's reading only captures Hegel's task in the *Phenomenology*, not in his mature work, the *Logic*.

Brandom openly admits, however, that his reading “crucially depends on claims that [he, Brandom] undertake[s] [...] without claiming that Hegel would have acknowledged them” (TMD 103). In order to give a fair assessment of Brandom's treatment of Hegel, it is necessary to pay closer attention than these critics have to the terms and criteria of adequacy that Brandom sets himself for textual interpretation. Doing so will put us in a position to understand Brandom's hermeneutics, and so motivate the project that will occupy us for the body of this work.

### 1.1 Reading the mighty dead: *De dicto* and *de re*

Brandom leads into the historical essays of *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (TMD 90–120), the book in which his first detailed reading of Hegel appears, by giving an account of textual interpretation informed by the theory of conceptual content he develops in MIE. He begins by rehearsing the central tenet of his inferentialism, that the content of a claim is to be understood in terms of its role in reasoning; as what follows from it and what it follows from. The inferential consequences of a claim, however, depend on what other claims are available for use as concomitant premises. If I know that it is overcast in Melbourne, and that it is winter, then I have good reason to think it might rain. However, if instead I know that it is summer, then I have no reason to expect rain, since rain in Melbourne is uncommon during the summer, cloudy or not. The inferential significance of the fact that it is overcast differs depending on facts about the seasons that can be employed in multi-premise inferences.

In the same way, the consequences that an interpreter may infer from the writings of a historical

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6 In the sense of what may be legitimately inferred, not what actually is inferred; hence inference is a normative relation (MIE 12).
thinker depend on whether she restricts herself to collateral premises that thinker would have accepted, or whether she allows herself to make use of any collateral claim she personally holds true (TMD 94–108). For instance, if I import my own belief that the world cannot possibly be the product of a human or divine mind, I may be able to take Berkeley's idealism as a *reductio* against his empiricist starting point, but the same move would not be possible if I restrict myself to claims Berkeley himself would have accepted (since Berkeley made it clear that he did *not* take his immaterialist conclusion to be absurd). Picking up on the technical theory he develops in MIE (495–547), Brandom calls a reading of the first kind, which aims to determine what the author took the content of her claims to be, a “*de dicto*” reading. On the other hand, if the goal of determining what the author thought followed from the text is set aside in favour of determining what, from the interpreter's perspective, really follows from the text, then the interpreter is undertaking a “*de re*” reading.  

The importance of the set of background commitments that the interpreter allows herself becomes clear when we observe that Brandom's understanding of conceptual content as inferential role makes unavailable any hard and fast theory-language distinction (TMD 91). If the content of a claim is taken to be constituted by its inferential role, then the meaning of the claim to be interpreted is itself affected by the set of background commitments adopted. Consequently, we cannot suppose a two-phase model of interpretation which has the interpreter first setting the meaning of some thinker's claims, and then proceeding to interpret them against the background of some further set of commitments (either the interpreter's own or the thinker's). There is no text whose meaning can in principle be settled prior to adopting a particular inferential perspective. Rather, the process of understanding a claim (or at least of making this understanding explicit) just is the process of drawing out its inferential consequences. The two phases therefore become inseparable and must proceed simultaneously. The choice whether to proceed in the *de re* or *de dicto* mode must be made at the outset, since it will, literally on Brandom's account, have a hand in determining the identity of the text to be interpreted. To fail to clearly choose an inferential perspective before beginning the interpretation, Brandom warns us, is to set oneself up for confusion and equivocation about the rules of the interpretative game (TMD 105).  

Brandom refuses to privilege any particular set of background commitments, and claims that both  

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7 These terms derive from Brandom's analysis of the role of *de dicto* and *de re* propositional attitude ascriptions, which I explore in chapter three.  
8 Brandom's thinking bears the influence of his teacher Rorty (1984, p.49), who offers a similar description of the interpreter's predicament: “Either we anachronistically impose enough of our own problems and vocabulary on the dead to make them conversational partners, or we confine our interpretive activity to making their falsehoods look less silly by placing them in the context of the benighted times in which they were written”. Rorty adds that “we should do both of these things, but do them separately”. Brandom vindicates Rorty's flippant remark with his more sober and technical account of *de re* and *de dicto* ascriptions. For Brandom, we'll see, ‘imposing’ our own vocabulary and perspective on the dead is a rational necessity.
de re and de dicto interpretations have merit (TMD 99). Nonetheless, Brandom makes clear that the reading he gives of Hegel in TMD falls squarely in the de re category (TMD 103). Furthermore, Brandom takes himself to be engaging in an exercise he calls “reconstructive metaphysics” (TMD 111). Rather than aiming to faithfully reproduce Hegel's every claim, Brandom sets out to elucidate them by stripping them down to their bare essentials and then seeing which of Hegel's remaining ideas can be reconstructed from this minimal basis (TMD 112–113). After this process of reconstruction, those that remain unsalvaged are to set aside until a reconstruction of them is found (TMD 116–117).

It should now be clear why accusing Brandom of textual faithlessness is insufficient. To do so is akin to blaming the electrician for failing to fix the plumbing: It is simply not the task he set out to accomplish. For a criticism of Brandom's reading to be effective, it needs to take into account the nature of de re interpretation and criticise it as such. The terms of a de re reading as described so far, however, do not provide us with any straightforward way to subject it to criticism, and indeed one might worry whether the enterprise renders criticism impossible. Since the interpreter openly resolves to proceed by adjoining the reconstructed claims to her own set of beliefs and seeing what follows, the critic seems to be able to do no more than evaluate whether the interpreter has reasoned soundly. If the interpreter is furthermore free to decide which elements of the reconstructed thinkers thought are central, and what can be jettisoned, then de re interpretation begins to look, as Pippin (2007, p.153) worries, like a “Get Out of Jail Free Card whenever questions about textual fidelity arise”.

If we are to take Brandom's historical enterprise seriously, we need some way of subjecting Brandom's treatment of historical figures to scrutiny that does not shield him from all criticism by making his word on the interpretation final. Otherwise, if the only lights by which we can legitimately judge the success of such an enterprise are the interpreter's own, then every de re reading will be successful, but only because the terms of the project guarantee it cannot fail. One way of gaining the purchase necessary to subject a de re reading to criticism is suggested by Brandom's more recent writings.

1.2 Rational reconstruction

In his 2007 Woodbridge Lectures, Animating Ideas of Idealism (RP chap. 1–3), Brandom extends and complements the de re model of textual interpretation, linking it more closely to his reading of Hegel and his conception of reason itself. In the third and final lecture, History, Reason and Reality (RP 78–108), he develops a model of rationality that he attributes to Hegel by using the metaphor of judgement in common law. The central feature of common law that Brandom thinks can shed light on our rational practice is that in common law, unlike statutory law, the content of legal concepts are not determined by
any explicit set of principles or definitions. Rather, all there is to determine the applicability of a legal concept in common law is the history of that concept's application, in the form of decisions made by previous judges. But crucially, the fact that common law is, as Brandom puts it, “case law all the way down” (RP 84), does not mean that judges are permitted to make any decision they please. There are determinate norms in play in common law, because each judge must justify her decision by pointing to precedents. Looking more closely at how norms in common law are instituted, Brandom thinks, is key to understanding the nature of rationality.

Brandom suggests that in an idealised common law scenario, norms are instituted by relationships of reciprocal recognition (RP 87). This can be brought out by considering the normative relationships that pertain between a current judge and the earlier and later judges that share her tradition. The present judge is responsible to all past judges because it is their judgements that she must use to justify her decisions. But the present judge also has authority over prior judges since she can refuse to take a judgement as precedential. The authority she exercises over prior judges, however, is counterbalanced by the authority future judges exert over her. For if her judgement is too far out of line, then future judges will not be able to take this judgement as precedential, and the current judge will thereby be deprived of her status as normatively relevant. In so far as she does successfully justify her judgement by judiciously selecting precedents, however, the current judgement will itself set a precedent and future judges will become responsible to the present judge. In this way, every judge stands in relationships of authority and responsibility to every other judge, and it is precisely these relationships that institute and generate the conceptual norms in play.

Brandom uses this model of rationality to bolster his interpretative enterprise by highlighting the historical dimension of judgement conceived on this model (RP 92–108). In order to make the justification for her decision fully explicit, a judge must not only make a case for the precedents she points to, but also explain why those judges who set the precedents were judicious in their choosing, and so on. In this way, a judge justifies her decision by reconstructing a rational history of the concepts involved, ignoring those judgments that she deems non-precedential, and emphasising those that are. She picks out and privileges a particular trajectory of past judgements and allows them to be seen as presenting ever-more veridical appearances by successively resolving conflicts and tensions, culminating in her own view. This is precisely what is involved in taking one's views to represent reality (RP 100). Brandom accordingly contends that if we think of rationality in this way, then far from being sloppy scholarship, his interpretation of Hegel is an example of Hegelian reason par excellence. Ignoring all but those elements of Hegel's thought that Brandom deems relevant is, on this reading, just what Hegel recommends (RP 107–108).
Thinking of reconstructive metaphysics on the common law model reveals what sort of criticisms a reconstructive _de re_ reading is vulnerable to, by its own standards. In order to take a history to be a rational reconstruction, the interpreter must see it as culminating in a view of things as they really are. If the rational reconstruction culminates in the thought of some historical thinker (as Brandom's _RP_ leads up to Hegel's), then by presenting the history in that way, the interpreter has also committed herself to what she takes to be that thinker's position. As a result, rational reconstruction blurs the distinction between the interpreter and the interpreted, and accordingly, criticism of the interpretation becomes possible by way of criticism of the interpreter.

Thus, while the reconstructive metaphysician is shielded against charges of textual omission (since picking and choosing is of the essence in a rational reconstruction) and textual misconstrual (since the interpreter openly resolves to understand the significance of a claim by her own lights, not those of the interpreted), rational reconstruction opens the interpreter to criticism of a different kind. If we are able to successfully point out a problem with the interpreter's own position that she takes to be a rational reconstruction of the some thinker, then we will have successfully criticised the interpretation as well. Put another way, rational reconstruction reverses the old dictum that the author should not be confused her characters. It forces us to identify the two by merging the interpretative acts of exposition and evaluation. Criticism remains possible, but it becomes impossible to say whether the criticism is merely of the interpretation, or of the position the interpreter adopts as a result of her interpretation.

### 1.3 Methodology

In what follows, I will trace out an alternative historical trajectory to Brandom's, beginning with Kant, and progressing through Hegel and Frege to Brandom. I hope to show that a serious tension exists between Kantian-Fregean and Hegelian ways of thinking about objects and objectivity, and that Brandom's much-touted Hegelianism falls under the weight of his commitments to Kant and Frege. This will make the difficulties Brandom has in appropriating Hegelian thought both visible and explicable. At the same time, it will reveal problems with Brandom's own account of objectivity.

