Expressivism and I-Beliefs in Brandom’s *Making it Explicit*

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In his book *Making it Explicit*, Robert Brandom takes it as one of his aims to formulate a non-Cartesian theory of I-beliefs that can do justice to the two features of I-beliefs that most lend themselves to a Cartesian interpretation. If we stipulate that I-beliefs are evinced by tokening the I-operator in a sentence, we could characterize the two features in this way: first, the use of I expresses a form of non-observational knowledge about our cognitive and practical doings; second, statements formed with the I-operator are immune from the possibility of misidentification. On a Cartesian interpretation, these two features are taken to signal that the mind’s relationship to its own content is not only indubitable but also *primitive*. By this we mean that the ability to be self-related in this way does not have its condition of possibility in a logically prior ability. Brandom attempts to undercut this thesis by showing that the ability to use the I-operator – and hence evince the possession of I-beliefs – has *its* condition of possibility in our ability to work within the inferentially (and thus conceptually) articulated space of giving and asking for reasons. As a result, the ability to formulate I-beliefs is not *given*, as the Cartesian would have it, but *instituted* through the acquisition of a conceptual repertoire. In Brandom’s terms, this means that the ability to formulate I-beliefs develops as we learn to take part in deontic scorekeeping.

In chapter 8 of *Making it Explicit*, Brandom makes another claim about I-beliefs which does not go down so easily. Here, Brandom claims that I-beliefs are an *expressive addition* to deontic scorekeeping, an addition that allows us to make explicit the acknowledgment of an inferential commitment as *my* commitment. Although, as we shall see, this is a valuable function, for Brandom it is an *optional* addition to scorekeeping rather than a *constitutive* element. As Brandom puts it, there is ‘nothing incoherent in descriptions of communities of judging and perceiving agents, attributing and undertaking propositionally contentful commitments, giving and asking for reasons, who do not yet have available the expressive resources I provides’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 559). A deontic scorekeeping community
can add this addition to its expressive resources, but it is certainly not necessary. In this paper, I shall attempt to demonstrate that this view of the I as an optional addition to deontic scorekeeping is incorrect, and furthermore, that even on Brandom’s own terms I-beliefs are a necessary condition for deontic scorekeeping. Contra Brandom, this does not commit one to repositing a Cartesian self. Why could we not say instead that the ability to marshal I-beliefs is acquired through learning a conceptual repertoire and that this leaves us with a being who now has the capacity, in being able to say I, to entertain the full-fledged contents articulated by deontic scorekeeping? Thus, while an individual’s ability to say I is not primitive, it is necessary for that agent to entertain full-fledged intentional contents.¹

The second goal of this paper is to understand why Brandom forecloses this option. It is my contention that Brandom does not pursue it because of certain meta-theoretical commitments that guide his analysis. To be specific, Brandom takes it that his expressive analysis of the structures which make up our ability to engage in intentional thought and talk is to be undertaken from a perspective which is external to the agents whose thought and talk are being accounted for. This perspective makes available to Brandom the thesis that there could be individuals who could take part in deontic scorekeeping and, consequently, differentiate in practice between their commitments (as required by deontic scorekeeping), without those individuals being able to know that it is they who were differentiating between those commitments. I hope to show that this thesis is suspect and therefore that the meta-theoretical assumptions which underlie it are suspect.

Before examining Brandom’s views, we must first say a bit about I-beliefs. I-beliefs are strong de re beliefs. Such beliefs are, as Quine puts it, ‘relational’ and not merely ‘notional’. In having these beliefs, an agent is in direct (usually perceptual) rapport with an object that she can pick out with the requisite ‘vividness’ by making identifying statements. The question that usually arises is what demands must be met for the object to be rendered sufficiently vivid. In recent decades there has been an explosion of interest in a type of demand that ‘one of the terms the believer can use to pick out the object – one of the expressions occurring in the nontrivial identity claim that identifies it for the believer – be used … in the demonstrative or indexical way’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 550). For what Brandom calls ‘mainstream’ analytic philosophy, an investigation into this demand has been a way of fleshing out the idea that ‘directly referential’ expressions (demonstratives, indexicals) ‘make possible a fundamental sort of cognitive contact with the objects of thought, a kind of relational belief which is not conceptually mediated – in which objects are directly present to the mind, rather than
being presented by the use of concepts’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 551). As is clear with a thinker like Perry, an investigation which interprets demonstratives and indexicals in such a way is rebelling against Frege and his stricture on naturalizing (or psychologizing) meaning. For Frege, there is no such thing as non-conceptual thought in that sense (Sinn) is always necessary for thought (Gedanke). For Perry and others, indexicals and demonstratives show that this is not the case because Fregian senses (Sinn) are objective and cannot be relativized to a time and place. As indexicals and demonstratives are necessarily relativized to a time and place, they are senseless. They have meaning or content only because of their directly referential relation to objects in the environment. Indeed, their content is the object of the ‘direct reference’.

Positing this type of referential relation is attractive to certain thinkers for two reasons: (1) it is an important element in elaborating a naturalized semantics, one which is radically causal and contextual, and (2) it provides a way to establish unabashedly the objectivity of some of our thought and talk. Insofar as our (at least perceptual) thought and talk hone in on objects in the environment in an unmediated fashion, it becomes unproblematic how different minds can hone in on and talk about the same objects.

