Title

Brandom, Bourdieu and Agency: An Inferential Re-Reading of Habitus and its Place within Education.

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Declaration

I, Grace Wilding, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.
Abstract

Robert Brandom’s Inferentialism is often perceived as both difficult and unwieldy. The central argument presented here is that Robert Brandom’s Inferentialism addresses the dualism inherent in constructivist accounts of meaning generally, and within the work of Pierre Bourdieu specifically, by providing a holistic account of meaning which bridges the mind-world divide. His holistic account of meaning is prefaced on his unique understanding of human rationality. Humans act for reasons and, as such, we are responsible for our beliefs and actions. This is agency. Via this revised understanding of agency, the charges of determinism which continue to be levelled against Bourdieu and Bourdieusian scholarship, most commonly in relation to the key conceptual tool of *habitus*, can be answered. This thesis will argue that a more nuanced, inferential, account of *habitus*, one which clearly demonstrates the process of agency, is possible. As the focus of Bourdieusian scholarship is not pedagogy directly but power, a model that can get to the heart of agency is a model that can provide an answer to, rather than description of, the enduring inequalities found in education. Furthermore, Inferentialism and its structured account of meaning can provide educationalists with a fresh way of approaching the process of research itself, one centred on the
human capacity for expression. The *logical expressivism* of Brandom’s Inferentialism is key to the potential that this theory has within the context of education, giving educational researchers and practitioners a fresh way in which to develop their conceptual understandings of issues surrounding inequality via the practice of giving and asking for reasons.
**Impact Statement**

The ideas presented in this thesis, whilst based within the disciple of the Philosophy of Education, have the potential to be relevant in a wide variety of contexts, both within and without the context of academia. Further, there are also a variety of ways in which the ideas presented in this thesis can be said to support future research. There are three central strands which situate the relevance of this work within the field of education: its theoretical contribution to the field, its potential application within an empirical context, and its several potential applications within a professional context.

The first of these, namely the theoretical contribution that this thesis can be said to make within the context of educational philosophy, can be distilled into two central strands. Firstly, it has considered novel potential applications of the Inferentialism of Robert Brandom within the context of education. Current applications of Robert Brandom’s Inferentialism within the field have focused on pedagogy. However, the central concern of this thesis is the potential that the application of Inferentialism has within the context of social justice and development. Secondly, this thesis can be seen as an extension of current work within the Philosophy of Education which challenges some of the assumptions made by constructive approaches. Inferentialism is a holistic philosophical approach and, as such, addresses the
epistemic issues which result from the dualism within constructivism.

The second potential relevance of this work is also within the context of academia and relates to the potential that the application of Inferentialism can have within the context of empirical investigation into educational issues. In challenging educational theory ontologically, there will necessarily be concurrent epistemological implications which will potentially impact on research designs and, more specifically, on the design of research into the efficacy of interventions which aim to promote greater social equality within educational contexts. Very simply, Inferentialism suggests that genuine change within educational contexts needs to focus on the understanding of educational concepts by practitioners themselves, and that these types of interventions need to complement other approaches and interventions.

Finally, Inferentialism has the potential to have significant impact within a professional context. This thesis was written with the professional development of educationalists in mind, and the ways in which professional knowledge can be developed in order to contribute to social development aims. These ideas would enrich approaches to teacher training and continuing professional development (CPD). Indeed, this would be a highly relevant and natural development of the ideas presented in this thesis.
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Introduction

This thesis aims to give a robust account of agency in order to provide a more coherent ontological foundation for educational theory and research, using Robert Brandom’s Inferentialism. Giving an adequate account of agency is seen as central to the ability of educationalists to address issues of social inequality across educational settings. Social development has to be driven actively if it is to be effective. Robert Brandom’s theory of Inferentialism, often referred to as Brandom’s inferential semantics, begins its explanation of agency with an account of the way in which agents are bound. Agents are normatively bound to concepts which are necessarily linguistic. What is meant by this is that the application of a word is a social act and that the norms governing the use of a word are binding as they are shared by members of a community. They are the result of shared practice, an idea which will be a consistent focus throughout this thesis and which demonstrates the impact of Wittgenstein on Brandom’s thinking and his ‘commitment to a fundamental pragmatism’ (Brandom 2011, 69). Without this type of normative binding, sociality would be impossible.

However, what is unique about Brandom and the normative pragmatist turn of his inferential semantics is his controversial move to argue that social norms are objective rather
constructed. Through a series of complicated theoretical moves which will be traced in this thesis, he shows that self and world are holistic and unified in his inferential semantics. He does not, therefore, need to deny the possibility of truth or, alternatively, to reduce the agent to a subject. This point is key as it will have clear epistemological implications for educational researchers and research designs. These implications will be considered throughout, specifically in the context of Bourdieusian research. Brandom’s argument, as we shall see, is both compelling and subtle and can provide educationalists with a more coherent ontological foundation for research and practice, one which can transcend the self/world dualism which, it will be demonstrated, is inherent in much current educational theory. ‘It is because Inferentialism places norms at the heart of human experience that it can avoid the self/world dichotomy’ (Noorloos et al 2016, 449).

Finally, his inferential semantics demonstrates that, as a result of the expressivist logic which language follows, it is only through the binding nature of norms that the freedom to think, to reflect, to express, to change, and transform ourselves, is possible. Drawing heavily on the work of Hegel, Brandom’s inferential semantics will demonstrate that this ‘model of normativity opens up a powerful and original notion of positive and expressive freedom and normative selfhood, as the product of the rationality-instituting capacity to constrain oneself by
specifically *discursive norms*’ (Brandom 2009, 77). Brandom’s understanding of *expressive* freedom, or *expressivist logic*, within inferential semantics has much to offer the field of educational research. As normativity is necessarily social, what we say and do can be understood in a social space. Actions and beliefs are *rational* because agents have *reasons* for them which can be understood by others. The human capacity to *make explicit* the content of our ideas, to express the *reasons* for our behaviours, can give researchers a fresh insight into the process of agency and concept development. Our ideas and beliefs change through this discursive practice, through the evaluation of our reasons for actions. This is what is referred to as the *game of giving and asking for reasons*. Over the course of this thesis, this concept will be explained in greater detail, drawing out the subtleties which separate it from other forms of expressivism. The thesis will also serially develop the relevance of this unique expressivism within the context of education, focusing in particular the transformative potential of this model of human rationality.

This understanding of agency is not unique and, as will be explored in this thesis, has its roots in Kantian philosophy. Within the context of Brandom, these ideas manifest themselves via his definition and understanding of sapience as being characterised as being *responsive to reasons*. Expressing something as an assertion or action means ‘putting it into a form in which it can both serve as and stand in need of *reasons*’ (Brandom 2000,
11). Agents do not act blindly; they are governed by reasons. I walk with purpose and intention when I walk to work. I am not driven by instinct but by reasons, reasons which I can express and justify within a public context. In Brandom’s own words:

‘Here is perhaps Kant’s deepest and most original idea...What distinguishes judging and intentional doing from the activities of nonsapient creatures is not that they involve some special sort of mental processes, but that they are things knowers and agents are in a distinctive way responsible for. Judging and acting involve commitments. They are endorsements, exercises of authority’ (Brandom 2006: 55).

As sapient creatures, we are constantly engaged in the process of justifying, considering, and reframing our understandings, our actions, and our beliefs. We are constantly engaged in the game of giving and asking for reasons and are, therefore, responsible for our beliefs and actions. We are accountable agents.

The subsequent reading of these ideas will focus on the ways in which Brandom’s inferential semantics can address the inadequacy of many current characterisations of agency within educational theory and research. Specifically, this thesis will focus on the work and legacy of Pierre Bourdieu and the problems that his characterisation of agency and the self/world relation have presented within educational research, focusing specifically on his concept of habitus. Habitus was his attempt to transcend
the self/world divide, ‘habitus focuses on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being [...] and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others’ (Maton 2008, 51). The aim of this is to demonstrate that the many criticisms of determinism levelled against Bourdieu within an educational context can be resolved if there is an ontological shift in researchers’ understandings of the concept of habitus. The reasons for the selection of Bourdieu specifically are firstly because Bourdieu typifies many of the issues which are endemic in much educational research: namely a lack of nuanced understanding of behaviour and agency. The concepts used within Bourdieu are often reified, becoming descriptive rather than explanatory, thereby losing the ability to challenge the problems that they locate. For example, in many applications of Bourdieu, the complexity of the relationship between language and action, between normativity and human agency, is lost. Problematic metaphors such as ‘ownership of linguistic capital is pivotal as a bargaining chip’ (Flynn 2016: 156, my emphasis) are common with Bourdieusian research when considering the complex role that language has to play in our cultural lives. This idea will come under detailed scrutiny in the middle section of this thesis. However, as is evident through the emphasis given here, concepts have become reified, leading to a lack of understanding of the development of language and the ways in which agents can become aware of the norms which bind them. This type of
language encourages a perspective of the human subject as being passive.

The second reason for the selection of Bourdieu is his continued relevance within the field of education, therefore making the content of this thesis directly applicable to current educational issues. Pierre Bourdieu’s work has clear strengths, which attest to his enduring popularity within the context of education. The focus on the issue of power and inequality at the heart of Bourdiesian research remains as relevant now as ever. Issues surrounding inequality and education have ‘reached a fever pitch just at a historical point when social mobility is stagnating or going into decline’ (Reay 2019: xvii). Bourdieu’s influence on debates surrounding inequality within education has been profound. In particular, his characterisation of habitus as the cultured dispositions of individuals to act in particular ways dependent on their social contexts has encouraged researchers to be much more focused on the link between patterns of behaviours and particular environments. His framework has allowed researchers to move beyond limited, simplistic and determinist characterisations of the relationship between the individual and social structures. In fact, on the surface, Bourdieu’s theory also accounts for agency in a similar way to Brandom, through an increased awareness of the norms which bind us. Classically, he describes the relationship between an individual and their environment as a ‘structuring structure’
(Grenfell 2009), as being in a reciprocally constructive relation, a concept which will be a clear focus of the Bourdieu chapters. This idea, and the idea of habitus, will be considered in depth in subsequent chapters to demonstrate that, whilst Bourdieu has many strengths, his account of agency is insufficiently nuanced, despite the many attempts to vindicate him (Threadgold, 2019). If agency is in any way mysterious, then it is impossible to promote change and responsibility within the context of education and the capacity for active change is limited.

The final justification of the use of Bourdieu is the fact that the issue of power is also an issue which is implicit in Brandom and yet one which has not been sufficiently developed within an educational context. Indeed, the possible applications of Brandom’s inferential semantics within the field of education have so far focused on its relevance to pedagogy (Marabini & Moretti 2017; McCorey 2017, Bakker & Husmann; Causton 2019; Derry 2016; Noorloos et al 2016; Bakker & Derry 2011). However, what is interesting about Brandom is that the objective and binding nature of socio-historical norms places power at the centre inferential semantics. Again, we see Hegel’s influence on Brandom as he uses his metaphor of the master/slave dialectic to account for the genesis of socio-historical meaning. Thus, to address issues of social inequality within education, an understanding of the role of these norms in reasoning has much to contribute to the ways in which these issues can be understood.
and addressed. Thus, Brandom’s inferential semantics does not only offer a sound ontological foundation for Bourdieu, but also complements his emancipatory aims.

After exploring the ways in which Inferentialism can be used to strengthen Bourdieusian research through a rereading of the concept of *habitus*, the argument will conclude with some suggestions as to the ways in which an inferential rereading of *habitus* can be operationalised within the context of educational research and practice. The ideas for application stem, as stated above, from the transformative potential of language’s *expressivist logic*. The suggestions rest on the argument that the type of rational agency outlined within Inferentialism means that social development is synonymous with the conceptual development of the agent. Inferentialism is a developmental theory and a theory in which action is the result of reasoning. To change behaviour, to change attitudes and human relations, the site of change needs to be the agent. ‘The *game of giving and asking for reasons* is the inferentialist concept most pertinent for an account of learning *activity*; that is, for the dynamics of learning’ (Taylor et al 2017, 775). It will, therefore, be argued that this discursive model, a model referred to by Brandom as *deontic score-keeping*, has implications for the ways in which policy and research are implemented within educational contexts if they are to be effective. The conceptual development and normative understanding of agents at all levels of education needs to be
developed according to the *inferential* model of learning and concept development provided by Brandom. The strength of the link between conceptual understanding and practice, between an understanding of conceptual norms and the reasons for action described in Brandom’s model will, therefore, have a significant impact on the ways in which new concepts should be introduced within educational settings. Further suggestions rest on the premise that inferential semantics can provide researchers with a fresh perspective on cultured behaviours and the relationship between the situated practices of particular groups and the reasons for their actions. To understand *habitus*, or any cultured behaviour, the focus should be on rationality and agents’ responsiveness to reasons rather than overly focusing on correlations between behaviours and contexts.

Thus far, the justifications of the application of Brandom within the field of education have been academic, arguing that Brandom’s unique theory of human action can provide a robust account of agency within educational theory, as well as beginning to suggest some of the ways in which these ideas can be applied. However, as alluded to above, this shift in the ontological approach to educational theory and research is a response to the material, everyday social contexts of education. Both as a researcher and a classroom teacher, the social inequalities which exist within schools, which are reflective of broader social inequalities, make moral demands. The arguments presented
here are my attempt to come to a better understanding of these issues and to contribute to this debate.

Issues surrounding individual differentials and their impacts on educational success have manifested themselves serially throughout educational theory. Class, gender, and other specificities of identity, and their relationships with notions of equality, inequality, quality and access are not novel areas of enquiry. Indeed, inclusivity and exclusivity have been some of the most pervasive topics in education for decades – even if only through the centrality of the most basic of exclusive dichotomies: pass and fail. When considering the unquestioned legitimacy of these and similar terms, it seems that education must inevitably exclude, and act, consciously or otherwise, 'as a kind of cultural filter through which children [are] passed' (Grenfell 2012, 17, my brackets). Not only does this filter enable or disable access to particular professions and lifestyles, it also equates to ‘different forms of identity and consciousness’ (Au 2008, 77), suggesting that individuals will integrate into different experiential worlds as a result of these filters which, as Bruner has suggested, ‘are never far removed from considerations of social class, gender and the prerogatives of power’ (Bruner 1996, 27). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the reputed founders of sociological discourse, such as Marx and Durkheim, or later icons, such as Bourdieu and Bernstein, all seem to chase the grail of equality, suggesting, as an almost self-evident assumption, that research should aim to
‘emancipate the disempowered, to redress inequality and to promote individual freedoms’ (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2017, 27).

It is against this emancipatory background that this thesis stands, saddened if not disheartened by two related observations. The first of these is that, despite the unceasing efforts of educationalists past and present, the problem of understanding inequality and difference seem depressingly insurmountable – unquestionably due to the complexity of the field and problems generated through the theorisation of material phenomenon which, when cast linguistically and systematically, lead to the over-simplification (through conceptual generalisation) of the multifariousness of the social. Second, educational theory, when translated into practice in terms of curriculum development, institutional organisation, teacher training, and pedagogical style, tends to be further simplified. In its recasting, it is often applied dogmatically and without sufficient critical understanding of the theoretical models by teachers themselves. The battle between educational research and the pressures of state-sanctioned accountability measures have also led to a reticent uptake of progressive ideas. Institutions and policy-makers struggle to move on from education’s externalisation tenet, which prizes ‘produc[ing] a record of our mental efforts’ (Bruner 1990/1992). It focuses instead on an externalised representation or artefact (such as the ‘bounded qualification’ critiqued by Basil Bernstein
(Bernstein 1990) rather than considering the quality of the lived experience of the learner and their ability to understand, mould and synthesise with cultural narratives.

This second issue relating to the tensions between theory and practice and the impacts that accountability and narrow conceptions of education as defined as exam success, is included here for a reason. It is argued that the approach to educational research which the inferentialist model provides is fit for the exploration of these types of issues. The inconsistencies and conflicting ideological drives which are played out in the classroom as a result of the oversimplification of theoretical concepts when applied in both research and practice can be made explicit through rational enquiry which will enable practitioners, researchers and policy-makers to evaluate the reasons for their actions as well as considering the historical residual inequalities which may implicitly guide their reasons for actions. The inferential analysis of the problems outlined above and those considered over the course of this thesis should be considered as the next steps of the argument developed here.

This central concern with the oversimplification of difference within educational theory demonstrates that a more nuanced approach to our understanding of the human agent is needed; one which more carefully considers the relationship between mind and world, between thought and action, as well as the relationships between individual minds - thus attempting to
avoid some of the crasser aspects of structuralism and its conceptual legacy. When considering inequality, theorists have expressed them in terms of conceptual binaries (indeed – the deploying of the marked term in-equality suggests its opposite) and, in doing so, have lost the individual. The loss of the individual and a coherent account of action equates to a loss of agency and, by extension, the possibility of an emancipatory challenge to inequality. ‘The crucial element of binaries – and hence of the potential for disrupting them – is their integral connection with constructions of the other and of otherness’ (Midgley et al 2011, 4). Whilst structuralist and post-structuralist approaches to issues of social exclusion may have helped to elucidate the social infrastructures which serve to produce and reproduce inequalities, they do not provide us with a coherent understanding of the reasoning agents upon which the dichotomising labels are projected (ibid). Focusing on the external denies the power of individuals – it defers to the structuring powers of society.

Recent interest by philosophers in the concept of normativity and the ways in which these norms are integral to our perception have used these ideas to help them deal with one of the most renowned dichotomies in philosophy: that of mind and world (McDowell 1996). The legacy of this dichotomy has resonated through both educational philosophy and research. The setting of mind against world means that we
misconstrue the interconnectedness of subjects and their environments, viewing them as separate, leading to a theoretical focus on the effects of one on the other (often leading to the subject being interpreted as passive), rather than considering the benefits of viewing them as an extension of each other. Thus, the best theoretical model of mind is one which can explain within a single viewpoint contrasting aspect of the whole. This is a central strength of Inferentialism: its unequivocal and novel rejection of the traditional mind/world divide. If we are to move towards any kind of understanding of what makes us individual, as well as what separates us, then we need to disrupt the divisive dichotomies which segregate our experiences when represented in research; we need to find a ‘potential means for moving beyond binaries toward more positive and transformative ways of conceptualising and enacting human relations, including in relation to education’ (Midgley et al 2011, 7). From here, we can attempt to re-evaluate the nature and purpose of education, placing rational agency at its heart.
Chapter One

Brandom, Empiricism and The Space of Reasons

The philosophical works of Robert Brandom, whilst complex and seemingly unwieldy, have much to offer the social sciences. His ideas are rich and multifaceted, offering a reader a nuanced and satisfying picture of human agency which should be the heart of emancipatory projects within the social sciences. It can support the promotion of more sophisticated and successful pedagogical approaches within our classrooms (Bakker & Derry 2011; Derry 2013; Bakker & Husmann 2017; Derry 2017; Marabini & Moretti 2017; Noorloos et al 2017; Su & Bellman 2018; Causton 2019) by providing a more subtle and explanatory (rather than descriptive) account of the relation between agents, as well as the relationship between agents and the social contexts within which they act. This chapter will introduce the basic principles of Robert Brandom’s philosophical position, commonly referred to as Inferentialism, and outline the ways in which these ideas have relevance within the context of education, both within the England and beyond. As Brandom’s ideas outline a distinctive ontological position, its application is universal and, if we accept its principles, it will hold true within any context.

The starting point is the issue of agency and the often-weak accounts of agency found within contemporary educational
The problem with agency within educational research results from its failure to unify the subjective and objective, the individual and the social, leading to outcomes which tend towards description rather than explanation, or, where there is an explanation, the negation of agency. It seems that social research, in many areas, has struggled to move beyond the confines set by structuralist approaches within the Philosophy of Social Science, upon which the discipline of sociology is largely founded, and which prefaces the impacts of social structures on individuals and therefore ‘offer only one side of an epistemology necessary to understand the social world’ (Grenfell 2008, 43). On the other hand, studies which attempt to capture the lived experiences of individuals using, for example, narrative-based approaches to data collection, often risk becoming overly subjective and individualistic. These approaches have ‘an uncontested acceptance of the daily lifeworld’ (Bourdieu 1992, 73) as their epistemological base, failing to sufficiently capture the social nature of human reason and experience. For example, whilst the editor’s forward to *International Perspectives on Theorising Aspirations: Applying Bourdieu’s Tools* rightly underscores the fact that ‘without theory, much educational research can be overly descriptive and/or restricted by narrow definitions of professional practice’ (Stahl et al 2019: xiv), many of the studies within the collection fall prey to the same criticism; they still cannot not sufficiently characterise agency. The issue,
both here and elsewhere in Bourdieusian scholarship, is the issue of balance between choice, or agency, and external forces.

What is needed is a fresh theoretical foundation on which to build an understanding of the mind/world divide. The work of Brandom does exactly this - in fact his ideas exclude the possibility of an independent external completely, without reducing knowledge to subjectivity. What is meant by this is that Brandom is not merely shifting the perspective of the relationship between the subjective and objective, between the individual and their social environment. He is denying that relation by asserting a form of holism in which the two are mutually coextensive. They are unified: there is no divide. ‘Inferential semantics is resolutely holist’ (Brandom 2000, 15). There are no longer any social structures existing independently of human cognition, everything exists within a unified system of inferential semantics. In coming to understand inferential semantics, we can find the fresh theoretical foundation needed to improve our ability to understand and address educational issues surrounding social inequalities. Essentially, Brandom unifies the subjective and objective by claiming them to be part of a conceptual whole, driven by intentional practice. This position is not an idealist position. This would not be unifying the binaries; it would simply be a rejection of the external all together. In order to understand the complex position he adopts, and the ways in which it can contribute to educational theory and research, the first half of this
thesis will focus exclusively on Inferentialism. It will then move on to examine the ways in which it has specific relevance to Bourdieu and Bourdieusian approaches to educational research. In order to demonstrate that the work of Bourdieu can be strengthened by an ontological shift in favour of an inferentialist model, it is necessary to come to a clear understanding of what this model looks like, drawing out the relevant details. Furthermore, without such an understanding, Inferentialism can be easily misinterpreted as another form of idealism. Indeed, this argument has been levelled and will need to be dealt with before moving on to any discussion of Bourdieu.

The Space of Reasons

In order to understand Brandom’s rejection of the traditional binaries of mind/world, of subjective/objective, the central concept of the space of reasons needs to be understood. Simply, the notion of the space of reasons views humans as essentially rational in as far as they act for reasons. Actions and statements can be justified with reference to reasons that can be understood, if not endorsed, by others. Human beings are defined as sapient rather than sentient because of their responsiveness to reasons. It is a view of sapience and intentionality prefaced on ‘the idea of knowing one’s way about in the space of reasons, the idea of responsiveness to rational relationships’ (McDowell 1996,
77). *The space of reasons* was a term initially coined by Wilfred Sellars in his article ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’ (Sellars 1963). He argues that knowledge cannot be situated within a simple empiricist framework, it cannot be justified with *reference* to a world based on bald sense experience. Human knowledge is characterised by the faculty of *justification*; to be right is to act, judge and assert for right reasons. Knowledge is the ability to understand and articulate the reasons for actions and assertions. Knowledge thereby informs my actions, I choose to act for reasons, and it is this which underpins the notion of agency.

This type of knowing is a form of *practical know-how*. I demonstrate knowledge through my ability to be able to justify and explain my actions in such a way as to be intelligible to others. The ‘acquisition of mastery of concepts, knowledge-making and meaning cannot be distinguished from their mastery of participation in communities of practice’ (Taylor et al 2017, 771). Bakhurst summarises Sellars’ position by claiming that ‘this sort of explanation essentially invokes normative notions: I aim to show how her belief is one she has a right to hold in virtue of her access to the right kind of reasons for belief’ (Bakhurst 2011, 100). Thus, Brandom’s ideas are underpinned by a distinct form of rationalism which rejects empiricism as the basis of knowledge and prefaces the faculty of judgement operating within a
normative conceptual framework which is essentially public and semantic.

Brandom defines a human agent as having the capacity for rational thought as a practical knowing-how in relation to the normative application of concepts; in other words, as knowing-how to use concepts. However, his radical rejection of empiricism begs the question as to the origin of the concepts which underpin rational thinking. Brandom answers this question with recourse to pragmatism. His ideas are based on the understanding that concepts develop pragmatically through human action and are essentially linguistic. Therefore, Brandom has characterised his position as normative pragmatism.

This kind of normative pragmatism lends itself well to practical application within the context of education as its theoretical framework is based on the lived practices of agents in social contexts, specifically in their use of language. Language, knowledge (in the form of making claims) and action form the theoretical holism to which Brandom subscribes. The fact that the application of a concept, whether expressed as an assertion or demonstrated through an action, can be justified through the giving of reasons, means that conceptual content must be related to and contain other prepositions. ‘I look at two kinds of normative status: commitments and entitlements’ (Brandom 2000, 188). The idea of commitments and entitlements will feature
throughout in relation to the game of giving and asking for reasons. Whilst this is not the place to deal with them fully, it refers to the idea that when I make a claim, I commit myself to other claims (to believing that things must be a certain way in order for me to make the claim), and that in making a claim I entitle myself to hold other beliefs (to make inferences about the consequences of my beliefs). For example, if I make the assertion that a candle is burning, then I commit myself to the claim that oxygen is present. Concurrently, I must also believe that if I put my hand in the flame, it will burn. Thus, we can see propositions, or claims, contain other claims. It is at this point that we can begin to see the significance of the game of giving and asking for reasons. It allows agents to make explicit the assumptions upon which claims are based and, as such, it supports approaches to educational issues which adopt investigative approaches to understanding educational and social issues on rationalist lines. It would allow researchers, policy makers and practitioners to consider the ways in which their own understandings can be developed to support social agendas.

Considering this, Brandom’s presentation of humans as sentient in so far as they are responsive to reasons, inhabiting the space of reasons, is central to the discussion of agency within educational theory and research under consideration in this thesis. Brandom ‘offers an account of a kind of consciousness, awareness in the sense of sapience, which underwrites a
corresponding account of a kind of self-consciousness’ (Brandom 2000, 35). This is the salient point: Brandom conceives of sapience as being defined as a person's ability to play the game of giving and asking for reasons, as being responsive to reasons. This game is a language game, and so to look at meaning is ‘to start with a notion of linguistic propriety that could be understood in terms of allowable moves in a game’ (Brandom 2000, 186). He views the agent as essentially rational and therefore capable of agency through their ability to exercise rational judgement. If we accept this, then we can view agents as capable of change through their own volition. This capacity for change by the agent needs to be acknowledged by those working within education, particularly those striving for social development. The ways in which we teach and interact with children and young adults needs to be guided by an understanding that the rational exposition of beliefs is the most beneficial approach to understanding all agents involved. Investigating our beliefs is the definition of agency: the exercising of our free will to form judgements which are defeasible in our own eyes. Furthermore, this agency can be enacted in both the reflexive professional practice of education professionals and as an ontological approach which can be used as a justification for the epistemological integrity of social research. Both of these facets will be considered moving forward.
The Pittsburgh School: Ontological Assumptions

Before exploring the potentialities of the work of Brandom within the context of education, it is important to place him within the wider philosophical context in which he is situated. In this way, a clearer understanding of Brandom’s account of normative force and the development of concepts in his inferential semantics will emerge. In tracing his context and influences, the assumptions which underpin his thinking will be made more explicit. This is imperative as, due to his radical rejection of empiricism which ‘had thought of experience as the occurrence of conscious episodes that provide raw materials for learning’ (Brandom 2011, 6), his ideas are complex and challenge modes of thought which seem natural as they are so deeply culturally and academically entrenched; therefore, his ideas, if not fully elaborated, can and have been misinterpreted. It is important that his claims of agency and of semantic holism are rigorously supported. If they falter, then so does the power of the argument that the philosophy of Robert Brandom can address the issue of determinism inherent in the work of Bourdieu, and potentially other examples of education research and theory. Therefore, this section considers Brandom’s place within the Pittsburgh School of philosophers and some very general similarities and differences between these philosophers. This discussion will clearly justify the reasons for the adoption of Brandom’s model over alternative models within this school, adding clarity to our explanation of Brandom’s
applicability within the field of education. Finally, through the exploration of the McDowellian concept of second nature and bildung (McDowell 1996) we can simply see the importance of pragmatism before we consider the concept within the context of Brandom’s semantics.