The approach I adopt bears many similarities with Brandom's method of rational reconstruction. This is deliberate: By engaging with the history that Brandom takes his own work to rely upon, I hope to enable a certain kind of internal critique by meeting Brandom on his own terms. I will take up the position of a contemporary common-law judge who challenges the rationality of another's judgement by pointing to alternative precedents, ones which shed doubt on Brandom's claim to be the torchbearer of Hegelianism. The method adopted here also differs importantly from Brandom's, however. Whereas the
goal of a rational reconstruction is primarily positive – to present a Whiggish trajectory culminating in the position that one takes to be reality – mine will be primarily negative. I aim to identify incompatibilities between certain lines of thought that cause them to resist homogenisation into a single view, by disclosing problems and tensions that Brandom inherits from his antecedents, specifically as regard the notions of object and objectivity.

In arguing that Hegelian and Kantian-Fregean ways of thinking about objects and objectivity are incompatible, and that Brandom's reading of Hegel (as well as the correlative features of Brandom's own thought) are flawed due to a failure to come to grips with this incompatibility, I will implicitly be taking a personal stand on the philosophical issues involved. I will be arguing that, by my lights, these commitments are incompatible, and in that sense what I present falls on the *de re* side of Brandom's divide. Nevertheless, I intend to subordinate the goal of forming and defending my personal stand on these issues to that of giving a historical explanation of Brandom's difficulties.

The scope of this work allows this task to be undertaken only in a highly abridged form, and often it will be possible to do no more than gesture in the direction of the relevant moves and ideas. Nonetheless, my intention is that the level of detail I present will suffice to make the outline of this historical trajectory visible. I begin by examining the connection between Kant's conception of objectivity and his pluralistic ontology, and investigate how Hegel rejected Kant's account of objectivity by providing an alternative characterisation of the structure of intentionality. I then go on to analyse Brandom's interpretation of Hegel's objective idealism, and explore various tensions between it and other parts of Brandom's philosophy. Finally, I trace these difficulties back to latent Kantian features of Brandom's thought that he inherits both directly and through Frege. Brandom's wholehearted adoption of Frege's conception of the object leads to an essentially Kantian account of objectivity. With these materials in hand, it will be possible to explicate difficulties faced by Brandom's reading of Hegel.
2 Objects and objectivity in Kant and Hegel

Beiser’s (2002) epic survey of German philosophy in the last two decades of the 18th century offers a novel interpretation of the period. Brushing aside the received view of the post-Kantian idealists as champions of the transcendental subject, Beiser (Beiser 2002, p.6) instead characterises the movement as “the progressive de-subjectivisation of the Kantian legacy”. In this chapter, I will briefly explore one stage upon which this “de-subjectivisation” took place by showing how Hegel reacted to and revised Kant’s conception of the object. I begin by rehearsing Kant’s account of objective validity, and then go on to examine Hegel’s objection that the conception of objectivity Kant was able to deliver was too weak to rule out radical scepticism. Hegel’s solution is an ambitious synthesis of Kantian and Aristotelian conceptions of the object, which aims to redeem essentialism in a post-critical, teleological framework.

2.1 Kant on objects and objective validity

In the First Critique, Kant distinguishes two meta-concepts that might broadly be termed “objectivity”. For a representation to possess objective reality (objektive Realität) is for there to be some actually existing object to which it corresponds, or in the case of a judgement, for it to be true. Objective validity (objektive Gültigkeit), on the other hand, is the weaker condition that there merely be a possible object to which the representation corresponds. Failure to possess objective reality is failure to be instantiated or veridical, while to lack objective validity is to fail to be so much as meaningful (Hanna 2001, p.84). In his pursuit of the semantic question, “what is the ground of the reference of that in us which we call ‘representation’ to the object?”, Kant develops a distinctive account of the latter notion.

As Hanna (2001, p.84) carefully expounds, Kant took objective validity to consist in three weaker sub-conditions. A minimally necessary, but not sufficient condition for objective validity is that a representation be self-consistent. Thus, the objective validity of “non-human human” is ruled out. For Kant, however, self-consistency only guarantees that a representation is thinkable and not “whether […] there is a corresponding object somewhere within the sum total of all possibilities” (CPR Bxxvi). In order to ensure that a representation corresponds to a genuinely and not just putatively possible object, Kant invokes the spontaneous unifying activity of the subject to whom the representation belongs. Kant appeals to the fact that any representation applicable to a possible object must be able to feature in a unified, single consciousness to conclude that what makes a representation more than formally possible is that it be bound by the rules which govern the conceptual network of the apperceiving subject (CPR A91/B124, 9 Kant (1967, pp.129–30), quoted in Hanna (2001, p.17).
A105ff., B130ff.). Thus, the subject bridges the gap between a representation which is merely well-formed and one which is genuinely possible in the sense that it can support rational connections to other representations (Hanna 2001, pp.86–87).

However, since concepts are formally capable of being applied even to things of which we could in principle have no knowledge (CPR A238/B298), Kant insists that formal validity and synthetic unity only suffice for a concept to be possible for some consciousness, not necessarily for one like ours. Kant wishes to rule out representations which correspond to an object possible only for a radically different kind of consciousness, for instance one which could intuit concepts, since “our functions for thinking would still be without any significance in regard to it” (CPR A286/B342) and “so far as I could know, there would be nothing, and could be nothing, to which my thought could be applied” (CPR B146, quoted in Hanna 2001, p.88). Hence, Kant requires one final condition for genuine objective validity. Besides being well-formed and synthetically unified, a conceptual representation must furthermore be tied back to our forms of sensibility, viz. the intuitions (Hanna 2001, p.88).

Robert Stern (1990) sheds a great deal of light on Kant's doctrine by presenting it as a response to problems with the conception of the object that he inherits from the empiricists. Locke and Hume's rejection of the reality of substances had the effect of reducing objects to mere “bundles” of simple ideas with no inherent connection to each other (Stern 1990, p.7). In keeping with his sceptical approach, Hume accounted for the unity of objects in purely psychological terms. We experience certain quantities to be unified in a single object when we are strongly habituated to associate those qualities with one another. However, over and above this habit of association, Hume insisted that there is no underlying substrate grounding this perceived unity (Stern 1990, pp.7–14).

Kant recognized that this explanation was lacking in two vital respects. The first problem pertains to the psychologism of the account: While it explains how perceptions are connected in our minds, it does not explain how the qualities they are perceptions of are related in the purportedly mind-independent object (Stern 1990, p.12). Secondly, Hume's account could not explain why some qualities, for example mass and extension, must necessarily occur together in any object (Stern 1990, p.12). Kant expresses the point succinctly: “Experience teaches us, to be sure, that something is constituted thus and so, but not that it could not be otherwise” (CPR B3).

Unsatisfied with the empiricists' inability to account for the necessary coincidence of qualities within an object, yet also wishing to resist the dogmatic appeal to an imperceptible, mind-independent substance, Kant needed a new way to account for the unity of the object. His solution was, in a phrase, his Copernican Revolution. While affirming that we cannot but think of the properties inhering in an object as
dependent on a substance (CPR B6), Kant forged a *via media* between positing an imperceptible, mind-independent substance and giving in to Humean scepticism by accounting for the unity of the object in terms of the conditions of the subject's experience:

Combination does not lie in the objects, [...] and cannot as it were be borrowed from them through perception and by that means first taken up into the understanding, but is rather only an operation of the understanding, which is itself nothing further than the faculty of combining *a priori* and bringing the manifold of given representations under unity of apperception, which principle is the supreme one in the whole of human cognition (CPR B134–5).

On Allison's (2004, pp.89–90) and Hanna's (2001, pp.89–90) readings, it is pivotal to making sense of Kant's position that we recognise this move as involving a revision and circumscription of the concept of object. Kant shifts the semantically relevant notion from *what it is to be an object* to *what it is to be an object, for a creature like us*. He sees himself licensing this move by having shown that objects as they are in themselves (or indeed for any creature radically different from us) can have no meaning for us, and thus, from our finite standpoint, are effectively no objects at all. This relativisation of the object to the human standpoint, however, rendered Kant's account of objectivity unacceptable in the eyes of Hegel.

**2.2 Hegel on Kantian objectivity**

In this section, I examine Hegel's comments on objectivity in the context of his discussion of Kantian philosophy in the 1830 *Encyclopedia* (E).\(^\text{10}\) We'll see that Hegel rejects Kant's account of objectivity because, although it addresses Humean scepticism, it opens the door to scepticism of a more radical kind. After giving an indication of the sort of move Hegel thinks is required to avoid this pitfall, I'll attempt to reconstruct, in broad outline, Hegel's proposed alternative.

In the course of positioning himself in relation to Kant in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel distinguishes three senses of the word “objectivity [*Objektivität*]”:

*To start with*, it has the significance of what is externally present [*des äußerlich Vorhandenen*], as distinct from what is only subjective, meant, dreamed, etc.; *secondly*, it has the significance, established by Kant, of what is universal and necessary as distinct from the contingent, particular and subjective that we find in our sensation; and *thirdly*, it has the last-mentioned significance of the *In-itself* as a product-thought [*des gedachten Ansich*], the significance of what is there, as distinct from what is only thought by us, and hence still distinct from the matter itself [*von der*

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\(^{10}\) Since my main goal is to explain what Hegel objected to in Kant's idealism, I will not be concerned with assessing the accuracy of Hegel's reading of Kant. See Priest (1992, pp.17–28) for a thorough appraisal of Hegel's reading.
Sache selbst], or the matter in-itself [an sich] (E 83, §41 Z2)

It is worth examining these three meanings in detail, since they encapsulate what Hegel took to be wrong with Kant's conception of objectivity, and point to how he sought to remedy it. The first meaning Hegel associates with “objectivity” corresponds to our pre-theoretical, everyday use of the term. Hegel takes the determining feature of what is objective in this sense to be its externality from us. As he puts it earlier in the same passage, “in ordinary language, to be ‘objective’ is to be present outside us and to come to us from outside through perception” (E 82, §41 Z2).

Hegel notes that Kant appears at first to have inverted this meaning, since Kant refers to what is impressed upon us from without as “subjective”, and reserves the term “objective” for the universal and the necessary dimension of our thought (E 82, §41 Z2). Hegel explains, however, that Kant's usage of these terms is not a mere Sprachverwirrung, since Kant employs them to make a point about thought-independence rather than externality (E 83, §41 Z2). He understands Kant to have argued that objects of perception, while indeed external to us, are nonetheless subjective in the sense that they must conform to the subject's forms of thought. The faculty determining these forms, on the other hand, is objective just in the sense that it is independent of and not constrained by the objects which impress upon it.

Nonetheless, Hegel contends that Kant's claim to have demonstrated the objective validity of cognition means something significantly weaker than it would have in the mouths of his pre-critical predecessors. Kant is able to secure a semantic connection between the subject and its object of knowledge only by shifting talk of the object-in-itself to the object-as-it-appears-to-us. A connection can then be guaranteed, because Kant establishes that the necessary and general features of objects as they appear are imparted by the very cognitive faculty that consumes them (E 81 §41). The suit fits because it's tailor-made. The problem, for Hegel, is that that Kant's anthropocentrised conception of the object leaves us with no guarantee that the purportedly objective features of reality are any more than creations of the transcendental ego (E 84 §42, §42 Z1). Since, on Hegel's reading, Kant's idealism extends both to the sensuous matter and the conceptual form of judgement (Schnädelbach 2000, p.30), the contribution of the object itself to the cognition becomes utterly minimal. There is, ex hypothesi, no guarantee that the properties we experience to be united in a single object are the result of any constraint by the object itself, since their coincidence is explained by way of our independent, synthetic activity. At best, then, Kant can hold that there is something mind-independent responsible for our cognition, but he must concede that any determinate feature of the object is the work of the mind (E 86, §42 Z3).