This result concerning the objectivity of some of our thought and talk is, however, put in jeopardy by considering the type of indexical which has the strongest relation to its object, namely, the I. Since, most notably, a series of articles by Castañeda, it has been widely accepted that the use of I to refer to oneself ‘self-consciously’ cannot be reduced to, or replaced with, proper names, propositions, definite descriptions, or other demonstratives and indexicals. It is, as Perry has said, the ‘essential indexical’.

The purpose of Castañeda’s investigation into the indexical I is to distinguish certain types of ‘I-beliefs’ from others. His basic insight is that although subjects can form different types of beliefs about themselves (using proper names, propositions, definite descriptions, etc.) some types are more logically primitive than others. An example of this would result from a case where a subject believes something of himself without realizing that he is believing it of himself. To quote an example used by Gareth Evans: ‘Oedipus was thinking about Oedipus, that is to say, himself, when he thought that the killer of Laius should be killed; but Oedipus was not thinking about himself “self-consciously” ... because he did not realize that he was the slayer of Laius’ (Evans, 1996: p. 206). Thus, we can see here that although Oedipus had a belief about himself, that belief was not ‘self-conscious’ in a way that is avowed by using the I-operator. For that, the I-belief which was a description (‘the killer of Laius’) must be self-ascribed or must be what Perry has called a ‘self-locating’ belief (i.e., the belief in which Oedipus locates himself as the killer of Laius). This self-locating belief would then be expressed with the statement ‘I am the killer of Laius.’
If this gloss on the semantic use of I is accepted, it can be interpreted (as it has been by Castañeda and Chisholm) as upholding a neo-Cartesian view of the self. This interpretation is the result of the two theses mentioned in section 1 that follow from the semantic irreducibility of the I: (1) That we ‘have a special sort of non-observational knowledge of one’s own doings’, which is expressed by using I, and (2) ‘The central sorts of claim one expresses using I involve immunity from the possibility of misidentification’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 554). It is clear that in most cases I do not need to perceive, internally or otherwise, what I am doing to know what I am doing. Similarly, excepting rare occurrences, when I know what I am doing, there is no room to ask whether it is I who am doing it. I am aware, in my doings (practical and theoretical), that it is I who am doing them. It is easy to see how some could take these results to imply a neo-Cartesian self. Because in cases where the I is used as a referring expression there is a reference back to an I with which we have immediate non-inferential awareness, this awareness or intimacy could be taken to be an awareness of a *self* which is fundamentally different than that of the objects to which we refer by using names, definite descriptions, etc. This awareness or acquaintance with ourselves is strongly *de re* in that being able to use the indexical I to refer to ourselves requires not just being in the right circumstance or context, as is the case with most indexicals and demonstratives, but *being* the right object of reference itself. This direct rapport with ourselves is so direct and unmediated as to be non-conceptual. In this respect, the neo-Cartesian position is in accord with the opposite position that wishes to use indexicals as a model to naturalize semantics. Both positions, however, fall into a problem analogous to the other minds problem. As Brandom points out, if one must be in the right context to have strong *de re* beliefs, and if one must *be* the right object to have I-beliefs, how it is possible for different interlocutors to share the same conceptual content if they do not share (as they cannot) the same space/time coordinates? In other words, how are strong *de re* beliefs shared in communication if their conceptual content is tied directly to the context of utterance?

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Brandom tries to weave a way through both positions (neo-Cartesian and naturalized semantics) by claiming that I-beliefs (and strong *de re* beliefs in general) are as conceptual as any other. He claims this for two reasons:

First, [I-] beliefs do not form an autonomously intelligible sort or stratum of beliefs; one cannot coherently describe a situation in which this is the first or only kind of belief that is in play. Second, although essentially indexical beliefs have a special sort of object-involving content that other beliefs do not, that object involvingness should not be
thought of as a nonconceptual element in their content; rather, the special sort of access to the objects their contents are about that the use of indexicals is a special kind of conceptually articulated access (though it is not correct to think of the role of the conceptual as mediating mind and its objects).

(Brandom, 1994: p. 551)

The second claim as to the conceptuality of indexical beliefs involves the thesis, elaborated in chapter 7 of *Making it Explicit*, that deictic expressions rely upon prior anaphoric relations for their meaning. By being involved in anaphoric chains, indexicals are inferentially articulated and thus conceptual. This type of argument provides the resources to demonstrate the first claim as to the non-autonomy of indexical belief. Because mastering anaphoric chains depends upon mastering deontic (inferential) scorekeeping practice in general, indexicals and their use are *instituted* by deontic scorekeeping and thus could not form an autonomous stratum of belief.

In this paper, however, we are interested in another strategy which demonstrates that I-beliefs do not form, and could not form, an autonomous stratum of belief possessed in the absence of any other type of belief. We are interested in this strategy because it is the one which leads to Brandom’s thesis that I-beliefs are expressive additions to deontic scorekeeping and hence optional. This demonstration follows a pattern of argument Sellars once used to disprove that ‘looks-talk’ could be had in the absence of ‘is-talk’. I-talk, as it were, will be shown to be supervenient upon a more basic level of discourse and so is not an autonomous level of discourse as the Cartesian posits. The way in which Brandom articulates this strategy is also taken over from Sellars. To explain how internal reports could be incorrigible yet not irreducibly private, Sellars elaborates a just so story – the myth of Jones. This myth attempts to show how phylogenetically a species which begins with an inter-subjectively available Rylean language describing recognizable objects in space and time could develop, through additions to the language, the ability to make non-inferential reports about their own ‘inner’ happenings. Brandom employs his own just so story to show how, starting from inter-subjectively available linguistic resources, the use of a device which refers only in the first person singular (the I) could come about through certain ‘expressive additions’. Brandom’s story concerns both the epistemic (perceptual) use of I and the practical (intentional) use of I. Let us begin with the epistemic use of I.