Robert Brandom is a prolific American philosopher, trained in the analytic tradition. He comprises one of a trio of philosophers, including Wilfred Sellars and John McDowell, who have been referred to by some as ‘The Pittsburgh School’, a label argued for by Chauncey Maher in his book of the same name (Maher 2014) by virtue of their ontological similarities. These similarities include features such as the rejection of what is commonly referred to as the myth of the given (which is the topic of Chapter Two). The myth of the given (very simply) is the rejection of the commonly held assumption that human thinking can be reduced to ‘merely being affected by things’ (Maher 2014, 1). Instead, these philosophers focus on the human capacity to respond to reasons. In being responsive to reasons, human beings are, on their account, unique from other animals. Indeed, it is this separation from animals which is Brandom’s starting point; it is so significant to him that his introduction to Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism (Brandom 2000) begins with this point. He is ‘more interested in what separates concept-users from non-concept users than what unites them’ (Brandom 2000, 3). When humans act, we act with purpose, we
act with intent. This intent is different from the intent shown by other animals. It is an intent of which humans are aware. Brandom focuses on ‘the conceptual in order to elaborate a relatively clear notion of the kind of awareness of something that consists in applying a concept to it’ (Brandom 2000, 2). Our actions are comprehensible to ourselves and either manifestly or potentially comprehensible to others. We act for reasons that we can and, in all but the rarest of circumstances, must share and justify to others – we inhabit the space of reasons in which actions can be understood and, if they cannot, are deemed alien or pathological. The very notion of an irrational act itself reinforces the legitimacy of the idea of a space of reasons. Humans by their nature demand reasons. As such, acts such as drinking a glass of water are comprehensible to others: we all, unless very young or suffering from cognitive impairment, understand that I drink to stay alive and can articulate that. Indeed, we frequently demand reasons from others for behaviours which we interpret as irrational. The human desire to know the why of behaviour binds us together as a community. Those who cannot satisfactorily explain themselves, or, more shockingly to our sense of identity, those who cannot give account of themselves at all, are accounted as dangerous, mad, simple, disabled, evil or beastly. Beyond reason is an area of liminality and unpredictability, a frightening realm beyond human control. However, quite rightly, the Pittsburgh School does not
insist that we all inhabit a unified *space of reason*, or that this space is clearly defined, but they do assume that this is the fundamental context in which humans relate to each other and to themselves.

There is a potential problem here for the Pittsburgh School, although it is mentioned in passing as it does not significantly relate to or impact on the subject under examination here. Arguably, there is here suggested an ethical quandary pertaining to the question of what it is to be human. To be human, to be sapient rather than sentient, implies a certain level of conceptual understanding and ability to conform to, or acknowledge, norms. Thus, on this conception, higher animals are denied that status, but so too, arguably, are some humans, e.g., someone with an extreme form of cognitive impairment. The most fitting argument in response to this is that, as the *space of reason* is an integrated, holistic system of meaning, we can consider any interaction with the system as personhood: it is not an in or out dichotomy. These arguments, those relating to both animal ethics and the status of personhood, are complex and therefore will not be pursued here. The issue has been raised to introduce a cautionary note into any endorsement of the type of exclusive rationalism suggested here. Philosophy should branch out into the field of anthropology and evolutionary science in order to address these issues fully. Philosophy, as any discipline, is only part of the picture of human experience, and, therefore, has
the potential to lose touch with situated experience if prefaced over other disciplines. Philosophy cannot gain an understanding of the nature of meaning and personhood through a single lens, and dogmatic rationalism can lead to some unsettling consequences morally and in terms of its limitations in explaining the development of conceptual thinking itself – which surely cannot be a self-referential, self-generating system but must be situated within a conception of ourselves as animals with an evolutionary history.

According to the Pittsburgh School, the notion of *the space of reasons* necessitates an essentially normative and holistic characterisation of concepts, one based on humans as language users, as possessors of a *second nature*. The notion of a *second nature* originates in the work of John McDowell. In his most influential work, *Mind and World* (1996), he characterises *second nature* with reference to Aristotle. Aristotle’s characterisation of ethics and ethical behaviour is as a set of dispositions formed by habit and upbringing. We need not recourse to external justifications, indeed we cannot, as ‘disenchanted nature’ will not provide any guidance to these questions. He believes that ‘we can return to sanity if we can recapture the Aristotelian idea that a normal mature human being is a rational animal, with its rationality as part of the animal, and so natural, being, not a mysterious foothold in another realm’ (McDowell 1996, 91). For McDowell, this is synonymous with *the space of reasons*, in fact,
it is more than this. *The space of reasons is natural.* We do not need to refer to anything outside of it and, as we grow ‘the resulting habits and thoughts are second nature’ (McDowell). Brandom would also accept this idea of a second nature - however, his explanation of its development is much more specific and fine-grained through his account of language and concept development.

So, to return to the initial point, why does the notion of the *space of reason* necessitate an essentially normative and holistic characterisation of concepts for possessors of a *second nature*? Because the practice of giving and asking for reasons is not always, indeed is not usually, an explicit one. Our understanding of the world around us already presupposes human intentionality. To return to my previous example, when I drink to survive, it is highly unlikely that a companion of mine will require me to explain this every time I pick up my glass. She knows what a glass is, not just as an object, but as an object with a function within a web of intentionality. It is *second nature* to her to understand the rational basis for my actions. However, if I picked up my glass of water and poured it into my shoe, it would be surprising if she didn’t ask for an explanation because I would have transgressed the boundaries of her understanding of a glass filled with water. I would be corrupting the concept – a concept we can share, reflect on and hold each other accountable for via language, in this case via the word *glass*. It is entirely, or at least
theoretically possible, that I could provide her with an acceptable explanation, i.e., there was a spider in my shoe. Indeed, if she were a child, the possibility of her accepting an alternative explanation is even more likely, as her concept of the pragmatic purposes of objects labelled as glasses may still be developing. My explanation, my giving of acceptable reasons, has therefore changed her conceptual understanding and her understanding of the relationship of language to states of affairs. Thus, intentionality itself requires a rule-governed acknowledgement of objects as things within perception.

Furthermore, implicit in the concept of a second nature, more fully explained by McDowell than by Brandom, is the notion of ‘bildung’. Bildung is a German term which is retained by these philosophers as it is difficult to translate into English. It can be thought of broadly as upbringing, formation of self and education - the space of reason is only accessible to us ‘because our eyes can be opened to it throughbildung’ (McDowell 1996: 87). This introduces a necessarily pragmatic dimension to the development of the space of reasons and therefore, by extension, concept development. It also underscores the essentially public nature of reason, breaking down the separation of different subjectivities and emphasising the shared nature of experience. In adopting this pragmatic normative approach, the Pittsburgh School philosophers (to a greater or lesser degree) wish to address the contradictions inherent in dualistic philosophies, which have
dichotomised mind and world, and which have, consciously or unconsciously, haunted Western philosophical thought under the enduring influence of Descartes and Hume. The implication here is that many constructivists who believe that they have overcome this dichotomy by claiming that all meaning is a personal/social construction are still dualistic. Derry discusses the dualistic assumptions inherent in various constructivist approaches at length, claiming that any ‘attempt to be agnostic about any idea of world outside human construction does not remove specific assumptions that remain implicit in and key to any argument that is developed’ (Derry 2013a, 46). To transcend these issues, we need to recognise, as McDowell does, that mind and world cannot be separated. We need to begin to consider concepts in the pragmatic context of the role that they play in reasoning about the world, rather than the way in which they are constructed in a relation between the social-individual. Whilst a more detailed critique of these constructivist views will follow in subsequent sections, it will be argued that, by adopting an inferential understanding of the conceptual, educational researchers and theorists will gain a clearer understanding of the ways in which learners act through an understanding of their reasons for acting. Concepts are not being co-constructed via the interaction between individuals and social structures. Individuals are using concepts to reason and as the basis of action, making inferences about possibilities and consequences. We need to completely
revise our understanding of the conceptual if we are going to bridge the gap between the individual and the social. Concepts provide agents with reasons for action. Classic constructivist approaches which unconsciously retain mind-world dichotomy limit our understanding of the reasons which guide active agents in their intentional engagement with the world. ‘We are in error if we exclude mind from nature’ (Derry 2017, 407)

The concept of the space of reasons has much to offer within the context of education. When approaching educational issues, we must approach individual agents as embodiments of rational conceptual worlds which are inherently social and potentially accessible to other social agents. Individuals apply concepts which they believe are understandable, knowable and explainable. This is even the case within the context of the majority of deviant behaviours. For example, I may not endorse theft, vandalism or murder, but I can understand the reasons given for the behaviour in almost all cases. This view, a view which accepts the rationality of agents, can be used to challenge ideologies within research contexts, policy development and on the level of school leadership. The pedagogical structure and expected behavioural norms within schools, including the multi-academy trusts which aim to raise standards and help address educational inequality, arguably adopt a deficit model of working-class experiences which should be challenged. Many schools seem to adopt strategies designed to ‘control and pacify rather
than educate and stimulate’ (Reay 2020: 60). Schools in which ‘working class bodies are marked as degenerate or deficient’ (Reay 2020: 61) should consider that the behaviour of students is rational, and that behaviour changes only in response to reasons. These changes are not limited to the behaviours of students. They should equally be used to critique reasons for action within both research and teaching contexts. The rejection of a dualistic ontological perspective which has, as stated above, problematically left residual marks on so many areas of social research, and the adoption of a rational-pragmatic view enables us to adopt a more nuanced view of human agency. Furthermore, it allows us to adopt a more compassionate view. Children in the care of teachers are responsive to reasons. Positive change comes with developing understanding rather than through the adoption of behaviourist methods. Similarly, teachers, senior leaders and policy makers themselves are also acting in a way which they believe is defensible. This view recognises that the understandings of agents also bring with them the cultural and individual biases from which their conceptual understandings have developed. Overall, this demonstrates that meaning and understanding are complex and therefore worthy of challenge and investigation. The understanding of the development of these systems and the justification of challenging these assumptions will be discussed in greater detail moving forward.
Brandom has now been placed within the Pittsburgh School, facilitating both the tracing of the central assumptions which bind this group of philosophers together, as well as the justification of the selection of Brandom as being the most fit for purpose within the context of education. The next section will outline in greater depth some of these ontological similarities, but also some of the tensions which exist between Brandom and the other philosophers within this group. The first reason for this is, again, to develop an increasingly nuanced understanding of key concepts. This is important as, while the general overview provided above sketches out the basic central tenants of the Pittsburgh School’s position, we will need to tease out the subtleties of these concepts over the course of the next two chapters in order to have a fuller understanding of the details given in subsequent chapters. Secondly, this comparison will introduce some potential criticisms which can be levelled at Brandom in order to underscore the ways in which Brandom addresses these issues. Finally, this comparison between Brandom and the rest of the trio will facilitate further the links between the ideas presented in this thesis and their relevance to educational research.

Therefore, to begin with, as noted, there are clear and distinct differences between the trio of philosophers. Indeed, even the label of the Pittsburgh School itself has been challenged, notably by Wanderer et al, who, in their review of Chauncey
Maher’s book *The Pittsburgh School of Philosophy* (2014), state that ‘this stress on common content is insufficient…Even adding the requirement of self-identification will not help; McDowell, for example, infamously resists ‘being cast as the hind legs of a pantomime horse called "Pittsburgh neo-Hegelianism"' (Levine and Wanderer 2013, online). One of the reasons for this is that, while the normative space of reasons is the epistemological primary for all of these philosophers, the level to which each challenged the idea of an empirical base is a point of contention. Brandom and McDowell differ significantly on this question. Brandom argues for a radical rejection of empiricism, believing that we can largely dispense with any reference to the empirical and retain a fully coherent semantic unity in our *space of reasons*. Incorporating his own unique reading of Sellars into his work, he endorses the idea that ‘much of traditional empiricist ways of thinking must be rejected’ (Brandom 2015: 99). Alternatively, McDowell offers a more naturalist account whereby our *second nature* develops via *bildung* and is integrated in the natural world so the two become, in a sense, interchangeable (McDowell, 1996). It is this aspect of Brandom’s philosophy which has received so much criticism as it begs the question of the ultimate origins of conceptual knowledge which needs to be explained if concepts are not to seem self-generative or innate (thereby weakening significantly the type of pragmatism which Brandom wishes to advocate). Sellars’ position on
empiricism has been hotly debated by Brandom and McDowell, as their interpretation of his ideas significantly shaped their own work. This critical shaping of Brandom is the focus of the next chapter.

It is these crucial differences, the debate over the interpretation of Sellars and the status of empiricism, that led Wanderer and Levine to be sceptical of the term *The Pittsburgh School*. However, while there are clearly substantial and significant differences between the works of these philosophers – often culminating in open debate - the term does serve to acknowledge the distinctive contribution to the discipline that these individuals have made, as well as acknowledging the influence which they continue to exert on an increasing variety of academic fields, including not only education but also law, psychology and history (Derry 2011, 2013, 2016; Guile 2006; Klatt 2004; Canale and Tuzet 2007; Lieberman 2007; Harrelson 2014; Winch 2012). The ontological position that they represent clearly has a wide appeal.

This section has explored some of the assumptions shared by the trio of philosophers Wilfred Sellars, John McDowell and Robert Brandom, introducing the linked concepts of *the space of reasons* and *the myth of the given*, which is a central concept in Brandom’s justification of his radical rejection of empiricism and which will be explained in detail below. Further, the importance
of both rationalism and pragmatism to Brandom and his approach to normativity have been introduced, as has his systematic approach to language. The normative development of concepts which are pragmatically developed and systematically structured, outlined in detail over the course of this thesis, are what make Brandom so applicable within a research context, over and above the other members of the Pittsburgh School.

**Concluding Comments**

This chapter has introduced the idea that the work of Robert Brandom can offer educational research a refreshingly subtle and intricate ontological perspective from which to view persistently relevant educational issues such as pedagogy, reflexive practice, social issue and relations. There are two main reasons for this claim. Firstly, and most importantly, Brandom allows researchers to work within a framework which clearly promotes agency in a way which previous research has failed to do. This is achieved through a radical rejection of empiricism which allows him to eliminate the separation of the subjective and objective, without reducing knowledge to an extreme form of either. As a result of the importance of empiricism to the aim of defending agency, the concept of empiricism and Brandom’s rejection of it will be developed in detail in the Chapter Two. Secondly, Brandom has developed a systematic approach to understanding meaning via the structure of concepts which are essentially linguistic and
inferential, they entail both commitments and entitlements. As a result, his ideas have both focus and precision, meaning that they can be clearly applied within the context of educational research.

Subsequent chapters will defend this position by tracing the stages of Brandom’s arguments. They will also expand on the essentially social nature of meaning, considering the centrality of pragmatism and history in the development of concepts. This will then facilitate the comparison of Brandom and Bourdieu, providing a detailed critique of the issue of agency within Bourdiesian scholarship in order to provide more details in relation to some of the issues which surround not only Bourdiesian scholarship, but educational research more broadly. It will also demonstrate the ways in which an Inferentialist ontological perspective can enrich Bourdiesian research and thus educational research more widely.
Chapter Two

Brandom’s Reading of Sellars: A Refutation of Empiricism

The following chapter will engage in greater detail with Brandom’s reading of Sellars and his concept of the myth of the given introduced in the previous chapter. This reading of Sellars – always to be construed as Brandom’s reading, rather than a direct or authentic reading - will progress the argument presented in this thesis in several ways. Firstly, it will explicate the claim that knowledge and awareness are necessarily conceptual rather than empirical. His ‘aim is to focus on the conceptual in order to elaborate a relatively clear notion of the kind of awareness of something that consists in applying a concept to it - paradigmatically by saying or thinking something about it’ (Brandom 2000, 2). This will demonstrate the need to revise current ontological assumptions and, therefore, methodological approaches to issues within the field of education. As stated previously, and explained fully in Chapters Six and Seven, current research fails to satisfactorily explain the relationship between agents and their environments. Consequently, the agency of individuals is lost, undermining the possibility of responsibility, change, evaluation and progress. What is needed is a theory which can overcome the seeming insoluble dualism between mind and world and thus the issue of determinism.
After demonstrating the necessarily conceptual nature of reality, the importance of *claim-making* within Brandom will be explored. The importance of the idea of *claims* within Inferentialism cannot be underestimated, and was introduced in Chapter One with reference to the idea of commitments and entitlements. To recap, the idea is that, every time I make a claim, such as *that candle is burning*, I commit myself to other claims such as *oxygen is present*. Further, the reasons that I give for my commitments entitle me to make claims, such as, *if I put my hand in the flame it will burn*.

‘Saying or thinking *that* things are thus-and-so is undertaking a distinctive *inferentially articulated* commitment: putting it forward as a fit premise for further inferences, that is, *authorizing* its use as such a premise and undertaking *responsibility* to entitle oneself to that commitment’ (Brandom 2000, 11).

Claims are involved in reasoning in a distinctly inferential way. The idea that all concepts make claims is at the heart of inferential semantics and the specific logic which structures concepts. Claims are therefore defined with reference to the role they play in reasoning. Each concept entails other concepts. Concepts do not simply represent the world; they embody our understanding of the purpose of things and our reasons for action. However, to understand claim-making and the ways in which claim-making impacts on reasoning and, therefore, action and behaviour within an educational context, the
legitimacy and implications of the myth of the given need to be demonstrated.

Understanding the claim-making nature of concepts, (the view that all assertions are inferentially linked to other assertions) also, and primarily, demonstrates the ways in which Inferentialism goes to the heart of agency. Every expression, every utterance, is the result of prior understandings and has associated implications which guide actions - actions that agents can account, justify and be held responsible for. Indeed, as the act of applying a concept demonstrates an agent’s understanding of the norm (or rule) of application, it necessarily means that agents can account for themselves and their actions, meaning, therefore, that they must take responsibility for their beliefs. Drawing on the Kantian paradigm (a key influence whose significance will be more fully explained in subsequent chapters), concepts represent the unique human capacity for ‘taking person-defining responsibility for our endorsement of even inherited attitudes, claims and goals’ (Brandom 2002), 22). Concepts do not only represent an external world; they provide reasons for our beliefs. As the action of applying concepts is, therefore, essentially a claim making activity which demonstrate an agent’s reasons for action, the implications of these concepts and their inferential webs should be a central focus of educational enquiry and study. As stated in the previous quotation, we have a
'responsibility for our *endorsement of even inherited* attitudes, claims and goals’ (ibid, my emphasis).

As educators then, we have a unique human *responsibility* to account for the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and goals of educational theory, research and practice. ‘Doing that would be seeing norms for belief, no less than for action, as our doing and our responsibility’ (Brandom 2011, 46). In *making explicit* the assumptions within utterances, researchers and educators can unpack and reveal the content of agents’ understandings and evaluate them. They can also evaluate their own goals and assumptions about the purposes of education. The passive acceptance of educational norms of practice is a denial of our own agency and this, as we shall see, will mean that strategies and research into social inequalities will be lessened in impact. Unless ideas are enacted, unless they are thought through and reasoned with at every level within the field of education, then their efficacy will be limited.

‘Within an era of neoliberal governance, people’s aspirations are often linked primarily to the acquiring of material goods and financial or career advancement. The rhetoric of neoliberalism can be ambiguous, mask assumptions and fail to reveal the complexities of the competing and overlapping life worlds experienced by students’ (Stahl et al 2019, 1).

Claims and our ability to justify, evaluate, accept or reject them are the heart of human agency. This faculty of judgement,
more fully discussed in subsequent chapters, is central to being sapient, to being human. The greater our capacity to make adequate judgements (here defined as the ability to make judgements based on an understanding of our reasons for our beliefs and actions) the greater our freedom and sense of agency. So, the notion and status of claims will illuminate the structure of concepts.

These ideas will support the subsequent explanation of Brandom’s use of the concept of the myth of the given, appropriated from the work of Wilfrid Sellars. The idea is to develop a full understanding of Brandom’s position. It is vital that Brandom is not misconstrued as a constructivist. As the argument so far has focused on Inferentialism as a form of normative pragmatism, and the development of conceptual norms within the context of social practice, Brandom’s unique position on the objective nature of social norms is not yet clear. Brandom wants ‘to explain how we can begin to understand the objectivity of thought’ (Brandom 2000, 204). To do this, we have to understand his radical rejection of empiricism. Without a radical rejection of empiricism, there is still an assumption that there is something which is epistemologically prior to conceptual thought, that there is a preconceptual external, an objective base reality upon which the conceptual is built. This is not Brandom’s position and the first step to understanding his
actual position is to understand the arguments he uses to reject empiricism.

*The Scientific and Manifest Image*

Wilfred Sellars’ impact on Brandom cannot be underestimated. His work precedes Brandom’s and so, unlike McDowell, they were not contemporaries. He, like Brandom, was concerned with the unification of theoretical dichotomies within a single ontological framework (Sellars 2007). The problematic nature of theoretical dichotomies is not a new conundrum; it is a subject much discussed and has often led to either limited or absurd epistemological positions which result in necessitating the endorsement of epistemological claims that are not and cannot be reflected in our practical, everyday beliefs actions, such as the rejection of the reality of either the individual subjective or objective domains. For example, if ‘the mental is defined by its *perfect* epistemic accessibility; it is the realm where error and ignorance are impossible - what is happening in one’s own mind is exactly whatever one thinks is going on’ (Brandom 2011, 118). This case, whilst polemically radical, demonstrates the problem of placing epistemic authority on the subjective. Truth is not willed into place and people, clearly, can be in error. However, in prefacing the external in epistemic accessibility, agency is lost as external structures become ‘rule-
like in the way they directed human behaviour’ (Grenfell 2011, 26). Thus, in essence, the criticism centres on the problem of either over-emphasising the centrality of social structures and their respective impacts on agents; or, conversely, of over-emphasising the subjective, phenomenological aspects of experience without explaining how this experience is shaped. These kinds of approaches can over-simplify the dynamic and progressive unity of mind and world, providing an unbalanced view of social phenomena. Indeed, it is not that they oversimplify the relation between the two – they fail to recognise that there is no relation as such. Our world is a conceptual whole, meaning that there is no separation and therefore no relation between mind and world in this sense. ‘Inferentialism of any sort is committed to a certain kind of semantic holism, as opposed to atomism that often goes hand in hand with commitment to a representationalist order’ (Brandom 2000, 29). Whilst the following arguments are complex (Brandom is notoriously challenging and difficult to access), this discussion should not be viewed as an esoteric philosophical discussion relevant only within the seminar rooms and libraries of universities. These problems extend to our understanding of educational settings and the tools that we use to both understand and improve them.

Wilfred Sellars’ views also reflect the idea that philosophy should not be divorced from the practicalities of other forms of knowledge. Indeed, he believes that philosophy should provide
the ontological foundations for all forms of knowledge. In his essay *Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man* (Sellars 2007) he provides a justification of this project via a discussion of the nature of philosophy itself. Philosophy is all subjects and none – all disciplines, in his view, need philosophy to situate them and, he argues, they can all be situated within his conceptual ontology. ‘The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the word hang together’ (Sellars 2007, 1). His reasoning here is a response to the observation that the world of ever-expanding knowledge has, in the wake of the scientific revolution, become increasingly atomised. Theoretical physicists may dream of proving the *grand design* whereby everything is explained by a unified theory where ‘abstract theories of logic lead to a unique theory that predicts and describes a vast universe’ (Hawking and Mlodinow, 2010, 228). However, in reality, what we have in knowledge is fragmentation, ‘the task of “seeing things together” has itself (paradoxically) broken down into specialities’ (Sellars 2007a, 371). Therefore, the job of philosophy, properly, is not that of analysis, if we are opposing analysis to synthesis. The job of philosophy is to situate specialisms ‘as a part of the landscape as a whole’ (ibid). He wanted to find a way to bring everything together. In particular, he wanted to find a way to validate all forms of knowledge, making them work together, whether physics or sociology.
He began with the observation that the multitude of different disciplines, of the different ways of *understanding* the world, could be divided into two sub-categories. He argued that all forms of knowledge could be subsumed into two ways of looking at the world, of making epistemic *claims* about it. These two *images*, as he called them were the manifest and the scientific images. He believed that unity could be achieved by adopting a ‘stereoscopic vision where two differing perspectives on a landscape are fused into one’ (ibid). He argued that these two perspectives, under which all other forms of knowledge enquiry can be categorised, could be unified by philosophical enquiry. These images, the manifest and scientific should not be viewed as exactly synonymous with the dichotomies of subjective and objective; however, there are clear similarities between the two. The manifest image echoes aspects associated with subjectivity. It refers to the view of the agent and their immediate experience of being-in-the-world (a deliberate reference to existential philosophy). Also, as we shall see, his portrayal of the manifest image of the world is conceptual from the outset and it is this image which precedes the scientific image, which is the basis for Sellars’ claim that everything is essentially conceptual rather than empirical. Sellars views inductive specialisms, such as sociology and anthropology, as an expression of the manifest image of knowledge. He characterises disciplines which use observational methodologies to describe correlations before
hypothesising causal relations between these correlations in an imitation of the natural sciences as expressions of the manifest. They are expressions of the manifest as they accept the world at face value, although they may be both critical and disciplined. They emphasise the ‘analysis of “common sense” and “ordinary usage”’ (Sellars 2007,8). In particular, Sellars believed that the manifest image had developed ‘refinement and sophistication...under two headings; (a) empirical; (b); categorical’ (Sellars 2007a, 375). For Sellars, the central difference between intellectual movements which represent the scientific and manifest views of the world was that the manifest image does not ‘involve[s] the postulation of imperceptible entities, and principles pertaining to them, to explain the behaviour of perceptible things’ (ibid).