Hegel's reading of Kant coincides with that of some recent commentators. For example,

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11 Hegel makes a similar point in the Science of Logic (SL 516; HW VI 256).
Greenberg (2008, pp.2, 17–41) defends Kant's account of necessity by attesting to the objective, mind-independent reality of objects on Kant's account, but viewing these objects as mere “initiators” of thoughts, admitting that “the necessity of specific properties and relations that are ascribed to our appearances of initiators is due entirely to the mind”. The similarity of Hegel's reading is evidenced by his happy admission that Kant's transcendental deduction does indeed entail the existence (“bloßen Existenz”) or being (“Sein”) of a reality outside the subject (HW II X 118, §42 Z3), but that its “generality and necessity” (E 81, §41) is imparted by the subject. Hegel's point, however, is that this hardly amounts to a proof of the “objectivity” of the categories: “If mere existence [Existenz] be enough to make objectivity”, he writes, “[then] even a crime is objective” (Hegel 1975, p.65, §42 Z3).12

Hegel therefore takes Kant's doctrine of transcendental objectivity to be in a third sense radically subjective, since it rules out the very possibility of genuine knowledge of the object. Thus, while Kant's transcendental idealism indeed circumvents Humean scepticism, it does so at what Hegel considers the unacceptably high price of separating the subject permanently from the purported object of knowledge. Hegel concludes that Kant and Fichte were, in Pippin's (1989, p.92) words, “skeptics, philosophers who finally undercut their own results by admitting that they have no way of establishing that the conditions for a possibly self-conscious experience of objects are genuinely objective”. Putting the point in religious terms, Pippin (1989, pp.92–93) suggests that Hegel saw Kant and Fichte enacting “a Christian, religious tragedy” by reserving knowledge of things in themselves for a non-human, divine standpoint. It is largely a desire to avoid this self-defeating subjectivism while respecting Kant's central insights, Pippin (1989) argues, that motivates Hegel to develop his own philosophical system.13

The solution to this Kantian impasse that Hegel presents in the Vorbegriff is to resist jumping from what he sees as Kant's correct insight that the categories are determinations of thought to the conclusion that they are merely a reflection of the subject's cognitive makeup (E 85–86, §42 Z3). “Although the categories (e.g. unity, cause and effect, etc.) pertain to thinking as such, it does not at all follow from this that they must therefore be merely something of ours, and not also determinations of the ob-jects [sic] themselves” (E 85–86, §42 Z3). It's important to emphasise that Hegel does not challenge Kant's claim that the object is a product of the subject's synthesis rather than a given of experience. Indeed, he asserts that “regarding the content of [Kant's] subjective idealism we do not have to lift a finger” (E 86, §42 Z3). Rather, he attempts to re-work Kant's subjective idealism into an objective idealism (OI) by denying Kant's inference from the activity of the subject to the conclusion that the

12 I use the older Wallace translation here (Hegel 1975), because the more recent one (E) obscures the emphasis on “objectivity” that I wish to bring out here.
13 See also Forster (1989) and Franks (2005) for discussions of Hegel's philosophical development in terms of the threat of scepticism.
objects of our experience are mere phenomena, forever cut off from the noumena. This inference, Hegel thought, relied on a fundamentally misguided metaphysics of intentionality which he sought to correct with his *Science of Logic* (SL).

### 2.3 Ontology and the “chemical” model of cognition

In the introduction to *SL*, Hegel claims that “the objective logic thus takes the place […] of the former metaphysics”, adding that “it is ontology which objective logic most directly replaces” (SL 42). Most commentators agree that this showed Hegel meant his *Logic* to be the successor science to traditional metaphysics, rather than a reversion to pre-critical metaphysics (Horstmann 1984, p.45; Fulda 2003, p.99; Pippin 1989, pp.176–178). There is less consensus as to why he thought this and how he intended his *SL* to take up this mantle. H. F. Fulda's (2003) commentary provides a starting point. Fulda (2003, pp.99–100) understand Hegel's mature logic as a systematic attempt to overcome the persistent view that cognition can be factorised into two components, one purely objective and another purely subjective, like two elements that are combined in a chemical compound. According to Fulda (2003, p.100), Hegel thinks that this view of judgement problematically presupposes a “conceptual opposition between a self-standing [*fürsichseiend*] subject – with all that belongs to it – and an independent object, with its attributes, given in thought”.¹⁴

Despite his insistence that the object is a product of synthesis, and so not an experiential given, such a distinction persists in Kant. Cognition, in Kant's system, consists in the application of a concept to an intuition, where the former is the free activity of the subject and the latter stands in for sense impressions (CPR A50/B74). Hegel holds that the sceptical conclusions of Kant's transcendental idealism follow only because Kant thought that cognition must be able to be factorised into mutually exclusively subjective and objective components. When Kant's insight that the free activity of the subject permeates all aspects of cognition is followed through under the assumption that the contribution of the subject must be principally distinct from that of the object, the extent of the subject's activity causes the objective contribution to all but vanish. However, by rejecting this “chemical” (Fulda 2003, p.99) model of cognition, the possibility is opened for conceiving of the activity of the subject in a way that does not set it at odds with the object.

In Hegel's view, Kant's acceptance of the chemical model of cognition was not a dogmatic oversight, but rather an inevitable consequence of his philosophical approach. Kant had motivated his first

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¹⁴ The translation is my own. Fulda's text reads “Dabei wird ein begrifflicher Gegensatz zwischen einem fürsichseitenden Subjekt – mit allem, was zu ihm gehört – und einem selbständigen, dem Denken vorgegebenen Objekt mit seinen Merkmalen unterstellt”
critique by bemoaning the “battlefield” that metaphysics had become (CPR Avii–viii). In order to place metaphysics on the sure path to a *Wissenschaft*, Kant thought the philosopher needed to begin by determining the limits of reason, a challenge to which the First Critique would rise. However, by first asking after the conditions of experience, Kant reduced the world to the realm of appearances, and since the transcendental subject was the most basic condition of any such appearance, it had always to be presupposed. The gravamen that united the early romantics and post-Kantians after Fichte was that this effectively exiled the subject from the world of experience. The subject, because a condition of any phenomena, could find no place in the realm of phenomena at all (Kneller 2007, pp.38–59).

Kant saw this conclusion as a great boon. It meant that the transcendental subject must be noumenal, and so it could act freely, unencumbered by the constraints of the phenomenal world (Kneller 2007, p.43). Yet this also had the effect of establishing a duality between subject and object. Since the objects of experience and the transcendental subject itself belonged to two different spheres, a dichotomy between the subjective and objective contributions to cognition was inevitable. Thus the chemical model of cognition, along with its sceptical consequences.

In order to overcome this, Hegel emphasises that the entire Kantian drama – the finite subject's synthesis of the phenomenal world and inescapable sense of an inaccessible thing-in-itself beyond it – must, in some sense, take place *in* the world. What is needed to do justice to this insight is a conception of reality that can encompass the entire structure of finite cognition, including the activity of the cognisant subject. As Gabriel and Žižek (2009, p.3) put it: “The whole domain of the representation of the world [...] needs to be understood as an event within and of the world itself”. If this vision could be achieved, then the subject appear once more a denizen of the world, and cognition would cease to look like the combination of elements from two different realms.

Hegel's project was therefore *ontological*, not in the pre-critical sense of giving an inventory of the basic components of reality, but rather in that that he sought to avoid Kant's scepticism by viewing the limits of knowledge as features of reality itself. This did not amount to projecting our cognitive psychology onto the world in a pre-Kantian fashion, but rather to the insistence that the thing in itself must be thought of as fundamentally inclusive of the subject, rather than opposed to it. Kant's insights into the subject's finitude would not be disregarded, but rather transposed from an epistemic to an ontological key, so as to respect the insight that our limitedness is itself part of the world (Gabriel & Žižek 2009, pp.5–6). To see how Hegel carries out this manoeuvre, it is helpful to examine Robert Stern's interpretation of Hegel's ontology. Stern, I will argue, does not get to the heart of Hegel's solution, but determining where his reading falls short will bring us closer to Hegel's position.
2.4 Kant, Aristotle and Hegel's ontology

As discussed above, Stern observes that Kant's invocation of the subject in order to unify the object is only necessary because of the atomistic starting point that he inherits from the empiricists. According to Stern (1990, pp.40–42), Hegel resists Kant's subjectivism by instead affirming an Aristotelian conception of the object, considering the object to have an inherent unity in virtue of exhibiting an irreducible substance-kind. In keeping with the romantic tendency to prefer organic holism to mechanistic atomism, he rejects Kant's presupposition that the world inherently consists of disparate intuitions in need of unification by a subject and replaces it with an Aristotelian essentialism according to which universals constitute the essence or true nature of a thing per se (Stern 1990, pp.30–45). He thereby circumvents the need for Kantian synthesis by taking the object to possess an inherent unity in itself (Stern 1990, p.75).

Hegel does ultimately adopt an essentialist position, but it is misleading to portray him in this way, as if he simply pitted Aristotle's view against Kant's. The most explicit piece of textual evidence in support of Stern's view is at the beginning of his shorter Logic, where Hegel draws a division between the permanent inner nature of a thing and its external being. There he follows Aristotle in arguing that although the universal exists in its instances, we should resist thinking of a genus as a mere collection, since we can only understand what each member of the collection is in so far as we consider it as a “this-such”, an instance of its kind (E 56–58, §24).

The context of Hegel's statement however makes clear that his position owes more to Kant than Stern recognises. The preceding sections (§21–23) emphasise the Kantian point that the subject is active in the manufacture and revelation of the object. Following Kant, Hegel affirms that the object is “the product of my freedom” (E 55, §23) and that “thinking it over [Nachdenken] changes something in the way that the content is at first [given]”(E 54, §22). However, Hegel emphasises against Kant that this needn't separate “the In-itself […] from what we make of [it]” (E 54, §22). On the contrary, Hegel suggests that it is “through the mediation of an alteration that the true nature of the ob-ject [sic] comes into consciousness” (E 54, §22). That is, the subject recognises the object as it is in itself by changing it. In order for this position to be coherent, Hegel will require a new conception of the object, as I explore below (p. 20). However, the fact that Hegel emphasises the object's being a “product of my spirit, [of me] as thinking subject” (E 55, §23) demonstrates that Hegel does not take the object to be a ready-made this-such, as Stern suggests.

Hegel's first step toward giving an account of the object that will avoid the pitfalls of Kant's...
position, while preserving his idealism, is to commit to providing an account of thought as itself a worldly affair. As discussed above, Hegel takes it that beginning with an ontological separation of the free thinking subject and the object of thought will irrevocably lead to Kantian scepticism. Instead, then, Hegel affirms that “thoughts can be called objective thoughts”, which is to say that “understanding, or reason, [is] in the world” (E 56, §24).