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The materials which allow Brandom to marshal his just so story are borrowed from Anscombe’s article ‘The First Person’.5 In that article,
Anscombe imagines a world in which each interlocutor has two names. The first name (B–Z) is pasted to each interlocutor’s chest and back and is out of sight for that interlocutor. The second name (A) is written on everybody’s wrist and is the same for all interlocutors. We learn to respond to our first name (B–Z) as our own, while A is used only through observation. When we observe actions which we wish to report (they are not yet my actions), we can trace them observationally to the A on our wrist. Thus, unlike our I language, the A language only refers to objects that are open to public view. In this language ‘one must observe in order to know who (“A”, or someone else) is doing something, and one is for that reason always liable to be mistaken about who is really doing it’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 555).

Even at this level of the A language, deontic scorekeeping practices have been instituted. A speakers can make claims, some of them as non-inferential reports on perceptions. These reports can be taken to be true by exercising reliable differential response dispositions; ‘responding to a fact or state of affairs by a performance that has the pragmatic scorekeeping significance in the community of acknowledging a doxastic commitment’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 556). We must notice right away that the acknowledgment of the doxastic commitment gains its significance not from the perspective of the one who acknowledges the commitment but from the perspective of the scorekeeping community. The scorekeeping community’s discursive practice gives the acknowledgment the significance it has as an acknowledgment implicit in the practice of the agent who is taken to acknowledge. This characterization of acknowledgment, however, seems to conflict with the way Brandom characterizes it in chapter 3 of Making it Explicit. There, acknowledgment is a species of the generic attitude of undertaking. The communicative commitments we undertake are inferentially related to other commitments that do not often fall within our own purview. Our commitments outrun our explicit acknowledgment of them. What we can acknowledge, we can express in assertional performances or avowals. These performances are explicitating, i.e., they are explicit to the one who makes them. In making assertional performances we make explicit to ourselves (‘self-consciously’) the commitments we enter into by those performances. As Brandom puts it, ‘the attitude of acknowledging a commitment is in effect that of attributing it to oneself’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 196).

This incongruity of the way acknowledgment is treated is not, however, problematic. This is because the just so story that Brandom is telling is a story which wishes to explain precisely how we can gain the ability to acknowledge commitments ‘self-consciously’ by using the essential indexical I. At the level of discursive practice so far described in the just so story, the self-attribution of commitments is still implicit in the practice of the acknowledging agent and available as a deontic status only to the scorekeeping community. In saying that self-attributions are still implicit in practice,
what we mean is that the attributing agent himself cannot claim, for example, that ‘I observe so and so.’

A scorekeeper treats another interlocutor as a reliable observer ... by attributing entitlement to reports with those contents issued by that interlocutor under those circumstances. But at this stage there need be no way explicitly to claim reliability, for instance as a justification in response to a challenge by someone who is committed (noninferentially or not) to an incompatible claim.

(Brandom, 1994: p. 556)

The trick is to explain how acknowledgments implicit in practice become explicit to the agent who acknowledges in the form of self-ascribed claims. For Brandom, as for the pragmatic tradition in general, the ability to acknowledge does not arise from the inside out, but rather, as it were, from the outside in. It arises through the inter-subjective discursive practices that institute sapience in the first place.

To make the next expressive addition to our basic deontic language, Brandom points out that agents who can make observation reports can observe others making observation reports. As a result, an agent can make an ascription that concerns another’s observation report. In this case, T may report ‘S claims perceptually that-p’ or, if T also endorses the claim that-p, then he will say ‘S perceives that-p.’ The essential move that Brandom makes is this: ‘T could now respond to a challenge by another to S’s observation report that-p by saying “S perceives that-p.” This response is also open to S, who in the basic case will phrase the same response as “A perceives that”’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 556). It must be made clear that the response open to S to say ‘A perceives that-p’ is only open to S after it has been mediated by T’s endorsement of S’s claim. If this were not the case, and it were open to S to self-ascribe her own perceptual reports straight away, then we would be saying that S could acknowledge her commitments to the report straight away. But the whole point of this exercise has been to explain how the ability to acknowledge (in this case one’s own perceptual reports) is not primitive but acquired through discursive practices. So, it must be the case that S learns to self-ascribe her own perceptual experience (‘A perceives that-p’) through learning to recognize the attributions of reliability on the part of other deontic scorekeepers. The key question which now arises is how the external attribution of the attitude of acknowledgment is taken over by the interlocutor to whom such acknowledgments are attributed without that interlocutor already having the attitude in question. In other words, how does the fact that others attribute acknowledgments to me bring about my ability to acknowledge the commitments I have undertaken? Unfortunately the lines quoted above are practically all that Brandom says
about how the self-ascription of acknowledgments comes about. This is because, as we shall see, Brandom’s meta-theoretical commitment to an expressive externalism leaves him fundamentally uninterested in this phenomenon. This is demonstrated by Brandom’s next lines:

At this stage, scorekeepers learn to treat the claim ‘A perceives that-p’ as in order whenever a perceptual claim that-p is in order – commitment or entitlement to the ‘A’ – ascription of perception that-p is attributed in just those cases in which commitment or entitlement to the underlying perceptual report is attributed.