As referred to above, the subtle differences between Sellars’ account of the manifest image and the more common formulation of experience as subjective is key to his characterisation of human reasoning and the claim that all knowledge of the world is conceptual and therefore unified. His aim was to challenge the scientific model which is generally accepted as the model which provides a true or progressive perspective of the world, whilst other forms of knowledge are seen as imprecise and irrelevant to the apparent truths which result from the scientific image. The manifest image is pushed out, giving an unbalanced view of the world. Furthermore, in
Sellars’ view, the manifest image precedes the scientific, and can therefore be seen as the more significant of the two and the scientific image has grown from the manifest. Therefore, by understanding this image and the relationship between the two, we will be able to unify the two images by demonstrating that they are both expressions of the same conceptual web.

As the name would suggest, the manifest image engages with the world as it is; it deals with that which is manifest, immediately apparent. Again, it is to be understood as conceptually manifest - not as the type of subjectivity based on raw sensory data. Sellars wants to draw his reader’s attention to the historical nature of the manifest image and so of our conceptual grasp of our immediate surroundings. The idea of the conceptual, of the manifest image of the world, as historical is key here and is one which is central to Brandom. It owes much to the influence that Hegel has had on the Pittsburgh School which will be discussed at length in subsequent chapters. However, very simply, the idea is as follows. As stated, the manifest image of the world, our immediate experience of the world, is conceptual. However, concepts, as previously discussed, are normative, and therefore necessarily social. Their application is rule-governed and rules are only sensical in a social context. As such, ‘experience - at once the application and institution of conceptual norms - is not merely a temporal process, but a historical one’ (Brandom 2002, 229). Our conceptual
understanding of the world is directly linked to past normative understandings of the world.

Going forward this will have both theoretical and practical implications which will form the foundation of the argument going forward. The historically binding nature of norms will be key to Brandom’s argument about the objective nature of norms, and thereby on the validity of his claim to have overcome the individual/social, or subjective/objective, divide. The relevance within the context of education is two-fold. Firstly, it posits the idea that history, and the biases and prejudices we inherit from it, are involved in the process of reasoning and so inform the reasons for the actions of agents. From this view, historical ideas form the basis for actions, and it is our responsibility to evaluate these inherited ideas. Secondly, it shows that norms and constraints, as they are objective, cannot be changed from the outside, they can only be changed through expressions of agency. These ideas need further elaboration and context. As the theoretical arguments develop, so too will the implications for research and practice. However, the central point here is that applications of concepts ‘that have actually been made already have a certain sort of authority over candidate future applications of that concept’ (ibid) and that it is the responsibility of agents, in this case within the context of educational theory, research and practice, to engage in the game of giving and asking for reasons as an expression of agency.
Sellars intended this conception of the manifest image to underscore the ways in which the manifest image of man-in-the-world involves particular reasoning structures. He dedicates some time explaining the ‘original’ manifest image of man-in-the-world and the idea that when we first became aware of ourselves in the world we saw objects as persons, meaning that the world was, from the moment of self-awareness, conceptual. In this sense, it can be seen as an extension of ourselves. To put it another way, we believed that objects acted, that causes were motivated and events had reasons. So, for example, the wind may blow or not, as it chooses; and if it does, then there are reasons for this. The world, from this view, is purposeful. This projection of motives and choice on the external world suggests causation, it suggests a because. However, as humankind has developed, we have come to depersonalise the external world, we no longer conceived of [the wind] as acting deliberately, with an end in view; but rather from habit or impulse’ (Sellars 2007a, 375). This view of the world, with its inherent belief in cause, effect and habitual behaviours, has led common-sense reasoning to be inductive in form.

If we return now to one of the initial aims stated in the introduction of this thesis, the rationale for the need for a shift in our thinking about the nature of educational philosophy and research is now becoming clearer. In particular, in coming to understand an agent’s manifest image means that we need to
consider not the experiences of an agent construed as feelings, aspirations etc., but the nature of their understandings and how these relate to the understandings of other agents and the communities within which they are embedded. Concepts are not representations of the world, they represent ourselves.

After having considered the relevance of the manifest image of knowledge and underscoring the key theoretical points which will enrich later discussions of Brandom’s Inferentialism, the scientific image will be briefly considered. Sellars’ concern was that increasingly the scientific image has been considered superior to, or an expansion of, the manifest. Whilst the manifest image is usually viewed as being prior to, or even foundational to, the scientific image, it is often perceived as limited. It is believed that ‘although the [scientific] image is methodologically dependent on the world of sophisticated common sense […] it purports to be the whole truth about that which belongs to the [manifest] image’ (Sellars 2007b, 388). In other words, there is a belief that science can explain and encompass all aspects of human life. However, for Sellars, this move creates a fatal negation. In positing the manifest image as subservient to, or a shadow of, the scientific image, the subject negates themself, for it is this very ability to encounter themself in the conceptual plain of the manifest which defines their humanity. As Sellars puts it, ‘any sense in which this image, insofar as it pertains to man, is a “false” image, this falsity threatens man himself, inasmuch as he
is, in an important sense, the being which has this image of himself (Sellars 2007c, 337). Put more simply, self-awareness is conceptual awareness. The world is an extension of ourselves first and foremost. Therefore, a denial of that is a denial of humanity. It is a reduction of self. There is a sense in which scientific accounts of the world fail to explain the experience of living as a person, even if they can describe and plot the biological events which accompany living. The scientific fails to explain the essentially conceptual and historical nature of world. Extrapolating from Sellars, the ideologies which we do not see, but live as second natures in the moment of spontaneity, are not false or wrong - they are the world as it is. They guide, consciously or unconsciously, our reasons for action.

These views have clear implications in the field of education. The manifest is real, public, shared, and knowable through investigation – although perhaps not via the traditional application of methodologies associated with qualitative research. The actions of classroom practitioners and of the children themselves are expressions of wider doxastic commitments to historical realities. Indeed, Brandom, as we will see later, goes further than this arguing that the semantic, the world of human meaning is objective – indeed, more so than the scientific because it is the overriding ontology upon which this view necessarily rests. He does not forward an idealist perspective, one in which meaning is constructed. It is objective,
and the scientific is part of this objective semantic whole. Whilst this may, on the surface, seem to have much in common with previous structuralist views, the inferential structure of Brandom’s semantic system contributes something original and essentially dynamic to previous accounts of historical meaning and social space.

So, in summary, it has been argued that the job of philosophical enquiry should be the unification of different forms of knowledge to transcend the subjective and objective binary. Sellars achieves this aim through his description of the manifest image as foundational of scientific forms of knowledge thereby prefacing the conceptual in his ontology. The prefacing of the conceptual leads us to posit an essentially social and historical nature of understanding the world. Educational research should therefore shift its focus to the exploration of agents’ applications and understandings of concepts.

**The Myth of the Given and Empiricism**

Having briefly introduced the concept of the scientific image of the world with reference to the manifest image, a more focused discussion of the scientific image will now follow. Critiquing this concept represents the next step in Brandom’s argument for a radical, rather than partial, rejection of empiricism in favour of his form of semantic holism. Sellars’ characterises the scientific
image as being typically considered epistemically privileged due to the impact that this view has had on our everyday lives in the form of science and technology. Sellars’ term scientific image connotes the idea that there is an ultimate truth which is not reliant on human perception. Within the scientific view, phenomena act in a law like way, independent of human cognition. It is assumed that observed data that cannot be sufficiently explained with reference to perceptible phenomena must be affected by imperceptible entities. Indeed, in theoretical physics especially, but also in other areas of science as well, the nature of reality is characterised by imperceptibles such as quarks, gravity, time, atoms. It seems, according to Sellars, that science is on a course of infinite regress into fragmentary descriptions, seeking laws and component parts of a system.

It is worth making absolutely clear here that neither Sellars nor Brandom are denying the clear advances made by scientific enquiry. They are not rejecting this mode of thought, a mode of thought which is integral to so much human endeavour. What they are arguing is that this form of enquiry is, in a way, not objective in the sense of being divorced from the manifest. The scientific image is a partial truth which does not acknowledge the essentially conceptual nature of knowledge. The ideas that it contains and produces are embedded in the space of reason via language, and are part of reasoning chains rather than
representative of empirical facts which are independent of human cognition.

Sellars classically challenges the prefacing of purely empirical, scientific ontological accounts by arguing that ontology has been blindsided by the myth of the given (a claim which, as stated above, is one of the key commonalities to found the work of the Pittsburgh School). When Sellars and other philosophers speak of objects as being given, they are referring to an ontological perspective which takes there to be an independent reality which is objective inasmuch as it is distinct and unchanged by the semiotics of human thought, culture and history. So, for example, if I see a plant as being green, that label refers to a specific and isolated quality of that plant. The label has a concrete content which exists in isolation to other concepts. Sellars (and subsequently Brandom and McDowell) will reject this simplistic representational view of language and the dualistic ontological perspective it represents. Whilst accepting that language is at least partially referential, and certainly allowing language users to identify and refer to specific objects, Brandom, via Sellars, is interested in giving ‘an account of the role of the explicitly representational vocabulary we use to express intentional directedness as codifying inferential commitments’ (Brandom 2000, 42). In other words, Brandom is interested in the ways in which humans, when referring to an object, do so with intent, purpose and belief; furthermore, he is interested in the
ways in which these doxastic commitments entail other commitments and beliefs. If as a mature language user, I use the referential term dog, it assumes that I believe in, and am committed to, the idea of dogs as quadrupeds – even if I cannot express it in these terms. The term dog itself contains further prepositions within it and I could not begin to use the term without some sense of these commitments. As my understanding of dog grows, my understanding will become progressively more abstract, containing a plethora of other concepts such as mammal, domestic and carnivore. Whereas, for a 2-year-old child whose language skills are still developing, it may simply be used in relation to a family pet; the commitment may end there. Brandom’s view places concepts within a holistic, inferential web, as forming our second nature and making us responsive to reasons (to use the McDowellian phrase). When someone makes an utterance, I can infer further beliefs from their utterance. Therefore, concepts, necessarily codified in language, are not seen solely as referents. Thus, green is also colour and shade; it is not red. Furthermore, as suggested above, as our knowledge of green becomes more abstract it arguably becomes more scientific, in the Vygotskian (Vygotsky 2012) sense of more abstract. It may come to include other concepts such as secondary colour, or allow us to infer the presence of chlorophyll in plants, etc.
Returning to Sellars, his answer to the problem of the perceived inferiority of the manifest image and common-sense understanding is to advocate the recognition of the essentially human nature of all endeavours. "From this point of view, the irreducibility of the personal is the irreducibility of the "ought" to the "is" (Sellars 2007: 399).

He goes on to posit a normative account of perception, which encompasses human action within the scientific image, thereby unifying the two images. To help us come to a more detailed appreciation of this solution, we will turn our attention to Sellars’ highly influential paper, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (henceforth, EPM). This paper outlines the problems with empirical approaches to epistemology and begins to outline a more inferential ontology which he sees as the bringing together of problematic dichotomies. We do not explore the paper in isolation, but will pay particular attention to Brandom’s reading of the paper (most clearly outlined in ‘The Centrality of Sellars’ Two-Ply Account of Observation to the Arguments in “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”’ (Brandom 2002, 348–67) as the aim is to provide greater insight into Brandom’s views, bringing into sharper focus Brandom’s account of a world which is semantic, rather than empirical. It will also help us to understand Brandom’s conception of language as inferential rather than referential, as essentially a claim-making enterprise, rather than a referential one. This will lay the theoretical groundwork for my claim that
educational research needs to view all classroom experience and discourse as conceptual. Thus, it needs to refocus its research on the activity of claim making, enacted through language and actions in our classrooms.

**Reliable Differential Response Dispositions: A Critique of Foundational Knowledge in Epistemology**

Sellars' answer to the problem of how to reconcile the two images of mankind is to reject the then generally accepted ontological position of empiricism – the idea that there is a level of reality which is *base or irreducible*. According to Sellars, ‘many things have been said to be “given”: sense contents, material objects, universals, propositions, real connections, first principles, even givenness itself’ (Sellars 1963, 127). Generally, it is taken to mean that what is knowable through experience (pure and pre-conceptual), presupposing an independent world as an objective base. EMP sets out to attack the notion of givenness in human cognition. For Sellars, the very act of cognition, of the grasping of a concept, can only happen in relation to other concepts. There is no *base* upon which knowledge rests. Knowledge is a system, a structure; and one which manifests itself through language. According to Brandom, ‘readers of “EPM” seldom realize just how radical is its critique of empiricism…Sellars does not make this basic idea as explicit as
one would like’ (Brandom 2002: 348). For Brandom (although hotly contested by McDowell\(^1\)) Sellars’ rejection of empiricism is absolute, and will form the basis upon which his own inferential account is based.

Sellars’ first challenge to empirical knowledge relates to the necessary conditions of it: namely to have a \textit{reliable differential response disposition} (RDRD) (Brandom, 2002: 350). RDRD involves a subject repetitively responding to the same stimulus. This ability is not, however, limited to persons. Indeed, we can imagine a scenario where a parrot responds to the colour red ‘by uttering the noise “That’s red.”’ (ibid), or where a computer software program responds to the colour red by playing a nursery rhyme. However, Sellars is at pains to point out that, whilst the human subject may also demonstrate RDRD, the cognition of persons is of a different character to this. Humans do not respond to red in isolation. He believes that the classic empirical picture which claims ‘that there are certain “inner episodes” which are non-inferential knowing that, for example, a certain red item is red and triangular… [and that these] are the necessary conditions of empirical knowledge as providing evidence for all other empirical propositions’ (Sellars 1963, 140, my brackets) is suspect.

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\(^1\) McDowell somewhat emotively claims that ‘Brandom’s reading of Sellars’ classic work is perverse’ (McDowell 2010, 130). He believes that Sellars is rejecting \textit{tradition empiricism} and that Brandom’s reading cannot be substantiated. This point is developed later in this chapter.
When humans respond to the colour red, they do not merely have a uniform response in the same way as a robot or a parrot might. They locate red within the space of reasons – meaning that they can make inferences based on this information and use this to justify or account for their actions. The application of a concept involves so much more than manifesting a mere RDRD. In acknowledging red, I acknowledge that something is red; I situate the redness in a bed of concepts – for example, a red triangle. My knowledge of red will include *not green, or light vs dark*. As my conceptual understanding develops, my concept of red will become ever more complex. I may begin by correctly understanding the concept of a red apple as a child, and end up considering the reliability of my own perceptions of red as my understanding of the nature of colour and light develop scientifically. The act of conceptual awareness ‘is a linguistic affair: grasping a concept is mastering a use of the word’ (Brandom 2002b, 250). This idea is supported by theories of child language development which have included descriptions of children engaging in the practice of categorical over and under extension. Thus, a young child may, after having correctly applied the lexical item ‘dad’ to the man in her house, mistakenly extend this term to include all men. The process of learning the ‘correct’ meaning of the term will involve the child changing her inferential understanding of the application of the term. It no longer means man, but, hopefully, the man that looks after me at
home. It encompasses expectations about behaviour and entails predictions of behaviour. Thus, the child may learn that dad puts her to bed, whereas the other men do not.

Crucially for Brandom, Sellars wants to stress the implausibility of non-inferential knowledge, and this is demonstrated in the *language game*. In stating that something is red, I am not merely reporting on a state of affairs, I am also holding myself accountable for that claim, and I understand that there are inferential implications of that claim. I am, to use Brandom’s vocabulary, *endorsing* a claim. ‘The taking up of a certain position in a game of giving and asking for reasons’ (Brandom 2002c, 351). The difference between myself and a parrot, is that I understand that red is not green, and *red* implies coloured (ibid).

Human cognition is not, therefore, adequately explained as base empiricism – it is more than that. Furthermore, our conceptual web is, in some sense, unreflective. I do not have to work out that something is red, or that a cup is a cup, or that its purpose is to hold my coffee. This extension, from the labelling of something base such as a colour to the inferential implications of this colour, brings out another aspect of Sellars’ ideas - the notion of pragmatism. My actions are preaced on a normative concept of physical space – a space where everything has meaning. This is perhaps the most powerful aspect of the
metaphor of the space of reasons. It is not merely a disembodied semantic structure. It is the fabric of being: ‘human beings acquire a second nature in part by being initiated into conceptual capacities, whose interrelations belong to the logical space of reasons’ (McDowell 1996: xx).

Additionally, this notion, for Sellars, is the answer to the ontological dichotomy represented by the opposition of the scientific and manifest image of humanity. In a sense, neither is correct and both are correct. Nothing in the experience of the subject, or of a society, can be objective in the sense of having any meaning beyond, or divorced from, intentionality. We cannot conceive of the non-conceptual – this is a paradox. Space is rational and normative. This does not mean that scientific enquiry is invalid – such a position is absurd. We live in symbiosis with the products of science, and these products are prefaced on the theoretical existence of imperceptible entities. Rather, we should remain aware that the scientific view is a model-theory (Hawking and Mlodinow 2010). What is meant by this is that science does not provide us with a realistic or uniform picture of reality. In describing science as a model-theory (or M-theory), we are claiming that it is comprised of lots of different, sometimes contradictory, theories which, ‘while they may look very different…can be regarded as aspects of the same underlying theory’ (Hawking and Mlodinow 2010, 17). Hawking and Mlodinow provide the analogy of the different types of maps
necessary to map the Earth’s surface: ‘to faithfully map the entire earth, one has to use a collection of maps’ (ibid). This could be read as an acknowledgement that scientific theory itself is comprised of and situated in inferential semantics. It is human understanding and so essentially normative; therefore, it can be argued that the normative, linguistic aspects of the greater whole are necessary and foundational to the practice of science. Science provides us with a partial and constrained form of knowledge, one which is not final in an absolute sense.

Furthermore, as claimed above, this attack on base empiricism allows for a clear account of agency as it foregrounds the faculty of judgement. Claims are something for which I am responsible. They are made in response to reasons and will change as our understanding develops. The very act of communication requires the constant justification of our claims when they contradict those of others or are not fully understood. We also chose whether or not to accept the claims of others in light of reasons – an activity which Brandom terms the *game of giving and asking for reasons*. The world is not given, we are not in any sense shaped by external forces. We act according to reason. This does not mean that we are free in the sense of living without constraint – we clearly are constrained in many ways, including by language. The ideas of both freedom and constraint presented here are key and will be further scrutinised in subsequent sections.
In conclusion, this section has introduced Brandom’s assertion that knowledge and understanding cannot be reduced to an empirical base and, therefore, the assertion that non-inferential knowledge is impossible. It also forwarded the central idea that concept development is inseparable from practice. This is so important because it is precisely the understanding of this practice that will be shown to have relevance within education. It is the making explicit of the practices our language embodies which can enable researchers to unpack and evaluate implicit commitments of both practice and policy within educational settings. Furthermore, the idea that discourse and language activity can be characterised as the game of giving and asking for reasons, of being based on the inferential elaboration of claims for which we are responsible, will prove to be intrinsic to responsibility and agency, meaning that we can be held accountable for our beliefs and resituate our concepts in light of reasons gained through human activity.

Some Criticisms of Brandom’s Reading of Sellars

There have been some highly convincing criticisms made of Brandom’s reading of Sellars which we will consider here. In responding to these criticisms, we will be able to strengthen Brandom’s position and his radical rejection of empiricism by arguing that, whilst his reading may be unorthodox, his arguments
as presented still stand, irrespective of their fidelity to Sellars. However, the more relevant and theoretically important reason is that it will contribute further to our understanding of the nature of claims and claim-making, underscoring their centrality in epistemology.

McDowell’s account of exactly how Brandom can be said to have misunderstood, or misrepresented, Sellars’ account is two-fold. Firstly, McDowell, along with DeVries and Coates (DeVries and Coates 2009), criticises Brandom’s analysis of what Sellars termed as “looks statements”. These relate to the ontological status of “looks” versus “being” in relation to observational reports of colour and are used to support his refutation of empiricism and the myth of the given. On Brandom’s reading of Sellars the fact that a subject acknowledges that something merely looks, for example, red serves to testify that empirical data, gained by the senses, is not considered a sufficient condition to endorse a claim, thus undermining the notion of the senses as the basis of knowledge. Reliable differential response dispositions are not evidence of understanding as they have no conceptual content. They are not knowledge. In other words, when we are in the presence of the colour red, we always respond in a particular way. However, Brandom sees this as no more than a disposition. If I see an object which looks red, but it is seen in, for example, red lighting, I may not wish to endorse this RDRD as a claim, or as a
report. Brandom believes that Sellars wants to challenge the idea that RDRDs can be reports at all ‘since they evince a disposition to call something Ø but do not do so’ (Brandom 2002d, 356). Therefore, if we want to ask the question which is conceptually prior, looks statements or being statements (statements embedded in a conceptual web which include, for example, the effect of lighting in how an object looks) then we must accept that being statements are prior and, furthermore, that they are a result of our RDRDs. From here, according to Brandom, our conceptual scheme is built on the foundations of collective social action and its implications as codified in language. For Brandom, this means that the application of a concept is never about the way that something looks, it is always about its relation to other concepts. These concepts are the result of social action as they have developed through the historical application of concepts within a social setting – they are expressions of shared understandings and practices and are therefore communicable and justifiable. These are codified in language and expressed as claims which, when analysed, will make explicit the assumptions and implications of our claims, and thus the justifications of knowledge and belief.

Thus, via the rejection of looks statements as the basis of knowledge, Brandom believes that he has radically dispensed with the empirical as the basis of knowledge. He claims that readings of Sellars ‘seldom realise just how radical its critique of
empiricism' (Brandom 2015: 99) and that his reading of Sellars within his inferential framework has clarified and substantiated this position. This is a complicated move which owes much to the influence of analytic linguistics on his thought as anything else. Truth should be viewed analytically, by considering the relationship between concepts. This facet of Brandom’s work is highly relevant within the context of educational research. His radical rejection of empiricism as the basis of knowledge in favour of a view of knowledge which is necessarily conceptual has implications for a researcher’s consideration of epistemological issues. Knowledge cannot be separated from human activity and intentionality. It makes claims which are related to other claims. To understand educational issues of inequality and the ways in which education can be said to either reinforce, accept or counter these inequalities, researchers need to consider the implicit claims on which our understanding of education and children are based. For example, if education is concerned with making progress, with measurable outcomes or with success as statements of fact, then the essentially conceptual nature of knowledge is not being considered. Outcomes are not neutral, nor is the idea of progress - they are inferentially linked to other concepts. Moving forward, a clear model of analysis based on Brandom’s precise account of the structural relations between concepts is possible, the specifics of which will be outlined in the final chapters. This model can provide a concrete analytical
approach to social issues, guiding the epistemological and, therefore, methodological approach to research questions.

However, the problem with this reading of Sellars is that it presents his reader with some difficult questions relating to apparent inconsistencies in the radical rejection of raw sense data as the basis of knowledge, questions to which an appeal to RDRDs does not seem a sufficient response. There seems to be no adequate explanation as to the functioning, development or origin of these RDRDs. What account can Brandom provide about the stimuli grounding these responses if he rejects sense data as a means of acquiring knowledge? If subjects do respond reliably, then we surely must be able to say something about the nature of the stimulus itself if he is not to be guilty of question begging?

The arguments surrounding this contentious area focus on some of the more technical aspects of both Sellars and Brandom (DeVries and Coates 2009; McDowell 2010) which will not be dealt with here. However, it can be reduced to the potential discrepancies between the meaning that these different philosophers (McDowell, Brandom and Sellars) apply to the epistemically contentious word *claim*. Whilst all these philosophers would want to bestow a sense of validity on states of affairs through the utilisation of the term *claim*, the endorsement of which provides a proposition with an epistemic
status for which a claimant stands accountable, the criteria relating to the accordance of that status differs considerably. This difference stems from the strength of the role of social agreement and normativity (a central tenet for all) within their respective philosophies. Brandom wants to preface the notion of endorsement within a social space in his inferential account, as this is the type of meaning which is relevant to the deontic scorekeeping model of language and social action he ascribes to. Brandom wants to distance himself from any acceptance of the claim-making nature of experience beyond inferentially articulated semantic content by demonstrating *theoretically* that raw sense data is not *necessary* to his account of objectivity. His account of objectivity, which will be outlined in subsequent chapters, represents a radical re-writing of many previous understandings of objectivity, one which is reliant on the pragmatic development of inferentially structured semantic content. He thus promotes a theory of meaning which is based on agency, on the notion of accountability and rational justification, denying any form of given-ness. This sense of agency and rationality will be key to our justification of the application of inferential analysis as a critical tool within an educational context. However, McDowell argues that Sellars himself had not given the same level of thought to the notion of a claim – he was not, here at least, concerned with socially
articulated practice. He wanted to discuss the misconception of experience within classic empiricism. He writes:

‘Sellars introduces the idea that experiences contain claims without any hint that he feels obliged to concern himself – here – with the question of what claims are... “Endorsement” just means endorsement. Once we are working with the idea that experiences contain claims, it is routinely obvious that the subject of an experience faces the question whether to endorse the claim her experience contains’ (McDowell 2009: 21).

However, perhaps Brandom’s avoidance of dealing explicitly with the word experience is not a move which solely proves a theoretical point to strengthen the cohesion of his argument. Any attempt to deal with the nature of experience is arguably an enterprise fraught with difficulties and contradictions, and Brandom’s holism is coherent without recourse to the base nature of experience. Indeed, he praises McDowell for his courage in attempting to deal with this difficult concept. However, Brandom’s inferential epistemology does not need it. The important claim is that sapience is characterised as being responsive to reasons. Therefore, this is the epistemological base with which educational philosophers and researchers should be concerned. It is a powerful one if we are interested in a world-view which is based in practice, avoiding the insoluble issues which surround dualistic accounts. Therefore, this is, perhaps, the only approach to reality that we can adopt without getting into theoretical difficulties relating to the nature of the interaction
between the internal and external; there are certainly significant
drawbacks in attempting to capture any sense of base empirical
experience or nature and the attempts to do so within a non-
Cartesian framework often feel question-begging and
uncomfortable. Certainly, in focusing purely on pragmatic action
and social interaction, Brandom provides his reader with a far
more systematic and holistic picture than the more esoteric
philosophy of McDowell, making it a more fitting model with which
to work with on the intersections of philosophy and social
science. As stated above, Brandom himself has spoken of his
own discomfort of dealing with the notion of experience:
“Experience” is not one of my words’ (Brandom 2000: 205
fn.). He is not rejecting or denying the problem, instead he side-
steps it. He does this in the knowledge that it is absolutely a valid
area of investigation for philosophers such as McDowell to
embrace. In a response to McDowell and his concerns with the
role of the empirical in Inferentialism, Brandom has said ‘I do not
find a theoretical need for a distinction between inferences that
are correct because of the content of their concepts and those
that are correct because of the way that the world is’ (Brandom
1997: 190). For Brandom, all that can be considered as having
content is semantic practice resulting from inferentially articulated
practice. This does not mean to say that he denies experience
completely – RDRDs are testament to this, but it is what Brandom
refers to as ‘platitudinous empiricism’ (Brandom 2000: 23), something without meaning or content.

The salient points to draw from this section are that it really does not matter whether or not Brandom has misread Sellars; his ideas stand irrespective of this. The reading of Sellars provided demonstrates the centrality of claims and of the conceptual nature of knowledge. Furthermore, we returned to and strengthened the idea that the analytic structuring of concepts within Brandom’s account can provide researchers with a clear and focused epistemic tool to utilise within social research, the details of which are provided in the final two chapters.