In a Zusatz, or addition, Hegel then gives a recognisably Aristotelian account of essences in order to allay the worry that he is endorsing some kind of pan-psychism, explaining that it is the determinations of thought in the form of category universals that pertain to objects, rather than some ephemeral consciousness or ghost-in-the-machine. Hegel's placatory discussion of essentialism here is only necessary, however, because of how much of Kant's view he adopts. It is only because of his Kantian admission that the object is a product of thought, together with his commitment to the objectivity of thought, that the threat of pan-psychism he addresses with Aristotelian essentialism arises at all. The invocation of an “inner nature” given by a category universal serves to show the objective sense in which thought can be “in the world” without “consciousness […] being ascribed to natural things” (E 56, §24 Z1). The Aristotelian point is accordingly subsidiary to Hegel's overarching idealism.

Hegel's distance from Aristotle can be brought still more sharply into view by observing that while Hegel is dissatisfied with Kant's solution to the unity of the object, he is equally dissatisfied with the approach of traditional metaphysics, which circumvents Kantian criticism by stipulating a substance ontology that mirrors the forms of judgement. 15 Proceeding in this way is still compatible with the chemical model of cognition, only now, instead of emphasising the activity of the subject at the expense of the objective, the inherent unity of the object is touted to such an extent that the activity of the subject becomes practically redundant. It is telling that Stern (1990) has little to say about Hegel's epistemology. In fact, as Horstmann (1990, pp.23–40) explores, Hegel rejected the stipulation of an Aristotelian substance ontology because it presupposed a dogmatic epistemology and semantics: It simply assumed that the forms of judgement map onto the ontological structure of the world.

According to Horstmann, Hegel attempts to navigate the unsatisfactory extremes of subjective idealism and dogmatic metaphysics by independently developing a concept of the object, and subsequently investigating the connection of this ontology to the forms of judgement. Hegel's key ontological move, however, is to insist that the modification of the object in thought is necessary for the development and realisation of its essence. That the subject's thinking plays an actively constitutive role in

15 Indeed, the preceding section of the Vorbegriff (E 65–76) is devoted to a criticism of “metaphysics” on precisely these grounds. Horstmann (1990) orients his concise introduction to Hegel's philosophy around this point.
the constitution of the object is an idea Hegel owes largely to Kant. But by viewing the activity of the subject as an ontological condition of the unfolding of the object's “true nature” (E 54, §22), Hegel is able to resist the Kantian conclusion that the activity of the subject cuts us off from the thing in itself. In this way he can be seen to aim for a conception of the object that will facilitate a synthesis of the Aristotelian and Kantian models of cognition, as Schnädelbach (2000, p.32) argues. To see the distinctive character of Hegel's essentialism, we need to consider another aspect of Hegel's conception of the structure of the object, also motivated by a deficiency he finds in Kant, this time in the Third Critique.

2.5 The teleological route to essentialism

Famously, Kant had explained away the apparent purposiveness of nature by reducing teleological judgement to a regulative capacity (CJ 234). While Kant was happy to allow that certain kinds of object could only be explained by invoking final causes, he insisted that such explanations have merely subjective validity. Teleological judgement is effective not because nature contains an extra, non-mechanistic variety of causation, but rather because certain purely mechanical processes are best understood by projecting features of our subjectivity onto them. Thus Kant writes:

> teleological judging is rightly drawn into our research into nature, at least problematically, but only in order to bring it under principles of observation and research in analogy with causality according to ends, without presuming thereby to explain it (CJ 234)

As Horstmann (1990, pp.48–50) explains, this established two dualities that Hegel found unpalatable. Firstly, it created a cognitive dichotomy regarding valid judgements, by according some objective and others merely subjective validity. Second, it drew a problematic ontological divide between objects that are amenable to teleological explanation and those amenable to mechanistic explanation. Hegel's reasons for objecting to these dualities are largely the same as those discussed above. In parallel to the way Kant's account of the unity of the object invited scepticism, Kant's discussion of teleology subjectivised the objective and thereby threatened the status of our knowledge. Having objected to Kant's account of objectivity for being covertly subjective, Hegel all the more staunchly rejects Kant's overtly subjective account of teleological judgement (E 104, §58).

In order to overcome these dualities, Hegel abandons the Kantian priority of mechanism, and instead proposes what Horstmann (1990, p.46) terms an “organological [organologisches]” model of the object. Rather than presuppose a world of externally connected, causally determined mechanism, and then have the subject project a teleological framework onto it, Hegel suggests that what it is to be an object is just to display the kind of inner purposiveness characteristic of organisms (Horstmann 1990, pp.46–48,
This teleological approach to objecthood then allows essences to reappear in a new guise, no longer as static, determinate universals, but rather as the inner potential that a thing realises in its development. The essence of the flower is the fruit (PPS 66); the concept, the idea (SL 670–675).

Having given his essentialism this developmental aspect, the way is then open for a reinterpretation of Kant's idealism. Recall that for Hegel, Kant's central insight was that the subject does not passively receive but modifies the object in thought. Since on this organic model the object must anyway develop in order to manifest its true nature, Hegel can simply interpret the contributory activity of the subject's thought as the process by which the object manifests its essence. In this way Hegel can accept what he calls the “content” (E 86, §42 Z3) of Kant's idealism, the subject's spontaneity, without admitting Kant's subjectivism. Note the dovetail between Hegel's teleological essentialism and his objective idealism. The difference between what an object appears to be now and what it is striving to become makes space for the synthesising subject to play an objectively significant role. Looking to examples of organisms in nature reveals that a reliance of one developmental process on another needn't amount to a hierarchical subsumption. A chick relies on its mother to feed it, but what the mother nurtures is the chick's independent development (she doesn't grow its wings). In the same way, the object relies on the subject for its realisation in thought, but is not thereby reduced to a mere creation of the subject.

This metaphor, of course, provides only a basic schema for filling out Hegel's objective idealism. It would take us too far afield to discuss the vital but difficult question of how the subject's activity of modification might facilitate the object's own development. A useful but, I think, ultimately too simplistic answer is provided by David Lamb's (1992) Marxist reading of Hegel's teleology. On Lamb's reading, the subject literally manufactures the object in the process of labour. Labour imbues blind nature with purpose by turning certain mechanisms on others, making them work for us, and thus “the teleology-mechanism dichotomy can be transcended by locating conscious human purpose within the causal network, without destroying it, or going beyond it” (Lamb 1992, p.175). Helpful as Lamb's idea is, it does not yet explain how thought might enable the object's development outside of the labour process, in the more passive relation of reflection.

Nonetheless, even in this skeletal form, Hegel's organological model of the object displays a distinctive mode of response to the Kantian, and an alternative to the chemical model of cognition. By having the object develop in thought, the organological model places the objective content neither ‘out there’ nor ‘in the mind.’ Rather, content is viewed as a process that necessarily incorporates both the subject and its world. It is therefore a first step towards making the transition from Kant's subjective idealism to Hegel's objective idealism, by providing it with the ontological underpinnings it requires.
2.6 Conclusion

The aim of this section has been to retell the story of Hegel's break with Kant, highlighting the centrality of ontological concerns to their differences. I want to close by drawing together to a number of features of this account that will become important in subsequent chapters. Hegel's dissatisfaction with Kant revolves around his subjectivism. He resists Kant's fall into scepticism by denying that the subject's free activity must be distinct from the object of its knowledge, which in turn requires a re-conception of the object and our relation to it. This does not amount to a dogmatic return to pre-critical metaphysics, but rather a transposition of Kant's transcendental epistemology onto the object itself. Thus, while Hegel does ultimately adopt a form of essentialism, he entitles himself to this view by revising the concept of essence to make it compatible with the insights he wishes to hold onto from Kant. By introducing an organic, teleological notion of objecthood, Hegel reinterprets Kant's epistemology at the level of ontology, yielding an idealised form of Aristotelian essentialism.

Teleological essentialism is a position bound to strike us as quaint or bizarre, and it has not been my goal to defend it.\textsuperscript{16} Perhaps there are more natural ways Hegel could have countervailed the competing claims of Kantianism and Aristotelianism. I do however hope to have shown that Hegel's position is not without good motivation. Ontological, rather than merely semantic or epistemological concerns need to be addressed to accept Kant's doctrine of synthesis without accepting Kant's subjectivised notion of the object. And this, of course, holds for any philosopher who finds herself in the same predicament.

\textsuperscript{16} Positions along the same lines are however not altogether wanting for adherents today. See Thompson (2008, pp.25–84) for an able defence of Hegel's treatment of life as a basic logical category.
3 Brandom's Hegel

Having highlighted some central features of Hegel's objective idealism, I now move on to discuss Brandom's *de re* reconstruction of Hegel's position. Though Brandom traces a number of his ideas back to Hegel, I will focus specifically on his reading of Hegel's objective idealism. Brandom's interpretative methodology makes it impossible to present his interpretation without also presenting his arguments for it, as discussed in the Introduction. Accordingly, I will begin by presenting Brandom's reconstruction of Hegel's objective idealism, comprising both his interpretation and defence. Most of Brandom's rhetorical effort is spent distinguishing his interpretation from the metaphysically extravagant doctrines that have traditionally been associated with Hegel's name. The steps Brandom is driven to take in order to safeguard his view, however, ironically threaten the very basis of his Hegelianism. Furthermore, bringing into view Brandom's own semantic commitments from *MIE* reveals that his objective idealism is ambiguous and misleadingly framed.

3.1 The promise of inferentialism

In the previous section, I suggested that Hegel sought to overcome the problems that beset prior epistemological theories, including Kant's, by rejecting the idea that cognition can be happily described as a combination of independent subjective and objective elements. In the twentieth century, specific instances of this idea were attacked by Wilfrid Sellars (1997, p.45) in his own “incipient *Meditations Hegeliennes*”. Under the banner of the “myth of the given,” Sellars (1997, pp.68–79) rejected the existence of epistemically relevant, non-inferentially elicited beliefs that presuppose no other beliefs. He thereby rebuked the notion that observations form an extricable foundation for knowledge, an “ultimate court of appeal” that is independent from our practice of inference (Sellars 1997, p.69). Even such non-inferentially elicited beliefs, Sellars (1997, pp.68–79) argued, must be caught up in our game of giving and asking for reasons, on pain of making them epistemically otiose. Sellars thereby undermined a certain form of the chemical model, which would seek to distil cognition into a purely objective substrate of sense data that the purely subjective activity of inference then goes to work on.

While Sellars' attacks on the myth of the given are renowned, his positive sketch of an alternative to mythical givenness has not received equal acclaim, being generally considered to be underdeveloped or impossibly opaque. Picking up where Sellars left off, Brandom develops his own anti-foundationalist account of language and rationality in *MIE*. On Brandom's account, entitlement and commitment to beliefs derive from the normative attitudes of one's fellow reasoners, rather than some experiential given (*MIE*
167–180). Even observation reports are only allowed to have epistemic significance in virtue of the inferential moves that they enable for those taking the observer to be reliable (MIE 226–227). By explaining how such non-inferentially acquired beliefs are nevertheless mediated by our subjective practice of inference, Brandom offers a model of judgement that does not invite its separation into independent objective and subjective parts.

Furthermore, Brandom’s commitment to pragmatism provides a promising route to make good Hegel’s aspiration to view epistemic structures as part of the world, rather than the work of a remote transcendental subject. Brandom commits to understanding traditional epistemic notions – knowledge, belief, taking-true and making-true – in terms of normatively laden actions, things that we do in our environment (MIE 141–167). He thereby steers clear of what Hegel thought to be Kant’s fatal first move, ruling out the possibility of knowledge from the outset by assuming the subject to be separate from its world.

