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Article

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AN INFERENTIALIST ACCOUNT OF PROPER NAMES[1]

SUMMARY: In this paper, I defend an inferentialist account of proper names. After a review of how the account works in the framework of Robert Brandom's inferentialism, I focus on two objections. The first one, from a Russellian view, is that the inferentialist account will eventually collapse into a Russellian description theory of proper names. The second, from a Millian view, is that the account fails due to the fact that proper names in fact have no conceptual content, as they are merely meaningless tags. I conclude by recapitulating the advantages of the inferentialist account of proper names.

KEYWORDS: inferentialism, substitution, proper names, anaphora, semantics, Robert Brandom.

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1. Introduction

There are three classic approaches to the semantics of proper names: the Fregean view (names have both sense and reference), the Millian view (names have reference but no sense), and the Russellian view (names are disguised definite descriptions). In this paper I defend an *inferentialist* account of proper names and defend it against objections from both the Millian and Russellian views.

While there may be different ways to develop an inferentialist account, I use here the approach set out by Robert Brandom in his *Making It Explicit* (1994). Brandom there develops a general account of singular terms without showing *just* how this account is to apply to proper names. Proper names pose what seems the biggest challenge to inferentialism, since the inferentialist aims to refrain from appealing to the reference relation to explain semantic facts, but proper names seem to be words that cannot be understood without appeal to reference. In this paper I show how an inferentialist account of proper names can indeed be developed and defended, thereby testing the limits of the inferentialist approach.

Here is the structure of the paper.

I shall first outline, in broad strokes, how an inferentialist account of proper names may be developed in the framework of Brandom's inferentialism (§2). I shall then address three challenges in turn. The first (§3) challenge alleges that Brandom has no good way to distinguish proper names from predicative expressions. I argue that the distinction is best made by appeal both to syntax and different kinds of inferential norms (§4). I then turn to a pair of objections coming from opposite sides of the philosophy of language. The first, from the Russellian side, claims that the inferentialist account can be reduced to descriptivism (§5). I show how such reduction is blocked, as the inferentialist account should incorporate the role of causal history in the way made famous by Kripke, even while not falling into the Millian alternative. The second objection, from the Millian side, claims that the inferentialist account fails because there is no conceptual content in proper names that can explain the inferential role of such names (§6). I show that this objection fails as well, as it misconstrues the inferentialist as holding that the relevant inferences are based on some independent conceptual content. Finally, I shall conclude the paper by gesturing some further work that needs to be done for the inferentialist account (§7).

2. The Inferentialist Strategy: Basics Explained

Put crudely, the thesis of inferentialism is that the meaning of a sentence is its inferential role. According to inferentialism, the representational dimension of a sentence plays an inessential role in explaining the meaning of the sentence. One prominent feature of Brandom's inferentialism, in particular, lies in how much it refrains from the representational dimension: Brandom argues that the representational dimension plays *no* explanatory role in understanding the mean-

ing of a sentence.[2] In this paper, I assume that Brandom's inferentialism as a general strategy is plausible. My focus will be on how far inferentialism can go: can proper names be explained inferentially? As the first step, let us ask: can parts of a sentence be explained inferentially?[3]

A sentence is, of course, composed of some parts. It is required for an inferentialist to account for the meanings of the parts ("subsentences" hereafter). As a criterion of adequacy for inferentialism, subsentences cannot be explained in representational or referential terms. The challenge is that a subsentence does not seem to play an inferential role.

Brandom's basic strategy is to appeal to the notion of substitution. Consider the following sentence,

(1) Scott walked.

Presumably, we can explain the meaning of it in terms of its inferential roles in the linguistic system.[4] For instance, we may infer from (1) to the following sentence,

(2) The author of *Waverley* walked.

So, part of the meaning of (1) is constituted by the inferential relation between (1) and (2). Now, the inference can be understood in terms of substitution: we get sentence (2) by substituting "the author of *Waverley*" for "Scott". Broadly speaking, we make an inference, a *substitution* inference, from (1) to (2). In this way, it is possible to explain the meaning of a subsentence if any ("Scott" or "The author of *Waverley*" in this case) by the (indirect) inferential roles it plays

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[2] In a reply to John McDowell's criticism of the strategy of refraining from the representational dimension, Brandom says:

> [o]f course I agree that rejecting representationalist explanatory strategies does not commit one to an inferentialist order of explanation. Instead of treating one of these semantic notions as antecedently intelligible and prior to the other in the order of explanation, one may insist that one must start with both, and restrict one's explanatory ambitions to illuminating the relations between them. And I agree that bracketing or abstracting from any substantive arguments on either side, such a strategy must be counted as initially more plausible than either of its more ambitious reductive competitors. But I undertake commitment to the bolder, riskier program in full awareness of its safer alternatives. (Brandom, 1997b, p. 189)

[3] Inferentialism cannot take the representationalist bottom-up strategy in understanding linguistic meanings. The bottom-up strategy explains, first, parts of a sentence in terms of representational relations and, then, the whole sentence in terms of its parts. Inferentialism reverses the explanatory strategy.

[4] In this paper, again, I suppose that inferentialism is plausible, at least at the sentential level. The question I ask is how we should explain the subsentential level, proper names in particular, in the framework of inferentialism.

in the inferences involving sentences in which it occurs. If inferences include not only sentential inferences but also subsentential-substitution inferences, then it would seem that the meaning of a subsentence can be explained inferentially. This at least paves the way to explaining the meanings of proper names, if any. After all, proper names are just a type of subsentence. So much for the basic strategy. Some clarifications are in order.

First, there is a question about the nature of substitution inferences. In order for us to make the inference from (1) to (2), we might say that we need the following sentence as a premise, i.e.,

(1a) Scott is the author of *Waverley*.