Concluding Comments

This chapter has introduced some of the ontological foundations of Brandom’s Inferentialism and situated these within the context of the so-called Pittsburgh School. The essential points to be taken from this summary are that we need to view experiential reality as intentional and therefore claim-making. It also reminds us of the limitations of a solely scientific approach to understanding the world, providing a robust justification of the reality of the manifest. Indeed, we could go further and argue that a denial of the manifest nature of claim-making reality is a denial of our own humanity and a refusal to accept ourselves within the world – or at the very least, it will lead to a tendency to promote
the scientific view above all others. In terms of the implications for us within the context of education, it demands that we acknowledge that semantic experience, beliefs and behaviour are interlinked, meaning that the relationship between claim-making and belief systems should be at the centre of our critical understandings of educational issues. Whilst this idea is not new, the argument going forward is that the semantic structure of Inferentialism does offer something new to the debate in terms of its power to expose inconsistencies within belief systems which can help us to provide a more coherent and ethical pedagogical vision within education.
Chapter Three

Normativity and Judgement in Inferentialism

This chapter will introduce the place that norms and normativity play within Brandom’s Inferentialism. Norms are at the centre of Brandom’s ontology and his work is often referred to as normative pragmatism. Brandom’s account of normativity is centred on linguistic normativity. It builds on the myth of the given explained in the previous chapter by providing a more fined-grained account of the conceptual. However, it is not Brandom’s account of normativity as a linguistic affair which is unique. The original assertion which separates Brandom from other thinkers is his objectivity about norms, i.e., his claim that norms are objective rather than constructed. This chapter will introduce Brandom’s account of norms and their place within Inferentialism. The next chapter will then focus on some criticisms of his account of norms. Specifically, it will consider the criticism that objectivity regarding norms can lead us into a fatalistic acceptance of social norms which would undermine agency, a feature which would not align with the emancipatory project outlined here. This will lead finally to the argument that Brandom’s unique understanding of normativity, which can account both for agency and for the immutability of history, can provide us with a clearer insight into the social issues which are played out within education. As such, it can thereby help to equip us with an understanding of how to
act purposefully to promote social development. The type of agency that will be expounded stems from the assertion that the game of giving and asking for reasons is a game in which agents are held mutually accountable, in which the faculty of judgement means that they are responsible for their beliefs and actions in the eyes of another agent. The Kantian influence is most strongly felt here. Brandom’s ‘aim is to reanimate some of those ideas, by breathing life into them by exhibiting a new perspective from which they show up as worthy of interest today’ (Brandom 27, 2009). From Kant, Brandom takes ‘perhaps Kant’s deepest and most original idea’ (Brandom 32, 2009), namely that ‘judging and intentional doing [...] are things knowers and agents are in a distinctive way responsible for’ (ibid). Brandom suggests ‘that this idea makes sense only if we think about the paradigm of discursive (conceptually contentful) norms as linguistic norms’ (Brandom 79, 2009). To use an example given by Brandom, if I use the word copper ‘I subject myself to normative assessment as to the correctness of my commitment [...] according to standards of correctness that are administered by metallurgical experts’ (Brandom 2009, 79). I am bound in my use of the concept. The use of words are governed by rules and these rules are based on the semantic content of a concept. Therefore,

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2 It is, of course, possible for a metallurgical expert to be wrong. However, there is a place for the role of the expert in making justifiable claims. Error is always possible, however, there is reason to trust the metallurgical expert. Brandom’s Inferentialism is underpinned by a belief in the place that ad hoc premises play in reasoning. This forms part of his rejection of analytical reasoning, a point which will be returned to later in the thesis.
because the concept of *copper* includes the claim that it is a metal, it would be wrong of me to use it to describe a plastic copper-coloured coin (even if I believed that I was using the term correctly). I would be breaking the rules, the norms which govern the use of this concept. My use of judgement in the application of this concept is in error and I am responsible for either acknowledging my application as an error or, if my understanding of the concept was based on a lack of understanding, of changing the way that I use the concept in the future.

When the notion of *responsibility* is accepted, there are implications within the context of education. Firstly, rational agents can be held accountable, they can be challenged. Agents who have the capacity to review and expand their understanding of concepts can also, therefore, evaluate and modify their behaviours. In this sense, Brandom accepts ‘the challenge to fill in the bare-bones picture of judging as normative doing, the alteration of one’s normative statuses [beliefs], the undertaking of some sort of responsibility’ (Brandom 2009, 35). It is important as if, as practitioners, researchers and policy makers, we can come to understand the process of agency, judgement and the development of conceptual understanding, more lasting changes can be affected when interventions relating to the reduction of inequality are introduced within the context of education. If educationalists have a better understanding of the concepts that they use in relation to equality of access to education, it will lead
to more effective practice and interventions. The question then becomes that of how we exercise our judgement and the basis on which these judgements are made.

For Brandom, agents are held accountable with reference to objective norms. His account of objective normativity is markedly different from accounts of normativity which see norms as socially constructed. Whilst sociality and history are central to Brandom’s explanation of the binding nature of norms on thought, it does not rest solely on this, and cannot, therefore, be seen as a form of constructivism. His claim to objectivity is based on his arguments relating to the very structure of language itself, and the idea that ‘all discursive practitioners have a formal sense of objectivity’ (Loeffler 2018, 209). It is not yet the time to unpick this claim. At this point, all that needs to be understood is that Brandom’s argument will culminate in the claim that norms are objective and that this argument rests on the idea that we cannot make incompatible claims. For example, if I claim that something which is copper cannot conduct electricity I am, of necessity, wrong. ‘I have tried here to explain how we can begin to understand the objectivity of thought - the way in which the contents of our thought go beyond the attitudes of endorsement or entitlement we have toward those contents’ (Brandom 2000, 204). In other words, our beliefs, our thoughts, are answerable to objective norms, to norms which cannot fundamentally be changed (although, as we shall see, they do develop).
Clearly then, there will be discrepancies between the objective nature of norms and an agent’s understanding of these norms. Whilst there are immutable rules, ‘this is not to say that all players actually do have the dispositions they ought’ (Brandom 168, 2015). If there were no discrepancy, then all agents would be uniform in their thinking and there would be no drive towards change. Brandom frames his discussion through the introduction of two terms: normative statuses and normative attitudes. Simply, normative statuses refer to the objective norms that should inform an agent’s reasoning and to which they are accountable, whilst normative attitudes refer to an agent’s own beliefs and understandings for which they are accountable. ‘Normative statuses, determine how the subject must, may, and must not reason’ (Loeffler 2018, 42), they are the objective norms to which we are accountable. However, ‘acknowledged commitments and entitlements are the normative attitudes in which our sensitivity to the norms binding us consists’ (Loeffler 2018, 42-43). This will form the basis of what is referred to as the deontic scorekeeping model in the game of giving and asking for reasons. ‘At each stage of the game, every participant has various commitments and entitlements to certain moves, in accordance with the rules governing the game’ (Loeffler 2018, 58). This normative game of giving and asking for reasons requires at least two participants who will track or score the claims made by an interlocutor with reference to their own attitudes
towards normative statuses. ‘Each competent participant is sensitive to the norms governing the game, and exhibits such sensitivity not only by contributing to the exchange more or less appropriately but also by keeping score implicitly in practice, that is by tracking the various participants’ deontic statuses’ (ibid). In this way, a responsible agent will be held accountable for claims and challenged on those which are contradictory; ‘at least some players usually acquire some new deontic statuses, or cease to have some old ones, in response to a legitimate move’ (Loeffler 2018, 58). As we will see later, this game is played on the intersection between past and future semantic content, and acts, in the present moment, as a litigator of sorts. It is in the playing of the game that we can pinpoint the moment in which agency is expressed, as well as acknowledging its temporal boundedness, a temporality viewed as the historical development of meaning, as our subsequent discussion of Hegel will show.

The recognition of these discrepancies should be seen as central to understanding educational issues. Discrepancies between agents and their unique normative attitudes mean that educationalists may not be unified in their aims and/or methods and interventions, undermining policy and research drives to reduce inequalities. Practitioners, researchers, policy-makers and students are separated in their normative attitudes. Whilst there is no possibility of absolute unity, nor desire for it, the relationship that everyone has to normative statuses means that
there is always the potential of bringing ideas and understandings closer together. The final chapter of this thesis will, therefore, foreground the importance of thinking through educational concepts, of evaluating them and the efficacy of the ways in which they are used by agents within and between various settings. The act of thinking through ‘tradition [...] more closely approximating the actual consequential and incompatibility relations of the concepts and making more correct applications of them’ (Brandom 2009, 101) will enable educationalists to drive and embed genuine social development. Successful interventions need to impact on the understandings which underpin the behaviours of agents, and these understandings need to come into some kind of alignment if change is to be constant across the education system.

**Theoretical and Practical Normativity**

The previous section demonstrated that this view of the agent, one which presents them as able to make epistemically valid claims about a world to which they have access as a result of being responsive to reasons, means that they can access and make coherent claims about the issues which they encounter the act of assertion, of making a statement, can be seen as a move in the game giving and asking for reasons; it considered conceptual normativity on the level of judgement and speech
acts. However, Brandom’s Inferentialism is not simply an analytical game relating to semantics and language. If it were, then it would not be able to adequately explicate behaviours within social contexts, specifically those within the context of education. The link between belief and action is central to the argument here, which sees the act of thinking through as key to social and educational development. Brandom’s Inferentialism is a theory of action; it is normative, linguistic pragmatism and, for him, this form of linguistic pragmatism is at the centre of everything. The normative game of giving and asking for reasons is inextricably linked to our behaviours (hence forth practical action). Like our beliefs, practical action is feedback-governed, subject to change. In the case of humans, ‘such behaviour - discursively intentional behaviour - is still practically intentional: it is perennially adjusted, feedback-governed behaviour’ (Loeffler 2018, 120). In demonstrating the way in which deontic scorekeeping is linked to practical action, we will be able to recognise the transformative potential of Inferentialism. It is important to remember that not only is the semantic an expression of praxis, understood as the application of concepts, it also guides practical action understood as behaviours. This section will outline the practical aspect of normativity within Inferentialism.

Brandom distinguishes between two types of normativity, theoretical and practical, going on to explain the relationship
between the two. In doing this Brandom is able to illuminate the relationship between doxastic commitments (beliefs) and practical action. As stated above, if we accept the link between practical action and belief, and can clearly explain the basis of belief, then we can change and challenge it. If we can do this, then we can impact directly on classroom behaviours, expectations and policies.

So, Brandom’s explanation of practical normativity derives from his account of theoretical normative outlined above. Indeed, in *Articulating Reasons*, he:

‘claim[s] that one can explain the role of beliefs in theoretical reasoning (leading from claims to claims) without needing to appeal to practical reasoning, while I do not believe that one can do things in the opposite order’ (Brandom 2000, 82).

As we know, for Brandom, *the space of reasons*, theoretical normativity, is synonymous with our use of language which is used with reference to an agent’s attitude toward normative statuses, which are analytic. Statements can be wrong. However, initiation into a linguistic community is an initiation into a world of *practice and activity*. Our normative attitudes are developed pragmatically. The game of *giving and asking for reasons* is a practice. ‘Such initiation is a normal part of what it is for a human being to come to maturity…it is what figures in German philosophy as *Bildung*’ (McDowell 1996, 84). It is at this juncture that Brandom considers specifically normative
vocabulary in the more traditional sense, i.e., in terms of *shall, ought* and *should*, which relate to the ways in which agents *shall, ought* or *should* act in light of their doxastic commitments. ‘With this background, I can state my fundamental thesis: **normative vocabulary** (including expressions of preference) makes explicit the endorsement (attributed or acknowledged) of **material properties of practical reasoning**’ Brandom 2000, 89).

His explanation utilises two concepts appropriated from Sellars, namely discursive entry and exit transitions. These two concepts both refer to discursive activity; this means that they are referring to the interactive *game of giving and asking for reasons*, to judging and justifying. Thus, these terms refer to the point when we move from the act of discursive practice to practical action and vice versa. Brandom believes that we can explain the relationship between theoretical and practical normativity ‘by exploiting the structural analogies between discursive exit transitions in action and discursive entry transitions in perception to show how the rational will be understood as no more philosophically mysterious than our capacity to notice red things’ (Brandom 2000, 79). In other words, he will show that our will is rational and follows inferentially from our beliefs. The link between belief and practical action is the ‘conceptually contentful perception’ (Brandom 2000, 83) discussed above. Observation itself involves particular commitments as I judge the world to be
thus and thus. This is my **discursive entry transition**. Observation, perception, the **space of reasons**, brings me into discursive human practice. My ability to inhabit this space allows me to judge appropriate actions, or my **discursive exit transition**. Thus, my belief that it is a house, rather than an office, opposite my window will (possibly) prevent me from playing loud music at midnight. If my doxastic commitments were different then my understanding would change, therefore my practical action would be different. The practical commitments are reliant on the very definition of the concepts which form the basis of my beliefs. Therefore, if doxastic commitments are successfully challenged then there will be a corresponding change in behaviour. This is relevant here as if, within the context of education, we are aiming to achieve meaningful and significant change, the site of change is the belief structures of agents. It must start with a thorough and robust examination of theoretical normativity, of our beliefs, which rest on our conceptual understanding.

It can be easy to over simplify this explanation. There is not a neat linear relation of belief to action. To fully understand the account of practice given here it is important to recognise that Brandom rejects a monochronic understanding of either theoretical or practical action. ‘Material inference is not in general

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3 The term monochronic as used here is a technical term used in formal logic. The idea introduced here will be outlined more fully as the argument progresses.
monochronic ...The reasoning we actually engage in always permits the constructions of hierarchies with oscillating conclusions’ (Brandom 2000, 88). Monochronic, linear reasoning of the type found within formal logic has no value when trying to understand the messy business of practical action. Conclusions are not set; our actions are not straight forward. What is meant here is that a straightforward analytic approach to understanding practice will inevitably fail. Consider the example of the house given above, in which my conceptual understanding means that I will not play loud music. There are so many potential ad hoc modifications which can be made here which would change the outcome. It may be that the house is down a private road, it may be that the inhabitants are on holiday, or that I dislike the inhabitants and deliberately want to upset them. The outcome of the initial judgement is not linear, it does not follow a linear analytic structure of the type found in basic formal syllogisms. Indeed, Brandom devotes some time to justifying the removal of formal logic from his theory of practice. This is clearly explained in Articulating Reasons (2000) in which he argues against established dogmatic views of formal logic in favour of the integrity of material inferences thereby validating the complexity of human reason and action.

This has relevance within an educational context. When considering how to address issues such as the underachievement or disengagement of individuals categorised
as belonging to a particular social group, any attempt to draw clear causal links following a monologic understanding to inform practical action is necessarily flawed. This has the potential to be a particular issue when acting in response to school-level data, which invites a narrow focus on particular variables (see Chapter Eleven for a full discussion). Furthermore, educational research still focuses on phrases such as *working-class educational experience* (Reay 2017), which arguably over-simplify the problem of educational inequality. It is presented as something de-contextualised, a concept which is separate rather than embedded. It also connotes a similitude between actors which undermines agency. This is not an attempt to deny the obvious inequalities which correlate to groups of individuals. A working concept of social class is necessary in order to allow researchers to define a field of study. However, the vocabulary used in such monologic characterisations of class inequalities within education obscure the underlying inequalities inherent in the ways in which concepts are applied.

Brandom’s understanding of the non-monochronic nature of logic and practical reason relates to the centrality of *material inferences* in inferential logic. Material inferences are the kind of inferences that we make every day when we express conceptual content. When we use material inferences, we do not need to use logical vocabulary to make a truth-claim. Brandom, argues that material inferences are prior to analytical ones (see example
below) and are based on the aptness of our concept application in a given context based on the aptness of prior applications of a concept. Brandom gives the example of seeing that it is raining and deciding to open an umbrella (Brandom 2000, 84). I do this because I know it will keep me dry as a consequence of practical action, as a consequence of the role in reasoning that the concept of an umbrella has. I do not do this because I moved through the formal steps of analytical logic, although I potentially could. The point he is trying to make is that material inferences are prior to analytic ones. Indeed, there are so many possible different factors impacting on reasons for action that they could not, practically, form the basis for action. This point brings us, as educationalists, back to the primacy of the pragmatic normative aspect of the conceptual and the link between this pragmatic normativity and practical action as the focus for educational research.

To demonstrate this point more clearly, we will refer again to Brandom's reading of Sellars. Traditionally, within formal logic, an inference has been considered valid if it follows the monochronic form of formal logic, i.e.:

a) All men are mortal;
b) Socrates is a man;
c) Therefore, Socrates is a mortal
The validity of the outcome is an assured and necessary progression from the initial premise if true; if we accept a) then c) must necessarily follow. It is expressed formally as follows:

a) If \( p \) then \( q \);

b) \( p \);

c) therefore \( q \)

However, Brandom takes issue with this logical formation if it is seen as necessary to meaning. It is fixed and inflexible - very different to our everyday experiences of reasoning. Material inferences, ones made on the basis of the content of concepts, rather than their form, have traditionally been viewed as inferior to logical inferences as they lack necessity and the certainty which most if not all disciplines seem, consciously or unconsciously, to seek. Material inferences can be defined as ‘the kind of inference whose correctnesses determine the conceptual contents of its premises and conclusions’ (Brandom 2000: 52), not the other way round. One of the examples given by Brandom to elucidate this concept is that the move from ‘lightning has stuck’ to ‘thunder will be heard soon’ involves the understanding of temporal concepts. Or, ‘Pittsburgh is to the west of Princeton’ or ‘Princeton is to the east of Pittsburgh’ (Brandom, 2000: 86) involves a prior understanding of the norms governing the rightness of the application of the spatial concepts of east and west. He then goes on to argue that, formally valid
logical inferences will also be good material inferences, however, the same is not true the other way around. Non-monochronic chains of reasoning, reasoning that involve an understanding of additional concepts, can never be fully represented formally. To return to my earlier example, if I look out of my window and judge that I see a house, a whole range of other concepts impact this judgement. I could say that it is a house because it is a human habitation, or because it is made of bricks, or because people live there - yet none of these is sufficient within formal logic as there is not a single defining quality or fundamental premise on which the claim is based. And yet they undoubtedly hold; we live our lives via the rightness of these forms of reasoning. Indeed, as Brandom points out, even within most formal academic contexts, including physics, material inferences are used (with the exception, perhaps, of pure mathematics); further, he cites medicine, a discipline integral to contemporary society, as an area of study which rests almost exclusively on this type of reasoning.

Therefore, as we can see, it is not formal logical reasoning that governs action. The reasonings which underpin our actions are not monochronic. Indeed, this type of material reasoning is prior to formal logic, the latter being reliant on the former, not vice versa. The link between reason and action are, from Brandom’s perspective, interconnected; they are more than simply reflective of each other, they are reciprocally generative. Thus, we can see
that Brandom’s rationalism is in no way disembodied. We do indeed act according to reason as our action and our reason are conceptually guided by concepts which are normatively defined; in other words, that are defined via the *practice* of using them, a practice that involves material inferences.

However, there are some issues to be flagged in relation to this account, in particular, Brandom’s rejection of the traditional Humean view of action in which *desire* and/or *will* feature as the antecedent. For Brandom, our desires and will are dependent on our beliefs. Whilst this is not necessarily understood by the subject themselves and thus is not to be understood on a macro level, it is true on a micro level. It is from the intricate web of assumptions and implicit beliefs based on which our will and desire are based. This highly rationalistic view has the potential to feel overly disembodied. Surely there are times when desire and will are the antecedent of belief? For example, there must be times when instinctual drives, cognitive pathologies and/or cultural conditioning supersede our beliefs as cause of action. This is clearly the case, and Brandom would accept this point, although always within the context of the space of *reasons*. Indeed, in some ways it gives his ideas greater force – those individuals who act under such compulsion are, in some sense, lacking in freedom. Furthermore, he could potentially counter with the observation that in all but the most extreme examples, even individuals who fall within or around these kinds
of groups, their drives are still reliant on belief (even if these are false beliefs) about the world which then lead to action within their own frame of reference. On the surface, this seems an acceptable conclusion, suggesting that we should be aiming to liberate individuals, to enable them to transcend their compulsions through the development of a greater understanding of their actions. This is similar in many ways to the type of emancipation envisaged by Spinoza in which ‘free will depends on whether the thought that drives an action is adequate’ Derry 2013, 85).

This section has argued that Brandom’s distinction between theoretical and practical reason demonstrates that Inferentialism is not overly rationalistic but clearly accounts for practice. The fact that Inferentialism can account for practice and activity is due to its rejection of monochronic descriptions of practice or reason and, instead, the embracing of material assertions and inferences. Finally, Brandom’s focus on activity and concept development as being situated within the inferential structure of reason means that we again return to the idea that, within the context of education, we can promote agency via the promotion of an awareness of reasons for action.
Concluding Comments

This chapter has demonstrated that normativity is the key component of Brandom’s Inferentialism as it is norms which govern language and concept development. As concepts are normatively bound in this way, they are therefore things for which we are distinctly responsible and accountable. This accountability is played out through the process of deontic scorekeeping, through the game of giving and asking for reasons. However, the norms which set the rules of this game are objective, understood as analytic objectivity. This objectivity about norms, from the point of view of educationalists, can offer us some fresh insights into old problems. This first of these is that it can provide some renewed understandings of the ways in which concepts and ideas bind us, and why it is that they are so hard to challenge within the context of social development. Secondly, the contrast between normative attitudes and normative statuses can support an understanding of disparity of belief, as well as providing a way of transcending these. The game of giving and asking for reasons and the process of deontic scorekeeping suggests that a drive toward greater unity is possible. Thinking through ideas and concepts develops conceptual understanding and can therefore help to bridge the many gaps between both individuals and institutions.
Chapter Four
Defending Brandom’s Objectivity About Norms

This chapter will explore and answer some of the central criticisms relating to Brandom’s objectivity about norms. Brandom’s thesis is one which is highly original and which, on first reading, seems difficult to reconcile with the concept of agency, a concept which must be defended if its utility within educational theory relating to social development is to be accepted. It seems natural to think that Brandom’s belief in a theoretically attainable truth with which agents are either better or worse acquainted means that, if they were making ‘correct’ judgements, their beliefs and actions would be fixed. If Brandom ‘conceives of the world as a totality of facts’ (Habermas 2000, 342), and if we justify our beliefs and actions through appeals to these facts, in the game of giving and asking for reasons, then ultimately, our beliefs and actions will be determined by these facts. However, this account, as will be shown, is a misreading. If objectivity about norms entailed determinism, then Brandom’s Inferentialism would have no place within the context of education and social development as it would imply a passive acceptance of norms, undermining the possibility of political action within the context of social development. This chapter will, therefore, defend Brandom against the claim that, the ‘privileging of assertoric speech acts also leads to unfortunate consequences
from the point of view of moral theory’ (Habermas 2000, 332), the central worry of Jurgen Habermas whose ideas will feature prominently in this chapter. The second criticism that Habermas makes that will concern us here is related to the first. He argues that, whilst Brandom’s claims to objectivity would mean that ‘objective idealism divests them [agents] of epistemic authority (and so moral authority)’ (Habermas 2000, 344), the point is undermined as these facts cannot account for themselves without recourse to a fundamentally pragmatic account of the development of norms. Habermas argues that Brandom is, therefore, misrepresenting the constructive nature of norms as he has not provided a robust enough account of objectivity.

**Habermas’ Challenge to Brandom’s Normative Pragmatism**

One of the most eminent critics of Brandom’s account of normativity is Jurgen Habermas who expressed his ideas in the article *From Kant to Hegel: On Robert Brandom’s Pragmatic Philosophy of Language* (Habermas 2000). Their on-going debate has been widely followed and has much to offer the present discussion as the dialogue between these two great thinkers has forced Brandom into a robust defence of his position on objectivity about norms. Furthermore, the contrast between Habermas’ and Brandom’s understanding of reason will help to clarify further Brandom’s position, who sees reason as historically
situated rather than abstract. For Brandom, reason does not stand outside of culture, but is part of it. However, whilst agency is bound by socio-historical norms it is these very constrictions which allow for freedom, thereby giving agents transformative power. Principally, we are concerned here with demonstrating that Brandom can indeed provide an account of agency within education, despite the fact that Habermas ‘ends his summary [of Brandom] with an understandable expression of scepticism about the final success of the account of the objectivity of concepts’ (Brandom 2000, 356). This discussion will demonstrate that, for Brandom, normativity and reason are inseparable concepts and that, unlike traditional accounts of reason, must be considered together as part of a unified whole.

Habermas argues that if we accept the principle that norms are objective, as Brandom does, then from an ethical or political perspective, these norms cannot be challenged. He is concerned that Brandom’s position ‘is committed to an objectionable kind of epistemological passivity, and that it is committed to an objectionable kind of semantic passivity’ (Brandom 2000, 357). The extending consequence of this is that any emancipatory intent in theory and research will be rendered null and void. However, this position is simply not true and Brandom justifies this by referencing again the notion of judgement. The key idea is that, whilst judgement is responsive to reason, it also contributes to norms as it judges. Whilst Brandom is arguing that
norms are objective, agents do not and cannot have a god’s-eye view of the totality of objective norms, and therefore the act of judging can never be determined the way in which Habermas envisages - this is a too simplistic reading. Theoretical objective normativity enables agency as it necessitates judgment. However, the active judgement used in subsequent applications of a concept by agents means that the objective nature of norms can and must change over time. Norms are not static. Whilst Brandom does lay claim to objectivity regarding norms, this does not mean that he adopts a fatalistic approach to human agency. Objectivity about norms does not mean that norms negate agency; any reading which accuses Brandom of fatalism is misreading his understanding of norms and normativity. ‘I deny that seeing our cognitive job as getting facts right - committing ourselves to claims that were in many cases already true independent of our activities - implies any such passive conception’ (Brandom 2000, 357).

As will be shown, this means that Inferentialism can challenge beliefs through the rational practice of holding each other to account. Extending this idea to the field of education, when fully understood, Brandom’s argument relating to the objectivity of norms provides us with an understanding of exactly how to approach and to challenge issues such as inequality, miscommunication and disparate understandings which give rise to inequalities, thereby promoting genuine social change. It is
through the recognition of the objectivity of norms that we can begin to take control of our own sense of agency and engage in meaningful action within the necessary normative boundaries of conceptual content.

This central criticism levelled against Brandom’s objectivity about norms by Habermas is driven by the claim that Brandom has not sufficiently accounted for the development of norms, that Brandom is ‘treating concepts as something we just find, out there… [and this] would threaten to make unintelligible the crucial notion of conceptual development, the cultivation and improvement of our concepts’ (Brandom 2000, 359). Partly, Habermas believes that the problem is that Brandom overly focuses on semantic norms and has misunderstood the ways in which norms develop. ‘His conception embraces cognitive and socio-cultural norms without distinction’ (Habermas 2000, 329). However, as we go forward, we will see that one cannot exist without the other. ‘The recognition of an independent, conceptually structured objective reality is a product of the social (intersubjective) account of objectivity, not something that is either prior to or a substitute for that account [...] our practices institute a kind of authority’ (Brandom 2000, 360). What Brandom is trying to say here is that norms are not somehow plucked from thin air, they are not unable to validate their epistemic status. They are based on practice, but this does not mean that we are not bound by facts. The two are inherently connected,
and the idea that the objective is also social does not mean that Brandom is endorsing a constructivist account of meaning (an idea developed in Chapter Five).