These features of Brandom’s philosophical approach both suggest that Brandom is in a good position to appropriate Hegel’s objective idealism. However, difficulties in the execution of his reconstruction will reveal another side to Brandom’s philosophy, one which cannot be straightforwardly synthesised with an Hegelian outlook.

### 3.2 Objective idealism as a sense dependence claim

Brandom motivates his discussion of Hegel’s objective idealism by asking what it is for contents to be determinate (HIHP 179–182). The answer he finds in Hegel is that to be determinate is to exclude other contents of the same kind (HIHP 179). To say that the property “transparent” is determinate is to say that it is impossible for an object which is transparent to at the same time be opaque. Similarly, for a state of affairs to be determinate is for it to rule out other possible states of affairs. “Something is happening” is highly indeterminate, because it places little, if any, restriction on what is the case. “Goethe died on a Thursday”, on the other hand, is determinate because it rules out his having died on any other day of the week. The idea, generally, is that to be a particular way is to be this way, rather than that. Brandom expresses this in the motto that “the essence of determinateness is modally robust exclusion”, which he takes to be a contemporary expression of the principle Hegel adopts from the medievals, *omnis determinatio est negatio* (HIHP 179).\(^\text{17}\)

This criterion of determinateness applies not only to the contents of properties and states of affairs, but also to their subjective correlates, viz. predicates and assertions (HIHP 182). The assertion

\(^{17}\) “Every determination is a negation”
“Christmas this year falls on a weekday” is determinate because it excludes any assertions entailed by “Christmas this year falls on a weekend”. What is ruled out by an assertion, however, is not the possibility that the contrary holds (since the subject asserting it might be mistaken), nor the possibility of asserting something to the contrary (since the subject might, despite her best efforts, contradict herself). Rather, it is the propriety of materially incompatible assertions that is excluded. It is impermissible for a speaker to claim both that Christmas falls on the weekend and on a weekday, in parallel to the way that an object cannot at once be transparent and opaque. Viewed in this way, a structural similarity shows up between the alethic modal incompatibilities that structure the objective world, and the deontic normative incompatibilities that exist in virtue of the norms that govern assertions within a discursive practice. Both are, broadly, relations of material incompatibility (HIHP 182). This is what Brandom takes Hegel to mean by the claim that not only our practice, but the world as it is anyway, is “conceptual [begrifflich]” (HIHP 181).

This is not to assert, however, that one and the same incompatibility relation structures the world and our discursive talk about the world. Only in the ideal case, one probably never attained, do the norms that govern material inferences exactly capture the modal facts. The question therefore arises how we are to understand the relationship between these two connected but numerically distinct incompatibility relations, responsible respectively for the determinateness of linguistic entities and extra-linguistic reality.

A realist might seek to explain subjective relations of deontic normative incompatibility (henceforth incompatibility\textsubscript{sub}) in terms of alethic modal incompatibilities (henceforth incompatibility\textsubscript{obj}) by some form of correspondence.\textsuperscript{18} On the other hand, an idealist might be expected to pursue the other direction of explanation, attempting to explain alethic in terms of deontic modalities.\textsuperscript{19} The claim that Brandom attributes to Hegel, however, is that neither the subjective nor the objective incompatibility relation should be considered explanatorily prior. Rather, Brandom has Hegel insist that each of these relations can be understood only by way of the other other. Although distinct, the two incompatibility relations are nonetheless “two sides of the same coin” (HIHP 182), both ways of talking about an underlying practice that involves both agents and objects. Brandom claims this is the basic idea behind Hegel’s OI (HIHP 182).

Brandom suggests we think of the relationship between incompatibility\textsubscript{sub} and incompatibility\textsubscript{obj} on the model of process and relations of inference, a distinction he attributes to Harman (1984). Like

\textsuperscript{18} Though never expressed in these terms, something like this seems to result from theories of formal semantics that are extended to natural languages, e.g. Lepore & Fodor (2010).

\textsuperscript{19} This latter strategy is manifested in recent neo-Sellarsian expressivist attempts to account for modal discourse in terms of inference licenses, for example Thomasson (2011). Brandom rebukes such attempts in \textit{MEMRTA}. 
Harman, Brandom rejects the existence of rules or relations which determine the process of reasoning (HIHP 191–192). In Brandom's view, modus ponens should not be thought of as a rule that tells to infer $q$ whenever we know $p$ and if $p$, then $q$, since we might have much better evidence for $\neg q$ and opt instead to reject $p$ or if $p$, then $q$. All modus ponens really tells us is that we may not hold $p$, $\neg q$ and if $p$, then $q$ simultaneously (HIHP 192). Logical rules in general explicate the content of the responsibility we have in virtue of being discursive agents to be consistent, by codifying illicit combinations of commitments (MIE 125; RP 35–47). In this way, inferential relations constrain but do not determine inferential processes. We can therefore distinguish between the rules which constrain inference and the process of inference that operates according to these constraints. Nonetheless, Brandom claims, this process is only intelligible as a process of inference in so far as it is governed by these norms. At the same time those norms cannot be understood in any way other than as “constraints on the inferential process of rationally altering one's beliefs” (HIHP 194). To fully understand either, we need to think of them both as inseparable aspects of a single, underlying discursive practice. Brandom does not make clear in HIHP precisely how this interdependence of rules and processes maps onto an interdependency of the two incompatibility relations, but a more perspicuous argument for this is given in BSD.

There Brandom starts from the pragmatist premise that intentionality is fundamentally a form of skilful engagement with objects in the world – chopping a log or catching a fish (BSD 178). More complex forms of intentionality like judging, believing and representing are to be explained as elaborate forms of this basic kind of involvement with objects rather than in terms of sui generis word-world relations. Such relations are an emergent, rather than determining feature of discursive practice. Since even the most basic intentional practices cannot be described without at least implicit reference to the objects they involve, it follows that it is an illusion to think we can independently describe the subjective incompatibilities between claimables and then combine this with an account of the objective incompatibilities between contents (BSD 179).

More specifically, Brandom argues that just by observing norms of material incompatibility we

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20 Brandom's invocation of Harman here is questionable. Brandom takes Harman's point to be that deductive logic tells us only what not to do inferentially, rather than what to do, for instance “not to believe all of $p$, if $p$ then $q$, and $\neg q$”, but early in the paper Brandom cites, Harman (1984, p.108) explicitly repudiates the idea that “logical principles correspond to principles of reasoning saying what one should not believe”. Harman (1984, p.108) not only rejects the idea that logic provides us with positive rules of inference, but also that it expresses open-ended “principles of belief revision” of the kind Brandom puts forward.

21 Wittgenstein (1967, p.440, §78) makes a general point along these when he compares rules of language to traffic rules, which allow and disallow certain behaviours but do not determine the pedestrian's every movement.

22 Completing this argument requires showing that an adequate account of complex intentional states can be given in terms of more basic forms of practical intentionality. Brandom attempts this undertaking in BSD, but Rödl (2007) doubts his success. The argument I present below aims to demonstrate shortcomings of Brandom's objective idealism, even under the assumption that his reduction of complex intentionality to basic practical intentionality goes through.
are already implicitly talking about objects. Brandom relies on the idea that an object just is whatever cannot display materially incompatible properties:

The judgment that \( A \) is a dog is \textit{not} incompatible with the judgment that \( B \) is a fox. The judgment that \( A \) is a dog \textit{is} incompatible with the judgment that \( A \) is a fox. That means that taking a dog-judgment to be materially incompatible with a fox-judgment \textit{is} taking them to refer or represent an object: the \textit{same} object. (RP 43)

Referring to objects is therefore something that we (implicitly) do whenever we engage in the practice of respecting norms of inference, not something that we might \textit{do as well as or instead of} engaging in that practice. It follows, according to Brandom, that the apparent independent intelligibility of incompatibility\textsubscript{sub} and incompatibility\textsubscript{obj} is illusory. The two relations are different ways of explicating the same “intentional nexus” (RP 49) – the way that we are rationally in touch with each other and our world. Brandom characterises this as a claim of mutual dependence between the senses of the deontic normative and objective modal material incompatibility relations (HIHP 196). Equivalently, he asserts, we can view it as a claim of dependence between what is required to grasp the concepts “objective world” and “subjective experience”:

One can understand the concept of a determinate \textit{objective} world only to the extent to which one understands \textit{subjective} process [sic] of acknowledging error – what Hegel calls “experience” – which is treating two commitments one finds oneself with as \textit{incompatible} (HIHP 196).

Brandom takes great pains to emphasise that this is \textit{only} a claim about what is required to grasp the respective relations, and does not entail a corresponding causal or existential dependence of the objective world on subjective minds (HIHP 198–199). To establish this, Brandom argues that in general a dependence of the sense of one expression \( P \) on another expression \( Q \) does not entail a corresponding dependence of the reference of \( P \) on the reference of \( Q \) (HIHP 195–196). Even though a hammer might well be defined as a tool to drive nails, and a nail just as what is driven by a hammer, it does not follow that hammers would pop out of existence if all the nails in the world were systematically destroyed (HIHP 195). To make the point clearer, Brandom invokes a possible-worlds framework. To see that sense dependence does not entail reference dependence, we need simply to observe that there could be a possible world at which \( P \) is instantiated (“there are hammers”) but not \( Q \) (“there are no nails”) even if the intension of \( P \) (“tool used for driving nails”) is a function of the intension of \( Q \). In a phrase: “Definitional dependence of \textit{intensions} does not entail de facto dependence of \textit{extensions}” (HIHP 196). Brandom’s OI, then, is a claim about the reciprocal sense dependence of incompatibility\textsubscript{obj} and incompatibility\textsubscript{sub}, which according to him does not entail that there would be no objective relations of modal incompatibility (and
therefore a determinate world) without subjective relations of normative incompatibility (i.e., the process of seeking to rectify incompatible commitments).

In a penetrating review of *TMD*, Robert Pippin (2007) observes that Brandom interprets Hegel's objective idealism as a variation on Kant's transcendental idealism. Kant has his own ‘reciprocal sense dependence thesis’, which holds “that the object is just ‘that in the concept of which the manifold is united’” (Pippin 2007, p.156). This view agrees with the description of Kant's conception of the object offered in the previous chapter: Kant, replacing the notion of object by object-for-us, makes the concept of object dependent on the subjective process of cognition.

Pippin observes, however, that Kant's thesis becomes a substantive philosophical commitment only in the context of certain metaphysical commitments that Brandom does not ascribe to. Brandom's position is, according to Pippin, ambiguous and threatens to be trivial:

That sort of observation [the reciprocal sense dependence of incompatibility sub and incompatibility obj] only gets its bite in positions like psychologism, or the positivist notion of verificationism, or in Kant’s transcendental ‘necessary conditions for the possibility of experience’ project, with its accompanying need for a deduction, or Wittgenstein’s Tractatus idealism in which the limits of language are the limits of the world, and I do not yet see where Brandom thinks his version gets its bite, is more than anodyne. (Pippin 2007, pp.156–157)

Pippin's comments are brief and remain unelaborated. In his reply, Brandom (2005, p.430) expresses puzzlement at Pippin's objection, emphasising that it is not trivial that objective relations of material incompatibility, defined in a “resolutely non-psychological” fashion, should nonetheless have an implicit conceptual connection to our practices such that the respective relations are only intelligible in terms of each other. This has, he remarks elsewhere, “not always been thought to be a truism (or even just to be true)” (BSD 189). In what follows, I will substantiate Pippin's comments by showing the sense in which Brandom's OI remains ambiguous, raises metaphysical questions, and, while not trivial, probably amounts to less than he suggests. To begin, it's useful to identify some counterveiling commitments which drive Brandom's reading.