If that is the case, the meaning of "Scott", if any, in (1) will have nothing to do with the kind of inference or inferential role. Rather, it will have something to do with (1a). And whether the inference is a good one depends on whether the premise (1a) is true. If it is false, then the inferrer makes a mistake. One part of the question here is how we should understand the nature of a sentence such as (1a); the other part of the question is how we should explain cases in which the inferrer makes a mistake in the framework of inferentialism. For clarity, let us label this question Q1, noting that it has two parts.

Second, for my purpose, there is a question about how we can identify proper names. There are different types of subsentences. They can be singular terms, plural terms, predicates, connectives, and so on. Even if the basic strategy can work, how can we sort out singular terms or proper names in particular? The question here is not a problem for the inferentialist account of proper names per se. But without it, the account would be incomplete. For clarity, let us label the second question Q2. Let me address Q1 and Q2 in turn.[5]

For Q1, we need to introduce two other ideas of Brandom. Defending both ideas will be out of the scope of the paper. But I will explain them to the extent that they can be seen as plausible. The first idea is this: in addition to *formally* valid inferences, we should also make some room for *materially* good inferences. Brandom inherits the notion of material inferences from Sellars (Sellars, 1953). The second idea is that logical locutions are solely expressive. This is called logical expressivism, which is attributed to the young Frege by Brandom. The two ideas are closely related to each other. Let me explain.

Here are some examples of *materially* good inferences:

[5] In this short paper, it is unlikely that Q1 and Q2 can be thoroughly addressed and defended. However, they should be answered to the extent that we can see the inferentialist account is indeed plausible, and we should take it seriously. And that is what I aim to do in the paper.

(i) The inference from "It is raining" to "The streets will be wet",

(ii) The inference from "Pennsylvania is north of Florida" to "Florida is south of Pennsylvania",

(iii) The inference from "Today is Wednesday" to "Tomorrow will be Thursday".

We know that these inferences are good as long as we understand both premises and conclusions. Brandom says, "Endorsing these inferences is part of grasping or mastering those concepts [in both premises and conclusions], quite apart from any specifically logical competence" (Brandom, 1994, p. 98). Here is the definition of the notion of material inferences: "[I]nferences whose propriety essentially involves the nonlogical conceptual content of the premises and conclusions" (Brandom, 1994, p. 102). On the other hand, those who only endorse *formally* valid inferences would treat those examples as enthymemes. For example, they would say that, for the inference (i) to be good, we need to add another premise, i.e., *if* it is raining, *then* the streets will be wet. Brandom denies this. As a *material* inferentialist, he thinks that formally valid inferences can be derived from materially good inferences, not vice versa. He says, "the notion of formally valid inferences is definable in a natural way from that of materially correct ones, while there is no converse route" (Brandom, 1994, p. 104). If this is correct, then the inference from (1) to (2) can be treated as materially good without appealing to the premise (1a).

One might say that the inference from (1) to (2) is different in kind from (i), (ii), or (iii). Taking (i) as an example, granted, if I understand the contents of the concepts *raining* and *wet*, then I understand that the inference is good. However, as the objection goes, there is no content of the proper name "Scott" in (1). So, the inference from (1) to (2) cannot be analogous to (i), (ii), or (iii). We can hardly treat the inference from (1) to (2) as *materially* good. What is worse, since there is no content of the proper name "Scott", it seems that in order for me to make the inference from (1) to (2), I have to know the premise (1a) first because it is the *only* reason for me to make the inference. That is, the premise (1a) has to be presupposed in order to make the inference. Notice that this objection does not need to deny material inferences *in toto*. What it needs is only to deny that material inferences are applicable to the sentences involving proper names. I think the answer to this objection is to deny the presupposition of it, i.e., a proper name does not have any content, and to treat our inferring ability as primitive or fundamental. I shall return to it in § 6, in which I will deal with the Millian objection.

The point so far, as well as part of the answer to Q1, is that when we make the inference from (1) to (2), the inference is good not because it is an enthymeme but because it is good *materially*. Nevertheless, what is the relationship between the inference from (1) to (2) and the premise (1a)? In order to answer this question, we have to turn to Brandom's second idea: logical expressivism.[6]

[6] For a recent development of this view, see Hlobil and Brandom's (2024).

As the name indicates, logical expressivism is the idea that the task of logical locutions is expressive. Brandom says, "Frege's logical notation is designed for *expressing* conceptual contents, making *explicit* the inferential involvements that are *implicit* in anything that possesses such content" (Brandom, 1994, p. 107; italics in original). To make the inferential relations explicit is to *say* them. The task of logical locutions is not to *prove* something, but to *say* something which otherwise can only be *done* by us implicitly. Logical expressivism is an attempt to rethink the nature of logic completely. Let us take conditional locutions as an example. Brandom says:

> Prior to the introduction of such a [conditional] locution, one could *do* something, one could treat a judgment as having a certain content (implicitly attribute that content to it), by endorsing various inferences involving it and rejecting others. After conditional locutions have been introduced, one can *say*, as part of the content of a claim, that a certain inference is acceptable. One is able to make explicit material inferential relations between an antecedent or premise and a consequent or conclusion. […] The conditional is the paradigm of a locution that permits one to make inferential commitments explicit as the contents of judgments. (Brandom, 1994, pp. 108–109; emphasis in original)

Let us think about (i). Clearly, the conditional locution related is this: *If* it is raining, *then* the streets will be wet (It is raining → The streets will be wet). Prior to the introduction of such a locution, I could treat "The streets will be wet" as part of the contents of "It is raining", again simply by grasping the concepts *raining* and *wet*. To put it another way, by making (i), I, in fact, make an inferential *commitment*, implicitly though. This is what I *do*. After the conditional locution has been introduced, I am now able to make my inferential commitment explicit in the form of the conditional locution. I can now *say* that an inferential commitment is made here by *saying* the conditional locution. The role of the conditional locution is to make explicit my inferential commitment that is otherwise implicit in claiming that it is raining.