Habermas’ criticisms relating to the issues surrounding Brandom’s failure to account for the ways in which norms can account for themselves, i.e., where they originate from, again underscores the similarities between Brandom and Kant, who Habermas claims also views rationality as self-regulating. ‘Brandom adopts Kant’s conception of autonomy in order to distinguish rational legislation from pure acts of free choice…the free will is the rational will that allows itself to be determined by good reasons’ (Habermas 2000, 328). Habermas’ issue is that, from this self-legislating view, rationality is already guided by the norms which it is supposed to be legitimising. There is no external view, there is no possibility of critique or criticism of the norm itself as the norm is the reference point for action. Habermas believes that this problem is a result of Brandom reducing ‘logical, conceptual and semantic rules as well as pragmatic ones – to norms of action’ (ibid). Habermas believes that Brandom’s understanding of normativity is not broad enough. He believes that Brandom’s normativity is simply based on the weighing of reasons for action and is, therefore, merely a cognitive process affair. In considering normativity as linguistic, he believes that he underplays the socio-historical forces which bind agents and the rational functioning Brandom describes. As
Habermas sees Inferentialism as describing a cognitive process, as the mere consideration of whether or not an action is correct in relation to the norms which govern the application of a concept, he believes that it does not give a sufficient account of the social. From this view, Inferentialism can only consider whether or not a linguistic norm has been applied correctly and the way that the judging of this provides reasons for action. It therefore lacks a critical function. It cannot critique the socio-historical development of norms; it can only consider whether or not it has been applied correctly and therefore whether an action can be justified.

Habermas argues that human rationality should not be reduced to the normative practice of giving and asking for reasons as this undermines the transformative potential of reason in a political/moral context. He believes that ‘being affected by reasons is, however, quite different to being obliged by norms. Whereas the norms of action bind the will of agents, norms of rationality – and conceptual norms in general – direct their minds’ (Habermas 2000, 329). Habermas is concerned by the question of will and free choice and an agent’s ability to reject reasons which, if rationality were a purely linguistic affair, would be (from Habermas’s view) impossible. In other words, Habermas is concerned at the lack of distinction between the ‘cognitive and sociocultural’ (ibid), between the process of rationality as being responsive to reasons and the social. What
Habermas maintains is that norms should not be reduced to the functioning of decision-making, of our *weighing* reasons and *considering* action in light of reason. This conception of reason could, perhaps, be more accurately characterised as internal dialogue, an internal form of cognitive process. Habermas is at pains to point out that norms bind our behaviour on a sociocultural level and cannot and should not be reduced to the act of judgement.

However, what Habermas misses here is the fact that both socio-historical norms and the process and structure of judgement are one and the same, one is not being *reduced*. An understanding of social forces is at the very essence of Brandom’s account. What Habermas does not appreciate here is the richness of the account of normativity provided by Brandom. Brandom’s conception of normativity cannot be reduced to the weighing of reasons – in fact, even the phraseology here invites a misconception. Brandom’s account is not a description of a cognitive process divorced from any understanding of the socio-cultural boundedness of reasoning. Reasons are not stand alone but based in material inferences. They are part of a relational inferential web, and the normativity is linguistic – a crucial distinction which will become clearer as this and subsequent chapters will demonstrate. Whilst reasons to act or not are not strictly binding, the language that we use to express them, and the inferred meanings within the
language, do lay objective claims on us. What Brandom provides in his account is an understanding of how the everyday norms which govern language use and, therefore, constitute the space of reasons, are synonymous with socio-historical norms. ‘Experience - at once the application and the institution of conceptual norms - is not merely a temporal process but a historical one’ (Brandom 2002, 229). He is able to account for the ways in which socio-historical forces are enacted in everyday reasoning as ‘negotiating and adjudicating the claims of reciprocally conditioning authorities [...] is a process’ (ibid). For this reason, Brandom is able to bridge the gap between the type of normativity typically dealt with by sociologists and their impact on the reasoning of agents. He is able to achieve this via what he terms as objectivity about norms.

Habermas further develops his criticism of Brandom’s objectivity about norms through the examination of the role that pragmatic linguistics plays within Brandom’s thought which, he believes, is another feature of Inferentialism which undermines Brandom’s belief in the objectivity of norms. For Habermas then, the problem of Brandom’s claims about the objective nature of norms results from Brandom’s adoption of a form of pragmatism typical of philosophy’s linguistic turn. In a post-Wittgensteinian landscape, meaning and language are intertwined. ‘We can explain what is real only by recourse to what is true’ (Habermas 2000: 331) within the context of language – the sentential
utterance is epistemologically privileged. Its radical abandonment of representationalist models of expression make it vulnerable to charges of linguistic idealism – a trap which Habermas does not believe that Brandom has extradited himself from.

Habermas begins this section of his exegesis with a neat summary of the linguistic arguments used by Brandom as he sees them and which, Habermas believes, can lead to a highly conservative account of normativity which has the potential to reinforce destructive and exploitative social norms by falsely presenting them as objective. He refers to Brandom’s claims that all semantic content is inferential, rather than representational (that claims/concepts are linked inferentially to each other as has been described) and summarises the process of the development of semantic content given by Brandom. So far, so good – Habermas has summarised Brandom’s advocation of the inferential nature of semantic content and its epistemological status in the understanding of states of affairs. He then continues with his summary of Brandom, describing Brandom’s defence against the charge of subjective phenomenalism via a distinction between the normative statuses and normative attitudes described in the previous chapter. To recap, when two interlocutors are in disagreement about a state of affairs then what we are seeing is a difference in normative attitude. Each interlocutor believes that they are entitled to endorse a particular
claim and that they have sufficient reasons to endorse their claims. However, disagreements of this kind can be resolved through an appeal to objective normative statuses, to the correct use of a norm, expressed as providing reasons for belief and action (although, we must remember that all agents are prone to error, they do not have a ‘god’s-eye view’). Thus, ‘this is the instrument suitable for analysing the objective content of a subjectively attributed and assessed utterance. With the concept of objectivity Brandom wants to mark the difference between what participants believe they actually know and what they actually know’ (Habermas 2000, 334). Habermas argues that Brandom’s use of the idea of normative attitudes and normative statuses in the instituting of a claim to objectivity is, problematically, a simple description of the analytical ability to demonstrate an agent’s false beliefs by either demonstrating that their belief leads to absurd or undesired consequences, or that anaphorically (with reference to past applications of the concept) the agent’s belief is unsubstantiated. Habermas finds this analytical approach to uncovering the essentially semantic-pragmatic nature of truth problematic as, he believes, normative statuses remain a social construction. They still relate to previous practice and human activity. He is concerned that if we adopt ‘a historical conception of rationality [which] consists in the inferential reconstruction of a tradition’ (Swindell 2007b, 119) then these traditions cannot be challenged. He is concerned that the claims of objectivity in what
is essentially a species of pragmatism risks obscuring the power that we have to change concepts, that it is not strong enough to counter the epistemological status of pragmatics. Analytic objectivity offers us nothing in terms of understanding either ourselves or the genesis and development of meaning. If this were true, then the application of Brandom within the context of education would be highly conservative and potentially damaging to emancipatory aims. Current practice, irrespective of the damage it may do to individuals within the education system, would be reinforced and sanctioned. Normative statuses as social constructions would therefore serve a hegemonic function.

However, it is not a criticism which is damning. Firstly, even if investigation reveals normative statuses to be hegemonic, the only way to challenge these is through exploring the tension between previous uses of terms and the intended consequences – it is about exploring the potential of situated change – which, within Brandom’s model, is the only type of change available. The reality of past usage cannot be eradicated, and therefore new meanings and applications are not unconstrained, however, understanding will give us new reasons for action. These reasons allow our free will not to accept the past without critique, but to act in the light of knowledge. However, to initiate social change and challenge, Habermas wishes to retain some notion of abstract reason, a place from which a subject may
stand abstracted from norms, adopting a privileged position of
critique.

Habermas believes that the coherence of Brandom's account would be strengthened through the re-evaluation of the fundamental relation upon which it is based. Habermas argues that Brandom's ideas are confused by underpinning his theoretic from an ‘I-Thou’ position. The ‘I-Thou’ can be seen as reflective of Brandom’s model of discourse, characterised by participation in the game of giving and asking for reasons. The game, whereby epistemic questions are resolved, rests on a **two speaker model** in which both interlocutors are responsive to reasons. This game resolves epistemic questions of the correct use of concepts via a direct relationship between two speakers. ‘Brandom denies the actually prevailing consensus of the linguistic community as an ultimate epistemic authority’ (Habermas 2000, 344). This is problematic for Habermas as it ‘does not give its due to the horizon of meaning of a linguistically disclosed world that is shared intersubjectively by all members’ (ibid). Habermas believes that this “I-Thou” relation, whether acknowledged by Brandom or not, presupposes a wider community which legitimise these norms and that this communal pragmatism undermines Brandom’s position. Habermas believes Brandom ‘actually construes what he calls the “I-Thou relation” as the relation between a first person who raises validity claims and a third person who attributes claims to validity’ (Habermas 2000,
In other words, when justifying myself to another in an “I-Thou” relation, there is the implication that this would be comprehensible to a third person. For example, if I am justifying my belief that an object is made of copper, this is not an appeal to norms which only exist between myself and an interlocutor, there is always the assumption that it is comprehensible to another. ‘Every round of discourse opens with an ascription that the interpreter undertakes from the observer’s perspective of a third person (ibid)’. Habermas believes that Brandom fallaciously privileges an informative, ‘score-keeping’ model at the expense of a full appreciation of the issues surrounding the management of a multifarious diversity of social voices. Habermas argues that Brandom would benefit by considering the semantic implications of an “I-We” approach, ‘guided by the imperative of social integration […] and the] rational coordination of plans’ (Swindal 2007b, 117). An I-We approach would be a model which conceptualised discursive practise as a communal practice, inclusive of a variety of voices.

Brandom’s answer to this does not involve a challenge to Habermas’s claim that semantics and the development of meaning is a complex, social act. In fact, as will be explored in subsequent chapters, he explicitly underscores the messy nature of social meaning. However, he defends the “I-Thou” relation as this is the principal way in which agents overcome differences and engage in linguistic practice. It is the structure of our everyday
interactions. Communication is not principally about agreeing on meaning but on learning about other’s commitments in order to engage in shared aims. The interlocutors are focused on each other. It is about understanding the intentionality of your interlocutor and, therefore, the “I-Thou” relation is perspectivally central as it focuses on the development of the mutual understanding of the aims, actions and beliefs of another, specific, individual. This is not to deny the social, but it does deny the “I-We” position as central to understanding communication. ‘A theory of linguistic practice that starts elsewhere and treats accounting for this sort of I-Thou interaction as peripheral, as something of an afterthought, has missed something crucial’ (Brandom 2000, 363), i.e., that linguistic practice is characterised as the practice of giving and asking for reasons. ‘The essence of communication is taken to consist in coming to be able to navigate smoothly across the doxastic and inferential gulf excavated between interlocutors by their differing commitments’ (Brandom 2000, 363).

Habermas’s work provides a thoughtful and rigorous critique of Inferentialism which necessitated a clear and robust response. In considering these criticisms the arguments presented in this thesis have been strengthened as it has introduced the idea that Brandom’s work does not provide a deterministic account of normativity, and neither are its claims to objectivity undermined by its essential pragmatism. The
development of these ideas will form the basis of the next chapter which will more fully expound the relationship between objectivity about norms and the socio-historical pragmatic development of these norms.

The most relevant point within an educational context is that Brandom’s Inferentialism does not promote any kind of passivity about norms. Agents are constantly and activity involved in the practice of giving and asking for reasons, a dynamic process which aims to bridge the gaps between the understandings of interlocutors. It is important to remember that none of the participants has a god’s eye view, and so the process of giving and asking for reasons, the process of judgement, is always relevant. Nothing within Inferentialism is static. This means that this theory has the potential to provide a fresh way of looking at the development of shared understandings within the context of education, a way which focuses on a justificatory approach to issues which respect and acknowledges the agency of individuals.

*Brandom’s Hegel: Objective-Subjective Holism and Normativity*

In order to further understand and defend Brandom’s objectivity about norms within the context of education, a fuller explanation of the arguments Brandom provides to underpin his belief in the
objectivity of norms is required. As stated above, any interpretation of Brandom which views his emphasis on the pragmatic nature of normativity as leading to an idealistic or constructivist perspective is based on an essential misunderstanding of the unique account of objectivity given by Brandom. The objective structure of reason, of the rules which govern the application of linguistic concepts, lends norms an immutable aspect, an unequivocal historicity which is, in this sense, objective. ‘Thus, the applications of the concept (and its relatives) that have actually been made already have a certain sort of authority over candidate future applications of that concept’ (Brandom 2002, 229). Further, any interpretations of Brandom which view this kind of analytic normativity as leading to either a passivity about norms, or as placing epistemic priority on an aspect of analytical linguistics which belies the pragmatic and constructivist nature on which this weak notion of objectivity is based, are both a misreading. ‘Habermas’ scepticism about the final success of the account of the objectivity of concepts (and so of the norms of speech, thought, and belief they articulate), against the background of the social practice account of language use that supplies its raw materials’ (Brandom 2000, 356) needs an answer.

This answer lies in recognising the Hegelian nature of Brandom’s project. Hegel’s influence on Brandom cannot be underestimated. Hegel is arguably Brandom’s greatest influence
and Brandom’s work can be seen, in many ways, as paradigmatically Hegelian. This is testified to in Brandom’s most recent book publication, the long awaited *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology* (2019). This extensive and detailed exegesis of a seminal thinker ‘is in many ways a severely selective reading’ (Brandom 2019, 1), and focuses on the aspect of Hegel which stands at the centre of Brandom’s Inferentialism and which ‘I believe is an axial, organising topic’ (ibid) in his work. This *organising topic*, this central thesis appropriated by Brandom, is Hegel’s account of conceptual content. As previously explained, this account of the conceptual is based on relations of compatibility and incompatibility. To return to our earlier example, if I take copper to be a metal, I cannot also claim that it is plastic as these two concepts contain incompatible claims. ‘This way of understanding conceptual content is not psychological...The kinds of relations of incompatibility and consequence that hold between states of affairs and the kinds that hold between subjective acts of thinking and judging are not the same’ (Brandom 2019, 2).

Brandom’s understanding of the conceptual, based on his reading of Hegel, also encompasses the twin ideas of judgement and responsibility. As we know, he claims that all acts are acts of judgement which relate to a wider whole and so are not subjective in the typical sense. The act of judgement does not stand outside of the world. However, in prefacing the act of judgement, the
concepts of responsibility and agency are introduced into Brandom’s account. This reading of the act of judgement is central in demonstrating that an agent’s engagement with norms is far from passive. Agents who are responsive to reasons can evaluate the concepts that they apply and have a responsibility to do so. Error is ever present in the act of judgement meaning that ideas are constantly challenged by agents. Beliefs and norms of the type with which Habermas is concerned can be challenged via the game of giving and asking for reasons. Leading on from here, Brandom acknowledges what he calls *cognitively irresponsible* beliefs, beliefs which are not made in the light of reason. ‘Cognitively irresponsible beliefs can be genuine beliefs’ (Brandom 2000, 105), cognitively irresponsible beliefs can manifest as acts of faith, for example, or in the unreflective acceptance of ideas.

Within the context of education, the idea of cognitively irresponsible beliefs is an interesting one. The scope of these kinds of beliefs is potentially wide. Within the context of practice, how many teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders do things simply because that is *what we do*, or because it is considered *good practice*? How many of them hold *cognitively irresponsible beliefs*? How deep is the conceptual understanding of the *why* within the context of practice and in what ways can this be said to undermine the overall aims of education? Within the context of social development, how effective is practice which aims to
include minority groups? How deeply are the psychological drives behind challenging behaviours understood, the understanding of which would arguably help to mitigate negative labelling? Finally, how unified are all agencies within the context of education and how does this impact on the efficacy of policy? Clearly then, concepts can be challenged. Brandom’s objectivity actually facilitates this process as it based on the exploration of inconsistencies of belief via the game of giving and asking for reasons. The picture of objectivity is, as we shall see, dynamic. It is not a simple, monological presentation of a single truth. This is not possible. It does however give us a structure and a process through which agency is expressed.

As with Brandom’s reading of Sellars, the view of Hegel presented here is one based almost exclusively on Brandom’s interpretations of his work. As we have seen, Brandom openly acknowledges that his writings specifically seek to use or reinterpret ‘the intricate and far-ranging story that he tells’ (Brandom 2019, 1) to support his own inferentialist position. Indeed, in Tales of the Mighty Dead, he states that what is offered is a ‘rational reconstruction of an argument’ (Brandom 2002, 178). As with all Brandom’s discussions of great thinkers of the past, he is as much concerned with making explicit what he considers to be the implicit aspects of their arguments to improve the coherence of their theories as he sees them – thus, Brandom’s writing embodies the kind of historical dialectical
approach he seeks to expound. Whilst a refreshing and creative approach, it means that the presentation of Hegel is not an orthodox representation.

Despite the undoubted difficulty of Hegel’s prose there is a wonderful elegance and beauty in the simplicity of the central principle that Brandom sees as underlying Hegel’s conceptual holism, a holism which allows Brandom to answer Habermas’ criticism that Brandom’s position can be reduced to either a form of constructivism or a constraining account of objective normativity. The principle appropriated from Hegel, upon which Brandom’s understanding of objectivity is based is that if something *is* then, of analytic necessity, it *is not* something else. Or, to phrase it in more Hegelian terms, for something to be determinate, then there must be things which are excluded from it. For example, a triangle cannot be a square, however, both must be polygons. This is objective knowledge. Thus, Brandom argues:

‘The first story begins with the thought that the way things objectively are must be definite or determinate. The essence of determinateness is modally robust exclusion: if things are one way, there are some other ways that they cannot be. Relations of *material incompatibility* - “determinate negation” – articulate a basic structure of Hegel’s metaphysics’ (Brandom 2002, 49).

This is the basis of what is characterised as the holistic perspective. Thus, when referring to *holism* we are referring to
the idea that everything is *relationally* connected through this initial analytic construction of a concept. A concept cannot exist alone, every concept is related to another, every other. There can be no separation. The expansion of this holistic relational whole, its shifts, movements and developments are the subject of Chapter Five which will focus on the socio-historical development of meaning.

This holism has some quite radical implications for the ways in which we view conceptual content, particularly as Hegel has not been a dominating influence in the development of ideas relating to conceptual content. ‘The master concept of Enlightenment epistemology and semantics, at least since Descartes, was *representation*’ (Brandom 2000, 7). However, Brandom’s appropriation of Hegelian semantics requires a relinquishing of representational semantics as the beginning of our thinking about concepts, and about our relationship with objects. Concepts should be seen as the products of relations of material incompatibility, not as representational in the traditional sense. Concepts necessarily cannot be thought of in isolation – one cannot have a concept without having a group of concepts. ‘Inferential semantics is resolutely *holist*. On an inferentialist account of conceptual content, one cannot have *any* concepts unless one has *many* concepts’ (Brandom 2000, 15). Conceptual content is a cluster of practical commitments and entitlements, of a nexus of related compatible
claims. Brandom is putting forward a thesis which can be characterised as a form of analytic pragmatism. The content of a concept is fixed insofar as it stands in relations of compatibility and incompatibility with other concepts. However, the act of judgement is pragmatic and, as will be explored in the next chapter, this means that semantic content shifts and grows in a dialectic which is synonymous with human activity or culture. So, in answer to Habermas, humans judge, assess and critique, but the starting point for this is semantic objectivity.

The idea that exclusion is the principle on which conceptual content is based, (the idea that 3 cannot also be 2, or the copper cannot also be plastic) and that this creates relations which are articulated within a holistic system, leads us to radically redefine the concepts of subjective and objective. These two categories are to be seen, ultimately, as standing in a necessary relation to each other forming a consistent whole (or infinity). On the side of the objective, we are dealing with facts which can assert themselves as analytic truth – and it is here that Brandom’s notion of semantic objectivity originates. However, to understand Hegel’s (and therefore Brandom’s) holism, we must recognise the relationship that the objective has to the subjective. When making subjective judgements about states of affairs subjects are engaged in a process of ‘resolving incompatible commitments by revising or relinquishing them’ (Brandom 2002e, 193). The subjective, the pragmatic action of subjects acting with
intentionality, is constantly engaged in assessing the rightness of claims using reason. It is not separate from world; it is not other from it. Agents can make valid epistemic claims about a world which is entirely accessible to them, there is no separation of mind and world. This view of the agent, one which presents them as able to make epistemically valid claims about a world to which they have access as a result of being responsive to reasons, means that they can access and make coherent claims about the issues which they encounter. This view places epistemic priority with the agent and their ability to make judgements based on claims of compatibility and incompatibility. The process of thinking through conceptual content by agents can therefore strengthen claims about states of affairs and the ability to act on this. In thinking through ideas, in considering the implications and commitments of given concepts, the better the efficacy of practical action within the context of education will be.

We have now seen how Brandom’s utilisation of Hegel’s understanding of the nature of concepts can substantiate Brandom’s claim to objectivity – it is an analytic objectivity and legitimises claims to knowledge. However, this combined with the idea of judgement means that, far from being a passive idea, it is active. Thus, Inferentialism gives an account of meaning which, whilst objective, is also pragmatic and these two are in balance with each other. From an educational perspective, this analytical account of objectivity points toward the idea that agents
can come together with greater harmony of purpose and intent via the idea of *thinking through*. This would allow for concepts’ incompatibility and compatibility relations to be seen more clearly, and for agents to have a wider understanding of educational concepts.

**Concluding Comments**

This chapter built on the explanation of normative semantics given in Chapter Three. It considered in some detail the challenges that Brandom has had to counter from Habermas, namely that Brandom has failed to convincingly support his claims regarding objectivity about norms as a result of his debt to pragmatism, and secondly that, even if he could demonstrate the objectivity of norms satisfactorily, then this would entail a fatalistic passivity about norms. Answering these criticisms is crucial for two reasons. Firstly, these criticisms are, as Brandom puts it, *understandable* (Brandom 2000). It is natural to struggle to reconcile pragmatism and objectivity, and it is certainly natural to question the place of agency within a system in which norms are represented as being objective. Secondly, Habermas’s challenge in relation to passivity about normativity has to be answered if Brandom’s ideas are to be considered fit for purpose in the context of social development within the field of education. Answers must be given to the charges centred around
the notion of judgement, and the way in which agents engage with
the objective semantic normativity. The answer asks a reader to
remember that objective truth is not something that agents can
access - meaning is a messy affair. They constantly judge and
consider through their rational participation in the *game of giving
and asking for reasons* and so are in this way responsible for their
beliefs and for their judgements, rather than being
deterministically constrained. This constant process of
evaluation and subsequent changes of belief and action intrinsic
to the *game of giving and asking for reasons* means that the game
is an *activity* which involves *engagement* with norms, not a
passive acceptance of them. Furthermore, it is the very existence
of objectively rule-governed norms based on the principle of
exclusion, which Brandom sees as Hegel’s central idea, which
allows agents to think at all. There can be no such thing as a
single concept. We need that initial analytic relation to be able to
use concepts at all. The idea that is being introduced here,
namely that there is a relationship between objective rule-
governed norms and the human capacity to think and express
themselves, is one which will be central going forward.

In coming to view agency in this way, as judgement
enacted in relation to analytic objectivity, the importance of the
relationship between normative attitudes and normative statuses
has been further reinforced. If concepts, as Brandom maintains,
are defined through social practice, then a case can be made for
the notion that differences in the normative attitudes between individuals can be seen as a result of their specific cultural practices – practices which are manifestly divergent within any given language sharing community, impacted upon by a wide range of environmental and biological factors. Brandom can provide a more fine-grained account of the universal reasoning processes which produce such radically different cultural behaviours such as those described by Barbara Rogoff in The Cultural Nature of Human Development (Rogoff 2003). In her book she criticises the tendency of researchers to ‘generalise’ claims made on the basis of studies of middle-class children situated within specific cultural contexts. She wants to foreground the idea that, when studying children, ‘their development can be understood only in light of the cultural practices and circumstances of their communities’ (Rogoff 2003: 3-4). These cultural differences will potentially lead to differences in behaviour as a result of different deontic commitments, of different understandings which are attached to specific circumstances. Works which compare the lives of children from very different global communities, such as Rogoff’s, clearly show that the behaviours of children are significantly impacted on by their contexts within the classroom. These behavioural differences have often been labelled a deficit or deviant behaviour, with educators expecting students to conform to their institutional and cultural ways of reasoning. Educators should
view behaviours which play themselves out within classrooms as a more subtle expression of the kinds of cultural differences cited by Rogoff to support her thesis. The behaviours, when viewed within an inferential context, will always be rational, will always be a result of being responsive to reasons which need to be appreciated and understood. The power of Brandom’s Inferentialism is, therefore, its power to help educators to adopt a more sophisticated view of disparate practices in disparate communities, and a more critical approach to their own practices. Largely, this will involve those working within the field of education to stop prefacing their own cultural models and understand that both parties in the game of giving and asking for reasons are learning. The “I-Thou” relation is a relation of equality in the sense that each is responsible for examining their reasons and making them explicit, thus appreciating the entitlements that follow. It should not be dictated by institutions that have the potential to hold irresponsible beliefs. The normative statuses, agents’ beliefs in light of reason, of all individuals are the result of identical reasoning structures with differences explained pragmatically, resulting from differing contexts. The highly structural process of human reason is applicable within all sociological and anthropological contexts. All behaviour is reasonable. There is no room here for a deficit model of human culture or behaviour. Individuals themselves may review their behaviour in the light of new reasons or through
the explicit examination of implicit reasons. However, all individuals are agents capable of making choices, these cannot be forced upon them.