### 3.3 Sense, reference and the spectre of British Idealism

For Brandom, a great deal evidently hangs on ensuring that objective idealism does not collapse into a reference dependence claim. We can identify two forces driving Brandom's desire to avoid such a position: Firstly, to resist aspects of Rorty's view he finds problematic, and secondly, to ensure sufficient
distance between his Hegel and more familiar “shadow” figure of Russell's creation.

Brandom (2000) follows his teacher Rorty (1980; 1989) in emphasising that we, rather than the world, are the producers and consumers of norms. In particular, both thinkers agree that linguistic norms including those of truth are instituted by our social practices (Rorty 1989, p.5; MIE 17). However, while Rorty (2000, p.184) gladly concludes from this that there were no truths before there were creatures like us, Brandom (2000, pp.162–165) resists this conclusion. He thinks it flies in the face of science, which tells us that the fact “photons exist” was true well before animals, let alone claim-making mammals, appeared on the scene (Brandom 2000, p.162). The advent of vocabularies did not bring about the existence of the things vocabularies are used to talk about. We only fall into the trap of thinking this, Brandom (2000, p.162) argues, when we lose track of the vital distinction between claimings and claimeds. There were no acts of truly claimings before there were us, and hence no truth-taking, but there were already true claimables. If Brandom were to endorse reference OI, he would be admitting that there were no objectively determinate facts until there were discursive practices, and hence conceding Rorty's point. A weaker form of OI is required to respect his distinctive position.

Another position Brandom no doubt hopes to steer clear of is an all too familiar one. When Moore (1993, p.118) declared that “there is no good reason to suppose either (A) that every physical fact is logically dependent upon some mental fact or (B) that every physical fact is causally dependent upon some mental fact” he was decrying the principle esse est percipi, which Hegel was (fairly or not) taken to be a representative of. If “social practice” is substituted for “mental fact” then Moore's comment becomes a denouncement of reference OI. To paint Hegel as a reference objective idealist, therefore, would be to endorse a position uncomfortably close to Russell and Moore's straw-mannish variation on the Hegel of the British Idealists. Writing for an audience of predominantly analytic philosophers, it's natural that Brandom should seek to emphasise the difference between his view and the speculative bogeyman that the name “Hegel” conjured in Anglophone philosophy for most of the twentieth century. Making objective idealism merely about what is required to grasp the two relations safeguards it against any such resemblance by accentuating the semantic-epistemic rather than metaphysical content of the claim.

Brandom's argument that his sense dependence thesis does not entail a corresponding reference dependence, however, makes use of a possible-worlds framework, which should surprise us. After all, possible worlds are the usual handmaidens of the “representation-first” semantics that Brandom (1997,
p.190) eschews. It would seem only charitable to take Brandom's mention of possible worlds to be philosophically non-committal, a mere tool of exposition. “Possible world” could be read as shorthand for, say, “maximally explicit consistent collection of claims.” However, if possible worlds are deflated in this way, then Brandom's argument ceases to be convincing. For if there are no normative incompatibilities (i.e., incompatibility_{sub} is not instantiated) then presumably there will be no claims either, since claims on his account are individuated by the normative incompatibilities they stand in to one another (HIHP 179). So there will, a fortiori, be no maximally explicit consistent collections of claims, and hence no possible worlds, and hence trivially no possible worlds at which incompatibility_{obj} is instantiated. Thus, on this deflationary reading, the sense dependence of incompatibility_{obj} on incompatibility_{sub} does entail a corresponding reference dependence.

Brandom might respond to this objection by pointing to the distinction between claimings and claimables. Possible worlds, he might argue, are sets of claimables, not sets of claimings. Only the latter are existentially dependent on norms, and so an absence of normative incompatibilities does not entail a dearth of possible worlds. However, as Rorty (2000, p.184) stresses, the existence of norm-independent ‘claimables’ in this sense amounts to very little, like “saying that the rules of baseball were there, but unexpressed, before baseball was played.” If a “claimable” just means “the possibility of a claim being made,” then all Brandom's assertion that there could be an objectively determinate world without normative practices amounts to is that it would be possible for claim-makers to come into existence and assert the determinateness of the objective world, even if there were no claim-makers actually in existence. If Brandom tries to save his thesis by explaining “claimable” in a more robust way than this, as a kind of worldly or metaphysical item, then his commitment to a pragmatist order of explanation comes under threat. In what sense is semantics answering to pragmatics if his argument relies on semantic entities that, on the pain of reference dependence, are not to be understood as aspects of normative practice?

Equally unsettling is Brandom's reliance on the distinction between sense and reference to state his version of OI. For this is a Fregean distinction that goes hand in hand with a way of thinking about language that does think of subjective practices of inference and objective states of affairs as strongly independent. On Frege's (1997a [1918], pp.336–337) account, senses exist in a third realm, neither material nor mental, and fundamentally independent from the way the world is. But this is precisely the picture of language that Brandom seems to be trying to steer us away from. Brandom wants us to view the

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23 We should tread carefully here. Brandom is an avowed methodological pluralist, and his methodology, he explains, is motivated by a desire to display the viability of an alternative than any fundamental flaw he perceives in possible-worlds semantics (Brandom 1997, pp.189–190). Nevertheless, it is worth attending to the fact that Brandom takes recourse here to a non-inferentialist approach, evidently finding no more straightforward way to argue his point.
sense, or meaning of an expression, as conferred by its place in that particular part of the world that is a
discursive practice, not as an otherworldly entity. As discussed above, it is this commitment to semantic
pragmatism which promised to satisfy the Hegelian desideratum that cognitive phenomena be worldly
phenomena. It is therefore urgent that Brandom's OI be established in terms native to his own system,
without drawing on the resources of Fregean or possible-world semantics, lest it presuppose what it is
supposed to resist. However, when we look to the resources Brandom furnishes us with in *MIE*, it is not
clear that we can so much as adequately state the thesis.

3.4 Possibility and perspective

*MIE* develops a semantic theory according to which conceptual content is always implicitly tied
to a perspective. We saw in the Introduction how this arises out of Brandom's commitment to
inferentialism. Since conceptual content is equated with inferential content (*MIE* 95), the content of a
claim comes to depend on its inferential context and hence its utterer's perspective. Far from being a quirk
that shows up only in the context of textual interpretation, this perspectivalism is a mainstay of Brandom's
theory. It is implicit throughout *MIE*, but rears its head most fully in Chapter Eight, where Brandom
reveals that the “essentially perspectival” (*MIE* 485) nature of conceptual content does not stifle
communication, but rather makes intelligible the representational dimension of our discursive practice.

The key tool he employs to show this is his analysis of *de dicto* and *de re* propositional attitude
ascriptions (*MIE* 530–547). A *de dicto* propositional attitude ascription is a statement of the form “S
claims that *p*”, while a *de re* ascription has the form “S believes of *t* that *p(it)***24** Whereas *de dicto*
ascriptions specify the content of a propositional attitude only from a given perspective, the latter,
Brandom claims, allow the “objective” content of commitments to be made explicit by incorporating the
commitments of a second speaker (*MIE* 598). This shows up as a difference in the inferential behaviour of
the respective locutions. If I am committed to “S claims that *p(t)*” and “S claims that *t=s***”, then I may
infer “S claims that *p(s)***”. On the other hand, if I am committed to “S claims that *p(t)*” and “*t=r***”, then I
may infer that “S claims of r that *p(it)***”, regardless of whether S also believes that *t=r*** (*MIE* 504–508). In
this way, I can use a *de re* ascription to make explicit what, from my perspective, really follows from S's
claim (*MIE* 598).

An example will illustrate. If Jane believes “soy is healthy”, whereas I think “soy is a
carcinogen”, then I may consistently infer that “Jane claims of a carcinogen that it is healthy”, even if Jane
would deny that soy is carcinogenic. This statement makes explicit what follows from Jane's belief about

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24 Note a slight quirk in Brandom's terminology. In his regimentation, “S claims that *p*** just expresses S's deontic attitude, and
does not require S to have explicitly declared that *p***. This is required for characteristic inferences stated below to be valid.
the health of soy against the background of my belief that soy is a carcinogen, and thus allows a
distinction to be made explicit, from my standpoint, between what is really the case and what Jane merely
takes to be the case. By combining our commitments into a single de re attitude ascription, I can make it
explicit that we are speaking about the very same object, not just using the name “soy” in two different
ways.

Brandom celebrates the fact that this account does not require the assumption of any privileged
standpoint associated with what is objectively true (MIE 594–595). Rather, objectivity shows up as a
“feature the structure of discursive intersubjectivity” (MIE 599). By tracking the consequences of other
speakers' commitments both from the perspective of their inferential background, and from one's own,
each discursive practitioner can maintain a distinction between deontic attitude and deontic status,
between what really is the case and what another merely takes to be the case, without the need for a
“bird's-eye view above the fray of competing claims” (MIE 601).

Leaving aside for now the question of whether this outcome is itself desirable, I want to examine
this doctrine's consequences for Brandom's objective idealism. It is easy to see why this might pose a
problem for the view Brandom wishes to adopt from Hegel. Brandom's objective idealism is a statement
about the semantic relationship between objective modal fact and subjective discursive practice. But if no
neutral, objective perspective is available, then from whose perspective is the objective idealism thesis
supposed to hold? More precisely: If not only normative relations of deontic incompatibility but also
modal relations of alethic incompatibility carry with them an implicit relativisation to an inferential
background, then an explicit statement of OI requires the specification of the inferential background
according to which those material incompatibility relations hold. I'll use the abbreviation
X-incompatibility to mean material incompatibility according to the inferential commitments of X. Using
this shorthand, we can explore some candidates for resolving the ambiguity of OI.

3.4.1 Three interpretations of objective idealism

First, we might suppose that Brandom's objective idealism involves a non-perspectival
incompatibility relation, the considerations above notwithstanding. This would give OI an awkward
standing in Brandom's system. It would then be a thesis whose content was unspecifiable on the model of
conceptual content that Brandom recommends. We might nonetheless adopt this interpretation and
understand it to constitute a recantation on Brandom's behalf of his perspectivalism, but this would be a
last resort. Apart from the fact that Brandom nowhere explicitly retracts his previous view, this
interpretation undercuts one of his most characteristic and thoroughly elaborated ideas, and is therefore to
be avoided if possible.

In order to retain Brandom's commitment to the perspectivity of conceptual content, we might interpret Brandom to be supporting the following thesis, which I'll call *de dicto OI*:

For any discursive practitioner X, there is a reciprocal sense dependence between X-incompatibility\(_{sub}\) and X-incompatibility\(_{obj}\).