To return to the question about the relationship between the inference from (1) to (2) and the premise (1a), (1a) is another important kind of logical locution: an identity locution (Scott = The author of *Waverley*). Similarly, the role of the identity locution is to make explicit the substitution-inferential commitment that is implicit in the use of the proper name "Scott". Brandom says:

> The consequences of application distinctive of identity claims consist in the undertaking of substitution-inferential commitments. What is made assertionally explicit as a claim of the form $a = b$ is commitment to a pattern of inferences requiring doxastic (assertional) commitment to the claim expressed by Pa whenever one undertakes doxastic commitment to the claim expressed by Pb, and vice versa. (Brandom, 1994, p. 419)

For Brandom, the substitution inferences I count as good are my "simple material substitution-inferential commitments" (SMSICs, for short; Brandom, 1994,

p. 372). Identity locutions make my SMSICs explicit. Now for the very question of the relationship between the inference from (1) to (2) and the premise (1a), here is the answer: The premise (1a), as an identity locution, makes explicit my SMSIC in the inference from (1) to (2).

Notice that the other part of Q1 has not been fully answered yet. Even if what we said above is correct, another worry still exists: Since I might make a mistake when I make an inference or the inference I make might be actually *not* materially good, we cannot conclude that part of the meaning of "Scott", if any, is the (indirect) inferential role it plays in the inference from (1) to (2) I make.

As I understand Brandom, here is the other part of the story. Admittedly, everyone has her own SMSICs. However, whether a material inference is good or not is actually governed by norms. No one can determine norms. That is why everyone can make a mistake. So, in the framework of inferentialism, there is still a distinction between treating the inference as good and the inference being actually good. What is the relationship between SMSICs and norms, then? Put crudely, norms are *socially* instituted.[7] However, this does not mean that they are static and uncontroversial. On the contrary, they are dynamic and contested. Everyone's SMSICs matter, but nobody's SMSICs can overwhelm others to the extent that hers can determine norms directly.

So, the answer to the other part of Q1 is roughly this: *My* inference from (1) to (2) is not a sufficient condition for us to conclude that part of the meaning of "Scott", if any, is the role it plays in the inference from (1) to (2). The substitution inferences are actually governed by norms. My SMSICs make some contributions to norms but are not sufficient to determine norms. The meaning of a subsentence is the (indirect) inferential roles it plays in the *norms-governed* material inferences involving sentences in which it occurs.

Let us turn to Q2. Brandom provides us with a way to distinguish singular terms from predicates. Syntactically, there are two[8] types of substitution-structural roles (SSRs) an expression can play (Brandom, 1994, p. 368):

(a) Expressions that can be substituted *for*. For example, in the inference from (1) to (2), "The author of *Waverley*" can be substituted for "Scott".

(b) Expressions that are substitutional *frames* or reminders. They are common to substitutional variants. For example, in the inference from (1) to (2), the frame can be shown as this: α walked.

[7] See §4 for more clarifications.

[8] There is one more type, expressions that can be substituted *in*. For example, "Scott walked" can be substituted in to get "The author of *Waverley* walked". However, this plays no role in the current discussion because the type is sentential, while our focus here is subsentential.

Brandom claims that the SSRs provide a *necessary* condition for being singular terms and predicates. Singular terms play the SSRs of being substituted *fors*, while predicates play the SSRs of being substitutional *frames* or reminders.

On the other hand, semantically, there are two types of substitution-inferential significance (SIS): symmetric and asymmetric. And the SIS also provides a *necessary* condition for being singular terms and predicates. Brandom says, "[p]redicate substitution inferences may be asymmetric, while singular-term substitution inferences are always symmetric" (Brandom, 1994, p. 372). For example, let us compare the inference from (1) to (2) with the inference from (1) to (3):

(3) Scott moved.

The subsentences, "Scott" and "the author of *Waverley*", in the inference from (1) to (2) are reversible, while the subsentences, "walked" and "moved", in the inference from (1) to (3) are not. Now, according to Brandom, by combining the SSRs and the SIS, we get a *sufficient* condition for being singular terms and predicates: singular terms are subsentences that are substituted *fors*, and that are involved only in *symmetric* substitution inferences; predicates are subsentences that are substitutional *frames*, and that *can* be involved in *asymmetric* substitution inferences.[9]

Or so that is Brandom's proposal. Suppose Q1 and Q2 can be addressed to some extent. We will have the basics for the inferentialist account of proper names. For the rest of the paper, I shall evaluate the account in various ways. In the next section, I will address the worry that Brandom's above proposal, as it currently stands, fails due to some circularity problems, and provide some solutions. More specifically, the circularity problems are that using the SSRs to distinguish between subsentences that are substituted *fors* and subsentences that are substitutional *frames* is circular, and using SMSICs to distinguish between pri-

[9] Admittedly, even if this way of distinguishing singular terms from predicates works, there is still a question about how to get proper names, since singular terms include some pronouns, proper names, and definite descriptions. To fully address Q2, we will need to introduce Brandom's notion of anaphora. I will discuss the role anaphora plays in understanding proper names in § 5. For now, my focus will be on Brandom's very first step of distinguishing between singular terms and predicates. If it can work, the job left will be just to make some further distinctions inside of the category of singular terms.