(Brandon, 1994: p. 556)

Here, Brandom is still concerned with the conditions for the attribution of A ascriptions, not with A’s self-ascriptions. But certainly the use of A that we are interested in explaining is the first-person use of A, for this use is the precursor of the use of I. But instead of explaining how the first-person use of A and eventually I come about through the recognition of others’ recognitions (attributions), Brandom just assumes this transition. This can be seen with Brandom’s next expressive addition. He says, ‘For the next stage, suppose that this functional equivalence of perceptual reports that-p and self-ascriptions of perceptions of the form “A perceives that-p” is extended so that “A perceives that-p” becomes available as an alternate noninferential response to the same situation that would previously have prompted only a report to the effect that-p’ (Brandon, 1994: p. 556). For Brandom, the salient point is that the self-ascription of the perceptual report becomes non-inferential and hence available without having to trace a fallible connection between the mouth issuing the report and the wrist marked with A. The addition of this non-inferential ability goes a long way to explaining how we can have A-beliefs that are non-observational and immune to misidentification. With this addition we have the conditions of possibility for a rudimentary use of I. But the important question to be answered, which Brandom elides, is how the ‘functional equivalence’ between the report that-p and the self-ascription of the report ‘A perceives that-p’ is originally set up. To this question we never receive an answer.

One might think that a consideration of action would provide a better way of accounting for the emergence of acknowledged I-beliefs. And indeed, this is the case. Accordingly, I shall briefly run through his just so story concerning how the use of I emerges in action (intentional) contexts. The first couple of moves in the story directly parallel those outlined above. The story begins with us observing each other’s actions in public space. Next, we
learn to ‘ascribe performances to individuals as intentional’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 557). This ascription (‘S does q’) begins by using chest and back names, but eventually comes to be used by saying ‘A does q’. At this stage, an important expressive addition appears which was not discussed in the case of perception. Brandom says:

For the next state, then, suppose that limited scorekeeping equivalence of attributions of doings and of self-attributions of doings is extended in practice by interlocutors learning reliably to respond to practical commitments to do q, not only by doing q, but also by undertaking doxastic commitment to the self-ascription ‘A does q’… [O]ne need not see a wrist label in order to use ‘A’ in this way. The result is that although it is possible for S noninferentially to claim ‘A does q’ without in fact doing q – for instance when the agentive ascription in response to acknowledgment of the practical commitment is not prevented, but doing q as a response is prevented – in the cases where reliability prevails and both responses are elicited by that acknowledgment, S will have nonobservational knowledge of those doings and will express such knowledge by the ‘A’ ascription. Furthermore, uses of ‘A does q’ that are elicited in this way are immune from errors of misidentification, as those based on observation of a labeled wrist were not.

(Brandom, 1994: pp. 557–8)

The main innovation introduced here is that agents can claim ‘A does q’ without in fact doing q. In the case of perception, the gap between the self-ascribed acknowledgment of the perceptual report and the ‘experience’ which is reported is minimal. In the case of action, because it is extended in space and time, there is a potential gap between the commitment to act and the action itself. Almost besides himself, Brandom here obliquely recognizes the pragmatic thesis that the ‘facticity’ against which action must project itself to be successful is a determining factor in the creation of subjective ‘inwardness’. Because action must come up against facticity, action can fail. By failing to act in the way he intends, the agent who intends realizes that there is a difference between the intention and the action with which the intention is normally bound up. Through failure, agents come to realize that there is a space of non-observational volition (intention) which is different than its embodiment in action. This difference is conceptualized by Brandom as a difference in ascription types.

‘Does’ as described here in effect attributes the intentions-in-action into which prior intentions mature. It would be possible to extend this discussion by introducing next ascriptions of prior intentions, which would lead to self-ascriptions of the form ‘A shall do q’. When
acknowledgments of these ascriptions come to be among the noninferential acknowledgments of practical commitments regarding future doings, they express nonobservational knowledge of one’s intentions, rather than just one’s actions.

(Brandom, 1994: p. 558)

With the distinction between ‘does’ and ‘shall’ we have opened a space for both the non-observational and non-inferential knowledge of our intentions and actions. This knowledge, while not infallible, has a non-inferential immediacy that guarantees, in most cases, immunity from misidentification. And with these two ingredients we have the conditions of possibility for the use of I and thus for the entertainment of an I-belief.

At this point, we have redeemed, at least in the case of action, the possibility of explaining the features (non-observability and immunity from misidentification) that were taken to characterize the special role of the I without assuming a neo-Cartesian self to begin with. These two features were examined in hopes of explaining why the I is the essential indexical, i.e., why it plays a role which cannot be substituted for by names, definite descriptions, etc. Brandom puts this essentiality (the I’s ineliminability) into deontic scorekeeping terms by saying:

[T]he key feature of the use of I that is not reproduced by other coreferential expressions … is its use in expressing the acknowledgment of a commitment. What I expresses is a potentially motivating acknowledgment of a commitment. The only expression that cannot counterfactually be separated from this motivational role is I. Acknowledgment of a practical commitment is the deontic attitude that corresponds to forming an intention – what is expressed by a sentence of the form ‘I shall …’.

