

**MAKING "REASONS" EXPLICIT:  
HOW NORMATIVE IS BRANDOM'S INFERENTIALISM?**

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**Abstract**

This paper asks whether Brandom (1994) has provided a sufficiently clear account of the basic normative concepts of commitment and entitlement, on which his normative inferentialism seems to rest, and of how they contribute to explain the inferential articulation of conceptual contents. I show that Brandom's claim that these concepts are analogous to the concepts of obligation and permission cannot be right, and argue that the normative character of the concept of commitment is dubious. This leads me to replace Brandom's conception of inferential relations as relations between deontic statuses with one according to which they are to be seen as relations between entitlements and acknowledgements of commitments.

*1. Introductory Remarks*

Brandom (2001) draws an interesting analogy between the status of modal concepts and that of normative concepts. He points out that while early (roughly, pre-Kripkean) naturalists questioned the intelligibility of modal concepts and tried either to dispense with them or to explain them in non-modal terms, it is striking that contemporary (roughly, post-Quinean) naturalists no longer see modal concepts as problematic and freely resort to them in their various explanatory projects, including the project of giving an account of meaning and intentionality. This is a welcome development of course, since according to a Kantian-Sellarsian argument on which Brandom puts much emphasis, the availability of non-modal concepts presupposes the intelligibility of modal concepts. Contemporary naturalists, however (as Brandom's story continues), are still highly suspicious of relying on the use of normative concepts in giving an account of intentionality (or indeed, of anything). But their reluctance is unwarranted, since (according to Brandom) the very same Kantian-Sellarsian argument which shows that the availability of non-modal concepts presupposes the intelligibility of modal concepts can be adapted to show that the availability of non-normative concepts presupposes the intelligibility of normative concepts. Hence, we should feel free to use normative concepts in our accounts of meaning and intentionality.

But just as admitting the legitimacy and irreducibility of modal concepts doesn't eliminate the need for an account of how they work and what they mean, admitting the legitimacy and irreducibility of normative concepts doesn't eliminate the need for a corresponding account of how they work and what they mean. Much progress has been made, in the last 50 years (or so), in our understanding of modality, but I think it is fair to say that no progress of comparable magnitude has been made in our understanding of normativity. This is basically how Rosen (2001) responded to Brandom's article: by asking whether our grasp of normativity is any better than our grasp of meaning and intentionality, and if so, whether it is sufficiently better for it to be used in giving an account of the latter.

In the present paper, I am asking the more specific question whether Brandom (1994) himself has provided a sufficiently clear account (i) of those basic normative concepts on which the normative inferentialism he has developed seems to rest, and (ii) of how they contribute to explain the inferential articulation of contents.<sup>1</sup> I will be raising a number of worries and misgivings which, taken together, will make it hard to avoid the modest conclusion that we do not have a firm grasp of the relevant normative concepts and do not understand what the resulting account of intentionality is supposed to be.

## *2. Brandom's Basic Normative Concepts*

Brandom's leading idea is that conceptual thought is inseparable from discursive practice, where this is conceived, most basically, as a kind of implicitly normative practice in which the fundamental moves (i) confer certain deontic statuses on the participants and (ii) are inferentially articulated, in the sense that they both count as the giving of reasons and are themselves in need of reasons, and thereby qualify as assertions. He recognizes two basic kinds of deontic statuses: commitments and entitlements. These are singled out as the two primitive normative concepts in terms of which his account of discursive practice (and thus, of intentionality) is to be framed (1994, pp. 159-166). They are to be seen as normative

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth stressing that what I am going to say has no bearing on Brandom's much wider program of analytic pragmatism, as expounded in his recent 2008 book, except to the extent that his normative inferentialism has somehow been absorbed into it; and even then, I will merely be questioning Brandom's official normative account of inferential relations, but not the very idea of giving such an account. My aim is clarification, not criticism.

insofar as "[d]oing what one is committed to do is appropriate in one sense, [and] doing what one is entitled to do is appropriate in another" sense (1994, p.159).

But if one were asked to give examples of normative concepts, the concepts which would probably first come to mind are such concepts as "ought" and "reason", and not the concepts of commitment and entitlement. A question thus arises as to what it is that makes them normative and what kind of normative concepts they are; in other words, one would want to be told exactly how the concepts of commitment and entitlement relate to the core normative notions of reason and obligation, and thereby, to be told in what senses it is "appropriate" to do what one is committed or entitled to do. And it is unclear, on reflection, how they are related to these familiar normative concepts.