The notion of normative statuses can also come into play when considering classroom practice. Most obviously, we may wish to ask how far teachers maintain the rational integrity of their beliefs when negotiating the distance between the normative attitudes of students and the historical defined normative statuses of historical reasons. The question being asked here is, do teachers understand the extent that the reasons they use to justify their actions and beliefs have a history which may no longer be relevant or accepted? How far are teachers aware of the idea that children act for reasons, that they review and assess the world with reference to their own normative attitudes? Are teachers engaged in the activity of making explicit the assumption of individuals’ normative attitudes to promote growth or are they dismissing them as defiant and wilful threats to their perceived authority, providing good reasons for young people to reject an education system that tried to invalidate what they see as rational choices? Furthermore, do educationalists themselves make responsible and coherent choices, ensuring that they are fully prepared to endorse and commit to the implicit claims inherent in their reasoning and actions? For example, are teachers fully aware of the implications of a model of education at one with capitalism? Does this tie in with the educational aim of protecting
the well-being of students, particularly those from minority and working-class backgrounds? Change needs to happen not simply from the top down (although this is needed). The conceptual awareness and hence development of those working within education need to be more fully developed if genuine change on the level of practice is to be affected.
Chapter Five

History, Reason and Agency

This chapter builds on the explanation of Brandom’s conception of normativity introduced in Chapter Four by exploring the relationship between reason, normativity and history. It will describe the ways in which reason, understood as the active involvement in the game of giving and asking for reasons, can be said to be the driving force behind the history and development of ideas and culture, thereby demonstrating that reasoning itself should be characterised as historical. In doing so, the argument will further counter criticisms that Brandom’s Inferentialism is passive, which would undermine its place within the context of education. To reason is to engage with content which has history.

There are two central implications relating to this idea which will be relevant here. Firstly, agents do not and cannot constantly evaluate every belief that they hold all of the time. This idea has been famously expressed by Kahneman who discusses fast and slow thinking. ‘The spontaneous search for an intuitive solution sometimes fails...In such cases we find ourselves switching to a slower, more deliberate and effortful form of thinking’ (Kahneman 2012, 13). In the context of Inferentialism, this does not mean that we are not constantly engaged in the
game of giving and asking for reasons, we can always explain the why, but what it does mean is that the reasons that we give often lack depth and may not be relevant to an agent’s context. Without evaluating the coherence of the application of their concepts, without evaluating the compatibility and incompatibility of their claims, then they will be enacting historical biases which may be inappropriate to their contexts and/or their beliefs. In other words, the normative attitudes implicit in their actions may be in error, they may be holding false beliefs which represent historical assumptions which may or may not be in harmony with the intentions of the agent.

This idea, referenced in Chapter Four, is characterised as an irresponsible belief. ‘There is a certain sort of cognitive irresponsibility involved in those who do not take themselves to be reliable reporters of a certain sort of phenomenon nonetheless coming to believe the reports they find themselves inclined to make’ (Brandom 2000, 105). There are agents who are unable to justify their beliefs. As our argument develops, the way in which historical norms are used to provide reasons for action will be explored. In doing this, it will explain both the immutability of history, but also the place of agency within this, clearly explaining the ways in which norms evolve as a result of agency. It is suggested here that neglecting this process in the context of education will lead to the playing out of historical prejudices in the field. Whilst everyday reasoning cannot be constantly engaged
in the process in an in-depth level, it can be facilitated within education at all levels. Thus, as Brandom does, it is important to acknowledge that, whilst humans are essentially rational creatures, they do not always behave rationally and that ‘there is nothing unintelligible about having beliefs for which we cannot give reasons’ (Brandom 2000,105).

If we accept Brandom’s account of normative statuses as socio-historical, we can perhaps justify placing it within a sociological paradigm which analyses historical power struggles, such as that of Bourdieu (discussion continued in Chapter Six). History has shaped semantics and normative content, meaning that the semantics of prejudice and power struggles can be seen by educationalists as objective truth. This is not fatalism. In accepting this truth agents can begin to transform themselves by accepting their responsibility and accountability in relation to the claims they make. In such a way they can act with agency rather than having their actions determined solely by normative statuses. The proposition that prejudice is in a sense objective is not as simple as it sounds. It does not legitimise the adoption of prejudiced beliefs. For example, it does not mean that the concept of working class will stay the same, or that previous uses will be relevant now. Concepts broaden to reflect new material inferences introduced by present contexts. This chapter will focus on Brandom’s explanation of the relationship between past and
present, the dialectic of culture, and the place of agency in this dialectic.

The relevance and impact of these ideas within the field of education have some interesting implications. Teachers, rather than being conceived of as subjectivities in the traditional sense, should be reconceptualised as enacting socio-historical reasoning, working with semantic content that is both socio-historical but also based on objective truth. Teachers will base their practical action on the claims made by concepts, for example, that of education. This concept clearly reflects the historical development of the term. For example, the organisation of schools based on an economic model, or the focus of attainment as the aim of education, clearly reflect the historical journey of capitalism, potentially to the exclusion of other purposes and groups. Within Inferentialism, this affects thinking itself, and so presents a subtle shift in the way in which we view individuals within education. Curriculum development, targeted interventions and pedagogical practice will reflect economic aims, and these will provide the reasons for their development. Reay recognises this in her discussion of the increasing importance of higher education for economic success and the resulting rising aspirations of all classes to achieve this. As ‘neo-liberalism is tightening its grip on educational policies’ (Reay 2018, 531) and ‘opportunities for earning a decent wage increasingly require higher levels of education’ (ibid) it can be argued that inequalities
in ‘higher education are no longer about exclusion from the system but exclusion within it’ (ibid). Exploring these issues with reference to normative statuses and normative attitudes will develop our understanding of the driving forces behind action in education.

In defending the claim that teachers should be viewed as enacting socio-historical reasoning, this chapter will more precisely expound Inferentialism in relation to Hegel, specifically, the Hegelian concept of the historical dialectic. The historical dialectic describes the way in which the rational process of agency drives culture forward. The *game of giving and asking for reasons* means that agents are constantly learning and adapting their beliefs as they develop their understanding of relations of compatibility and incompatibility. ‘When the unmasking that is the *implicit* structure of experience is made *explicit*, Hegel calls the result “dialectic”’ (Brandom 2019, 358). Brandom’s account of the development of normative content is based on this idea, the idea that, in playing the *game of giving and asking for reasons*, of making claims explicit, agents drive culture (conceptual normativity) forward. ‘Rather than being a passive and uncomprehending *subject* of experience, self-consciousness understanding itself as sceptical is a restless *agent*, *producing* explicit dialectical recipes for thwarting each determinate inclination to endorse’ (ibid) claims. We must remember that, for Brandom, this ability is the essence of what it is to be human, to
be sapient; sapience, from his view, is solely based on our status as language users. He claims that other animals are simply sentient.

‘Sapience, by contrast, concerns understanding or intelligence rather than irritability or arousal. One is treating something as sapient insofar as one explains its behaviour by attributing intentional states such as belief and desire as constituting reasons for that behaviour’ (Brandom 2000, 157).

For Brandom then rationality, understood as the practice of giving and asking for reasons, is agency and therefore is the essence of what it is to be human. It is also historical, and in this sense bound. However, its ‘restless’ nature precludes determinism, as the rest of this chapter will demonstrate.

**Brandom and Kant**

In order to fully appreciate these ideas, we need to return to Kant, recapping some of the key ideas before explaining the next steps of Brandom’s argument. As we know, the Kantian model selectively appropriated by Brandom, can be seen as a rejection of previous models of meaning which were founded on representationalist epistemologies. Rather than focusing his analysis on how far our representations can be said to accurately reflect the world as it is, he rejected the idea that we ought to think about knowledge as gaining a picture about the world ‘as-it-
is'. Instead, he wanted to explicate the process of judgement which renders our experiences into a coherent system (or a unity of apperception) through which knowledge becomes possible. Kant believed 'that the activity of judging itself requires further classification as a process of rendering the detail of our experience coherent and intelligible' (Walker 2007, xi). Brandom views Kant’s starting point as a rejection of the classificatory theory of consciousness whereby judgement is viewed as predicating. We link objects to previous examples, subsuming them underneath general categories or concepts based on commonalities. So, my understanding of the word table is based on my sense experience of that table, and experience of other objects with similar physical qualities. This allows me to categorise a group of objects under the category of table. The word directly corresponds and represents my sensory experience of that object. The concept is based on this, meaning that it does not require other concepts to gain epistemological status. From this view, 'the truth definition is founded on the referential relations between terms and the world denotata or extensions' (Lycan 2008, 115). It has a vertical-linear structure and cannot account for the complexity of the content of concepts. Thus, according to Brandom’s reading of Kant, we need to reject this form of vertical-linear understanding of the structuring of concepts. Rather, we need to understand that in applying a concept, we are simultaneously endorsing a whole host of other
concepts and that we have an obligation to accept these concepts. Further, we need to be able to justify these beliefs for which we are responsible. This notion of responsibility, as referenced, is something which Brandom claims is aligned with notions of semantic credibility and the coherence (or reasonableness) of concomitant action. Subjects are responsible for integrating their judgements into a coherent unity of apperception (Brandom 2009, 35). Critically, this involves rejecting incompatibilities between our commitments while, via ampliative reasoning, accepting other commitments which are implicit in earlier commitments. However, there are significant problems in this picture, most pertinently, the problem of the ‘first predicate’, the origin of the first concept, in this pragmatic view and the implications of this problem for the dependent notions of freedom, normative force and objectivity.

As rational creatures we are ‘always liable to normative assessment concerning our reasons for thinking as we do or doing what we are doing’ (Brandom 2009, 38) as a result of the rule-like nature of concepts which include and exclude, infer and/or are inferred. Furthermore, these rules are not only logical but cultural and pragmatic. This raises an important question for educational researchers and theorists. If we are ‘responsible’ as rational agents, can this notion of responsibility be inclusive of a sense of moral responsibility and thus be used within education as a critical tool? Can we extrapolate accountably about matters
of fact to accountability relating to ethical questions within education, including macro social issues, individual action and pedagogy? If we accept the arguments presented here then the answer is yes on two accounts. Firstly, the inferential structure of reason applies to all aspects of understanding and deontic belief - ethics, as well as matters of fact, are necessarily essentially semantic. It may be however, that we wish to dispense with the idea of ethics and morality and replace them with intent. All action should be able to account for itself in relation to both antecedents and their consequents. And between these two there is some capacity of agency which is characterised as intentionality. Brandom’s reading of Kant provides the justification of this argument, via the notion of responsibility and, more specifically, the notion of freedom and agency which prefaces this responsibility.

According to Brandom, an ‘integral element of Kant’s normative turn is his highly original conception of freedom’ (Brandom 2009, 58). Kant believes that human rational capacity characterised as an agreed boundedness to norms (i.e., the rules which define the use and application of concepts) promotes positive freedom. Positive freedom is the freedom to act, as opposed to negative freedom which is characterised as freedom from interference. Thus, ‘freedom for Kant is a distinctive kind of practical ability’ (ibid). This kind of normative boundedness is different from the type of boundedness which non-sapient
creatures and objects are bound by. These types of entities are bound by natural laws, by forces best expressed through the use of alethic rather than deontic vocabulary, whereas we are bound by ‘conceptions of laws’ (Brandom 2009, 59). Meaning, exemplified in language, is bound by very different laws to the natural world. I must obey the laws of nature whether I am aware of them or not. However, this is not the case with norms. Norms are something that we can be consciously aware of and, in understanding these rules, we become free to make choices. Understanding in this sense is equivalent to freedom. I am not blindly following, I am aware. By binding ourselves to normative laws governing language and behaviour, humans thereby have the capacity to deploy concepts – it enables our practical ability to think using these concepts – an ability Kant referred to as spontaneity. Somewhat romantically, Brandom refers to this ‘bonanza of positive freedom’ as ‘a pearl without price, available in no other way’ (Brandom 2009, 75). Without this boundedness, rationality could not exist. It is this boundedness which allows expression, creativity and communication to occur. It is only through being normatively bound that we have the freedom to be human at all.

However, to sustain this conception of normative positive freedom we first need to demonstrate that normative statuses (such as responsibility, entitlement, commitment and authority) are indeed attitude-dependent, thus differentiating them from the
types of law-governed behaviours or the natural or supernatural world. We need to show that they are the product of human activity. Thus, human beings can only be autonomous in so far as they are only constrained by norms which they themselves recognise – thus, subjects themselves are, in this sense, authoritative. Without recognising a norm, there can be no rational action as an agent could not be able to participate in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Kant’s ideas here owed much to the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Rousseau 1968), of whom he was a great admirer. Indeed, the Enlightenment project of demonstrating the necessity of freedom and autonomy within the body politic which so profoundly influences our contemporary understandings of social structures, greatly influenced Kant’s thinking about the binding nature of social norms. Before the Enlightenment revolution in philosophical thought, political subjects had been seen as subject to the laws of a higher power (whether feudal or supernatural) of which they were compelled to obey. However, the advent of the Social Contract Theory challenged this traditional view, claiming that political institutions, in order to gain legitimacy and authority, must be based on uncoerced agreement. ‘Kant’s views on the source of the norms of reason are an expansion, internalisation, and radicalisation of this Enlightenment account of the source of political rights and obligations’ (Loeffler 2017, 41). Thus, we are only accountable to those norms which we acknowledge as
having authority over us – our norms are attitude dependent thereby rendering the subject an authoritative agent. Brandom’s use of vocabulary here is fully implicative of this notion of responsibility – his notion of *commitment* and *entitlement*. Thus, rational activity, from a Kantian view, consists in the practical activity of the reasoning subject who can give an account of the norms to which she is bound, and through this explicative ability, she legitimises those norms via her recognition of those norms as authoritative. She then, based on this acknowledged recognition and willing commitment, is responsible for her subsequent critical and ampliative judgements and their integration into a cohesive unity of apperception.

However, Brandom cannot accept this argument as it is. The issue with this attitude-dependence model of norms is that, whilst it does give a sense of autonomy, it renders the whole notion of *boundedness* to a norm, and thus the possibility of *normative force* (the strength of norms to make claims on us), unintelligible. Whilst we need to preserve the attitude-dependence of normative force to preserve subject autonomy, we need some form of objectivity to be allowed into normative content, thus requiring that *normative force* and *normative content* be independent from each other. If norms and their content were attitude dependent then we would be left with a kind of subjective idealism which is epistemologically weak. As, ‘if not only the normative force but also the contents of those
commitments – what we are responsible for – were up to us, then, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, “whatever seems right to us would be right” (Brandom 2009, 64). Kant answers this issue with a discussion of the nature of the application of concepts, appealing to the idea that, as agents can be in error, concepts cannot be entirely attitude-dependent. Brandom gives a succinct example of Kant’s explanation. When a subject makes a judgement or acts in response to the empirical world, they utilise concepts. Thus, I may judge that what I see is a dog and this maintains my unity of apperception, i.e., it doesn’t contradict any of my pre-existing beliefs about states of affairs. However, on closer examination, I may realise that the empirical data is incompatible with this concept and therefore I may apply a different concept such as fox. In taking this line, Kant adopts a characteristically rationalist order of explanation. It starts with the idea that empirical experience presupposes the availability of determinate concepts. To understand what I experience, I have to have concepts available to me. To make sense of the animal that I see I need to have some understanding of the concept of dog before I can interpret what I see. I also need to be able to evaluate my claims in light of other concepts. ‘For apperception – awareness in the sense required for sapience, awareness that can have cognitive significance – is judgement: the application of concepts. (Brandom 2009, 65)
This Kantian perspective of the functioning of judgement seems to be guilty of question begging. The clear issue which is the result of this view is that of the origin of determinate concepts (we are not talking about concepts such as dog here which was a simple demonstrative example, but the more fundamental concepts, a priori concepts upon which human experience is based). If concepts are a prerequisite of sapient experience, then they cannot be derived from it. Brandom rejects both appeals to the notion of ‘innateness’ or of ‘noumenal’ activity. It is at this juncture that Brandom turns to Hegel – a move which will enable him to maintain what he describe as *phenomenalism about norms*, and thus explaining the social origin of the conceptual content of norms which are nevertheless, attitude-independent; whilst simultaneously maintaining the attitude-dependence of normative force and thus preserving the notion of rational responsibility as the paradigmatic feature of human sapience. Indeed, he claims in *Making it Explicit* that a ‘central task of this work has been to show how such objective conceptual norms can be made intelligible in terms of social-deontic score-keeping practices governing attitudes of taking or treating oneself and others as having inferentially articulated commitments and entitlements’ (Brandom 1998, 607).

Essentially, the use of Hegel allows Brandom to turn this two-stage model of judgement into a one-stage model. In other words, rather than having a pre-existing concept and *then*
applying it to the world, Brandom via Hegel will demonstrate that
the action of applying is also the action of developing the concept
- the act encompasses all. He will explicate the origin of the
determinateness of concepts through their application by
subjects, and thus, ultimately, with an appeal to human activity
resulting from intentionality. The notion of recognition lies at the
heart the story of the development of attitude-independent
conceptual content, thus rendering conceptual meaning
essentially and necessarily social. This will be critical to
Brandom’s radical claim to objectivity via the social; radical as,
typically, theories of concept development which revolve around
sociality and culture do not make these claims.

Within the context of education this characterisation of
norms as being both attitude-dependent and attitude-
independent will further educationalists' understandings of the
ways in which agents are both bound and empowered by history,
providing a solid ontological basis from which to consider
approaches which can complement work in the area of social
development. Greater understanding of the balance between
agency and historical constraint can be used as a critical tool to
gain greater control over social action and empower agents
working within the field of education.

To substantiate these claims, the exact nature of Hegel's
contribution to Brandom's argument needs to be critically
evaluated. Ultimately, both Kant and Hegel are attempting to address similar issues. Indeed, Hegel viewed himself as working within a Kantian tradition. As referred to above, Kant was attempting to transfer the emancipatory ideals and insights of Enlightenment political philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau into his epistemology. Famously, he drew heavy inspiration from the paradigm-shifting astronomer Nicholas Copernicus and his thesis that the earth moves around the sun. Kant saw this transformative understanding as analogous to what was needed in philosophy. He believed what was needed was a ‘Copernican Revolution, which similarly inverts the relationship between the subject and the object, the perceiver and the perceived’ (Rockmore 2003, 7). As we saw above, this revolutionary drive allowed Kant to factor in the notion of autonomy via the notion of the attitude-dependence of normative force. However, it ultimately led to the undermining of the notion of responsibility and boundedness in an extreme form of idealism, an epistemology whereby knowledge could only be gained through an understanding of the application of innate concepts. It is against this background that we must place Hegel:

‘his own theory is and should be regarded as the system on which Kant insists but which is not present in the critical philosophy, the one which Kant would have liked to propose, the one which the post-Kantians strive but fail to construct’ (Rockmore 2003, 55).
Thus, Hegel wishes to address the problem of the determinateness of norms.

Hegel deals with this problem via the notion of social recognition, arguably the defining feature of the Hegelian view, and probably his most famous. This concept of mutual social recognition is characterised as a master-slave dialectic, the name deliberately alluding to the traditional feudal/ontological notions of normative rightness inverted by Kant. Hegel did not invert that power-relation as Kant did. Kant's inversion was to turn the epistemological lens inwards, given epistemic priority to the act of judgement, rather than outwards to an 'objective' empirical reality. Hegel recognised that mutual recognition is a necessary feature of normative construction, thus bypassing the issue of extreme idealism. It is only in recognising the rational authority of another that normative rightness can be established, and in such a way the norms can be said to be both attitude-dependent and attitude-independent.

The trajectory Hegel endorses is the result of a progressive trajectory that begins with traditional modes of normativity based on asymmetrical social relations of subordination [...] culminating in Hegel's mutual recognition model based on symmetrical social recognitive attitudes’ (Brandom 2019, 262-263)

Normativity, and therefore sapience, originates from an asymmetric relation, a hostile “I-Thou” relation, meaning that normative correctness is not based on the subjectivity of an
individual, nor is it a social contract between equals, and neither
is it innate. These are all positions which could not substantiate
Brandom’s objectivity about norms. It is not an account of
normative and cultural development which is based on an “I-We”
relation. Norms are not simply that on which the whole
community agree – otherwise rightness would be determined by
agreement, thus suggesting that a society can never reach a
wrong judgement. The notion of objectivity that Brandom
provides, based on Hegel’s characterisation of normativity is
stronger.

As one of the central issues of this thesis is power, a theme
theoretically central to both Brandom and Hegel, the idea that the
initial social act is unequal will prove highly relevant. Brandom
has the potential to strengthen approaches, such as that of
Bourdieu, to educational issues. Meaning and normativity begin
with an initial act of mutual recognition and subjugation. It is this
initial and defining social relation which both shapes and drives
societies. The initiation of norms is based on the notion of mutual
recognition. This recognition involves acknowledging the
authority of another agent who is more powerful than the other,
and simultaneously acknowledging the corresponding obligations
that this act of recognition implies. Thus, ‘all authority
(“independence) is taken to be on the side of the superior, and all
responsibility or obligation (“dependence”) is taken to be on the
side of the subordinated’ (Brandom 2019, 263). Brandom uses
this concept of subjugation in the ontological sense, a sense which can explicate the origin and development of norms without appealing to the ideas of either representation or innate ideas. This subordination/obedience model 'can be thought of in traditional objective ontological terms [...] or, digging deeper as Hegel does, as instituted by a social power relation rooted ultimately in threats to biological life' (ibid).

Pinkard, when discussing this relation, says that:

‘…out of the dialectic of recognition between master and slave, Hegel will develop his social conception of knowledge – that is, his idea that the standards for what counts as authoritative reasons should be seen as the outcome of the community’s collectively coming to take certain types of claims as counting for them as authoritative, a process best understood in historical and institutional terms’ (Pinkard 2008, 53).

Hegel argues that all conceptual knowledge must begin with mutual self-recognition as this is the basis for awareness of self as an authoritative agent. This can only happen through the affirmation of oneself as a subjective consciousness acting intentionally, and thus independently, as an authoritative agent in the practical sphere. This affirmation can only be through mutual recognition. Agents require recognition to gain a sense of self-awareness. However, the problem with recognition is that it demands a certain level of synthesis. There is a level of subjugation in recognition as it requires viewing another – not only
oneself – as having an authoritative reason for action. Thus, for Hegel, the subject is not all powerful – the subject requires the acknowledgement, and thus, to a certain extent, the empowerment of another thinking subject. This is the revolutionary notion of the master-slave dialectic which suggests that the identity, and thus power, of the master is inherently and necessarily dependent on the recognition of the slave; furthermore, and even more provocatively, the slave must be equal to the master in order to be able to fulfil this function of affirmation.

In the context of educational theory, research and practice, this further supports the claim that Brandom’s Inferentialism has much to offer the field. The suggestion is that, if semantic normativity is both objective and based on an initial act of subjugation based on mutual recognition, then inequality is inevitably part of the space of reasons. This initial historical act cannot be erased, it becomes objective. Therefore, from the point of view of education, it is highly relevant. The implication is that all of the concepts enacted in every speech act and every corresponding rational action developed from this starting point. Power and the struggle for power has shaped the objective reality of our conceptual world and is the basic principle upon which the conceptual is based. Only through the understanding of these struggles can we come to understand them, thereby promoting agency.
However, this presentation of the master-slave dialect still suggests a constructive approach to meaning. How can meaning be said to be objective when it is based on human authority? In following this argument, we still do not have any sense of objectivity or attitude-independent normative content. All we have so far is two subjectivities with their own independent desires and beliefs who demand to be recognised by each other as independent subjectivities. In Hegel’s view, the struggle for recognition and the competing claims of these two subjectivities ‘would at first be a struggle to the death’ (Pinkard 2008, 57). The only way to avoid this ultimately fatal struggle is for the subjects to find a way to transcend their own subjectivities and agree the right reasons for action in the world, i.e., to become social. However, as there cannot be an ‘objective’ world from which they can view their respective reasons and judgements (being trapped in a necessarily perspectival view) ‘it must itself be constructed out of social practice; the agents themselves must construct a social point of view on the basis of which they will be able to reconcile the various conflicting judgements and beliefs generated out of their personal points of view’ (ibid). Essentially, in this battle, the first to submit becomes ‘the slave’, thereby accepting the views and desires of the ‘master’s’ subjectivity and the ‘objective’ is therefore formed. Once this initial dialectic is established at the heart of social groupings, culture may develop. The deployment of the ‘objective’ concepts legitimises
them through use, meaning that the initial intentionality of the master ossifies into the institutional skeleton of the body politic, thus transcending all subsequent subjectivities within it, thereby rendering these norms attitude-independent. As time passes, the norms can no longer be changed, the master may die but the norms do not.

It is worth recasting these ideas into an inferential framework, remembering that Brandom is using Hegel’s ideas to support his own argument, not replicating them authentically. Brandom’s Inferentialism places all social, sapient interaction within a score-keeping model, characterised as the game of giving and asking for reasons. For Brandom, the score-keeping activity of rational agents is prefaced by the principle of mutual recognition. The practice of using a concept and then justifying this use by giving reasons, by accounting and taking responsibility for beliefs and actions, necessarily involves mutual recognition which leads to objective normativity. I must recognise both myself and the other as rational agents who are responsive to reason for the game to be played at all. In the gaming of giving and asking for reasons, reasons given to justify claims are both socially recognisable and objectively binding. Whilst the initial act is one of subjugation, the practice of giving and asking for reasons will, over time, render the norms objective, with past uses having authority over present uses. If the reasons are sound, the claims of an interlocutor are correct, objectively correct. I can justify my
claim that something is copper by listing its characteristics, for example, that it conducts electricity. However, this objectivity arises from mutual recognition, on the recognition of the interlocutor as an agent who is responsible for their beliefs.

For Brandom, there is a tension inherent in this dialectic – namely the tension between the idea that someone’s application of a concept may, in the eyes of another interlocutor, or scorekeeper, commit her to things she does not yet acknowledge. To give an example, I may judge the coin in my pocket to be gold. A chemist would also therefore attribute to me the ampliative belief that the coin has a density of 19.3g/cm3, whether or not I acknowledge this commitment myself (Loeffler 2017, 47). The idea is that, as interlocutors recognise each other as rational agents, unseen tensions exist between the beliefs of the two parties. Recognition means that we will often ascribe beliefs to others who do not necessarily hold them as we assume that they reason as we do. This idea is an interesting one and one which further supports the thesis that there needs to be a culture of thinking through educational concepts as a community. Within a professional context, for example, a senior leader may hold a set of beliefs about the relation between social class and pedagogical interventions, whilst some members of staff hold quite different ones. It is easy to believe that, when using the same language in the same context, that the same
claims are being endorsed by all. However, as we have shown, this is not the case. This idea is developed in Chapter Eleven.

This section has explained the ways in which Hegel’s holistic, one-stage model of concept application can be said to avoid the issue of attitude-dependant norms leading to idealism. Further, it foregrounds the master-slave relation as the original relation which bestows authority on norms and the ways in which the social application of these norms develops into an objective system of meaning. In response to this, it has been suggested that the originating master-slave relation is of interest to education as it demonstrates that power is essential to meaning, and not only in the traditional constructivist sense - these power relations have objective force.

**Hegel, History and the Application and Development of Normative Statuses**

The previous section demonstrated the ways in which Hegel’s one-stage model, based on the master-slave relation, supports Brandom’s claim that meaning is both socially defined through the situated application of concepts within a social group, as well as being objective. The focus will now shift to consider the precise nature of practice, social action and speech acts which take place when concepts are used, and therefore how normative statuses are used by individual agents. This will clearly demonstrate the
ways in which these statuses bind us, but, simultaneously, it will also describe human agency. To demonstrate the impact that history has on individuals and the ways in which normative statuses bind them, Brandom gives an analogy from British and American common law. He does this to demonstrate how history can be said to impact on our concept use, whilst the action of the application of the historical concept also helps to further define the concept. This model, as well as highlighting the importance of history, also acknowledges the demands of the present moment on concept use and, therefore, agency. Loeffler doesn’t simply see this model as ‘an illustration or analogy but rather as a simplified model or paradigm for how all ordinary empirical concepts are instituted through a sociohistorical sequence of applications of concepts by scorekeepers’ (Loeffler 2017, 212).