In plain English, this is the claim that we cannot understand what a given subject takes to be impossible without understanding which norms of incompatibility that subject takes herself to be bound to. I call this formulation *de dicto* because it restricts itself to the perspective of X as regards both incompatibility relations, just like a *de dicto* propositional attitude ascription explicates commitments subjectively, from the perspective of a single agent. *De dicto* OI is the most obvious consequence of Brandom's arguments, and seems at times to be all he intends to establish. For instance, Brandom closes BSD with the suggestion that like he, Hegel was out to argue that “the activity of taking or treating two commitments to be incompatible in the subjective normative sense just is what it is to take or treat two properties or states of affairs as incompatible in the objective modal sense” (BSD 200, my emphasis).

However, if *de dicto* OI is the correct way to interpret Brandom's idealism, then Brandom is not entitled to draw from it the strong consequences that he does, and presents it in a way that is patently misleading. For Brandom claims, provocatively, that his objective idealism underwrites a *modal realism* (HIHP 181). Indeed, on his reading one of Hegel's great services was to show that objective idealism is the only way to earn the right to claims that there are true, objective, modal facts (MEMRTA 32). Taking assertions to be incompatible is what we are doing when we are saying that there are modal facts, and thus objective idealism, by stating that the concept of objective modal incompatibility implicitly involves subjective practices, points to the pragmatic foundations of modal fact-stating vocabularies. Yet we are hardly entitled to see objective idealism as giving expression to a modal realism if all that has been shown is a dependence between what is taken to be objective modal fact and the process of taking commitments to be incompatible. For objective idealism to explain modal realism, we should need a sense dependence between what is taken to be incompatible and what is really objective modal fact.

An interpretation of objective idealism that would come closer to vindicating Brandom's talk of a "modal realism" while also respecting the perspectivalism of the relations involved is the following, which I'll call *de re* OI.
Let X and Y be any two arbitrary discursive practitioners such that Y interprets X. Then there is a reciprocal sense dependence between $X$-incompatibility$_{\text{sub}}$ and $Y$-incompatibility$_{\text{obj}}$.

That is, we cannot make sense of what X takes to be the case without making reference to what, from the perspective of Y, really is the case, and vice versa.

*De re* OI would be more satisfying than its *de dicto* counterpart if it could be established. This version picks up on Brandom's idea that objectivity should be understood as a difference in perspective that each discursive practitioner can maintain, rather than as a particular privileged standpoint. It adds to this idea the claim that there is a reciprocal sense-dependence between the relations which determine what really is the case and what any other discursive practitioner$^{25}$ merely takes to be the case. In particular, if we let the discursive practice that we, the inquirers, engage in be Y, and let X be a real or theoretical discursive practice that we are theorising about (for instance, any of the autonomous discursive practices identified in *Making It Explicit*), then *de re* OI states that we can only make sense of the subjective norms of material incompatibility that practitioners of X institute by making reference to what we take to be in fact materially incompatible in the objective modal sense, and vice versa. This at least has the right shape to express the idea that an account in terms of practices of inference is required to “make intelligible” what we are saying when we use alethic modal vocabulary.

However, Brandom’s arguments for *de dicto* OI do not, in any obvious way, establish this result.$^{26}$ A dependence between what any single agent takes to be impossible and what that same agent takes to be impermissible does not imply a dependence between what an agent takes to be the case and what really is the case. Furthermore, it is still not clear that *de re* OI is strong enough to underwrite modal realism. We still have, merely, a relationship between what one agent takes to be impermissible and what another agent takes to be impossible. Even if one takes oneself to be the agent Y, it is difficult to avoid the impression that one is merely stating a relation between what are ultimately just two more perspectives (one of which happens to be one’s own), rather than objectivity and subjectivity as such. And so long as Brandom requires that conceptual content be irreducibly perspectival, it's hard to imagine how one could shake this impression.

### 3.5 Conclusion

The arguments given in this section does not purport to be decisive. The non-perspectival, *de dicto*

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$^{25}$ Or the same one again; there is no restriction that X≠Y. If we set X=Y we get *de dicto* OI as a special case of *de re* OI.

$^{26}$ The best hope for establishing *de re* OI might be a Davidsonian argument showing that we need to make use of our own knowledge of modal fact in order to radically interpret anyone, however I will not explore this possibility here. I am grateful to Greg Strom for this thought.
and *de re* interpretations do not logically exhaust all possible ways to frame Brandom's OI. Nonetheless, what has been shown is substantial. Recognising the requirement that material incompatibility (subjective or objective) needs to be specified from an inferential perspective on the deontic scorekeeping account shows that if Brandom is not to re-instate the Fregean distinction between a linguistic realm of senses and a realm of worldly practice, then serious issues arise for the interpretation of the thesis.

We can now hang some flesh on Pippin's insightful but terse remark that Brandom's OI has no “bite”. Brandom's arguments only establish a weak form of OI that states, for a given practice, there is a sense dependence between what those practitioners take to be objective modal fact and which inferences they disallow. However, Brandom's presentation suggests something stronger, namely that there is a reciprocal sense dependence between what *really* is the case and what some discursive practice takes to be the case.

In our attempt to explicitate Brandom's OI thesis, we have observed how Brandom's perspectivalism and his objective idealism pull in opposite directions. Brandom begins with an idea that is true to Hegel as I have presented him: That the determinateness of objective reality and the process of our coming to know it are inextricably linked. However, in ensuring that this thesis does not entail metaphysical extravagances, Brandom complicates its interpretation and threatens to reduce it to a claim too weak to underwrite anything like modal realism. In the next and final section, I will look for the source of this tension, and show how it can be usefully viewed as a latent hostility between Hegelian and Kantian elements in Brandom's thinking.
4 The Fregean path to Brandom's Kantianism

In this chapter, I will show how Brandom's commitment to a Fregean account of singular terms and their referents leads him to adopt an essentially Kantian conception of the object. By examining how Frege's platonic realism was complicated by his contextualism, I will show how Brandom inherits an ontology from Frege that undercuts the integrity of his objective idealism. Seeing how Brandom reduces the object to a structural feature of discursive practice will position us to diagnose the source of the problems his Hegelianism encounters.

4.1 Frege: Reference and the context principle

With characteristic precision and astuteness, Dummett (1991, pp.83–86; 1973, pp.498–501) has argued that the early Frege's works offer two different characterisations of reference, which are not obviously compatible, and bear differently on Frege's ontology. On the one hand, the key to Frege's novel semantic approach is to think of the reference of a subsentential expression as its semantic value, that is, as the contribution it makes to the truth value of a sentence in which it occurs (Dummett 1991, pp.84–85). Simultaneously, Dummett (1973, p.499) explains, a requirement of Frege's realism is that the reference relation should be characterisable, in the case of singular terms, as the relation of a name to its bearer. That is, the reference of the term “Napoleon” should be the French general, that of “Paris”, the city itself.

In the case of concrete objects, these characterisations stand in no obvious tension. The sentence “Paris is the capital of France” is true just because Paris is the capital of France, that is, because “Paris” refers to Paris which satisfies the predicate referred to by “is the capital of France”. By referring to its bearer, the term “Paris” makes the appropriate contribution to the truth value of the sentence, and so the two characterisations of the reference of “Paris” stand in harmony.

In the case of abstract objects, however, things are not so clear. For there is no obvious section of space-time that stands to the concept “justice”, the imaginary number “2+i” or “the mood of the party” in the relation that “Paris” does to the city of the same name. Thus, we might doubt whether the characterisation of reference as the relation of name to bearer holds in these cases. One way of dealing with this problem is to adopt an extreme platonism, stipulating a non spatio-temporal bearer for the name of even the most abstract objects, so as to force the two characterisations to coincide. Frege's realism about numbers appears, on first glance, to be an attempt to do precisely this. However, such an interpretation is confounded by another of Frege's commitments, the context principle:

The meaning [Bedeutung] of a word must be asked for in the context of a proposition, not in
isolation. (Frege 1997a, p.90)

Requiring only that a name have sense relative to any given context, rather than a uniform meaning across all contexts, allows for a different way of settling the reference of singular terms than by the name-bearer relation (Beaney 1997, pp.17–20). For supposing further that we have some way of settling the truth conditions of a sentence in which a name occurs other than by a prior notion of reference, we needn't stipulate a bearer for each name in order to define its reference. Instead, we can take the truth condition of the sentence in which the name occurs to have explanatory primacy, and give a purely formal account of reference in terms of this truth condition. Frege noticed that proceeding this way was possible in many mathematical cases. For instance, sentences of the form “the direction of line $x$ = the direction of line $y$” are true just when “line $x$ is parallel to line $y$”. This allows us to settle the truth-value of these sentences without requiring a bearer for the name “direction of line $x$”, assuming we already have an account of when “line $x$ is parallel to line $y$” is true. Therefore, we can define the reference of “direction of line $x$” in a given sentence in a purely formal fashion, as its semantic value, that is, the contribution to the truth value of the sentence, seeing that we have an independent handle on when the sentence is true.

Dummett (1973, pp.499–500) argues that if Frege's context principle is employed in this way, then a severe disanalogy appears between the reference of concrete and abstract objects. Only the former are taken at “face-value” (Dummett 1991, p.83) to be the bearers of names, the latter have their reference determined formally and thus can be viewed as eliminable parts of the language. This amounts to making reference otiose in the case of abstract objects, since no appeal to it is required in laying down the truth conditions of such sentences.

In light of such considerations, Reck (2005) explores the consequences of the context principle for Frege's ontology. Reck argues that heeding context principle requires us not to read Frege as a platonist in the usual sense, as one who begins by positing a realm of objective particulars, thus treating existence and objecthood as primitive, then explains meaning as a relation of reference to these objects, and the objectivity of our judgements as deriving from this reference relation. Rather, Frege's platonism should be understood to invert this order of explanation (Reck 2005, p.27). The contextual platonist begins with a collection of basic laws which govern the objects to which our expressions refer. True statements are then explained as those that follow from these laws, and false statements as those that do not. In particular, these laws determine which statements of existence are true, and thus what exists. Terms that refer are simply those that function, logically, as singular terms (Reck 2005, pp.27–29).

For our purposes, the most important difference between these two forms of “platonism” is that the latter, but not the former, is language-relative. The reason is clear: The metaphysical platonist begins by
settling questions of ontology before considering matters of epistemic and linguistic access to them. Thus, for the metaphysical platonist, linguistic considerations are irrelevant to the question “what objects are there?” The contextual platonist, by contrast, can only answer questions of ontology with respect to a given set of basic laws in a particular language, and so the ontology she arrives at will depending on the language under consideration.

### 4.2 Brandom, Frege and the order of semantic explanation

In his treatment of singular terms, Brandom resolutely pursues the order of explanation suggested by Frege's context principle (MIE 360–412). Brandom views Frege's adoption of the context principle as an expression the earlier Kantian idea that the judgement is the primary unit of semantic significance, an idea Brandom defends on pragmatist grounds (MIE 362–363). Sentences, the linguistic correlate of judgements, form a special semantic category because they are the smallest freestanding unit which can be used to make a move in the game of giving and asking for reasons. In Dummett's (1973, pp.83–84) terminology, only sentences are bearers of force. Since Brandom requires that semantics notions must be explained in pragmatic terms (MIE 83–84), he takes this to imply that a proper order of semantic explanation must begin with sentences and then proceed to explain the semantic role of subsentential components such as singular terms indirectly, in terms of the inferential properties of sentences in which they occur (MIE 413). This, Brandom contends, was the laudable impetus behind Frege's context principle, which likewise made whole sentences rather than singular terms primary in the order of semantic explanation (MIE 363).