Brandom declares (1994, p. 160) that "[c]ommitment and entitlement correspond to the traditional deontic primitives of obligation and permission", and it is tempting (and easy) to take them as simple variants of these familiar concepts; which would in turn make it easy to connect them with the concept of reason, since (as it is widely held) what one ought to do is nothing but what one has (most) reason to do. He goes on to suggest (1994, p. 160) that just as being obliged to do something can be defined as not being permitted not to do it (and being permitted to do something as not being obliged not to do it), being committed to do something could be defined as not being entitled to not doing it (and being entitled to do something as not being committed to not doing it), which certainly reinforces the impression that "commitment" and "entitlement" are little more than other words for "obligation" and "permission". However it seems this can't be right, even if it should turn out that commitment and entitlement are interdefinable in the way that obligation and permission are (which also is questionable).

For it is abundantly clear (from the way in which Brandom uses these terms) that commitment doesn't entail entitlement, while no one would want to deny that obligation does entail permission; from which it follows that either commitment doesn't entail obligation or permission doesn't entail entitlement. And it does seem intuitively implausible to suggest that permission to do something entails entitlement to do it, *if* (as seems to be the case) being entitled to do something requires having a reason or being justified to do it, since one clearly may have no reason to do what one is permitted to do. It

doesn't look as implausible to hold that entitlement to do something entails permission to do it, but combining this with the claim that being committed to do something entails not being entitled not to do it would lead to the conclusion that being committed to do something entails not being permitted not to do it (i.e., having the obligation to do it), and hence, would definitely establish that permission doesn't entail entitlement. At this point, it looks as if we could maintain that commitment entails obligation and entitlement entails permission, while denying that commitment entails entitlement, and yet hold that being committed to do something entails not being entitled not to do it. But this last claim must nonetheless be rejected because it would make it impossible for one to have incompatible commitments (e.g., to be simultaneously committed to do something and not to do it) while still being entitled to (discharge) at least one of them; and this is something Brandom explicitly recognizes to be possible. Furthermore, it must be observed that while there is a familiar distinction between *prima facie* and (what some call) *ultima facie* obligations (and permissions), no such distinction seems to apply to commitments (though some such distinction, as will be seen below, seems to apply to entitlements).

So it remains unclear how commitments and entitlements are related to obligations and permissions, and in what senses it is "appropriate" to do what one is committed or entitled to do. This suggests it would be more promising to inquire into how these concepts relate to the concept of "reason", even though it is quite unclear, at first sight, how this could deliver *two different* senses of appropriateness. Although it sounds natural to suppose that doing what one is entitled to do is appropriate because one always has some reason to do what one is entitled to do, it seems implausible to hold that doing what one is committed to do is appropriate because one always has a reason to do what one is committed to do, unless "reason" is here used in a quite different sense. It does seem intuitively false that one always has some reason to do what one is committed to do. Suppose you are committed to kill your neighbor because you said you will do it, or perhaps because it is the only way for you to reach a certain goal. Does that mean you have a reason to do it? If it does, it certainly is not in the sense in which you have reason to do what you are entitled to do, and it is unclear whether and in what sense "reasons" of this kind will count as normative. Moreover, it is puzzling, in this context, to have to turn to the

concept of reason, since (at least in Brandom's view) both reasons and what they are reasons for are *essentially* conceptually articulated in a way that commitments and entitlements in general are not (only *discursive* commitments and entitlements are conceptual, but not all commitments and entitlements are discursive), and we are supposed to be looking for normative concepts that could be used in explaining (*inter alia*) what it is to be conceptually articulated. But let us put these worries aside for a while, and ask how discursive deontic statuses relate to reasons.

A discursive practice is one in which certain performances (e.g., uttering a sentence) count as assertions. To make an assertion, in Brandom's view, is at once to acknowledge and undertake a certain commitment which counts as "doxastic" in virtue of the fact that it is inferentially articulated in the sense that acknowledging such a commitment is both to give a reason and to do something which can be seen as in need of reasons. If I understand him correctly, Brandom's strategy is to explain what it is for such a doxastic commitment to have a certain conceptual (propositional) content in terms of the inferential relations which link it to other doxastic commitments. In other words, inferential articulation is to be seen as pertaining primarily to relations among (discursive) deontic statuses, and only derivatively to relations among conceptual contents such as propositions. Loosely speaking, the idea is that instead of saying, for example, that one cannot be committed to p without being committed to q because (in virtue of the fact that) p entails q, we are, on the contrary, to be led to see that p entails q because (in virtue of the fact that) one cannot be committed to p without being committed to q.