Within common law, the role of a judge is not a simple one where applications of legal concepts have explicit guidance. Judges have to decide on a case-by-case basis whether a given legal concept has an application in a given case. In order to do this, the ‘judge is performing what is recognizably a kind of synthesis by rational integration’ (Brandom 2009, 85). They begin by looking into the past and looking at previous applications of the concept under consideration. They would begin to consider potential similarities and dissimilarities between the present case and previous cases through a process of rational justification (ampliative inference and critical exclusion
of commitments). However, the very process of looking to the past in this way, to justify and lend authority to the application of the concept, ‘is also intelligible as developing and determining the conceptual contents (thought of now in terms of relations of material consequence and incompatibility) that in turn constrain the process going forward’ (ibid). In other words, the very selection of the concept for application to a present case, the reasons and justifications behind the selection process will in turn become part of the conceptual history, thus constraining future judges in their own applications of the concept. Succinctly put:

‘...the judge presents what is in effect a rational reconstruction of the tradition that makes it visible as authoritative insofar as, so presented, the tradition at once determines the conceptual content one if adjudicating the application of and reveals what that content is, and so how the current question of applicability ought to be decided’ (Brandom 2009, 87).

The attitude-independence of normative content is not absolute – it is a social objectivity which preserves a phenomenalism about norms. In this respect, we can see the process of agency. Whilst it is true that agents are immutably bound by historical norms, this does not mean that these norms are exactly replicated over time. There is scope, on the level of the individual agent, to weigh and consider. This conception of agency means that agents do not have the freedom to change the world at will, the past cannot be changed or
eradicated. Change is driven by the intentionality of each agent. For example, a teacher's desire to create a more inclusive environment for her students will lead her to evaluate and rationalise her practices and this process will lead to change. However, this act will not eradicate exclusion. There will be implicit claims in her choices that she cannot see, that her practice has not uncovered. Change is gradual and dialectic in this way. For these reasons, it is important that change is placed in the hands of individual agents within education to promote positive agentic development in their own behaviours.

Before concluding this chapter, it worth making a very brief reference to Hegel’s difficult concept of *Geist* and the essentially linguistic aspect of Geist. This concept is relevant insofar as it will introduce the way in which Inferentialism can be seen as a transformative force. The referencing here is incredibly simple - this is a concept that worthy of its own thesis. However, it is only the overall principle which is important here. Geist, or *Spirit* is a Hegelian term often discussed by Brandom, Geist or ‘Spirit as a whole is the recognitive community of all those who have such normative statuses, and all their normatively significant activity’ (Brandom 2002, 227). Geist is human history and the dialectic process which drives it forward towards a better version of itself through rational activity. It implies that the process of weighing reasons and making them explicit means that:
‘...if we properly digest the achievements and failures of modernity, we can build on them new, better kinds of institutions, practices, and self-conscious selves - ones normatively superior because they embody a greater self-consciousness, a deeper understanding of the kind of being we are’ (Brandom 2019, 470-471).

Geist is the unstoppable force of human activity and the inevitable movement of meaning through the boundedness of linguistically structured activity. It is only within the context of objectivity about norms, of the boundedness of concepts, that we can act and, through the activity of judging, drive culture forward. And, ‘at its core is language’ (Brandom 2009, 72). Language should be viewed as the public existence of norms. It is their public manifestation; it is the stream of history.

This section has set out to explain the process of the application of normative statuses and the ways in which we can be said to be bound via the common law analogy, whilst also considering how the process of justification should be understood as the expression of human agency. It introduced the concept of Geist as the driving ‘meta-force’ of communal activity which is historically given, thereby demonstrating that meaning is a dynamic process, rather than a thing; it is activity.
Concluding Comments

In summary, we have traced the influence of Kant and Hegel in Brandom’s Inferentialism. The discussion of Brandom’s reading of these two philosophers centred on particular facets. Initially, we discussed Kant’s account of normative rationality, focusing on the self-conscious nature of the binding aspect of normative rules as opposed to natural laws. This promotes the view of the human subject as active and empowered, thus becoming responsible for their commitments. However, to deal with the problem of the determinate nature of concepts and their origin Brandom turned to Hegel. Here we focused on the centrality of the notion of social recognition, prefacing the importance of the social in the determinate content of concepts. In addition to Brandom’s ideas, it was argued that, whilst the discussion of power and authority is evident within Brandom’s work, it is not problematized, challenged or applied. Brandom’s work is highly abstract and it is, it seems to me, our job as educators to take these rich theoretical insights and use them to provide fresh insights into educational and social issues. Finally, the recognition of the transformative power of the historical dialectic suggests that Brandom’s Inferentialism has the potential to help us come to a better understanding of ourselves. Through this, we can enact agentic change in education.
Chapter Six

Bourdieu and Brandom: Justifying the Comparison

The next two chapters will look at the work of the well-known French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whilst Chapter Eight will outline the ways in which Bourdieu’s work would benefit from an evaluation of his ontology from the perspective of Inferentialism. The focus will be on Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, to which Chapter Seven is dedicated as this is the concept which is central to his characterisation of both agency and practical action (what he would term *dispositions*). However, in order to gain a full understanding of *habitus* it will be necessary to situate this idea in relation to his other concepts or, as he calls them, *thinking tools*. This critical exegesis will demonstrate some of the endemic problems inherent in Bourdieu’s philosophy and his conception of agency - a criticism which continues to plague Bourdiesian scholarship. Further, it will be suggested that the problems seen in Bourdieu may be symptomatic of wider issues in the Philosophy of Social Science impacting on educational research, specifically those which are based on different forms of constructivism and the problematic characterisation of the relationship of the individual to society represented in the individual-holism debate in the Philosophy of Social Science. Inferentialism can address these issues promoting a more
coherent ontological basis for theory and research. In comparing these two thinkers, a clearer understanding of the functioning of agency in *habitus* will emerge, one which is characterised as capable of reasoned decision-making and action within educational settings.

Another reason that this comparison is useful is that both of these thinkers place the issue of power at the centre of their understanding of semantics, although in very different ways. Whilst Inferentialism is being used to strengthen Bourdieusian philosophy, in doing so the idea of power in Inferentialism is similarly developed by Bourdieu’s emancipatory aims. It can be placed in approaches which claim that ‘the social origins of […] suffering are often misrecognized and internalized by members of society, a fact which only serves to exacerbate suffering’ (Schubert 2008, 180) because the initial semantic relation was one of inequality, was one of exclusion. Whilst it has been demonstrated that Brandom’s Inferentialism can pose pertinent questions about the place of power and subjugation within the context of semantics, his ideas need to be placed within context of the Philosophy of Social Science in order to be relevant within the field of education. Pierre Bourdieu dedicated his career to explaining the issue of power within a sociological context. Indeed, his compelling and paradigmatic discussions on this topic are undoubtedly the reason for the enduring popularity of this thinker. His work is dedicated to understanding social
inequality and the reproduction of these inequalities within the field of education, and society more widely. He worked both on social philosophy and empirical research, but is more widely known for the former. He recognised that ‘the education system, whose scale of operations grew in extent and intensity throughout the nineteenth century, no doubt directly helped to devalue popular modes of expressions’ (Bourdieu 1992, 49) and thereby reinforce social inequalities. His social theory represents his attempt to understand the occurrence of difference in a social world which reinforces inequality through social positioning and the relationship between social position and the ‘value’ of the cultural capital of particular groups within society.

A further reason that the bringing together of these two thinkers represents a positive step within the context of education is that Bourdieu remains enduringly popular and continues to exert a significant influence on educational research and theory. Bourdieu remains compelling; his account of habitual behaviours shaped pragmatically within social contexts is highly satisfying. Perhaps one reason for this is what his work represents within the wider context of the Philosophy of Social Science. His work represents a breaking away from some of the assumptions prevalent in structuralist accounts of social life which he felt were overly deterministic. According to Grenfell, some of the most notable of these thinkers were Weber, Marx, Durkheim and Levi-Strauss as discussed by Michael Grenfell (Grenfell
Thinkers such as Durkheim ‘are commonly taken to appeal to the causal overriding criterion’ (Zahle & Collin 2014, p4) when characterising the relationship between the individual and society, ‘maintaining that social phenomena exist sui generis’ (ibid), that they superseded the individual, and are structures in and of themselves. Structures, not individuals, should be understood as causes of behavioural trends. According to Zahle and Collin, humans are characterised as subjects rather than agents. Bourdieu provided a more focused and interactive account of the relationship between the agent and the cultural institutions and spaces in which they moved. However, despite the self-conscious moving away from the deterministic influences of structuralism, his work has been much criticised and many have felt that Bourdieu has not managed to describe the kind of empowered agent which he claims to. There remains a fierce debate surrounding the question of whether ‘Bourdieu posits a determinist logic underpinning his concepts’ (Rampersad 216, 70) or whether Bourdieu presents a different view ‘of human behaviour- directed but not determined’ (ibid). If, as this thesis maintains, Bourdieu’s is a deterministic logic, perhaps Brandom’s objectivity about norms and his discursive I-Thou model of deontic scorekeeping, can give a surer explanation of the social individual. In this way, it contributes something distinctive to the Philosophy of Social Science which recognises that the ‘ontology of any domain ought to give account of what there is in that
domain’ (Pettit 2014, 77). It seeks to develop a ‘social ontology [which] comprises the interactions of individual human beings together with the patterns that constrain those interactions or that emerge from them’ (Pettit 2014, 78).

If a slight ontological shift were to be made within Bourdieu’s social philosophy, then the dual issues of agency and determinism in Bourdieu can be addressed. The ontological shift needs to be inferential as it is only Inferentialism’s unique account of the agent as being rationally responsible for their actions that can unify the power of the social and the power of the agent, explaining each feature without undermining the other. The game of giving and asking for reasons foregrounds the idea of an agent who is responsible for their judgements, an agent who acts ‘in accordance with what she takes to be these norms of justificatory, ampliative, and critical reasoning’ (Loeffler 2018, 52), and should be central to any account of agency within the context of education. The detailed account of Bourdieu which follows will consider his influences and his central theoretical ideas with this aim in mind. It is necessary to give a detailed account of Bourdieu, rather than a general overview, so as to demonstrate clearly both the need for Inferentialism, and the ways in which Inferentialism could be used.

In summary, the comparison between the two thinkers is justified firstly in relation to the centrality of the issue of power
within each model - a feature that Bourdieu can help to make more explicit in Brandom. Secondly, the two thinkers have some clear ontological similarities which means that Inferentialism will strengthen rather than weaken Bourdieu and therefore, arguably, resolve the central theoretical issue with which Bourdieusian scholarship has struggled with for so long. Finally, the popularity of Bourdieu and his impact on current scholarship means that the issues of agency and determinism within his ideas and their re-interpretation in current research demands an answer. If this can be achieved, and a more robust account of agency given, then the greater the possibility of meaningful social development within the context of education.

**Language and Epistemology in Bourdieu and Brandom**

The relevance of bringing together Bourdieu and Brandom is strengthened by a shared ontological concern: language and semantics. However, whilst both writers see language as key to understanding the social, their foci are very different. Brandom is concerned with the relational inferential structure of concepts and the practical activity of giving and asking for reasons, while Bourdieu’s interest is in language as symbolic of forms of power. Bourdieu sees meaning as controlled by powerful groups, and that this control undermines and negates the power of other groups. He argues that ‘language itself is a form of domination’
(Schubert 2008, 179). ‘According to Bourdieu, contemporary social hierarchies and social inequality, as well as the suffering that they cause, are produced and maintained less by physical force than by forms of symbolic domination’ (ibid). This domination is referred to as *symbolic violence* and is the focus of Bourdieu’s highly influential *Language and Symbolic Power* (Bourdieu 1992). In viewing language in this way, Bourdieu often characterises it as a commodity. He underscores the ‘relationship between linguistic differences and the system of economic and social differences’ (Bourdieu 1992, 56), a feature which remains true in education. Whilst it is clear that this relationship is not simple and shifts over time depending on the social forces at play (i.e., curriculum design, examination foci, pedagogical approaches, government policy), ‘the study of classroom language is [still] fraught with issues concerning what constitutes pedagogic competence for students and their teachers’ (Hardy 2012, 170). This correlation, the correlation between language and educational success, is therefore an area which remains relevant. Bourdieu’s ideas, as will be shown, have a powerful resonance and enduring relevance within education today.

As in Chapter Four, which focused on Habermas and his criticisms of Inferentialism in order to develop a clear understanding of relevant theoretical issues, much of the following section is a critical response to the comparison of
language in ‘Discourse as practice: from Bourdieu to Brandom’ (Kibble, 2014). However, the reading of Kibble given here is less sympathetic than the reading of Habermas as the criticisms given by Kibble lack the depth and coherence of Habermas’ argument. Nevertheless, they do provide a useful backdrop from which not only to introduce the ideas of Brandom and Bourdieu, but also to defend them against the types of criticisms made in this article.

As the title of the paper suggests, the underlying comparison drawn by Kibble is the two writers’ commitment to the notion of practice in relation to meaning and semantics. However, as will be shown, for Kibble Brandom’s account of objectivity undermines the possibility of practice in Inferentialism. For both, cultural practice is seen as the cornerstone of meaning. Significantly, Bourdieu rejects what had traditionally been seen as the foundation of linguistics, namely ‘well-known distinctions between langue and parole (Saussure), and competence and performance (Chomsky)’ (ibid). Very simply, these thinkers saw language as an autonomous system, an independent structure supported by syntax. Speakers were seen as being more or less competent in their mastery of this single, unified system. They were separate from it and their forms of language were deficient. This idea of separating language from the act of performance is, according to Bourdieu, incomprehensible - language is based entirely on practice. Similarly, as we have seen in previous chapters,
semantics for Brandom is a question of the logical relationships between concepts originating in practice. Whilst his view of language is based on analytic objectivity, the practice of giving and asking for reasons is a social practice and, whilst the application of a norm is governed by the past, judgements made in the present are material judgements, involving the consideration of a wide array of reasons.

Kibble, along with Habermas, does not believe that Brandom’s Inferentialism successfully combines both objectivity and social practice in his account of language. However, unlike Habermas, who believed that Brandom’s account was essentially a form of social constructivism, Kibble believes that Brandom’s account is entirely an analytic account of language, one which is divorced of social practice. He claims that Brandom’s is an account of language which ‘does not deal with actual practices so much as abstract, potential practices of idealised agents that are not subject to psychological constraints and are capable of “perfect” reasoning’ (ibid). Kibble feels that this undermines Brandom’s commitment to pragmatism. This reading, however, does not acknowledge the complexity of Brandom’s Inferentialism and what his account can offer in terms of understanding human agency. What Kibble’s interpretation fails to recognise is that Brandom does not require the individual agent to be constantly accounting for themselves in a perfect expression of inferential reasoning. There is not a god’s eye-view. As demonstrated in
previous discussions of normativity, there is a distinction between normative statuses and normative attitudes, individuals are capable of error.

Kibble also refers to the fact that the internalised semantic systems proposed by the two theorists claim to explicate novel actions, thereby underlining the inextricable link between language and the associated behaviours demonstrated by agents. The relevance of this is that the relationship between language and the behaviours of those working within the field of education should be central to any effective model of social development. To instigate change meaningfully is largely about challenging the conceptual understanding of agents. Novel actions are a result of previous actions and the ways in which judgement has been applied in the past. From the evaluation of past behaviours in comparison to the situation in which agents find themselves in the present moment, novel action results. Potentially, in understanding the precise factors which impact how these novel behaviours are decided we can consider the extent to which these novel behaviours are the consequence of agency or, alternatively, the result of impacting external structures, suggesting a determinist perspective of the human subject. We can thereby have greater control over them gaining, to a certain extent, a greater level of freedom in our own behaviours. ‘Both authors outline ways in which basic or core
principles can be combined to generate new practices appropriate to particular situations’ (ibid).

So, both thinkers believe that the language used by agents is directly linked to behaviour. However, the reflective justificatory model forwarded by Brandom focuses on acting for reasons, whereas Bourdieu’s model of action is often characterised as an algorithmic consequence of previous actions. Bourdieu’s model is an uncomfortable one, one which has left those who have embraced his legacy with some problematic implications when it comes to agency and determinism – a point which will be developed in Chapter Seven. On the other hand, the Bourdieusian model better accounts for the types of non-reflective behaviours and the undoubted impact that the powerful have over these actions. For example, within the context of education habituated pedagogical practice on a daily basis would be an example of such unreflective behaviour, of what research might identify as the teacher habitus. The types of internalised practices could include judgements relating to progress, the structure of questioning or classroom layout. These types of behaviours are reflective of the issue characterised by Stephen Ball as ‘the naturalisation of policy’ (Ball 2012, 3). When considering the strategies used to achieve educational success by the middle classes, it seems that the ‘policies and practices [in education] are, I have suggested, well attuned and responsive to these concerns and give them legitimacy’ (Ball 2012,
Educators themselves fail to see this as the policies, as naturalised, appear as ‘common-sense’ (Ball 2012, 3).

There is much of interest here. How do our experiences and culture impact our current decisions? How can we judge these decisions? If we are guided in such a way by our past understandings, what becomes of free will and emancipatory action? How can we challenge the historical inequalities and biases which guide our behaviours? The answers are not simple. Bourdieu himself seems to provide different answers to the question of the generation of novel behaviours from paper to paper, meaning that his position lacks clarity - a clarity which Brandom has the potential to provide through his characterisation of the agent as a rational in the sense of being responsive to reason. Indeed, Bourdieu’s account of habitus, the collection of dispositions on which most of our discussion of Bourdieu will be based ‘is an enigmatic concept…despite its popularity, “habitus” remains anything but clear’ (Maton 2014, 48).

From this, we can see that both thinkers subscribe to forms of linguistic pragmatism and place cultural practice at the heart of semantics. The praxis is necessarily linked to language, to human action and decision-making. Kibble’s criticism of Brandom which claims that his account of language is purely analytical and, therefore, divorced from human social activity, is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the complex social
nature of the *game of giving and asking for reasons*. It demonstrates, not for the first time, that our cultured identities, our socio-economic backgrounds, are reflected in our speech – an insight to which Bourdieu also subscribes. However, it could be argued that Bourdieu’s difficulties stem from here - stem from the lack of specificity in his account of the connection between language and practice which is so crucial to agency. The link he describes between language (viewed as symbolic) and practice, and his scepticism of the possibility of *explicating* practice via language, immediately creates a gap between language and practice which, to some extent, renders action mysterious, which renders its functioning vague. On the other hand, within Brandom’s inferentialist account of language, the *I-Thou* relation in which agents evaluate claims, excludes any external – there is nothing mysterious here. The *game of giving and asking for reasons* is based on claims, and the practical commitments linked to these claims. This does not exclude choice. The game is so dynamic that agents must choose how to act in response to reasons which are never set, even within normative objectivity.

**Bourdieu’s Influences: Establishing a Relational Ontology**

After establishing that both these thinkers espouse forms of linguistic pragmatism, meaning that there are some ontological similarities between the two, Bourdieu’s main influences will be
considered and some of the tension inherent in his position elaborated. It is important to understand these influences as Bourdieu’s attempts to overcome the constraints of his predecessors were characterised by himself as an attempt to overcome or unify the theoretical dichotomies of subjective and objective that these theories represented and thereby accounting for agency in his social philosophy. He was concerned with the ‘fatalistic determinism’ (Grenfell 2011, 26) that was implied by his structuralist predecessors. He wanted to reclaim the possibility of real social change through a revised understanding of the relationship between agents and the social spaces in which they found themselves. Therefore, an understanding of the issues that Bourdieu was attempting to address and the ways in which he addressed them, are a necessary precursor to any critique of Bourdieu’s claims to agency and the role that Inferentialism can play in addressing these issues. It is from his influences and his engagement with these that he inherited many of his central ideas and, arguably, it is from these that he inherited some of his most profound conceptual flaws. Finally, after demonstrating the issues which characterise Bourdieu’s description of agency as resulting from a rejuvenated understanding of the relationship between the theoretical binary of subjective and objective, of the individual and society, the relevance of Brandom’s Inferentialism will be reinforced.
The question of agency is crucial to educational theory and research. Bourdieu’s ideas and the impact that they have had on education are, without a sound explanation of agency, at best descriptive of the impact of social structures on individuals. Without agency, the entire enterprise of educational research itself is called into question, limiting the efficacy and scope of research, leading to a more limited use of research as a tool to improve pedagogical practice which is overly focused on a narrow view of progress. Agency is central to our ability to engage in ‘critiquing neoliberal forms of education’ which could promote ‘understanding of how agents can speak back to the institutional discourses’ (Stahl 2019, 68-69), as well as to our ability to unmask ‘the rhetoric of neoliberalism [which] can be ambiguous [and] mask assumptions’ (Stahl et al 2019: 1). It can provide a platform from which to challenge the very aims of neoliberal education itself. Without this sound ontological basis, ‘without theory, much educational research can be overly descriptive and/or restricted by narrow definitions of professional practice (Murphy 2019, xiii). The very possibility of genuine agency in the form of reflexivity has been the focus of much critical writing within Bourdieusian scholarship and within sociology more broadly.

The issue for Bourdieu is his understanding of agents’ dispositions to act as ‘relied on sub- or pre-conscious conceptions of practice’ leading some authors to be ‘critical of the possibility
of bringing a concept like reflexivity into a Bourdieusian perspective, while others have considered it useful, even necessary’ (Threadgold 2019, 45). In other words, he relied on a conception of practice that was not a result of rational agency, but rather an encultured response to stimuli. According to this reading of Bourdieu, agents act subconsciously, relying on habituated practices. Their behaviours are not reasoned, are not the result of agency. Change is the result of external stimuli, rather than the result of rational agency. Bourdieu’s attempt to explain agency as an individual’s response to novel stimuli needs elaboration, i.e., Bourdieu needs to sufficiently explain the decision-making process, demonstrating the workings of rational agency. Thus, it is the spontaneity of judgement leading to conscious action which will come under scrutiny here, evaluating whether Bourdieu’s agent acts in such a way that it can be said to be ‘balancing out the social-within and the social-without’ (Archer 2012, 49) in a self-conscious way. Bourdieu’s essential ideas stand; his focus on power and the politicisation of the situated relations between an agent and their environments remain profound - however, what is lacking is a nuanced explanation of agency.

As one would expect, Bourdieu’s influences were diverse. He openly acknowledges the influence of the great structuralists and functionalists upon which the discipline of sociology is based (in particular Marx, Weber, Durkheim,
Saussure and Levi-Straus); he credits these thinkers as fostering his appreciation of the impact which social structures can be said to have on individuals. These influences are demonstrated by Bourdieu’s interest in the interrelationship between culture and behaviour. However, to say that he ‘was somewhat sceptical of the then fashionable trend called “Structuralism”’ (Thomson 1991, 3) and its presentation of the relationship between the human subject and their environment, is common within Bourdieusian scholarship. Specifically, Bourdieu was critical of the deterministic nature of these theories whose sharp distinction between the subject and social structures created, in his view, a false dichotomy which placed undue emphasis on the power of social structures to construct the subject. He was rightly concerned with the implications that this kind of subjugation of the subject to objective social structures would have on the possibility for political action or meaningful social development. Whilst he was critical of this, he retained many of the insights of these thinkers. Whilst expressing concern about agency, and about the prefacing of either subjectivist or objectivist models of culture, he did believe that the impact of structures on individuals was clear. Indeed, he takes some of the insights of these structuralists to be some of ‘a small number of sociological principles, most often derived from Durkheim or Weber, which are, in my eyes, constitutive of sociological thinking’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 92).
Arguably the single most important idea that Bourdieu took from structuralists such as Durkheim and Weber was that ‘the science of society thus understood as a bidimensional […] must craft a set of double-focus lenses that capitalize on the epistemic virtues of each reading’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 7). In other words, Bourdieu appreciated the relationalism upon which structuralism rested, one which highlighted the relationship between that which it conceptualised as objective structures and subjective experience. In particular, he liked the ways in which these sociologists allowed for the ‘breaking of common-sense perceptions’ (ibid) to uncover the causes of regularities in social behaviour which are arguably invisible to the agents themselves, such as was presented in Durkheim’s seminal work On Suicide (Durkheim 2006). In this work, the relationship between the act of suicide and social fields such as religion was demonstrated; a correlation was established between the seemly solely subjective and intensely personal act of suicide and social positions or groupings. However, while he was appreciative of this form of demystifying analytical gaze, he was concerned about its tendency to be reductive, and felt that it was ‘lacking in a principle of generation’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 8), in the ability to account for either novel actions or the development of culture itself. He viewed these theories as demonstrating a failure to explain the mechanics of these structures which were often taken as givens. The structures the theorists described were often
reified and then viewed as simply being projected onto subjects, thereby annihilating that which they set out to explain. This stands in stark contrast to the inferentialist conceptualisation of culture as the normative manifestation of practice. Indeed, there seems to be a logical inconsistency in the annihilating move of the structuralists from the point of view of normative pragmatics. If culture is generated via practice, in destroying the subject it destroys itself.

However, as Bourdieu also claims, the view given above is a generalisation which belies the richness and philosophical complexity of the theorists from which he draws. Whilst they all suffer in some measure from the reductionist flaw, they also offer very specific strengths which Bourdieu succinctly outlines in his essay, ‘On Symbolic Power’ (originally published in the journal *Critique of Anthropology*, 1977, but now more widely available in his book *Language and Symbolic Power*, 1991). Here, he begins by placing Durkheim’s structuralism within the Kantian tradition, claiming that ‘Durkheim explicitly includes himself in the Kantian tradition’ (Bourdieu 1991, 164). The importance of this acknowledgement cannot be underestimated because, within this tradition, the cognitive structures or schemata of the thinking subject, and the ways in which the subject construes the object via these, are central. However, ‘with Durkheim, the forms of classification cease to be universal (transcendental) forms and become…social forms, that is forms that are arbitrary (relative to
a particular group) and socially determined’ (ibid). Bourdieu (taking further inspiration from linguistic structuralists such as Saussure) takes from this notion that symbolic forms of communication themselves are structuring structures as it is through these that we construct objects. Thus, social symbols, or schemata, are the concepts through which we engage with and recognise the world; however, they are themselves socially constructed. Thus, from Bourdieu’s view, they are both structured and structuring in a mutually constitutive relationship. Agents create social structures/symbols, and these in turn shape the agents. These symbols were also viewed by Bourdieu as forms of social power, reflective of social rather than individual concerns. Symbolic power, therefore, is ‘one which tends to establish a gnoseological order’ (Bourdieu 1991, 166), an order of meaning, of symbolic power, which is the basis of knowledge itself. It is through symbols that we view reality, shape it. Thus, within Bourdieu the idea of symbolic power is central. To have control over language, over the symbols and signs which constitute culture itself, is to have power over the construction of social reality, its norms, expectations and practices. This is where we begin to hear the distinctive voice of Bourdieu – in the reclamation of the centrality of schemata, of the centrality of the gnoseological and a subject’s construction of objects via the normative power of symbols (centrally but not exclusively linguistic symbols). However, he goes further than Durkheim –
for whom symbols were a functional instrument of social integration and consensus. Bourdieu insists that symbols are more than this. He introduces the idea that symbols are power, introducing the concept of *symbolic power*; he claims that the appropriation and use of symbols ‘is an authentic political function which cannot be reduced to the structuralists’ function of communication’ (Bourdieu 1991, 166). In Bourdieu’s view, Durkheim did not place due consideration on the notion of power and interest in the symbolic exchange, nor did he consider adequately the notion of struggle.