Brandom embraces the conclusion that adopting this contextual approach makes reference unavailable as an explanatory principle. Instead, Brandom takes up the challenge to answer the question “what is a singular term” without recourse to “the dark and pregnant notion of referential purport” (MIE 361). This is not to deny that language has a referential dimension. We still need to explain why it makes sense to think of singular terms as the names of bearers. But rather than using the concept of the name-bearer relation to elucidate the contribution of singular terms to the meanings of sentences, Brandom offers a purely structural account of the semantic significance of singular terms in terms of their inferential roles, and on the basis of this attempts to make their representational aspect intelligible (MIE 367–376).

### 4.3 Brandom, Kant and the order of ontological explanation

Brandom does not explicitly address ontological questions in *MIE*. He does, however, follow the order of explanation that Reck associates with “contextual platonism” by taking the objects to which a
language refers to be determined by the singular terms in that language, rather than explaining reference via an antecedently intelligible name-bearer relation. Brandom accordingly takes it that to say what it is to refer to an object, one needs only to determine when it is permissible to introduce a singular term into the language (MIE 413–416).

While not presented as an ontological doctrine, this account has clear ontological ramifications similar to those that Reck attributes to Frege. Namely, on this account, what objects there are depend on which singular terms are used by a practice. Now this result on its own need not imply that objects can be created and destroyed by the whim of discursive practitioners. A Brandomian discursive practice, as we are often reminded (MIE 332, 632), is a group of agents in a concrete environment. As such, the need for the discursive practice to deal effectively with its environment might place some restriction on the singular terms which a discursive community will come to adopt.

However, when we look to the role that singular terms play in Brandom's account of language, it is difficult to see how the environment places any constraint on our use of singular terms whatsoever. Brandom does explain how the possibility of acquiring non-inferential commitments engenders the possibility of friction with the environment and thus causes a practice to come to endorse inferences that reflect modal facts. For example, we might exist in a community that permits speakers to classify anything that tastes sour as an acid, and anything that is an acid as something that turns phenolphthalein blue (BSD 184–185). If we discover something that tastes sour but does not turn phenolphthalein blue, we will be forced to revise our norms of correctness and cease to endorse the inference form sour to acid, or from acid to turning phenylpthalein blue. In this way, practices can allow purely internal, deontic norms of correctness change in response to the objective lawlike facts exhibited by their environment. Notice, however, that this accounts only for how incompatibilities among concepts are brought into line with facts. No corresponding account is given of how the singular terms a community takes there to be come to reflect the objects in the environment.

In place of this, Brandom offers an account of how the practice of respecting norms of material inference is, ipso facto, referring to objects. Objects are just equivalence classes induced by symmetric inferences (MIE 484), and so taking two properties to be incompatible just is taking them to refer to a common object, as we saw above. Yet this gives us no reason to think that singular terms should converge on objects in the environment analogously to the way that inferential norms converge on modal facts. Brandom shows, merely, that there must be some object available to which properties can be predicated. His account places no restriction at all on which or how many objects the practice takes there to be. The

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27 See also Wanderer (2008, pp.176–177)
ontological question of what objects there really are is cast aside in favour of the semantic question of what it is to “so much as seem to be about something” (RP 29). Though Brandom admits at one point that “referential purport is one thing, referential success is another” (MIE 433), he hears in this only a demand to explicate the difference between “taking it that an expression has been introduced as purporting to refer to a definite object and taking it that it in fact picks out [...] such an object” (MIE 433). But this, of course, is still to evade the question of what it is to in fact refer successfully to an object.

4.4 Some Hegelian misgivings

Brandom's subsumption of the question of referential success under the question of referential purport evidences a familiar shift in the concept of an object. Just as Kant appeals to the unity of the subject in order to account for the unity of the object, so too does Brandom secure the unity of the object via the cohesion of the discursive practice. For both Kant and Brandom, objects are ultimately reduced to structural features of the conceptual economy. Neither offer us a satisfactory account of relationship between the objects that the subject (Kant) or discursive community (Brandom) take there to be, and the objects that there really are. Brandom's argument that any sufficiently rich discursive practice is, as such, a representational practice this leaves us with something like the Kant's guarantee that our cognitive activity, as such, must refer to some “transcendental object = X” (CPR A109), a mere guarantee of something outside our subjectivity. Neither give us any grounds to think that the specific objects we take there to be reflect anything beyond the structure of our own cognition.

Yet this, we will recall, was precisely the feature of Kant's idealism that Hegel's objective idealism was designed to avoid. Hegel might object to Brandom that making the concept of object parasitic on that of singular term subjectivises the notion of object, and so fails to live up to the task of transforming Kant's subjective idealism into a properly objective idealism. For Hegel, the remedy was to put forward a new ontology that would allow the subject's spontaneity to coexist with the autonomy of objects, by literally granting them a life of their own. In Brandom's case, what is needed is an ontology that will show how the dependence of objects on our norms does not reduce them to mere shadows of our norms.

Brandom, however, is reticent to address issues of this sort. To him, ontology reeks too much of an attempt to reveal “the true or ultimate structure of reality” (Brandom 2008, p.179), which he thinks can only amount to the baseless privileging of one vocabulary over all others. Different vocabularies make different features of the world and our practices explicit, Brandom claims, but none are inherently more fundamental than others. This ontological egalitarianism echoes the perspectivalism which, as we saw in
the previous chapter, confounds his interpretation of objective idealism. Brandom shares with Kant the modesty to refrain from saying what the object is apart from our normative constitution of it, and to hope for no stronger sense of “really true” than “what, from my perspective, really is true.” Kant was content to be so modest, but Hegel was not. His objective idealism was designed to grant Kant's perspectivalism but free us from its thrall, by providing us with an ontology that would allow us to see this limitedness as constitutive of the things in itself, and hence indirectly allow us knowledge of it. Short of such an ontology, however, it is difficult to see how Brandom provides us with any more than a socially inflected form of Kantianism.
5 Conclusion: Kantian modesty or Hegelian ambition?

I introduced my project by arguing that to respect Brandom's methodology, we must go further than merely pointing out differences between Brandom and Hegel. An effective critique of de re reconstructive metaphysics must show that some such differences are pernicious by Brandom's own lights. This is what I have attempted to show by providing a rival reconstruction of Hegel's objective idealism. So as to respect Brandom's decision to “pick and choose,” I have used my own reading of Hegel as a guide to points of tension in Brandom's own account, rather than a standard of correctness for it.

As I read him, the gravamen of Hegel's dissatisfaction with Kant was his subjectivism. Kant addressed the problem of the unity of the object by appealing to the free activity of the subject, but had thereby made the object of knowledge look like a thing of the subject's creation. I argued against Stern that Hegel's response to Kant is not to revert to Aristotelian ontology, but rather to reject Kant's metaphysics of intentionality. The subject's active role in the synthesis of the object only leads to sceptical conclusions if we assume that our free activity cannot also be viewed as the development of the object itself. Resisting Kant's subjectivism therefore turns on finding a way to view epistemic structures as objective processes. In this sense, rather than Stern's, Hegel addresses Kant's subjectivism at the level of ontology.

I went on to suggest that Brandom appeared to be in a good position to take on board Hegel's objective idealism since, thanks to Sellars, he is acutely conscious of the myth of the given. Brandom therefore proceeds, in Hegelian fashion, to offer an account of intentionality which allows no clean separation of the “subjective and objective poles of the intentional nexus” (RP 53). However, in its execution, Brandom's reading of Hegel faces serious problems. Brandom attempts to restrict his idealism to a claim about our grasp of concepts, rather than what there is. This thesis turned out to be difficult to square with his perspectivalism, which denies any objective standpoint from which the thesis might hold.

With Brandom's Fregean concept of the object in view, we can see more clearly where Brandom's Hegelianism miscarries. Brandom ensures that talk of objectivity is inseparable from talk of subjective practice only by making us, the discursive practitioners, wholly responsible for which objects there are. This shows up in his account of singular terms, which can be viewed as a social-discursive analogue of Kant's transcendental idealism. Hegel could object to Brandom, as he did to Kant, that by making objects dependent singular terms, and singular terms a reflection of the norms we create, Brandom fails to offer us a way to view our free activity as the realisation of the object's own nature. Instead, objective reference comes to look like the internal activity of a discursive practice, reminiscent of the solipsism of the transcendental ego that Hegel thought was the outcome of Kant's subjective idealism.
For this reason, Brandom's pragmatism fails to live up to the promise of de-subjectivising Kant's idealism. Though it does indeed offer a way to view cognitive structures as worldly processes, his distaste for ontology prevents him from giving an account of the object which would allow the autonomy of the object to coexist with a community of free subjects. Instead, by employing his pragmatism to purely semantic ends, Brandom shirks the question of what there is outside of us, and so re-enacts Kant's tragedy of solitary subject at the level of the discursive community.

I do not pretend that these criticisms constitute a definitive refutation of Brandom's reading, nor do I think that Brandom’s attempt is without value. Brandom performs a rare feat by translating Hegel out of his native idiom, without any residual dependence on unexplained Hegelian jargon. Whether we ultimately read Hegel's objective idealism as a claim of sense-dependence, reference-dependence or in a way that defies these categories, Brandom deserves to be commended for offering a vocabulary in which, or against which, this debate can take place. The value of a vocabulary, after all, resides largely in the possibilities for its eventual subversion, as Rorty would no doubt agree.

What ultimately confounds Brandom's historical enterprise seems to be the range of loyalties he attempts to maintain. By overplaying the continuity between Kant, Hegel and Frege, Brandom turns their differences into problems for his own view. Though he provides a most ambitious revitalisation of these “mighty dead,” his work still evidences the tendency to homogenise the views of the German Idealists. Whereas Russell did this so as to reject them in one fell swoop, Brandom does so for the sake of their revival. But if Russell's Hegel was a straw-man, then Brandom's threatens to look a disfigured creation.28 Hegel did not simply add a socio-historical dimension to Kant, and any attempt to read him as if he did will face grave difficulties.

When Dieter Henrich set out half a century ago to bring German idealism back into contact with the Anglophone world, he made no attempt to veil the fractures which permeate that tradition. The transatlantic collection he edited was aptly titled “Kant oder Hegel?” (Henrich 1983). There are elements of Brandom's philosophy that make him uniquely placed to effect a Hegelian revival in analytic philosophy, as he is well aware. However, this Hegelian ambition stands in tension with his Kantian modesty, as evidenced by the difficulties that arise when we try to interpret Brandom's “objective idealism” in line with his MIE account of content. Brandom needn't swallow whole either Kant's or Hegel's position, but he must recognise these incompatibilities, for the sake of the unity of his own system, and for a true analytic Hegelianism.

28 Like McDowell (2007, 1:21:30–1:21:46) thinks Brandom's “analytic pragmatism” risks looking like a “Frankenstein monster, […] something enabled to stumble about in a semblance of life by having had new organs grafted into it”.
6 Bibliography


