

Department of Philosophy
Philosophy 621 Seminar in Metaphysics Winter 2017

Instructor: Prof. D. Davies
Time: Wednesday 14:30-17:30
Room: Leacock 927

Topic for 2016-17: Robert Brandom's *Making It Explicit*

Course description

In this course, we shall engage in a detailed reading and critical evaluation of Robert Brandom's very influential book, *Making It Explicit*, in the 700 or so pages of which he makes very explicit [!] both the background to, and the details of, an 'inferentialist' account of conceptual content. Conceptual content is the kind of content ascribable to linguistic expressions and to intentionally characterised mental states such as beliefs and desires. The conceptual content of a sentence, utterance, or mental state is normally represented propositionally, through a 'that' clause characterising the bearer of such content. Bearers of conceptual content are standardly taken to be capable of representing or misrepresenting the world in virtue of that content. Consider, for example, the statement that Montreal is on the St Lawrence River, and the belief that Montreal is North of London, respectively. Bearers of conceptual content are also taken to stand in various kinds of inferential relations to one another, in virtue of which those to whom such bearers are ascribed are taken to be assessable in terms of their epistemic and practical conduct. For example, if I believe that Montreal won the 2010 Grey Cup and I believe that their opponents were Saskatchewan, then I should also believe that Saskatchewan didn't win the 2010 Grey Cup. And if I want to vote in an election and I believe that I can only vote if I go to the polling station before 9 p.m. today, then I should go to the polling station before 9 p.m. today. Both the 'representational' and the 'inferential' dimensions of conceptual content have been widely assumed to be 'normative', in some sense. The purported normativity of conceptual content has been a concern for those seeking to offer a 'naturalised' theory of linguistic meaning and of the intentional content of mental states.

Philosophical theories of conceptual content have usually assumed that the latter is to be explained in terms of the representational properties of the bearers of such content, and that their inferential properties are then to be explained, in turn, in terms of such a 'representationalist' theory of content. Brandom, however, argues that a theory of content must ground the normativity of the latter in inferential properties conferred on the bearers of content by our linguistic practices. These practices 'articulate' the inferential content of linguistic expressions through various kinds of **deontic statuses** ascribed to users of those expressions - such statuses being commitments or entitlements to the making of moves in a 'game' of giving and asking for reasons. Brandom's 'inferentialist' account of conceptual content takes our ordinary discourse to be contentful in virtue of 'making explicit' what is implicit in these social practices. He also takes much of our philosophical and logical terminology, in terms of which we think about the issues of conceptual content and inference, to serve a higher order 'expressive' purpose, 'making explicit' how our ordinary linguistic expressions themselves 'make explicit' what is implicit in

our social practices. Brandom further argues that, given his ‘inferentialist’ account of conceptual content, we can see the ‘representational’ properties of bearers of content, and the ‘objectivity’ of our thought and discourse, as themselves ‘constructed’ through our practices of ascribing and assuming certain deontic statuses.

Making It Explicit, while somewhat daunting in its length and philosophical scope, is an extraordinarily rich work, offering new ways of thinking about many themes both in the history of philosophy and in contemporary analytic philosophy. In addition, Brandom claims that his inferentialist approach allows us to bring certain Hegelian insights, long neglected in analytic philosophy, to bear upon some of its most central questions. In our reading of *Making It Explicit*, we shall also draw upon Brandom’s later work, *Articulating Reasons*, which is intended to provide an entry into some of the central ideas of the larger book, and upon some of the responses to *Making It Explicit* collected in the volume *Reading Brandom*.

Seminar format and evaluation

Seminars will have a mixed lecture/discussion format. I shall take responsibility for presenting an overview of the week’s readings in the first hour or so of the class. After a short break, we shall move to a standard seminar format. Graduate students taking the class for credit will be assigned responsibility for initiating discussion in one meeting of the seminar with a 15 minute critical response to the week’s material. At most other meetings of the seminar, a designated undergraduate student will be responsible for initiating discussion by identifying what they take to be the most salient issues arising out of the readings. Grades will be determined as follows: 80% of total grade will be awarded on the basis of a term-paper due at the end of classes (approximately 15 pages for undergraduates and approximately 20 pages for graduate students). The remaining 20% will be awarded on the basis of participation in the seminar, including presentations. Any requests for extensions on the deadline for the term-paper must be made prior to the final class.

Texts and readings

The primary text for this course is Robert Brandom’s *Making It Explicit*, copies of which can be purchased at *Paragraph* bookstore. An e-copy of the secondary text, Brandom’s *Articulating Reasons*, is available through the McGill Library. Also available at *Paragraph* are a couple of copies of *Reading Brandom*, the tertiary text for the course. There is a copy of this book in the McLennan-Redpath library, which I shall put on reserve, and an e-copy of those chapters assigned as supplementary readings will be uploaded to MyCourses, as will copies of other supplementary readings.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity/ for more information).