On the face of it, the foregoing (admittedly *very* rough) characterization of discursive practice appeals not only to the (putatively) normative concept of commitment, but also to the even more basic normative concept of a reason. It is thus somewhat surprising that *Making It Explicit* doesn't give the latter any definite "official" status (despite making extensive use of it). The purpose of the rest of this paper is to suggest that there is still a lot of substantial work to be done before we could claim to have a firm enough grasp of this concept, and of how it relates to the concepts of (discursive) commitment and entitlement, for them to be relied on in an account of intentionality (and especially, of conceptual contents).

Let us first focus on entitlements. As will have been noticed, the characterization of discursive practice that has been offered doesn't mention them at all. So where are they? The only way in which they (implicitly) get involved in this characterization is through the close relationship they seem to have with reasons (and commitments). To say that doxastic commitments are in need of reasons is to say that it may be asked what it is that entitles one to them, and to answer that question, i.e., to give a reason, is to acknowledge (and undertake) a further doxastic commitment. Thus, at least in the context of discursive practice, entitlements essentially are entitlements *to* discursive (and in the first instance, doxastic) commitments (which makes them some sort of "higher-order" deontic statuses).

I just pointed to the intuitive connection between reasons and entitlements by saying that asking for a reason for a doxastic commitment is asking for what it is that entitles one to this commitment. But this can easily be seen to be ambiguous. There is a sense in which to say that something entitles one to a certain doxastic commitment, amounts to saying that this something makes it the case that one enjoys the deontic status of being entitled to this commitment, period. When we see it in this way, being entitled to a doxastic commitment is tantamount to having ("all things considered") sufficient reason for this commitment. But there is another way to understand the claim that something entitles one to a certain doxastic commitment, according to which it says that the something in question contributes positively to, or counts in favor of, one's being entitled to this commitment, or in other words, that the something in question is what is often called a *pro tanto* reason for this commitment. To read it in this way is to see it as making an irreducibly relational, non-detachable use of the verb "to entitle". What I mean by this, is that one's having a *pro tanto* reason for a certain doxastic commitment doesn't make it the case that one is entitled to this commitment. It would certainly be possible to say that it makes it the case that one is *prima facie*, or *ceteris paribus*, entitled to this commitment; but this would amount to introducing a quite different sort of entitlements (and one which could apparently only be understood in terms of this contrast between a detachable and a non-detachable sense of "to entitle"). I don't mean to suggest that Brandom is unaware of this distinction; on the contrary, there are many indications that he intends his usage of the concept of entitlement to do double duty and cover both cases. The problem remains, however, that it is not

always clear exactly how it is used; and in any case, failing to keep track of this distinction seems to mask the real structure of the view being propounded.

Let us now turn to the concept of commitment, and ask (i) how it relates to the concepts of reason and entitlement, and (ii) whether the way in which it relates to them is apt to reveal its (putatively) normative character.

One seemingly obvious thing is that a commitment is always something for which it makes sense to ask whether one is entitled to it, and thus something for which it makes sense to ask whether there is any (or sufficient) reason. This suggests that one could not be committed to anything without thereby being committed to being entitled to this commitment. It is unclear, however, whether this (even if it turned out to be the case) would be enough to display the normative character of commitments. For the concept of commitment to clearly qualify as normative (deontic), *perhaps* it must be the case not only that if something counts as a commitment then it necessarily is something for which reasons may be asked/given (i.e., something to which one may be entitled), but also that if something is such that reasons may be asked/given for it (i.e. such that one may be entitled to it) then it necessarily counts as a commitment. Now, I do think it is arguable that the concept of something for which (normative) reasons may be asked/given is the concept of something *intentional* (such as an intentional act/attitude), and that there is thus an internal, conceptual link between normativity and intentionality. But this could not be of any help in the present context, since the plan is to explain intentional acts/attitudes in terms of commitments, and not the opposite. Furthermore, even if it is granted that intentional *attitudes* could somehow be seen as discursive commitments, it seems implausible that intentional *acts* could likewise be seen as discursive commitments, because acts and attitudes belong to different (and mutually exclusive) ontological categories (acts are events or episodes, while attitudes are states or properties). It must then be admitted that commitments (and *a fortiori* doxastic commitments) are not the only kinds of things for which reasons may be asked/given, these also include certain acts or performances.

It could rightly be objected that it is a mistake to look at commitments only as things for which reasons may be asked/given, and that we must also look at the way in which they are involved in the *giving* of reasons, even if this implies restricting our

attention to discursive (and even doxastic) commitments. But what is it to "give" a reason, and what kinds of things are apt to be *given* as reasons, i.e., as making one (either *ceteris paribus* or all things considered) entitled to something?