Besides, there might be a question about logical locutions, say, the (1a) mentioned before, i.e., the identity locution. Which part is the singular term or the predicate? The answer, I think, is this: The apparatus of the SSRs and the SIS applies only to non-logical locutions. The identity locution (1a) as a logical locution is used, again, to make my SMSIC in the inference from (1) to (2) explicit. With (1a), we can now *say* that my inference is appropriate. What is more, the identity locution (1a) presupposes a certain kind of material substitution inference as the inference from (1) to (2), and is thus fully derivative in that sense. Brandom says, "[i]n short, the use of identity and quantificational locutions presupposes singular term and predicate use" (Brandom, 1994, p. 382).

mary and non-primary substitution-inferential cases is circular. The distinction between primary and non-primacy cases is needed to rule out some apparent counterexamples to the idea that singular terms only play symmetric SIS.

3. Circularity Problems and Solutions

Instead of saying that singular terms play the SSRs of being substituted *fors*, while predicates play the SSRs of being substitutional *frames* or reminders, why not to say the other way around? That is, what is wrong with (c) or (d) as follows?

(c) Predicates are expressions that are substituted *fors*. For example, in the inference from (1) to (3), "moved" can be substituted for "walked".

(d) Singular terms are expressions that are substitutional *frames* or reminders. They are common to substitutional variants. For example, in the inference from (1) to (3), the frame or reminder can be shown as this: Scott *β*.

Brandom notices this problem very well. He admits that (c) and (d) are possible options, and that nothing is wrong with them. However, he says, "it is important to distinguish between *substituting* one expression (of a basic substitution-structural kind) for another and *replacing* one sentence frame with another" (Brandom, 1994, p. 369; italics in original). He thinks that we should treat *frames* as products of being substituted *fors* and thus as derivatives rather than basic. But the very question is why. Why should we think that singular terms must play the SSRs of being substituted *fors* and predicates must play the SSRs of being substitutional *frames* or reminders? We cannot, for instance, appeal to our general practices on formal logic because logic, according to Brandom, is solely expressive. Otherwise, this would put the cart before the horse. In other words, for Brandom, we have to distinguish singular terms from predicates first and provide the theory of logic later.[10] It seems that Brandom cannot make the distinction without falling into some sort of circularity.

I suggest that the SSRs actually do *not* play a role in distinguishing singular terms from predicates. However, I do not think that this is a big problem for Brandom. After all, the leading question was, "What are singular terms?". It is

[10] Besides, Brandom's answer to another question, "Why are there singular terms?", does not shed any light on the very question we have, either. To answer the question, "Why are there singular terms?", is to rule out the other three options as follows:

(1) substituted for is symmetric; substitutional frame is symmetric;

(2) Substituted for is asymmetric; substitutional frame is symmetric;

(3) Substituted for is asymmetric; substitutional frame is asymmetric (Brandom, 1994, pp. 376–377).

However, notice that these three options are all based on the idea that singular terms play the SSRs of being substituted *fors* and predicates play the SSRs of being substitutional *frames* or reminders. But why we should accept this idea is the very question.

apparent that the distinction between singular terms and predicates cannot be made merely in terms of the notion of substitution. Instead, predicates can be well distinguished from subjects syntactically. The notion of substitution will still be useful when we already have the syntactic distinction between subjects and predicates at the sentential level. I suggest that it is a syntactic fact that some part of a sentence is a subject and some is a predicate. That predicates play the SSRs of being substitutional *frames* or reminders should not be understood as a way of defining predicates but as a way of assigning a role to predicates. What inferentialism needs to reject is just a representationalist understanding of a subject or a predicate. Our real problem is to explain, on syntactical grounds, when a subject is a singular term or when a predicate contains a singular term.

Suppose subjects and predicates can be distinguished. Is adding the SIS sufficient for being singular terms? McCullagh (2005) argues not.[11] Again, the proposal is that a subsentence is a singular term if and only if it is a substituted *for* and the substitution-inferential relations related to it are *symmetric*. On the face of it, this is quite implausible. Consider the following three counterexamples (CEs):

(CE 1) The substitution inference from "A bachelor walks" to "An unmarried man walks".

(CE 2) The substitution inference from "The morning star is what Amy believes to be Venus" to "The evening star is what Amy believes to be Venus".

(CE 3) The substitution inference from "'I am hungry' is what Basil writes on the board" to "'Scott' is what Basil writes on the board".

For (CE 1), "An unmarried man" is not a singular term but an indefinite description (which can be either singular or plural); nevertheless, it fits the definition of being a singular term; for (CE 2), i.e., a propositional attitude ascription example in general, "The evening star" is a singular term, but the substitution can be asymmetric; for (CE 3), i.e., a quotation example in general, the substitution can be arbitrary. How can Brandom rule them out?

Brandom's basic strategy is to make a distinction between primary and non-primary substitution-inferential relations (Brandom, 1994, pp. 374–375). The hope is to group those counterexamples into the non-primary substitution-inferential relations. But how can we make that distinction? McCullagh thinks that Brandom's explanation of this crucial distinction is circular (McCullagh, 2005, pp. 198–200). Roughly, the story goes like this: Whether the substitution inference is primary or not depends on the set of simple material substitution-

[11] McCullagh also thinks that the SSRs cannot be a necessary condition for distinguishing singular terms from predicates. He points out that Brandom may not understand predicates as a type of subsentence (e.g., "walked") but as a type of sentence (e.g., "α walked"). Clearly, even if that is correct, that does not solve the problem (McCullagh, 2005, pp. 215–219).

inferential commitments (SMSICs). However, the SMSICs make sense only if we can figure out the generality of them. For example, the simplest way to understand the generality is to say that they include the set of *all* the substitution inferences. Suppose *A* and *A'* are subsentences. For *any* sentence having *A*, say *AB*, if a person commits the substitution inference from *AB* to *A'B*, then she also commits the reverse, from *A'B* to *AB*. We can see that this kind of generality cannot rule out those counterexamples. Indeed, if we can find a kind of generality that can do the job, then we can use it to define the notion of primary or non-primary. However, it seems that there is no way for us to do this without appealing to the notion of primary or non-primary. Brandom's explanation is thus circular. Brandom has a circularity problem here, too. McCullagh thinks that Brandom's project fails.

