

*Modality, Normativity, and Intentionality*

Bob Brandom  
University of Pittsburgh

Section I:

- Problematic 1: explaining the intensionality (non-extensionality) of intentionality.
- Project 1: understanding the intentionality characteristic of mind and language by deploying a naturalistic but modally rich vocabulary centering on the sorts of *counterfactuals* used to codify *causal* relationships.
- Problematic 2: offering an account of the distinctive *normative* character of intentionality—meaning, content, and concept use.
- Project 2: explaining conceptual normativity in terms of counterfactual dependencies, paradigmatically of representing events and states of affairs on represented ones.

Section II:

- For at least the first half of this century, philosophers (especially English speaking ones) were extremely suspicious of modal idioms. What such talk expressed seemed at best obscure, and at worst perhaps in principle unintelligible. During this period one of the outstanding philosophical problems and projects was precisely to render respectable the use of counterfactuals and appeals to what was possible or necessary. Conceptually fastidious philosophers in the broadly empiricist tradition felt themselves obliged to either to demonstrate the legitimacy of these notions or to show how to do without them.
- Just how did that which seemed most in need of philosophical explanation and defense become transformed so as to be unproblematically available to explain other puzzling phenomena?
- 1) The first answer is that what happened is a revolution in modal logic and semantics.
- 2) If the natural sciences generally help themselves generously to modal notions such as dispositions, if they distinguish what is possible from what is not, treat some but not all regularities as lawful, and endorse counterfactual conclusions, why should not a scientific semantics be entitled to do the same?
- 3) Kant and Sellars think there is an argument that the use of any ordinary empirical descriptive concept commits us to the correctness of at least some counterfactually robust inferences. Thus the use of any such concept presupposes the applicability in principle of modal vocabulary, whose expressive role it is to make explicit the difference between two sorts of inferences: counterfactually robust and not.

## Section III:

- We should reject global skeptical challenges to the in-principle intelligibility of normative concepts, as we should reject corresponding challenges to the intelligibility of modal ones. They proceed from and depend on an ultimately unsustainable picture of the meanings of extensional, descriptive, empirical predicates as autonomously intelligible apart from counterfactual-supporting connections to other predicates, and normative features of their use.
- Just as it is legitimate, where helpful, to use *modal* vocabulary in elucidating and explaining various features of intentionality, so it is in principle legitimate to appeal to *normative* vocabulary to do so. It is not circular or otherwise objectionable to appeal to non-extensional modal concepts to make sense of the kind of intentionality peculiar to intentional phenomena. And it is not circular or otherwise objectionable to appeal to normative concepts to make sense of the specifically *conceptual* normativity distinctive of intentional phenomena.