(Brandom, 1994: p. 552)

Because the acknowledging of a commitment is expressed by the intentional ‘shall’, acknowledgment is not expressed in action itself (as the undertaking of a commitment can be), but rather through the forming of an intention to act. This forming of an intention in practical reasoning, which is ‘the undertaking by acknowledging of a commitment, is something that no one but I can do’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 553). By using the essential indexical I, I make this fact explicit. I make explicit my acknowledgments and show that I am disposed to respond to them by performing (if possible) the requisite action.
Here, at the end of Brandom’s just so story, the I is conceived of as an expressive addition to the language rather than as a constitutive device. It makes explicit, in the form of assertions, the acknowledgments that one has taken on implicitly in practice. This distinction between that which is explicit in the form of assertions and that which is implicit in practice is the heart of Brandom’s expressivism. Because Brandom’s commitment to expressivism is at the basis of the thesis that the I is an optional addition to scorekeeping, we must examine it more closely. In its most basic form, expressivism as a philosophical project attempts to make explicit, in the form of assertions, the commitments (cognitive and practical) that are implicit in our normative practice. Roughly speaking, there are two ways in which an expressivism can be elaborated, as an ‘internal expressivism’ or as an ‘external expressivism’. Let us begin with the latter since it is this type of expressivism which guides Brandom’s analysis.

(a) For Brandom, the expressivist project is necessarily attached to his commitment to the priority of the practical, i.e., to the thesis that the meaning of linguistic expressions can be explained by their use. For him this thesis signals that semantic, specifically inferential, practices have their content conferred upon them by non-semantic normative practice. Brandom’s version of this pragmatic thesis is, however, idiosyncratic. For he takes it that the conferral of semantic content from proprieties of practice must be achieved without assuming that those practices have an irreducible semantic component. This assumes that one can, at least in principle, distinguish between a level of inferential assertional practice that is semantic and a level of normative practice that is not. The belief that this distinction is theoretically respectable is the core of Brandom’s external expressivism. We can see why he embraces this thesis if we consider his discussion of concept use. As we know, he wishes to break with the empiricist understanding of concepts as representations. As Brandom correctly holds, concepts cannot be understood apart from their use in discursive practice, specifically the practice of inference. He says, ‘[t]o grasp or understand a concept is … to have practical mastery over the inferences it is involved in’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 89). For an externalist like Brandom ‘[t]he challenge is to explain what sort of practical capacity the relevant kind of understanding consists in, without an ultimately circular appeal to semantic concepts such as intentional content, concept-use, or the uptake of representational purport (treated as an explanatory primitive)’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 89). In other words, Brandom wishes to specify the practical proprieties of understanding without assuming that those practices are irreducibly semantic. For if we did, the expressive project would be circular: it would assume (semantic content) what it wishes to explain. Because this is an illegitimate form of explanation, one must assume that the theorist can give an
explanation that describes normative proprieties of practice *without itself using the semantic concepts.*

(b) An internal expressivism, on the other hand, attempts to make explicit in the form of assertions commitments implicit in our normative practices *without* assuming that those practices can be described without using the semantic concepts that are to be conferred. It claims that the distinction between a level of assertional practice that is semantic and a level of normative practice that is pre-semantic is not a theoretically respectable distinction. Rather, normative practices are always semantic insofar as meaning *just is* what is constituted by normative proprieties. On this basis it is still possible to formulate the expressivist distinction between practices that are implicit and those that are made explicit. However, in this case both modalities are within the purview of the semantic. There are practices that have a meaning that is explicitly assertional, and there are practices that have a type of sense that is implicit in practice. These practices have an intelligibility or sense that is embedded in the logic of practice itself. Indeed, it is because these practices are within the purview of the semantic that it is possible to bring them to explicitness at all.9

Brandom’s commitment to an external expressivism is, as we mentioned above, dictated by his commitment to his version of the priority of the practical. We can gain a deeper insight into this commitment by examining his discussion of original intentionality. Original intentionality is the practical attitude by which an intentional system attributes content or meaning to other systems, either living (persons) or non-living (language). Systems that can attribute in this way make an event mean something ‘by taking it to mean that, by understanding it that way’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 60). Through understanding and interpretation (i.e., through attribution) originally intentional systems *institute* meaning. *Making it Explicit* is an account of the attribution of original intentionality.

The theory developed in this work can be thought of as an account of the stance of attributing original intentionality. It offers an answer to the question, What features must one’s interpretation of a community exhibit in order properly to be said to be an interpretation of them as engaging in practices sufficient to confer genuinely propositional content on those performances, statuses, attitudes, and expressions caught up in those practices? The key to the account is that an interpretation of this sort must interpret community members as taking or treating each other in practice as adopting intentionally contentful commitments and other normative statuses. … Insofar as their [the individuals of the community] intentionality is derivative – because the normative significance of their states is instituted by the attitudes adopted toward them – their intentionality derives from each other, not from outside the community. On this line, only
communities, not individuals, can be interpreted as having original intentionality.