However, I think that the kind of circularity McCullagh mentions can be explained away. Indeed, as to the relation between substitution inferences and SMSICs, Brandom, in some places, seems to suggest that the proprieties of the former are determined by the latter. For example, Brandom says:

> [T]he substitution inferences […] are determined by all the simple material substitution-inferential commitments (SMSICs). (Brandom, 1994, p. 373)

> [T]he substitution inferences to and from that sentence, in which that expression is materially involved, must be governed (their proprieties determined) by the set of simple material substitution-inferential commitments that link that expression with another. (Brandom, 1994, pp. 373–374)

However, those passages can be explained more charitably. I discussed briefly the relationship between norms and SMSICs in § 2 when I tried to address Q1. It is Brandom's view that the proprieties of substitution inferences are determined by norms rather than by SMSICs directly. Since SMSICs play an essential role in forming norms, we can say that SMSICs indirectly determine the proprieties of substitution inferences.

Contrary to McCullagh, if the SMSICs are not supposed to explain the notion of primary or non-primary, the circularity would disappear. But the difficulty, of course, is still with us. Norms need to be explained further in order to make sense of the notion of primary or non-primary. It might be the case that the kind of circularity problem is merely put off. In the next section, I will elaborate on the notion of norms and suggest how it can be worked out. For now, let me add that even if saving Brandom's original proposal on this point fails, as the previous one does, there is no need for us to be pessimistic.

Lewin (2022) argues that Brandom's answer to the question "What are singular terms?" is incorrect as it stands since it fails to achieve a sufficient division between singular terms and indefinite descriptions. So, according to Lewin, Brandom's original proposal cannot deal with the type of counterexamples such as (CE 1). However, with some revisions, within Brandom's substitution-inferential framework, Lewin thinks that the question can be answered. He proposed

the following revised account: "[s]ingular terms are substituted-fors that *do not stand in any* purely inferentially strengthening, asymmetric SMSICs; rather, singular terms stand, systematically and directly, only in *symmetric* SMSICs and *inferentially weakening*, *asymmetric* SMSICs" (Lewin, 2022, pp. 23–24; emphasis in original).

It is clear that Lewin gives up Brandom's original idea that singular terms are involved only in *symmetric* substitution inferences. Instead, he first makes some distinctions among inferential relations (e.g., in terms of inferential strength or weakness: "a man" is inferentially stronger than "a person" since everything that follows as a consequence from the latter likewise follows from the former, but not vice versa) and then points out singular terms behave differently in different types of inferential relations. In that way, indefinite descriptions can be distinguished from singular terms. So, to address those counterexamples, the lesson might be just that we need finer substitution-inferential structures.

4. Norms Revisited

In § 2, I mentioned the fact that we are fallible creatures, i.e., we may make a mistake when we make substitution inferences. So, each of our SMSICs is not sufficient for determining whether a substitution inference is correct or not. Instead, materially correct substitution inferences are governed by norms. There is a question about the relationship between SMSICs and norms. In § 3, I mentioned that we need the distinction between primary and non-primary substitution-inferential relations to keep Brandom's original suggestion on SIS intact and avoid the counterexamples. I suggested that the distinction should not be explained directly by SMSICs but by norms. There is a further question about how norms can help us make the distinction. In both cases, more clarifications on norms are necessary.[12]

First, to avoid the Wittgensteinian or Sellarsian regress problem, norms should not be understood as explicit rules or principles. Explicit rules or principles can be applied appropriately or inappropriately. This requires us some further explicit rules or principles, and so on, to infinity. Instead, norms should be understood as implicit in our social practices.

Second, norms are not merely regularities of our behaviors. A regularist holds that to talk about implicit norms is just to talk about regularities. Regularism avoids the infinite regress problem because it takes a kind of regularity as the final anchor for a norm. However, Brandom thinks that regularism has two main

[12] Brandom's views on norms have evolved over time. In *Making It Explicit* (1994), norms are socially instituted, to put it crudely. In *A Spirit of Trust* (2019), in addition to the social dimension, Brandom adds a historical dimension to understanding norms. It is out of the scope of the paper to address the latter. In this section, I will focus on the former and clarify the notion insofar as it is necessary for us to understand SMSICs and address challenges to the inferentialist account of proper names I propose. Thank you to the anonymous reviewer for asking for greater elaboration on norms.

problems. The first problem is what he calls the gerrymandering problem, i.e., the problem of drawing a line between regular behaviors and irregular behaviors. It seems that we will not be able to do this because we can make any behavior into a regular one or an irregular one. The second problem is that regularism "threatens to obliterate the contrast between treating a performance as subject to normative assessment of some sort and treating it as subject to physical laws" (Brandom, 1994, p. 27).

Third, as a positive account, Brandom suggests that norms come from our attitudes, i.e., our taking or treating something as correct or incorrect. However, since our attitudes can still be appropriate or inappropriate, they are still normative. That is, norms cannot be reduced to something that is not normative. Indeed, practical sanctions might be used to explain our attitudes. But they are inessential because the normative statuses of our attitudes can change without having any practical sanctions. For example, a person, after performing something, can be treated as being or not being entitled to a certain thing without being actually awarded or punished.

