

Is Logic Demarcated by its Expressive Role?

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Logical expressivism is an ingenious proposal to account for the nature of logic. Accordingly logical locutions are used to make explicit inferential commitments implicit in a discursive practice. We use logic in order to make our inferences explicit as claimings and thus to make our practice of inferences subject to the business of asking for and giving reasons. Our inferences thus become subject to reflective endorsement or rejection and so logic has its purpose in facilitating reflection on our practice. But the role also imposes constraints on the introduction of logical vocabulary; in order for logic to perform this role its introduction must not bring about a change in the content of terms in the original practice—else we would seem not to be able to express inferences involving those contents—and this entails, given inferentialism, that logic must be inferentially conservative. In this way we connect the expressive purpose of logic with more traditional views of logic as being topic neutral or as empty in content. The elements of the picture—inferentialism about content and Brandom’s conception of a basic philosophical function of making doings explicit as claimings—seem to mesh very neatly. Despite this, I argue that expressivism as a view of logic limps at every step. (i) Logic cannot perform its explicating role unless we presuppose it has a more fundamental role in forming compounds. Inferential relations are essentially multigrade, whilst logical locutions—the truth functions—are exclusively one or two place relations. Expressing the multigrade relation of entailment is only possible given a recursive operation of conjoining (and, perhaps, disjoining). So this more primitive role of forming compounds is a presupposition of the explicating function. This is not a mere technical difficulty because expressivism about logic precisely contrasts itself with, among others, a view of logic as concerning the ability to form certain sorts of complexes. (ii) The very notion of making an inference explicit is obscure and seems to rely on a notion of formal validity: we explicitate an inference by supplying a claiming which converts the inference from a materially good inference to a formally good inference. This is in tension with Brandom’s claim that, whereas it is difficult, if not impossible, to account for material goodness of inference in terms of formal validity, inferentialism and expressivism combine to give a neat characterisation of formal validity in terms of material goodness of inference. Not so, I claim, because either grasp of the expressive role of logic, and thus grasp of the distinguishing feature of the logical, presupposes a grasp of formal validity or we have no clear conception of what it is to render an inference explicit. This issue touches on a more general concern with Brandom’s approach. Grant that a major concern of analytical pragmatism is to give an account of content by saying what it is we are able to do in saying. In order for the programme to function we need to understand what it is to be able to say what we are able to do. But that is not an unproblematic notion. To be sure, it doesn’t raise the general problem of the nature of representation but it raises a special case of it: what is it to represent a doing? It is far from clear that we have good grounds for thinking the special case is an easier problem to solve than the more general one. (Essentially the claim here is that Brandom’s fundamental notion of VP-sufficiency remains obscure.) (iii) If logic is indeed to have a purpose in explicating inference for reflective appraisal then we need a notion of similarity of content, despite differences in

inferential role. This is because introduction of non-logical vocabulary may well be inferentially non-conservative, forging inferential connections between old contents which we may want, on reflection, to reject. But, if we have such a notion, then we need not insist on logic as being inferentially conservative in fulfilling its distinctive role. So the purpose of logic, conceived expressively, is in tension with expressivist constraints on logic—constraints which enable us to see the expressivist as accounting for the same locutions as other theorists. Without these constraints expressivism is a view that, perhaps, includes logic but seems to include a great deal else besides. So it would be unclear whether it was giving an extensionally correct account of logic. (iv) Expressivism about logic, as I've said, requires that logic be conservative relative to content. But Dummett argues, persuasively to my mind, that any such requirement on logic will disable itself from accounting for the epistemic usefulness of inference, unless content is permitted to 'push back' its pragmatic envelope. The question we need to focus on is whether this 'pushing back' can be motivated on grounds independent of the requirements of logic. Here lies a lacuna in Brandom's programme.

Bibliography

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