(Brandom, 1994: p. 61)

Because only communities can have original intentionality and the project of Making it Explicit is to give an account of the ‘stance of attributing original intentionality’, one might think that the account would begin by giving a second-person account of the inter-subjective practices of that community. After all, it is these practices that inter-subjectively institute original intentionality. Here, the theorist would attempt to make explicit, through a second-person dialogical form of self-reflection, the norms which implicitly in practice confer intentionality. This would articulate an internal expressivism.

Brandom does recognize that any interpretation of a community’s practices must eventuate in an internal form of expressivism on account of the fact that the interpreter is herself part of a community which institutes original intentionality. Here,

the sort of scorekeeping that is – according to the interpreter outside the community – internal to and constitutive of the community being interpreted comes to coincide with the scorekeeping of the interpreter who attributes discursive practices to the members of that community. External interpretation collapses into internal scorekeeping.

(Brandom, 1994: p. 644)

However, this statement and the meta-theoretical commitment it expresses do not, in fact, guide Brandom’s analysis of original intentionality. It is, as it were, a bare assertion that is not put into practice. The analysis actually given in Making it Explicit is instead guided by the idea that the theorist can specify the conferral of original intentionality within the community from the outside. ‘If the practices attributed to the community by the theorist have the right structure, then according to the interpretation ... the intentional contentfulness of their states and performances is the product of their own activity, not that of the theorist interpreting that activity’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 61). One must notice how strange this passage is. The criteria by which it can be judged that the intentional content of states and performances is the product of the activity of community members and not a projection of the theorist is given by whether the theoretical interpretation has the right structure. And how do we determine whether the interpretation has the right structure? Presumably by whether it makes sense of its object. And how do we determine whether it makes sense of its object? By seeing whether the interpretation has the right structure. But what determines
whether this is so? Here we are in a circle that, unlike the hermeneutical circle, is vicious insofar as it can never draw upon the knowledge gained by the reflection of agents who are pre-theoretically involved in the practices which confer original intentionality. Brandom cannot have recourse to this type of knowledge because it is always semantically contentful and thus never puts the theorist in a position to ratify Brandom’s priority of practice thesis. Because of this threat to one of his central theoretical commitments, Brandom has recourse to an external expressivism in which the state of attributing original intentionality is analysed from a perspective situated outside of the intentionality originally conferred by the community. From this perspective it becomes possible to demonstrate how semantic content can be conferred by non-semantic normative proprieties.

8

Brandom’s meta-theoretical commitment to an external expressivism explains why he takes it that the indexical I is an optional expressive addition to deontic scorekeeping. Brandom’s project wishes to elaborate the features that a correct interpretation must display for it to be an interpretation of a system that attributively institutes original intentionality. This system is the community and not the individuals within the community. The individuals within the community can only have derivative intentionality, i.e., they have it because the scorekeeping community attributes it to them or takes them to have it. We can now see the reason for Brandom’s claim that ‘the fundamental concept of the metalanguage employed in specifying the model of assertional practice is that of the deontic attitude attributing a commitment’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 196). Both of the other deontic attitudes, namely, undertaking and acknowledging, can be specified in terms of attributing. ‘Undertaking a commitment is doing something that licenses or entitles others to attribute it’, while ‘[t]he attitude of acknowledging a commitment is in effect that of attributing it to oneself’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 196). This latter ability to self-attribute a claim explicitly (use the I to express an I-belief) is the end result of Brandom’s just so story. However, because the attitude of attribution is fundamental and is the ground upon which the other attitudes are founded, this end result is optional for the coherence of one’s interpretation of the community as the originally intentional system. For Brandom, we could coherently interpret a community of sapient beings without their being able to acknowledge their commitments explicitly and thus say I. ‘[T]here need be nothing incoherent in descriptions of communities of sapient beings, attributing and undertaking propositionally contentful commitments, giving and asking for reasons, who do not yet have available the expressive resources I provides’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 559).

Being able to perform all of these functions without the use of the indexical I means that the I is not a necessary feature of our intentional mindedness.
As Brandom says, ‘those who lack it [the I] can be conscious in the sense of sapient – can be explicitly aware of things by making judgments about them’ even if ‘they are in an important sense not yet self-conscious’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 559). Sapience is a term that Brandom contrasts with sentience. To be sentient means that one can respond differentially to stimuli. To be sapient requires that one’s differential responses ‘mean something to us … have conceptual content for us’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 4). Because on Brandom’s pragmatic understanding we are demarcated by what we can do rather than what we are, we must find a practical way to articulate our conceptual understanding. Here, the practice of inference becomes the key concept. ‘Our attitudes and acts exhibit … a content that can be grasped or understood, by being caught up in a web of reasons, by being inferentially articulated. Understanding in this favored sense is a grasp of reasons, mastery of proprieties of theoretical and practical inference’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 5). In other words, sapience is bound up with our ability to take part in semantically contentful (because inferentially articulated) deontic scorekeeping. The question becomes: is the demarcation of sapience as a phenomenon which, in principle, could occur in the absence of the self-consciousness that accompanies the use of I a plausible self-demarcation?