Finally, as I mentioned, norms are socially instituted. Brandom understands sociality not as *I-we* relations but as *I-thou* relations. If we understand sociality as *I-we* relations, then we would think that the regularities the whole society exhibits could determine whether our attitudes are appropriate or not. We would have all the problems of regularism mentioned above. It is plain that regularities the whole society exhibits can still be appropriate or inappropriate. Moreover, the underlying thought of *I-we* relations is that we can treat the whole society just like a person. But this is mere fiction. So much for the clarifications on norms. Let us return to the two questions at the beginning of this section.

For the first question, on the one hand, norms are eventually explained by our attitudes or social institutions; on the other hand, norms cannot be simply identified with some actual attitudes or social institutions. In fact, understanding sociality as *I-thou* relations makes an explanation of the objectivity of conceptual norms possible. Brandom says:

> The objectivity of conceptual norms requires that any attitude of taking, treating, or assessing as correct an application of a concept in forming a belief or making a claim be coherently conceivable as mistaken, because of how things are with the objects the belief or claim is about. (Brandom, 1994, p. 63)

> In *Making It Explicit*, the representational properties of semantic contents are explained as consequences of the essentially social, perspectival character of inferential practice. […] This account […] then makes possible an explanation of the *objectivity* of concepts. It takes the form of a specification of the particular sort of inferential structure social scorekeeping practices must have in order to institute objective norms—*norms according to which the correctness of an application of a concept answers to the facts about the object to which it is applied, in such a way that anyone (indeed everyone) in the linguistic community may be wrong about it*. (Brandom, 1997a, p. 151; emphasis mine)

With the account of the objectivity of conceptual norms, our personal SMSICs contribute but do not determine norms. And it is also clear that the correctness of substitution inferences is determined by norms rather than by our own SMSICs.

For the second question, some counterexamples, such as (CE 2) and (CE 3), can be easily grouped into non-primary cases because they are propositional attitude ascriptions or quotational cases. We could have a norm to explain that singular terms in those cases are not substituted symmetrically because they are involved in non-primary cases. The kind of norm underlying is nothing mysterious. A person not knowing that the morning star is the evening star will not be committed to the kind of substitution inferences; and we would not be committed to the kind of quotational substitution inferences, either. If we do not have the kind of SMSICs or the SMSICs are incorrect, then the counterexamples will not get off the ground in the first place.

Some counterexamples, such as (CE 1), cannot be explained in the above way. In these cases, we do have the kind of SMSICs, and the SMSICs are correct. Again, the problem in these cases is that they fit the definition of singular terms, but the terms involved are actually not singular terms. My suggestion here is, to follow the point I argued before in footnote 9, that the cases should be treated as logical locutions (e.g., a bachelor = an unmarried man), and we should have a norm to exclude them, i.e., to treat them as non-primary.

I submit that the basics of the inferentialist strategy are plausible. I now turn to some serious objections from its rivals.

5. The Collapse Problem

Some might think that the inferentialist account of proper names, as a version of use theories as it is, can be reduced to a Russellian description theory of proper names. Let us call it the Collapse Problem. If so, the inferentialist account will inherit all the drawbacks of a Russellian theory. For example, William Lycan says:

> Proper names pose a problem for the "use" theorist. Try stating a rule of use for the name "William G. Lycan", or for the name of your best friend. Remember, it has to be a rule that every competent speaker of your local dialect actually obeys without exception. The only candidate rules that occur to me push the "use" theorist into a description theory of meaning for names. (Lycan, 2019, p. 83)

For Russell, proper names are merely truncated or disguised descriptions. For example, one description of the proper name, "Scott", can be "the author of *Waverley*". Therefore, "the author of *Waverley*" is part of the meaning of "Scott". From the point of view of a description theory of proper names, this is exactly why we can make the substitution inference from (1) to (2). Here, Lycan's idea is something like this: Given any rules of use for the name, "Scott", we will inevitably come to some descriptions in the end; therefore, the inferentialist account

of proper names, as a version of use theories, will collapse into a Russellian description theory of proper names after all.[13]

Let us scrutinize Lycan's view. To put it more formally for simplicity: Given the rule of use, *R*, a proper name, *N*, can be analyzed into a description, *D*, in the end. In this case, Lycan's idea can be put as this: According to a description theory of proper names, the meaning of *N* is *D*; according to the inferentialist account of proper names, the meaning of *N* is the roles *N* plays in substitution inferences such as from the claim "*N* walked" to the claim "*D* walked"; the inferentialist account of proper names can be reduced to a description theory of proper names.

Now the central question is, "For the inferentialist account of proper names, is it the case that given the rule of use, *R*, a proper name, *N*, can be analyzed into a description, *D*, in the end?". I shall argue that the answer is No. So, it is not the case that the inferentialist account of proper names can be reduced to a description theory of proper names.

Prima facie, for Brandom, since the substitution inferences involving singular terms are always reversible, a singular term can only be substituted with another singular term. That is, the proper name, *N*, can only be substituted with another singular term, i.e., another proper name, pronoun, demonstrative, indexical, or definite description. If it is another singular term other than a definite description, then we can repeat this process until a definite description, *D* in the above case, is found. So, it would seem that *N* can be analyzed into *D*, after all.

