

Brandom's five-step program for modal health

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Empiricists worry about our knowledge of counterfactuals and of necessary truths. How could we by observing contingent facts come to know that something *must* be the case, or that if something *were* the case, then something else *would be* the case? Observation seems only to tell us what is in fact the case, with no counterfactual frills, as it were.

In *Between Saying and Doing*, Brandom presents an argument designed to show that *all* our knowledge is shot through with modal knowledge.¹ If Brandom's argument works, empiricist worries are misplaced, or alternatively, we might say that the empiricist is powerless to meet these worries on her own terms, but that a better view of factual knowledge will leave room for our knowledge of modal and counterfactual facts. If we know anything at all, then we know at least some modals. Brandom's argument is interesting, because if it works, we get a new kind of support for appeals to knowledge of counterfactuals, different from attempts at providing a direct rationalist support for such knowledge.

Brandom's central argument for his claim about knowledge of modals is in five steps, with both a preliminary and a more considered conclusion. It is mainly set out in chapter 4 of Brandom (2008). The argument starts with what Brandom calls the *Kant-Sellars thesis about modality*, which is that mastery of ordinary empirical vocabulary requires that we already know how to use modal vocabulary ((2008), pp. 96ff). Grasping any claim, modal or not, entails grasping some counterfactual or modal claim. So understanding of counterfactuals is a necessary precondition of understanding anything at all about the world. Brandom proceeds to develop this idea more systematically, in an argument in five steps. First, the argument in outline:

1. Every discursive practice must have some vocabulary that can be used observationally.
2. Those who engage in discursive practices must distinguish in practice between materially good and materially bad inferences.
3. Material inference is in general non-monotonic. It is defeasible, and its defeasibility cannot be cancelled by some exhaustive spelling out of the possible defeaters.
4. Many of a subject's beliefs could only be justified by exhibiting them as conclusions of material implication. A believer is "epistemically responsible" insofar as she acknowledges a commitment to being able to justify many, if not most, of her beliefs.
5. To count as a discursive practitioner, one must be at least minimally epistemically responsible.

These five steps yield a preliminary conclusion, the *updating problem*: "Every change of belief ... is *potentially* relevant to the justification of every prior belief." (p. 108)

How are we supposed to be able to hold on to the right set of beliefs, and update successfully? Brandom argues that the only solution to the updating problem is that people who use a

¹ An argument of this form is also found in *Making It Explicit* (1994), see for instance pp. 633-636.

vocabulary already from the outset must have an idea of the “counterfactual robustness” for their material inferences. Two speakers, who on the surface agree on a factual claim, may turn out to not be in agreement, if they turn out to disagree about virtually every counterfactual related to the factual claim. In such cases, we can start to wonder if they even agree about the basic, factual sentence. Agreement about factials requires some kind of underlying agreement about counterfactuals.

The next step is that such counterfactuals can be used to introduce modal locutions, in the way Ryle suggests in (Ryle (1950)): understand “If p were true, q would be true” as being equivalent with “It is not possible that p and not q ”. Then we can take our use of counterfactuals to account for our knowledge of modal truths. Since we are discursive creatures, we can be granted such knowledge, and hence we have provided a transcendental argument for modal knowledge: modal knowledge is needed for non-modal knowledge, and since we have such knowledge, we should realize that empiricist worries about modal knowledge are without basis.

This picture of how our modal knowledge should best be understood requires further grounding. As it stands, it is little more than a sketch (so my account is a sketch of a sketch), and some of the details may turn out to be problematic. How much epistemic responsibility is required? What kinds of counterfactual are relevant for understanding a given factual statement? How *do* we know the counterfactuals? How much disagreement about counterfactuals can we tolerate? But I think that the general thrust of Brandom’s argument should be clear enough from my brief account, and it is this general strategy for grounding our knowledge of counterfactuals that I will focus on in my talk.

Some of the steps in the reasoning above are not controversial. For instance, (1) appears to be little more than a truism, whereas some other steps may be more problematic. A central difficulty remains. What backing does the five-step argument give to our ability to use counterfactuals and modals? From an empiricist point of view, there is something almost miraculous about our supposed knowledge of counterfactuals: how *could* we know these, when there is no basis in observation for them? There may still be room for the empiricist to wonder. It seems that Brandom’s argument gives us a weak conclusion – we are only given a guarantee that we know *some* counterfactuals, but nothing much is said about *which* counterfactuals we know, nor about which counterfactuals are true. Perhaps all the five-step argument gives us is a weaker conclusion: in order to count as knowing facts, we must be *using* counterfactuals – but there is no real check on our ability to use them; maybe it has not been shown that we must be able to use them correctly, as long as there is some agreement between speakers.

I will be arguing that if Brandom’s five-step argument is to work properly, we need something extra: something showing that the use of a particular modal or counterfactual statement is *justified*, that there is some way to distinguish correct from incorrect use. The bare assertion that our knowing facts must rest on our using counterfactuals does not show enough.

But how might we go about to show this? I think there is a kind of dilemma for Brandom’s position here: the transcendental argument doesn’t show that our use of counterfactuals is correct, so something more is needed. But if we beef up the transcendental argument with some

other argument that shows the correctness of the use of counterfactuals, then no transcendental argument is needed: then we have a direct argument for our use of counterfactuals. Such “beefing up” might for instance be some kind of traditional appeal to intuition of necessary truths. But few put much faith in such intuition, and if we were to have such faith, there would be no need for the five-step argument: in that case we would just have direct modal knowledge. So the ambitious argument to show the indispensability of modal knowledge for observational knowledge is left dangling. Or so I shall argue.

References

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