As we have seen, Brandom’s answer is yes: the I is an expressive addition to our deontic practices and not a constitutive element of them. Consequently, we could coherently describe a community without it. However, we could not describe a community without the notion of a single performer to whom a chain of commitments can be attributed. The notion of one performer who is responsible for two different claims is implicit in the practical acknowledgment of relations of inferential consequence among claims. One interlocutor is not responsible for the inferential consequences of commitments undertaken by another; such consequence relations govern only the commitments of a single interlocutor. The notion of incompatible propositional contents [the inferential relation which specifically renders content] similarly presupposes the assignment of responsibility of commitments to those contents to reidentifiable interlocutors. … Asserting, challenging, deferring, justifying – all these significances that performances can have according to basic discursive scorekeeping practices depend on sorting commitments and performances into the concomitancy classes corresponding to individuals.

(Brandom, 1994: pp. 559–60)

For our interpretation of an originally intentional community to be coherent we need to posit, at least implicitly in the practice of those being interpreted, the notion of a single responsible performer. In other words, while we can
interpret a community as not having the expressive resources of the I explicitly available to those community members *themselves*, for us – for the interpreters – the notion of an individual scorekeeper is essential. Community members can acknowledge commitments to be their commitments implicitly in practice and not explicitly in what is said. Therefore, the expressive resources of the I are unavailable to those interlocutors even if they are available to the interpreting agent of a community and its practices. Is this result cogent?

The question must be asked: what is it for an agent to acknowledge two (or more) claims *implicitly in practice*? To answer this question, we must make a distinction between the assertion that-p and the assertion that I claim that-p. To acknowledge a claim implicitly in practice is simply to assert that-p rather than that I claim that-p. Here, one asserts the content of the claim, implicitly acknowledging its commitments, yet the acknowledgment of those commitments as *my* commitments has not yet been made explicit. We can acknowledge two incompatible claims simply by asserting that-p and asserting that-q when p and q possess commitments that are formally or materially incompatible.¹¹

In making the distinction between that-p and that I claim that-p we seem to provide Brandom with the means to understand how claims can be acknowledged implicitly in practice and so with the means to parry the suggestion that the essential indexical I is a constitutive part of deontic scorekeeping. But this is to move too quickly. To see why, we must examine what Brandom calls ‘the default and challenge structure of entitlement’.

The model presented here has what might be called a *default and challenge structure* of entitlement. Often when a commitment is attributed to an interlocutor, entitlement to it is attributed as well, by default. The prima facie status of the commitment as one the interlocutor is entitled to is not permanent or unshakable; entitlement to an assertional commitment can be challenged. When it is *appropriately* challenged … the effect is to void the inferential and communicative authority of the corresponding assertions (their capacity to transmit entitlement) unless the asserter can vindicate the commitment by demonstrating entitlement to it.

(Brandom, 1994: pp. 177–8)

It is important to realize that the default and challenge structure of entitlement is a constitutive part of deontic scorekeeping insofar as it is built into the performance of the *assertion*. In making an assertion a deontic
scorekeeper is both authorizing further assertions and *undertaking a specific task responsibility*, namely the responsibility to show that they are *entitled* to the commitment expressed by their assertions, should that entitlement be brought into question. This is the responsibility to *do something* (Brandom, 1994: p. 173). While this task responsibility is usually not invoked insofar as one’s assertion is usually not challenged, any assertion could be challenged, thus bringing this task responsibility into play.

The question whether the I is necessary for deontic scorekeeping does not arise when one is making assertions that are taken by default to have entitlement because one can acknowledge a claim and its commitments without making explicit that it is I who am making the claim and taking responsibility for those commitments. Rather, the question concerning the necessity of the I only comes up when the claims of a performer are challenged and the performer is required to *do something*, to provide reasons, to justify his assertion. In the case of an assertion like ‘that-p’, when it is challenged the performer can justify the statement without explicitly claiming that it is he who is justifying the statement. But this is only possible because this assertion concerns an objective state of affairs that can be justified by agent-neutral reasons. But is this the case when the assertion that is being challenged concerns an agent’s own action or perception? Here what is being challenged is, for example, one’s entitlement to perform an action or one’s entitlement to claim that one’s perception is veridical. In either case, the justificatory reasons offered cannot be agent-neutral in the way that reasons justifying the assertion ‘that-p’ are. When we are asked whether we are entitled to perform action X, our answer makes essential reference to the reasons for *our* being entitled to perform action X. This challenge would result in the assertion: ‘I am entitled to perform X because…’. Insofar as the challenge is addressed to us, the reasons which are invoked in answering it are invoked with the specific intent of *taking responsibility* for the action and its practical commitments (or at least the commitments that are known to the agent). In taking responsibility for the action and its practical commitments, one is explicitly ascribing them to oneself. If one were to put this type of ascription into assertional form, it would go: ‘I claim that I am entitled to perform X because…’.