On the view we are considering, it is fairly clear that to give a reason is *to do* something which makes it manifest that one accepts, and therefore has, a certain doxastic commitment; in Brandom's words, it is to *acknowledge* or endorse a certain doxastic commitment. Yet questions arise (i) as to whether what is thereby being given as a reason is the doxastic commitment itself (one's having this commitment) or merely its content, and (ii) as to whether the reason so given could be a reason for a further doxastic commitment except in virtue of being in the first place a reason for *acknowledging* this commitment. As it happens, Brandom says both that doxastic commitments are what can be given as reasons, and that reasons are what are given as the contents of doxastic commitments. He also seems to hold that at least some reasons may be reasons to *acknowledge* certain doxastic commitments, and hence to perform a certain kind of *act*, which threatens to conflict with his view that inferential relations are relations between deontic statuses, as well as with his claim to have provided an account of intentionality in normative terms (since these *acts* of acknowledgement would remain unaccounted for). These are questions concerning the terms and nature of the relations between reasons and what they are reasons for; and since these are supposed to be closely allied to inferential relations, it will be helpful to turn to Brandom's conception of the latter.

Brandom (1994, p. 168-169) describes inferential relations as relations of inheritance and/or exclusion between (discursive) deontic statuses. In what he calls the intrapersonal (or concomitant) dimension of inferential articulation, he recognizes three kinds of inferential relations. Commitment-preserving inferential relations are such that one cannot be committed to the premises without thereby being committed to the conclusion; entitlement-preserving relations are such that one cannot be entitled to being committed to the premises without being entitled to commitment to the conclusion; and incompatibility relations between two commitments are such that having one of them precludes being *entitled* to having the other, which means that one cannot have the one commitment without thereby *failing* to be entitled to have the other.

What is striking in these characterizations of inferential relations is that they don't involve the concept of a reason at all, and they don't even suggest that there is any normative relation linking either premises to conclusion or commitment/entitlement to the premises to commitment/entitlement to the conclusion. To say, for example, that one cannot be committed to p without being committed to q is just to say that the one commitment somehow "entails" or "necessitates" the other, and doesn't involve any normative relation between these two commitments (let alone the relation of "being a reason for"). Yet it seems that *some* normative relation must be in play somewhere, if *inferences* (as opposed to inferential relations, as characterized above) are to be described as correct/incorrect or appropriate/inappropriate. If the aim is, as I think it is, to account for the inferential articulation of *contents* in normative terms, it doesn't seem to carry us very far to be told, say, that p entails q in virtue of the fact that being committed to p entails being committed to q. This suggests that to find what we are looking for, namely, how commitments get involved in the giving of reasons, we must look at actual *inferences* and not only at (inferential) relations between deontic statuses.

Consider a particular commitment-preserving inference, such as "the sky is red, therefore, it is not blue". This is what Brandom would describe as a materially correct deductive inference. In *making* such an inference, one *acknowledges* being committed to the sky's being red, and takes the fact that it is red (i.e., the *content* of one's commitment) as a reason (in this case a *conclusive* reason) to *acknowledge* being committed to its not being blue. There may be some uncertainty as to exactly how the notion of a conclusive reason relates to that of being entitled "all things considered", but the two notions are certainly very close. There is also some uncertainty as to whether one's conclusive reason to *acknowledge* being committed to the sky's not being blue can or should also be described as one's reason for *being* so committed, since we are here assuming that the agent already is so committed (in virtue of the fact that one cannot be committed to the sky's being red without being committed to its not being blue). But let us suppose there is some derivative sense in which it can. Still, the only normative relations in play here are between a *content* and the acknowledgement of a commitment, and/or between a content and a commitment.

And it is intuitively clear that in making such an inference one is not giving one's being committed to the sky's being red as one's reason to acknowledge being committed to the sky's not being blue. For if this were what one is doing, the inference would not be correct, because being committed to the sky's being red *is no (normative) reason* to acknowledge commitment to the sky's not being blue (and *a fortiori* no reason for being so committed), in either of the two senses that we have considered so far (namely the *pro tanto* sense and the "all things considered" or "conclusive" sense). To see this more clearly it must be reminded that acknowledging a commitment is here understood in such a way that it involves *endorsing* that commitment (and not merely admitting it). Clearly, that one is committed to the sky's being red doesn't make it the case that one has a reason for (is entitled to) endorsing a commitment to the sky's not being blue; for if it did, it would mean that being committed to the sky's being red (or indeed, to anything) is in itself a (good) reason for endorsing it, or in other words that it suffices to make it the case that one is *entitled* to this commitment.