However, as astute readers would notice, the above processes rely on substitution inferences, which in turn rely on our SMSICs. And our SMSICs have a causal transmission history. For instance, one day, Amy told me, "The person reading the newspaper is Basil". The next day, I could say, "Basil is walking a dog". I would also be committed to saying, "The person reading the newspaper yesterday is walking a dog". I might find out later that Basil is a professor who teaches philosophy. Then, I would also be committed to saying, "The professor is walking a dog". In this case, my SMSICs rely on my history of how I learned to use the term, "Basil". We can see that those SMSICs bring the inferentialist account of proper names *closer* to a version of the Kripkean causal transmission approach (Kripke, 1980) rather than a version of description theory. A description theory of proper names keeps silent on SMSICs or causal-historical chains. That is why the inferentialist account cannot be collapsed into a description theory.[14]

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[13] We know that a description theory of proper names is problematic in several ways. The immediate problem is: "Are all descriptions of 'Scott' the meaning of 'Scott'?". As a reply, a descriptivist can confine herself to those most weighted ones, i.e., to a version of Cluster theories. However, both Russellian and Cluster theories are still subject to the Kripkean criticism (Kripke, 1980). Kripke points out, for example, that it is possible that no description of "Scott" *actually* belongs to "Scott", but Scott is still Scott, i.e., that descriptions and proper names modally function differently. For my purpose, the differences between Russellian and Cluster theories do not matter.

[14] Thank you to the anonymous reviewer for suggesting that showing how the inferentialist account is not susceptible to Kripke's arguments against descriptivism would allow

I shall make haste to add that the inferentialist account of proper names is not just a version of the Kripkean approach, which suffers from the problem of the nature of the kind of causal-historical chains. Instead, the inferentialist account takes proper names as anaphoric phenomena, or "as anaphoric dependents" (Brandom, 1994, p. 579). I mentioned in footnote 9 that, to fully explain proper names, we would need to single them out of singular terms. Kripke points out, correctly, that proper names behave differently from descriptions modally. He thinks that proper names are rigid designators that refer to the same objects in all possible worlds. According to Brandom, the right way to interpret the notion of rigidity is to appeal to the notion of anaphora (Brandom, 1994, p. 468). Proper names are anaphorically dependent phenomena. We have seen that anaphora plays a role in my previous Amy example. When I say, "The professor is walking a dog", by "the professor", I refer anaphorically to "the person reading the newspaper". There is an anaphoric chain. So, the inferentialist account replaces a causal-historical chain with an anaphoric chain. It avoids the problem of explaining the nature of the chain in question.

6. A Meaningless Tag?

As I mentioned in § 2, there is another worry, a very different worry from the last section indeed, about the inferentialist account of proper names. In the last section, the worry was that the meaning of a proper name is a description(s) after all. On the contrary, the worry we now have is that proper names are merely meaningless tags, as Mill thinks (Biro, 1995; Predelli, 2017). The Millian view poses a problem to the inferentialist account of proper names, not just because they are opposing views but because material inferences, which are required for the inferentialist account, do not seem to work if the Millian view is correct.

Material inferences do not seem to work for proper names because endorsing the inferences needs to grasp the conceptual content of both premises and conclusions. But if the Millian view is correct, then proper names are peculiar in that they bear no conceptual content. Of course, proper names have references. We might say that the referential dimension is the conceptual content of the proper name in question. However, this does not help the inferentialist account. A great virtue of material inferences for Brandom is that, in order to make them, we do not need to appeal to the referential or the representational dimensions of both premises and conclusions. Rather, those dimensions are *implicit* in material inferences at the very beginning. The referential or representational locutions are expressive in the sense of making explicit the inferential commitments that are involved in material inferences. In this sense, the referential or representational locutions are more similar to logical locutions, the job of which is also to make explicit our commitments in our material inferences. Brandom says, "[n]ot only

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us to distinguish the inferentialist account from descriptivism very clearly and would have substantive value per se.

the standard logical vocabulary, but also traditional semantic vocabulary such as 'true', 'refers', and the 'of' of intentional aboutness, should be understood as semantically explicitating" (Brandom, 1994, p. 116).

The point so far is that although there is an apparent solution to the problem, i.e., to treat the references of proper names as part of the conceptual contents of proper names, this is not available to an inferentialist like Brandom. Incorporating references in the way just indicated (so that referential locutions are part of mere expressive vocabulary) does not help explain why material inferences are available for proper names. Making explicit our referential commitments in our material inferences presupposes that the inferences have already been made. That is, the solution takes effect too late. So, the question remains: How is it possible that an inference involving a proper name be *material*, given that a proper name bears no conceptual content other than its reference?

The thought underlying this question is this: in the inferentialist account, a material inference is the kind of inference whose correctness *essentially* involves the conceptual contents of its premises and conclusions. One way to understand this idea is that, to make a material inference, the conceptual contents of its premises and conclusions have to be grasped first. And given the Millian theory of proper names, the only content, *if any*, a proper name has, is its reference. Therefore, the reference of the proper name has to be grasped first in order to make a material inference involving this proper name. However, this is blocked by the inferentialist account. Therefore, an inference involving a proper name cannot be material. On the contrary, the only way to make the inference, for instance, from (1) to (2), is to appeal to the premise (1a) since it is the only reason for the inference to proceed. Therefore, an inference involving a proper name must be formal.

Of course, the objection carries weight only when we accept the Millian view and the definition of material inferences: *if* the Millian view is correct, and *if* the definition of material inferences is correct, then material inferences involving proper names cannot be made. I will accept the second antecedent, i.e., the definition of material inferences. My replies, accordingly, will have two parts. The first part is more conciliatory: we can go with the Millian view but insist that we can still make material inferences involving proper names. The second part is more bellicose: we should reject the Millian view.