This result signals a structure similar to Kant’s thesis that although the ‘I think’ is not always attached to our cognition, it could be so attached. In our case the idea is that while the I is implicit in most assertional practice (insofar as most assertions are not challenged), it can be made explicit in the case of a justificatory challenge that involves the agent’s own action or perception. Since a justificatory challenge to one’s action or perception is a *permanent possibility* of assertional practice, the I can become explicit at any point in the space of reasons. Brandom can ward off this conclusion only by arguing that the default and challenge structure is not necessary for deontic scorekeeping in general. He does this when he argues that the A
label used by Anscombe’s speakers ‘can be used in deontic scorekeeping’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 555). At that stage (a stage before the I is in use) speakers can exchange reasons and take and make theoretical and practical assertions to be true by exercising reliable differential response dispositions. ‘At this stage’, so Brandom thinks, ‘there need be no way explicitly to claim reliability, for instance as a justification in response to a challenge by someone who is committed (noninferentially or not) to an incompatible claim’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 556). Brandom claims that at this stage there need be no way to claim reliability explicitly because he himself recognizes that to do so brings the indexical I into play. Hence he must deny that A speakers, to be involved in deontic scorekeeping, are required to take over the task responsibility of justifying their assertions in the space of reasons. But if one can’t take over this task responsibility, can it plausibly be said that one is taking part in deontic scorekeeping?

10 This question can be answered in the affirmative only if deontic scorekeeping can be carried out in a way that is, in principle, pre-assertional. For once the assertion enters the picture, so does the challenge and default structure and hence the essential indexical I. Here we must be careful. Of course it is the case that there are performances that count in the space of reasons that are not assertional. But could those performances count in this way if the being who enacts them could not take part in assertional practice at all, i.e., if he did not have the ability to provide reasons for these non-assertional practices? The performances could count for other scorekeepers without the performer being able to provide reasons, but this does not help Brandom’s case if we countenance that these other scorekeepers can already engage in assertional practice and thus defend their claims in the case of a challenge by using the indexical I. For that would only show that we need to give an ontogenetic account of how subjects come to be subjects through learning the deontic capacities (including use of the I-operator) required for rational thought and agency. But we have already granted the need for an ontogenetic account of this type. Brandom’s point is different and much stronger: it is not that the I is an expressive addition for individual scorekeepers who are learning the mechanisms of deontic scorekeeping, but that it is or could be an expressive addition for the whole community of those who are sapient or those who ‘say We’. To say this, however, one must also say that a community can engage in performances and exchange reasons about those performances even though the agents of this community do not take part in assertional practices. For again, if they could take part in assertional practices, they could answer challenges concerning their actions and perceptions through undertaking the task responsibility of providing agent-relative reasons, reasons that make essential mention of the indexical I.
Brandom can arrive at his conclusion concerning the optionality of the I because his meta-theoretical commitment to an external expressivism allows him a theoretical perspective that can discern a level of normative practice below the semantically charged inferential practices that necessarily give rise to the default and challenge structure. But this pre-semantic level is one that is posited by a theoretical reconstruction of the deontic practices of a community from outside of that community. Here, Brandom is substituting a thesis arrived at through theoretical reconstruction for one that arises from the object that is purportedly being analysed, namely, from the structure of the activity of those participating in deontic score-keeping. From this second-person point of view, the default and challenge structure that pertains to the exchange of semantically contentful reasons affects all participants, including, of course, oneself. As a result, each agent participating in this exchange of reasons must be able, when a challenge is levied, to offer agent-relative reasons and hence to use the essential indexical I.

As we saw earlier, Brandom’s embrace of an external expressivism is dictated by his interpretation of what is required to meet his ‘priority of the practical’ thesis, i.e., that meaning is determined by use. For Brandom, this means that pre-semantic practical proprieties confer semantic content on certain types of performances without assuming them to be already semantic. In this way our explanation avoids circularity. But this thesis is, in my view, retrograde. It is motivated by a commitment not so much to pragmatic modes of thought as to a worry which has its origin in foundationalist thinking. If we could excise the pull of that type of thinking, the necessity to ground semantic content on non-semantic normative practices would disappear and we could happily accept the notion that semantics and pragmatics are co-constitutive aspects of deontic scorekeeping and so of our rationality. We could also happily accept the thesis that I have been arguing for, namely, that the indexical I is a constitutive element of deontic scorekeeping and not an optional addition.

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Notes

1 To render this position fully defensible would require a theory of ontogenetic development like that given by Habermas. See Habermas, 1992.
2 See Perry, 1977.
3 The reading outlined here leaves out an option which has been pursued by McDowell and Evans that there are *de re* senses. See McDowell, 1998 and Evans, 1981.
The term acknowledgment is first used in chapter 1 to describe generically the normative attitudes which mediate between rules (norms) and action. We, as normative creatures, are not directly subject to norms or rules; ‘[t]heir compulsion is rather mediated by our attitude toward those rules. What makes us act as we do is not the rule or norm but our acknowledgment of it’ (Brandom, 1994: p. 31). This acknowledgment can be both explicit to the agent who acknowledges and also implicit in the practice of that agent. In chapter 3, acknowledgment is solely an explicit attitude.

This transition is problematic, as pointed out above. However, for the sake of my exposition I shall not belabour it here.

This use of internalism and externalism has nothing to do with the way these terms are typically marshalled in the theory of justification or in the theory of content. This is because, as we shall see, they refer here to meta-theoretical positions.

From this point of view, an internal expressivism would accuse an external expressivism of having a commitment to the myth of the given insofar as it assumes that elements that are outside of the space of reasons (non-semantic yet normative practices) can relate to elements inside of it (semantic inferential practice).

My complaint that Brandom does not elaborate an internal expressivism is essentially the same as Habermas’ criticism that Brandom overlooks the second person. See Habermas, 2003.

I owe the content of this paragraph to an anonymous referee of an earlier version of this paper.

References