This is not to deny that one may indeed take one's being committed to the sky's being red as one's reason to acknowledge commitment to its not being blue. But this would have to be expressed by saying something like "I am committed to the sky's being red, therefore, the sky is not blue", and would immediately be seen to be incorrect. In other words, to *take* something as one's reason doesn't make it a reason. Moreover, in making such an inference, one is not acknowledging commitment to the sky's being red, but to *being committed* to the sky's being red; in other words, *that one is committed* to the sky's being red appears as the *content* of some further commitment, which does nothing to show that commitments themselves are or can be reasons.

It is no help to observe that being committed to the sky's being red can *of course* be a or the reason *why* one is committed to the sky's not being blue, in virtue of the fact that (as we are assuming) the one commitment entails the other, since the notion of a reason *why* is not normative, and that of entailment, in any case, has not yet been shown to be normative (even though this is part of what the whole project is ultimately aiming at). Hence, it remains quite unclear how commitments, as opposed to their contents, are involved in the giving of reasons.

It might be complained that we are not looking in the right direction. Just as we found the connection between entitlements and reasons by considering the use of the *verb* "to entitle", perhaps we may hope to find the connection between commitments and reasons-giving by considering the use of the *verb* "to commit". But the most natural way to understand the claim that one thing commits one to another, is as saying that the first thing makes it the case that one is committed to the other. And on this construal, it is simply false that being committed to the sky's being red *commits* one to being committed to the sky's not being blue (for this then says that being committed to the sky's being red makes it the case that one is committed to one's being committed to the sky's not being blue, which is intuitively false, or at least very odd).

On the other hand, it seems natural to hold that being committed to the sky's being red *does* make it the case that one is committed to *acknowledging* being committed to the sky's not being blue, and thus, that the first commitment *commits* one (in the intended sense) to *acknowledging* the other. I have already insisted that acknowledgements are not deontic statuses, and this may be a source of trouble since inferential relations are supposed to be relations between deontic statuses. But independently of this, the problem here is that even though this relation certainly appears to be normative in some sense, it remains unclear how its normative character relates to that of reasons. For it was argued above that being committed to the sky's being red is not a reason for acknowledging (endorsing) commitment to it's not being blue. Here it may be added that it would still leave us with a puzzle if it were, since it would mean that the normative relation involved in saying that something *commits* one to endorse a certain commitment is not different from the one involved in saying that something *entitles* one to endorse this commitment, which would clearly be unacceptable.

At this point, it must, I think, be recognized that the reason relation (i.e., the relation of "being a reason for") simply is a relation between contents and either commitments or the acknowledging of commitments (or both). So if, as certainly seems to be the case, there is a normative relation between being committed to the sky's being red and acknowledging being committed to its not being blue, it must be of a different sort. And here we may want to make a distinction between being rational and having reasons, i.e., between the

normativity of rationality, which has to do with the relations between one's acknowledgements of commitments, and the normativity of reasons as such. The suggestion, in a nutshell, is that even if being committed to the sky's being red is no reason for acknowledging commitment to its not being blue, it would still be *irrational* for someone committed to the sky's being red not to acknowledge commitment to its not being blue.

This sounds intuitive enough, but notice it would not be acceptable to say that it would be irrational for someone committed to the sky's being red not to be committed to its not being blue. For *that* is not *irrational*, it is plainly impossible; which I take to show that there is still no normative relation between the two commitments, but only a normative relation between one commitment and the *acknowledgement* of another. Now the latter relation can itself plausibly be seen as deriving from the obtaining of a corresponding relation between acknowledging commitment to the sky's being red and acknowledging commitment to its not being blue; or it will at least be granted that it would be just as irrational for someone who acknowledged commitment to the sky's being red not to acknowledge commitment to its not being blue.

The upshot is that if the aim is to account for the fact that the sky's being red entails its not being blue in terms of the *propriety* of inferring the latter from the former, it would seem much more promising to look at normative *rationality* relations involving acknowledgements of commitments than to look at any normative relations between commitments (for there just doesn't seem to be any such normative relations). As we might tentatively put it, it is in virtue of the fact that it would be irrational to acknowledge commitment to the sky's being red while refusing to acknowledge commitment to its not being blue (i) that the sky's being red entails its not being blue, *and* (ii) that the sky's being red is (or would be, if true) a (conclusive) reason for (acknowledging) being committed to its not being blue. We could of course go on to claim that it also is in virtue of this same fact that being committed to the sky's being red entails being committed to its not being blue. But what would be the point of doing so?

Once we have reached this point, it becomes hard to see what real work the concept of commitment is supposed to be doing. It looks as if we could dispense at least with the

(supposedly deontic) status of being committed, and appeal only to the idea that some acknowledgements "rationally commit" one to (or as I will put it below, "rationally require") others. In other words, we seem to be in a position to account for the inferential relations between contents (and perhaps also of the reason relation between contents and discursive commitments) in terms of normative relations between intentional acts (which I have already insisted cannot be deontic statuses).