Here is the first part. It is wrong to think that given the definition of material inferences, to *make* a material inference, the conceptual contents of its premises and conclusions have to be grasped first. Here is the right way to understand the idea of material inferences. It is about the *propriety* or *correctness* of an inference rather than about the necessary condition for making an inference. That is, we should treat our inferring ability as primitive or fundamental. Why should we privilege our inferring ability? Following the Wittgensteinian idea, Brandom thinks that the meaning should be understood in terms of use, i.e., to ask the meaning of a sentence or a subsentence, we have to ask what kind of doing (or use) can make it meaningful in the first place. Or, as Brandom puts it, "[s]eman-

tics must answer to pragmatics" (Brandom, 1994, p. 83). Further, treating our inferring ability as primitive or fundamental does not mean that the inferrer does not have any reason when she makes the inference. The point is that her reason does not need to be explicit when she makes the inference, i.e., her reason can be implicit at the very beginning, and to *make* the inference, she does not have to appeal to the reason she has. Otherwise, we will have the regress problem: to explain the reason she has, she needs another reason, and so on.

Further, again, whether the material inference from (1) to (2) the inferrer made is appropriate or not does not depend on the inferrer herself. The inferrer makes her SMSIC, but whether she is *entitled* to it or not does not merely depend on herself. By default, when she makes the inference, she has the entitlement to her SMSIC. However, when her inference is, say, challenged by someone else, she loses her *entitlement* to her SMSIC if she cannot provide any reason. Following Wilfrid Sellars, Brandom thinks that the core of linguistic practices is the "game of giving and asking for reasons". When I make an assertion, I commit to the assertion myself and issue a re-assertion license of the assertion. At the same time, I am responsible for justifying the assertion. Others can challenge, rely on, or defer to the assertion. When the assertion is challenged, or when others ask for reasons for the assertion, I am obliged to defend it, or to give reasons for it. I can also appeal to some authorities who can defend it, or simply withdraw it. Brandom says: "the characteristic *authority* on which the role of assertions in communication depends is intelligible only against the background of a correlative *responsibility* to vindicate one's entitlement to the commitments such speech acts express" (Brandom, 1994, p. xii; italics in original).

The point I make here is that the inferrer can hold her authority to the material inference she makes as long as she can defend it. For example, she can say that she makes the inference because Amy told her that the author of *Waverley* is Scott. In this case, the inference is made because of some testimony, not because of the reference of the proper name in question.

Here is the second part. I suggest that we can also deny the Millian view. The well-worn argument against it—John Biro calls it the neo-Fregean argument, which says that only by postulating that a proper name has a sense can we explain the phenomenon that co-referring proper names are not always substitutable *salva veritate* in sentences ascribing propositional attitudes—might be wrong (Biro, 1995, p. 185). However, this does not show that the Millian view must be right. I shall show that the inferentialist account of proper names provides us with some resources to reject the Millian view.[15]

The inferentialist account highlights the relation between inference and content. It takes the top-down strategy by first articulating sentential meanings in terms of inferential roles and then subsentential meanings in terms of substitution

[15] Indeed, the arguments I offer will not be conclusive. But with some other considerations to reject the Millian view which are irrelevant to the inferentialist account (e.g., the problem of the inscrutability of reference), my purpose here is to show that the inferentialist account provides us with some extra considerations to reject the Millian View.

inferential roles. That is, there is a close relation between inference and content: "an expression has conceptual content conferred on it by being caught up in, playing a certain role in, material inferences" (Brandom, 1994, p. 103). By making the inference from (1) to (2), the inferrer confers a certain kind of conceptual content on the expression (the proper name "Scott" in this case), which is the role the expression plays in the inference from (1) to (2). By making material inferences, we are the makers and takers of the meaning. For another example, sentences like "You are Julius Caesar!" or "You are Emperor Qin, Ying Zheng", are not just false, as they would be if "Julius Caesar" and "Ying Zheng" only have references. I can make the inference from "You are Julius Caesar", to "You are intelligent and powerful", and thus confer the conceptual content of being intelligent and powerful to the proper name, "Julius Caesar". Some might think that those cases are merely metaphorical. Saying "You are Julius Caesar", is like saying "You are like Julius Caesar". In that case, the sentence could still be true even if "Julius Caesar" only has a reference. But one of the virtues of the inferentialist account is that we do not have to treat them as merely metaphorical.

Further, the inferentialist account highlights the role anaphora plays in understanding proper names. Taking into account the roles our SMSICs play in material inferences and the anaphoric chains proper names rely on, it is implausible or at least misguided that proper names can be merely meaningless tags. If proper names are anaphoric phenomena, then the question of whether a proper name has content can be misleading because the same question applied to anaphoric relations seems not to have a Yes or No answer.

7. Conclusion

I have introduced the inferentialist account of proper names in the framework of Brandom's inferentialism. Two more potential objections have been addressed and replied to. The first one is the objection mentioned by Lycan, which says that the inferentialist account of proper names can be reduced to a Russellian description theory of proper names. The second one is the objection mentioned by Biro, among others, which says that proper names are merely meaningless tags, as Mill thinks. These two objections can be understood as two extreme theories of proper names. The inferentialist theory of proper names provides us with an alternative and a middle way in some sense. An inferentialist agrees, as a Russellian description theorist would agree, that part of the meaning of a proper name can be the inferential role it plays in an inference that has the proper name in its premise and a description of the proper name in its conclusion. At the same time, an inferentialist agrees, as a Millian theorist would agree, that the references of proper names do not contribute anything to the meaning of proper names. Moreover, the inferentialist account of proper names reveals the anaphoric role proper names play, which is otherwise overlooked by other theories.

I will conclude the paper by highlighting areas that require further attention and research, to defend the inferentialist account of proper names thoroughly.

First, in the paper, I assume that inferentialism at least works at the sentential level. Inferentialism, especially Brandom's version, requires further defense. Second, I only developed the Sellarsian idea of material inference and explained Brandom's logic expressivism to some extent. Finally, although I elaborated more on how norms are supposed to work for proper names, the topic needs further detailed treatment. However, I can only leave them for another day.

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