### 3. *Inference and Normativity*

Let us now have a closer look at the two other kinds of (intrapersonal) inferential relations, and ask how the ambiguity that has been found in the notion of entitlement reflects on Brandom's characterizations of them. This will lead us to unearth a further ambiguity and to revise Brandom's classification of inferential relations. The resulting characterizations of inferential relations will then, hopefully, put us in a position to come back to the normativity issue.

I start with entitlement-preserving relations. The first thing to observe is that in the very same paragraph in which he describes entitlement-preserving relations as being such that one cannot be *entitled* to being committed to the premises without being entitled to commitment to the conclusion, Brandom (1994, p. 169) states that "[t]he premises of these inferences entitle one to commitment to their conclusions [...] but do not compel such commitment. For the possibility of entitlement to commitments incompatible with the conclusion is left open". I think it is fairly clear, intuitively, how this statement is to be understood, yet it is puzzling that it doesn't say anything about being *entitled* to the premises (or about *inheritance* of entitlement).

Consider someone who is committed to a certain match's being dry. *That* this match is dry is a reason for (and thus *prima facie* entitles) such a person to acknowledge commitment to the claim that it will ignite, if struck. But (looking at it from a certain angle) this has nothing to do with this person's being or not being *entitled* to being committed to the match's being dry; it looks as if one could not be committed to the match's being dry without being (*prima facie*) entitled to the claim that it will ignite if struck. In accordance with Brandom's remark that "the possibility of entitlement to commitments

incompatible with the conclusion is left open", the same person could also be committed to the match's being at a very low temperature, and thereby be (*prima facie*) entitled to the claim that it will not ignite if struck.

It might be thought that the condition that one must be *entitled* to (commitment to) the premises in order to be entitled to (commitment to) the conclusion becomes relevant when it is *all things considered* entitlement which is in question. But it is obvious that someone who is committed to the match's being dry, and *all things considered* entitled to this commitment, can still fail to be *all things considered* entitled to the claim that it will ignite if struck. For one can be (committed and) *all things considered* entitled to both the claim that the match is dry and the claim that it is at a very low temperature, and in such a case one will *not* be *all things considered* entitled to the claim that it will ignite if struck (though one will still be *prima facie* entitled to it).

However, when we look at it from another angle, it seems just *incredible* that the mere fact that one is committed (or even acknowledges commitment) to the match's being dry makes it the case that one is even *prima facie* entitled to being committed to its igniting if struck. Such entitlements plainly are too cheap, which seems to justify the requirement that one be *entitled* to being committed to the match's being dry.

What this shows, I think, is that we should have a closer look at the relations between reasons and entitlements. A reason, I said, is something that *entitles* one to acknowledge some (discursive) commitment and which can be given as the content of a (doxastic) commitment. Obviously, a (propositional) content as such could not entitle one to anything unless one is actually (doxastically) committed to it, yet its being a reason for this or that commitment doesn't depend on anyone's being committed to it. Now suppose p is a *pro tanto* reason for (acknowledging) being committed to q. Then there are two senses in which one might say that the fact that p (*prima facie*) entitles one to acknowledge commitment to q. On one way of reading this claim, what it says is that (i) one is committed to p and (ii) one's being so committed *would* make one *prima facie* entitled to q, *if* one were entitled to being committed to p; and on another reading, what it says is that (i) one is both committed to p and entitled to this commitment and (ii) one's being so

committed and entitled makes it the case that one actually<sup>2</sup> is *prima facie* entitled to acknowledge commitment to q. So, there is a distinction to make between what I will call *conditional* and *unconditional* entitlement, which is *not* to be confused with the distinction between *prima facie* and *all things considered* entitlement.

This distinction is not restricted to *pro tanto* reasons. For suppose now that p is a sufficient or conclusive reason for (acknowledging) being committed to q. Then to say that the fact that p (*all things considered*) entitles one to acknowledge commitment to q can be understood either as saying that (i) one is committed to p and (ii) one's being so committed *would* make one *all things considered* entitled to q, *if* one were *all things considered* entitled to being committed to p, or as saying that (i) one is both committed to p and *all things considered* entitled to this commitment and (ii) one's being so committed and entitled makes it the case that one actually is *all things considered* entitled to acknowledge commitment to q.

Moreover, it seems that all (and perhaps only) Brandom's commitment-preserving inferential relations actually belong to the latter category of *all-things-considered*-entitlement-preserving inferential relations (i.e., to what I call below inferential relations of the ATC type). For example, consider again the inference from "the sky is red" to "the sky is not blue". In making this inference, one is giving a conclusive reason to endorse commitment to the sky's not being blue; which means that one's being committed to the sky's being red would make one *all things considered* entitled to being committed to the sky's not being blue, if one were *all things considered* entitled to being committed to the sky's being red.

Thus, with the distinction between conditional and unconditional entitlement relations, both of Brandom's descriptions of entitlement-preserving inferential relations can be seen to be acceptable, provided one is read as involving unconditional entitlement and the other as involving conditional entitlement. Furthermore, depending on whether we read these descriptions as involving *prima facie* or *all things considered* entitlements, we get different kinds of inferential relations, one of which seems to correspond to Brandom's

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<sup>2</sup> "Actually", but still "subjectively", insofar as it could turn out to be false that p, in which case there is a further sense in which one will fail to have an adequate reason to endorse q.

"commitment-preserving" inferential relations, thus suggesting that there is no need for a special category of commitment-preserving inferential relations.

I have pointed out that some entitlement-preserving inferential relations are such that *prima facie* entitlement to the premises makes one *prima facie* entitled to the conclusion (let's call them inferential relations of type PF), and that some others are such that *all things considered* entitlement to the premises makes one *all things considered* entitled to the conclusion (type ATC). But it seems also intuitively clear that some entitlement-preserving inferential relations will be such that *all things considered* entitlement to the premises makes one *prima facie* (but not *all things considered*) entitled to the conclusion (type ATC-PF), and that *no* inferential relation will be such that *prima facie* entitlement to the premises makes one *all things considered* entitled to the conclusion (type PF-ATC). It seems just as clear that all inferential relations of type ATC-PF also belong to type PF, and that all inferential relations of type ATC also belong to type ATC-PF and to type PF. The interesting question I don't know how to answer is whether all inferential relations of type PF also belong to type ATC-PF.

Let us now briefly consider Brandom's third kind of inferential relations, namely incompatibility relations, which Brandom explains (1994, p. 169) by saying that p and q are incompatible propositions when commitment to p precludes entitlement to q. It is fairly clear, in light of the previous discussion, that this can only be understood as involving conditional entitlement, i.e., as saying that one's being committed to p would make it the case that one is entitled to (acknowledge) commitment to q if one were entitled to commitment to p. For otherwise (as I have already pointed out), the mere fact that one has two mutually incompatible commitments would prevent one from being entitled to *any* of them, which is certainly not what is intended. Hence, incompatibility relations turn out to be entitlement-exclusion relations (instead of relations between commitments and entitlements).

And now the question arises what kinds of entitlement-exclusion relations there are. Clearly, there must be entitlement-exclusion relations of type ATC, i.e., such that one's being committed and *all things considered* entitled to p precludes one's being *all things considered* entitled to q (which is arguably the same as making it the case that one is *all*

*things considered* entitled (to acknowledge) not to be committed to q). But as far as I can see, and somewhat surprisingly, there doesn't seem to be entitlement-exclusion relations of any other kind. There are no entitlement-exclusion relations of type PF-ATC, i.e., such that one's being committed and *prima facie* entitled to p precludes one's being *all things considered* entitled to q, no entitlement-exclusion relations of type ATC-PF, i.e., such that one's being committed and *all things considered* entitled to p precludes one's being *prima facie* entitled to q, and no entitlement-exclusion relations of type PF, i.e., such that one's being committed and *prima facie* entitled to p precludes one's being *prima facie* entitled to q. However, I take this to be an anomaly, and to indicate that we have overlooked something.

To appreciate what it is that is missing, we must return to the idea of a *pro tanto* reason, and properly register the fact that there are both positive *and* negative reasons, reasons for *and* reasons against. For example, the fact that this match is at a very low temperature is a reason against (acknowledging) being committed to its igniting if struck. Suppose one is committed and *prima facie* entitled to this match's being at a very low temperature; it would seem that one is thereby *prima facie* entitled to refrain from (acknowledging) being committed to this match's igniting if struck, or as we might put it, that one is thereby *prima facie* dis-entitled to (acknowledge) being committed to the claim that this match will ignite if struck. It should be obvious, however, that this doesn't mean that one could not also be *prima facie* entitled to (acknowledge) being committed to the match's igniting if struck (e.g., in virtue of the fact that one is also committed and *prima facie* entitled to this match's being dry), for there is no incoherence in having both a reason for and a reason against one and the same thing. Just as one can be *prima facie* entitled to both p and not-p, one can also be both *prima facie* entitled and *prima facie* dis-entitled to p. Hence, there is after all some sort of "negative" inferential relation between the claim that this match is at a very low temperature and the claim that it will ignite if struck: an entitlement-repelling relation of type PF.

It should now be easy to see that Brandom's entitlement-exclusion relations really are entitlement-repelling relations of type ATC. One's being committed and *all things considered* entitled to the sky's being red makes it the case that one is *all things considered*

dis-entitled to (acknowledge) being committed to the sky's being blue. Of course, it also *precludes* one's being *all things considered* entitled to (acknowledge) being committed to the sky's being blue, but this is only because one cannot be both *all things considered* entitled and *all things considered* dis-entitled to one and the same thing. Clearly, there must also be entitlement-repelling relations of type ATC-PF, if there are entitlement-repelling relations of type ATC, since one cannot be *all things considered* dis-entitled to p without being also *prima facie* dis-entitled to p. But there can be no entitlement-repelling relations of type PF-ATC, i.e., such that one's being committed and *prima facie* entitled to p makes it the case that one is *all things considered* dis-entitled to q.

The upshot is that all (intrapersonal) inferential relations are either entitlement-preserving or entitlement-repelling. This looks like an improvement, but on the other hand, it is still unclear how any of this could help to see inferential relations as being grounded in normative relations between commitments and/or entitlements. As far as I can see, the conclusion still stands, that the relevant normative relations basically involve the acknowledgements of commitments rather than commitments or entitlements themselves.

Let us consider again the two basic types of entitlement-preserving inferential relations, namely type ATC and type PF. Suppose one is committed and *all things considered* entitled to the sky's being red. As a result, one is thereby *all things considered* entitled both to be committed to the sky's not being blue and to acknowledge being so committed; but this is not in virtue of there being any normative relation between being committed and *all things considered* entitled to the sky's being red and being *all things considered* entitled to be committed to the sky's not being blue and to acknowledge being so committed. So far, there are only consequential relations between entitlements. Yet it seems such a relation could easily be introduced, in the following way. Let us say that being committed to p "rationally requires" acknowledging commitment to q iff one could not be committed and *all things considered* entitled to p without being *all things considered* entitled to q. Turning now to PF type entitlement-preserving relations, we could say, in much the same way, that being committed to p "rationally recommends"<sup>3</sup> (or "rationally supports") acknowledging commitment to q iff one could not be committed and *prima facie*

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<sup>3</sup> I borrow these terms from Broome (1999).

entitled to p without being *prima facie* entitled to q. Proceeding in similar fashion, one could thus introduce normative relations corresponding to each type of entitlement-preserving or entitlement-repelling inferential relations.

The point is this: once these normative relations have been made available, there is (as far as I can see) nothing to prevent one from reversing the perspective and take them as the primitives in terms of which the consequential relations between entitlements (or between entitlements and dis-entitlements), and ultimately all inferential relations among contents, are to be explained.

One more point. The normative "rationality" relations I have just alluded to are relations between a commitment and the acknowledgement of a commitment (or, taking entitlement-repelling relations into account, between a commitment and a "dis-acknowledgement"). However, one might not be completely satisfied with such relations. For suppose again that one is committed and *all things considered* entitled to the sky's being red, but this time suppose further that one doesn't (and/or wouldn't) acknowledge being so committed (perhaps because one's commitment to this claim is a remote consequence of one's other commitments). It isn't clear in such a case that one is rationally required to acknowledge commitment to the sky's not being blue, nor that one would necessarily be rational if one were to acknowledge being so committed (since one could acknowledge this commitment on other, incorrect, grounds). Such worries might lead us to prefer saying that *acknowledging* commitment to p "rationally requires" acknowledging commitment to q if and only if one could not be committed and *all things considered* entitled to p without being *all things considered* entitled to q; and similarly for the other relevant normative relations. These, I think, are two possible and legitimate ways to go, though they rest on different intuitions about the force and nature of the norms of rationality.

All of this remains somewhat incomplete and sketchy, but I think what I have said can easily be seen to point towards two main conclusions.

The first is, as announced at the beginning, that we do not have a firm grasp of the normative concepts of commitment and entitlement in terms of which Brandom frames his account, and hence do not understand exactly how the latter is supposed to work. I have

urged that the only way to see the real normative significance of these concepts would be by making it explicit exactly how they relate to the more familiar, but almost equally elusive, concepts of "reason" and "rationality".

The second, and more tentative, conclusion is that if there is to be any hope of providing an explanation of the inferential articulation of contents in normative terms, one must start with appropriate normative *relations* (instead of statuses), and give pride of place to acknowledgements (i.e., to intentional *acts*, as opposed to statuses) as terms of these relations, which could therefore not themselves be explained in terms of deontic statuses.<sup>4</sup>

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