In contrast, Bourdieu believed that Marxism offered a more compelling account of the political and hegemonic functioning of language in that it ‘lays great emphasis on the *political functions* of “symbolic system”’ (ibid). However, whilst Marxism offered Bourdieu a more satisfying account of the relation between the subject and social structures in that it appreciated communicative structures as hegemonic devices of power which ‘contributes to the fictitious integration of society as a whole’ (ibid), it has been read by some as reductive in that it does not recognise the internal struggles for power over symbolic production which take place within a given field, thus again reifying structures without any adequate explanation of a generative principle. It does not consider the relationship of agents to each other and how these may be said to impact on the whole, presenting an overly
simplistic model which does engage with more nuanced social relations.

However, the notion of power and the political struggles surrounding the legitimate wielding of power remained central to Bourdieu throughout his entire career – a strand of thought which could be said to owe as much to the work of Weber as to that of Marx and, as discussed, is what makes Bourdieu so relevant within the field of education. Indeed, Bourdieu’s own development of the notion of the state follows Weber’s notion of interest. ‘I have often quoted a remark of Weber about law which says that social agents obey a rule only insofar as their interest in following it outweighs their interest in overlooking it’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 115). Here we begin to see a shift onto the motivations of the individual with or in relation to the social structure. With the introduction of interest, we begin to see a more fine-grained theory which will account for the relations between people within social structures – their positions are defined through interest and capital. Individuals within social spaces act to promote their own interests and they act to gain symbolic capital, they accumulate symbolic wealth (for example, economic, cultural, social) to gain power. Even Bourdieu’s definition of the state as having ‘the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 112) is a deliberately intertextual reformulation of Weber’s assertion that the state is that ‘which lays claim to the monopoly on the
legitimate use of physical force’ (Weber 2017, 1). The alteration inherent within the reformulation, namely the substitution of physical for symbolic violence reaffirms Bourdieu’s interest in foregrounding the generative two-way link between social structures and individuals. His focus on the symbolic, its uses and effects, represents his attempt to answer what he felt was the central structuralist flaw: namely their ‘inability to build a solid link between internal and external structures’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 22), limiting agency.

The strength of Bourdieu’s work is his explicit focus on the issue that remains implicit in Inferentialism, the issue of power. Bourdieu directly addresses, via the notion of symbolic power, the struggle between agents within a symbolic social setting. Clearly, the impact of particular groups of agents on the historical dialectic will be more profound than others. For example, arguably, those with control over social and digital media, policy makers and, to a lesser degree, teachers themselves, will have competing claims on meaning, meaning which is linked directly to dispositions/practical action. The decisions of some agents will take precedence over others, (remembering that the initial master-slave dialectic is, according to Brandom and Hegel, the originating principle of the social, thus the combative instinctual drive for dominance is assumed by both Bourdieu and Brandom on some level), the socio-historical development of meaning must reflect this. Whilst this is shown in
the work of Bourdieu, what is needed within this perspective is a theory of action which can promote a clearer sense of agency, allowing agents to consider the reasons for their actions and, in such a way, act from a sense of volition rather than habit.

The shift that we see in the thinking of Bourdieu is simple and yet profound. Rather than looking at the relationship between structures and societies on a macro level, Bourdieu began to consider the relationship between individuals and their position in social space via the concept of interest: the idea that agents act to gain power and position. Practice, from this view, is based ‘on unconscious calculation of profit (ultimately, the improvement of their own position in the field). In this, they had a personal interest in the outcome’ (Grenfell 2008, 152). Social space is complex, relational and shifting. There are a variety of different social spaces, referred to as fields, all of which have their own norms within which agents compete with each other for power. His move was to refocus the site of study to the specific interactions between individuals and their relation to the spaces in which they moved. He wanted to consider the dispositions displayed by agents as a result of the fields of power in which they moved. In doing this he could demonstrate the two-way relationship between culture and the individual, between the norms of the field and the actions of the agent. This is what is referred to as Bourdieu’s relational ontology.
Bourdieu’s essentially relational ontology is built around the four key concepts all of which have been alluded to: field (a social space which is seen as having its own norms, e.g., the family, law, education), habitus (a collection of dispositions which constitute the social self), dispositions (inclinations to act or respond to stimuli in particular ways), and interest (an agent’s conscious or unconscious drive towards power and position). Through these he constructs an ontology which views the world and its agents as inherently social, and reflective of one another: thus, the belief that common regularities can be found between seemingly disparate communities via these concepts, concepts which govern all communities. Bourdieu believes that all communities are based on these endemic relational inequalities, resulting from the relation between the individual and their environment. His sociological aim was to make explicit relations which would otherwise, to the uncritical eye, seem to be natural differences. Thus, he wanted to demonstrate that differences between people both within and across societies were in fact the result of the norms of the fields of power within which they operated. Bourdieu’s social philosophy is concerned with exploring these relations and the commonalities of particular dispositions linked to particular fields. Without critical analysis, the constructed nature of both individuals’ conceptual landscapes, and the social structures which they reflect, can remain hidden, limiting agents’ capacities to challenge and
change these internal and external structures. The synchronicity between the internal and external often means that agents acting within normative social spaces will feel ‘like a “fish in water”’: it does not feel the weight of the water, and takes the world for granted’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 127). Thus, his sociology seeks to understand the occurrence of differences in social worlds which follow the same practical logic, which are, on the surface, part of one homogenous society but which, however, as a result of social positioning and the relationship between social position and the accumulation of symbolic power, are unequal.

Whilst the exploration of inequalities which remain hidden is needed to promote social change, the issue here is that of the ways in which change can occur. In the Bourdieusian model, agents who are like fish in water, do not of themselves have the capacity to change without a change of external circumstance. Indeed, he believes that it is only through sociological analysis or sudden and large social upheaval that agents can begin to free themselves from the deterministic structures (both objective and subjective) which bind them as ‘knowledge seeks to defuse this sort of hold that social games have on socialised agents’ (Bourdieu 1998, 79). In doing so, it would appear that he is himself undermining the agency which he claims to have retained, reducing the agent to a passive subject. However, when placed within an inferential framework,
it is possible to account both for agency and the binding nature of power relations. Agents do not act blindly or in ignorance of their environments. The game of giving and asking for reasons is the essential structural relation which constitutes the social, conceived as an I-Thou relation. Whether the practice is implicit or explicit, all ‘assertions are essentially performances that can both serve as and stand in need of reasons’ (Brandom 2000,189), and agents engage in them all of the time to greater or lesser degrees. It is clear that not all assertions are judged all of the time, ‘Brandom thinks that a player’s ability to attribute commitments and entitlements to peers may be entirely implicit’ (Loeffler 2018, 59-60), similar in some sense to Bourdieu’s idea of being a fish in water. However, the very existence of political discourse and the holding to account powerful agents is essential to what it is to be human. Art, journalism, film, documentary and even dinner conversations demonstrate the critical power of agents and their awareness of power (which obviously vary on an individual level). Agents are not automatons. ‘Self-conscious creatures accordingly enjoy the possibility of a distinctive kind of self-transformation: making themselves different by taking themselves to be different’ (Brandom 2009, 146). Agents are not passive, but engage constantly with the world of which they are part. ‘Or, to put it differently, it is their nature to have not just a past, but a history: a sequence of partially self-constituting self-transformations, mediated at every stage by their self-
conceptions, and culminating in their being what they currently are’ (ibid). Agents can see the water, and this is reflected in the dialectical nature of their cultural artefacts, as well as in their everyday discursive practices.

However, despite the issue of agency in Bourdieu, this characterisation of the social world as being a mutual constitutive space governed by relations of inequality, it is unsurprising that Bourdieu has had such a profound impact on educational scholarship. So, what is it that is so appealing about his ontology? The answer is simple: his unflinching characterisation of individuals as embodiments of social practice, and his attempt to overcome some of the issues of previous approaches within the Philosophy of Social Science - specifically Structuralism and Functionalism which believed that ‘society was a self-referencing organism, the institutions in which functioned to sustain the whole’ (King 2011, 430). However, whilst his ideas successfully highlighted social relations as being essentially unequal and driven by interest and field position, his ontological framework is lacking in the nuance needed to retain the concept of agency.

Field, Habitus, Interest and Illusio: Thinking Tools for a Relational Ontology

This section will delve more deeply into Bourdieu’s key theoretical concepts which form the cornerstones of his ideas. The purpose
of this is that, firstly, it will allow for the continued exploration of some of the ontological tensions within Bourdieu’s constructivist account. Secondly, these concepts are all related to \textit{habitus} and are necessary to a full understanding of it.

Bourdieu’s relational ontology is expressed via key concepts which represent the relations between agents within competing \textit{fields} of social practice, as well as the relation of agents to the \textit{fields} of practice themselves. Through the exposition of these relations a researcher will come to understand the relations of power which remain implicit within every social system. In reading Bourdieu ‘it is clear that what is emerging here is a set of technical terms -Key Concepts (see Grenfell 2008) - with which one can approach the analysis of social phenomena’ (Grenfell 2012, 32). Bourdieu’s relational ontology, as we have seen, represents a theoretical attempt to transcend the traditional simplistic binaries of the subjective and objective, of the individual and the social, promoting a stronger claim to agency and a more precise understanding of the impacts of social structures on individuals. However, his concepts are not purely theoretical. The introduction of the terms \textit{field}, \textit{interest}, \textit{disposition}, and \textit{habitus}, which are explored in the next chapter, aim to provide researchers with specific and usable research tools which can help select and refine the focus of research. These concepts are \textit{tools} and ‘what makes these tools so robust and relevant today is that there is still a requirement for
the researcher to account for how they used them’ (Burke 2019, 23). The tools themselves can be said to enable critical reflection on the part of the researcher, encouraging them to consider what may or may not be viewed as being adequately characterised in relation to each concept, as well as encouraging researchers to think relationally as the tools themselves cannot be understood in isolation. ‘Bourdieu referred to these [key concepts] as his “thinking tools”, the value of which could be assessed by the results they yielded’ (Grenfell 2012, 32). They should not, therefore, be considered as fixed ideas in and of themselves, but rather as lenses through which to approach and explore phenomena. However, the use of these tools has not been unproblematic, and not simply because of the ontological issues described above. It has not always been remembered ‘that these are tools to be used, not commandments to be adored’ (Burke 2019, 23). In much Bourdieusian scholarship, the issues of determinism within Bourdieu’s work have been exacerbated by a narrow understanding of these concepts, an issue which will form part of this discussion.

Bourdieu’s relational ontology foregrounded two-way, active and reciprocal relations between given socialised individuals and social structures which were seen as both produced by and generative of these individuals. I also foregrounded the idea that the relations between socialised individuals as possessors of relative amounts of economic, social,
symbolic and cultural capital which he saw as demarking areas of social space, were enacted within what he termed as *fields*. When Bourdieu speaks of agents as possessing capital, what he means is the possession of resources which can improve an individual’s status or position within a *field*. ‘Power and dominance derive not only from possession of material resources but also from possession of cultural and social resources’ (Crossley 2012, 86). For example, different forms of language can provide status, as can forms of knowledge. *Fields* can be broadly viewed as social groupings which have a distinct logic of practice in which different forms of these types of capital have value; they are groups defined by their practices, discourses, values and behaviours. For example, education can be viewed as a *field* of practice, as law, medicine, art and business can. The type of capital values in business may be economic, whereas in art knowledge of aesthetics would be more highly valued. A *field* can be characterised as the network of relations between its members. Within it ‘positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in their determinations, they impose on their occupants, agents or institutions’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 97). However, the use of the term *field* as a tool is, in many ways, misleading as it seems to imply that Bourdieu’s relational ontology assumes that there are static and discrete areas of practice. It is important to remember the status of *field* as a thinking tool. The tool is founded on an appreciation of social space as being a
complex, overlapping and shifting relational structure. ‘However, this degree of multidimensionality is hardly helpful as an analytic concept. An essential feature of the Bourdieusian field is therefore that it is identifiable and bounded’ (Grenfell 2011, 30).

Whilst field is not the central focus of our discussion of Bourdieu, it is worth briefly summarising the criticisms of this concept which is so closely tied to habitus. This close tie results from Bourdieu’s claim that the fields in which agents move are largely responsible for the dispositions of the habitus. In other words, fields directly link to the actions of agents. One of the central criticisms of this concept then is that of the delineation of field borders. The methodological border problem for researchers working with Bourdieu’s toolkit is ‘where to draw the line, that is, how to find out where the field effects stop’ (Thompson 2012, 77). For example, if looking at teacher behaviour (habitus) in relation to social class, how much of their behaviour is a result of their professional context or field and how much by their political values? By extension, the boundedness of the notion of field begs the question of the links between fields. ‘Bourdieu is unequivocal that some fields are dominant and others subordinate, but it is not necessarily clear how this domination is materially enacted’ (Thomson 2012, 78). The second issue identified in relation to the concept of field and its relationship to social action is that ‘it dwells too much on the reproductive aspects of fields and not their change’ (Thompson 2012, 77).
These issues can be more effectively dealt with in an inferentialist framework. Bourdieu’s issue here is that he is looking from the outside in, thereby misconstruing the nature of practical action, action based on reasons. In focusing on the understandings of agents, thinking through some of the tensions between competing interests, educationalists can see the ways in which fields compete and overlap allowing agents to think through their ideas and understandings. Whilst a general field can be used as a methodological tool; it must be understood within the context of the practice of giving and asking for reasons.

The next key concept which we will consider here is Bourdieu’s concept of interest. This concept is used within Bourdieu to explain the reasons motivating the actions of an agent within a field and the reasons that may govern their behaviour, or, to rephrase, the dispositions of the habitus. The relevance here is that, as dispositions to act are seen as constituting the habitus, understanding the driving forces behind these dispositions is key, particularly if those within education want to develop attitudes and practices. Rather than conceiving of action as the result of the arbitrary inclination of a mysterious will, Bourdieu believed that behaviour within a given field was better characterised as a result of strategy. Thus, ‘practice was based not only on the link between their individual habitus and the field conditions which surrounded them, but on unconscious calculation of profit (ultimately, the improvement of their own
position in the field)' (Grenfell 2012, 152). These interests link to the concept of *illusio*. This is the idea that the value of symbolic capital linked to dominant social groups that are endowed with a sense of objectivity is fallacious – these forms of capital only derive their value as a result of interest - people want them, so they become valuable and, synonymously, people want them because they are valuable. So, 'interest – the illusio – has all the appearances of being natural, while it is indeed a product of the field, as a collective act, apprehended by individuals according to their own socially constituted *habitus*’ (Grenfell 2012, 158). For example, within some groups the accumulation of material wealth is valued - this is the dominant value within consumer capitalism. However, this value is not universal. Within some communities, the rejection of material wealth is valued and value is instead placed on accepted forms of creativity or wisdom, for example. Money itself has no intrinsic value; it is only validated through the collective acceptance of its value. This is *illusio*.

What we are seeing here in Bourdieu is contextualised intentionality; it is the idea that human beings are driven, that they are not simply automatic. As we have seen, Brandom also acknowledges the intentional nature of sapient creatures, although his view differs significantly from the view presented by Bourdieu. Brandom presents humans as beings who purposefully act within the space of reasons, weighing, justifying and considering meanings which inform and are informed by
action. However, whilst for Brandom intentionality is arguably the defining characteristic of sapience, his conception of intentionality lacks the politically charged characterisation of Bourdieu's interest. It does not consider the competitive strivings and motivations which combatively play out within social groups. However, within the context of education, if the aim is to understand and address dispositions to act in particular ways, then this concept is key, and complementary to an inferentialist approach. The notion of reasons can be combined with that of interest to explore the socio-cultural nature of rational behaviour. Interests develop as ‘impulses, drives and desires are stimulated, but they are not individualistic or idiosyncratic as they follow patterns conditioned by the social environment’ (Grenfell 2012, 163). However, when placed within an inferential framework whereby acting in accordance with field interests is viewed within a rational context, then agency can be retained.

**Concluding Comments**

This chapter has provided an overview of Bourdieu’s influences and the ontological problems that these influences present in relation to their characterisation of the relationship between the individual and the social. It also introduced the relational ontology which Bourdieu believed overcame the problem of the theoretical dichotomy between the subjective/objective found in previous
sociological theory. In addition, it provided an outline of Bourdieu’s *thinking tools*, acknowledging the continued relevance of these tools. However, it further argued that these tools have some fundamental flaws which could be addressed if placed within an inferential ontological framework. Finally, it underscored the importance of the concept of *power* in the work of Bourdieu and how this can situate some of the ideas implicit in Brandom’s Inferentialism by considering the concept of *interest* as having the potential to stand as a reason for action. The central aim of the chapter has been to lay the foundations for a more detailed discussion of the ways in which Brandom can help us rethink the relationship between Bourdieu and agency.
Chapter Seven

Habitus, Action and Agency

The previous chapter has shown that Bourdieu’s work was a response to previous structuralist and functionalist accounts of a subject’s relationship to social structures which clearly divide the subjective and objective realms. He was attempting to unify the classic theoretical binaries of objective and subjective, of the individual and the social, into a new ontological perspective. Indeed, his entire relational theoretical framework, constructed using the thinking tools of field, habitus, capital, interest and illusio, attempted to demonstrate that the individual and the social are essentially coextensive; they are mutually constitutive spaces. For example, whilst schools may be said to structure and construct the individual habitus, conflicts between habitus and field will in turn challenge the institution itself. Bourdieu believed that through ‘educational structures and social rituals […] the state moulds mental structures and imposes common principles of vision and division’ (Bourdieu 1998, 46), however conflicts between habitus and social structures mean that the institution itself will change. This is what is meant by habitus and social structures being mutually constitutive spaces. This aspect of Bourdieu’s social theory is what separates Bourdieu’s work from previous structuralist accounts. However, the mutually constitutive positioning of agents and fields masks
inequalities and differences, making them seem *natural* rather than cultured, neutralising individuals’ abilities to recognise the arbitrary nature of social organisation through the naturalisation of social structures – the feeling of being a *fish in water*. He repeatedly argues that, just as the act of cognition is structured, so too is social space ‘in that it is made up of entities positioned with respect to each other’ (Grenfell 2011, 29) and that these multiple, dynamic and shifting social spaces (which he refers to as *fields*) reflect and are reflected in our cognitive structures and our actions, with different structures making different demands on individuals, often presenting contrary values.

The focus of this chapter will be on perhaps the most popular thinking tool *habitus*. Bourdieu used this thinking tool to understand the behaviours, actions and desires of the situated agent. The relation of the *habitus* to *field* does, according to Bourdieu, help to explain the impact of social structures on individuals. Whilst it is important to bear in mind that Bourdieu has claimed this to be a mutually constitutive relation, there are significant issues with his account. As explained in the previous chapter, *fields* are often seen as determining the dispositions of the *habitus*. However, it could be said that perhaps Bourdieu ‘dwells too much on the reproductive aspects of *field*’ (Thomson 2012, 77). Whilst action is explained, rational agency is not. This could suggest that the relationship is not one over which an individual has control. The aim of this chapter is, therefore, to
provide a more detailed account of this central concept, critiquing
its claims to agency. This will then allow for a demonstration of
the ways in which Brandom’s account of agency can lend greater
coherence to Bourdieu’s ideas, providing an account of agency
which could have more value within educational theory and
practice. It is this final aim that will be the focus of the next
chapter.

**What is habitus?**

The concept of *habitus* can be seen as an individual’s habitual
predispositions to behave in particular ways. It is a:

‘…system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level
as categories of perception and assessment or as classificatory
principles as well as being the organizing principles of action’
(Bourdieu 1990, 12–13).

It is habits and dispositions to act in particular ways are shaped
by social structures, within which the state and other powerful
groups control symbolic content. This succinct definition is useful
as it immediately posits the concepts of normativity and practice
as central to *habitus* (via ‘dispositions’ and ‘categories’ in respect
of normativity, and via ‘action’ in relation to practice), as they are
to Inferentialism. However, the significant difference is that within
the context of Inferentialism agents act with more awareness of
the reasons for their actions. They have greater epistemic status,
i.e., they have access to knowledge about norms. This idea of understanding normative activity is one which can enrich Bourdieu and his characterisation of the habitus as it gives a less fatalistic account where meaning is viewed as an *imposition*, as a form of *violence* separate from the individual. For Bourdieu, norms are symbolic and represent arbitrary ways of thinking about the world. They are ‘the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view’ (Bourdieu 1998, p.57). The focus on, albeit very different, forms of normative semantic content also suggests to us that there is the potential to draw out another ontological parallel between Bourdieu and Brandom. Both are concerned with judgement and the ways in which individuals form an ‘assessment’ of the world in relation to normative understanding and how these assessments serve as the basis of practical action. However, despite the power and succinctness of Bourdieu’s definition here, he uses *habitus* quite fluidly throughout his work, giving his readers different senses of the term depending on where and when it is used, leading to some confusion on the part of many readers. Indeed, ‘his well-known dislike of definitions’ (Nash 2010, 176) has proven somewhat frustrating for those who find such ambiguities difficult, citing it as a significant issue in the operationalisation of this concept. However, the reading of Bourdieu given here is a broadly sympathetic and adaptive one: his ideas need development, not rejection. The reading of
habitus given here is necessarily limited to particular texts and does not cover the entirety of Bourdieu’s work, which is extensive. The primary texts upon which this reading relies upon are *Language and Symbolic Power* (Bourdieu 1991) and Bourdieu and Wacquant’s collaboration, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), supported by the commentaries of Michael Grenfell (2012, 2012, 2011, 2008)

Any critical exposition of the concept of *habitus* needs to begin with a brief summary overview of its historical development, from its Aristotelian beginnings. The reason for this is that the current usage of the concept retains many of these overtones, meaning that further discussion will facilitate a richer understanding of the connotations of the concept – particularly in foregrounding the simple psychological power of *habit* within behaviour. Bourdieu, in choosing to coin the term *habitus*, was deliberately inviting his readers to consider the history of the concept. ‘Why did I revive that old word? Because with the notion of *habitus* you can refer to something that is close to what is suggested by the idea of habit, while differing from it in an important respect’ (Bourdieu 1993, 86), i.e., by using it to develop the idea of a structuring structure, both affecting and effected. Early thinkers considered habit as a possession of individuals which predisposes them to act in certain ways. So, for Aristotle, ‘one who has trained as a scientist possesses the necessary disposition to act in certain ways’ (Nash 2010b,
This strand of thought was also developed by medieval philosophers such as Aquinas and Ockham, for whom ‘habits are laid down by past acts of knowing and incline the intellect to further acts of knowing’ (ibid). Ironically, despite the criticisms of Bourdieu’s reliance on ideas from this tradition, which sees the very notion of habit as being unreflective and automatic, what was initially attractive to Bourdieu about this concept was the potential he saw in it for human freedom, as ‘a theoretical escape from determinism’ (ibid). To him, it suggested that with some kind of change or shock in the environment (usually through ‘generational change, dislocation of the habitus, social crisis and field restructuring’ (Hardy 2012, 126) described as a process called hysteresis discussed later in this chapter and Chapter Eight) habits could be broken. Furthermore, the Aristotelian notion of habit as a possession implies that it was something external to ourselves – rather than intrinsic to our natures. The history of habit therefore, posits this concept as a possession of the individual. What Bourdieu sought to add to this concept was a sense of the social history behind these habits and recognition of the cultural narratives behind individuals’ dispositions. ‘Habits have a history too, in that they are acquired, but for Bourdieu, “history” refers to the practices of social groups, particularly classes’ (Nash 2010, 179). It is this emphasis on the social-historical dimension of human behaviour, this recognition that our own personal habits and dispositions are the idiosyncratic
manifestations of the history of a social group, that differentiates Bourdieu’s ideas from previous uses of *habit*. Habits have a history which extend beyond the length of an individual life.

The historical emphasis of Bourdieu here is one which is in sympathy with Brandom, and one which could be deepened if brought into closer discussion with Inferentialism. The idea of *habit* which informs his concept of *habitus*, like Brandom, views cultural practice as historical. However, Bourdieu does not explain this without falling into the determinism trap. Habit understood in the context of historically situated social groups is merely the engagement of communities in the replication of practice inherited generationally. From Bourdieu’s work, the sense of habit does not appear to allow for rational agency, and therefore has been construed as being deterministic. If habits are inherited then agents become subjects which seem to passively accept their cultural heritage. For Bourdieu, habits do not change unless there are the kinds of social *environmental dislocation* referred to above. ‘It is perhaps understandable, then, if his work has been criticised for being deterministic’ (ibid). Whilst *habit* and *habitus* are not identical, the critique is relevant as it is such an important part of *habitus*. However, if we introduce Brandom’s dialectical understanding of history and its impacts on social practice, Bourdieu can avoid this trap as it describes the way in which individual agents *use* historical norms as the basis of action. Norms arise through *linguistic practice* and actors derive
meaning from *actively* playing the *game of giving and asking for reasons* (also discussed in Chapters Four and Five). If we make this change to Bourdieu’s ideas, then practical action (dispositions) is still constrained by history, but these constraints can be evaluated and transformed by rational agency. To fully appreciate the strength of Brandom’s position in relation to norms, it is worth revisiting some of the contrasts between Brandom and Bourdieu’s understanding of language. It is Bourdieu’s characterisation of language which is so problematic as it has a symbolic rather than inferential role in his semantics. Meaning within Brandom’s Inferentialism is not symbolic of power relations, it is not a projection of the interests of powerful agents: it is pragmatic judgement. The importance of this contrast is crucial as a deontic score-keeping model of rational judgement negates any need to refer to external forces at all. Agents make pragmatic judgements about things and it is this that guides action, they are not ‘pushed’ or habituated in the way suggested by previous structuralist accounts. Whilst Brandom is not dismissive of external forces, ‘there are no ultimate, fixed, perspective-transcendent standards’ (Loeffler 2018, 246). Language does not have a symbolic referential structure which is projected onto individuals. This type of understanding of language results from Bourdieu’s endorsement of an ‘I-We’ semantic relationship in which communal agreement is central. Bourdieu believes that symbolic meaning, meaning whereby the practices of powerful
groups come to dominate and dictate meaning, require communal recognition. In the context of language, ‘there has to be a convergence of the social conditions which enable it [an authoritative group] to secure from others a recognition of the importance which it attributes to itself’ (Bourdieu 1992, 72).

So, the inferential structure of language, and the process of making explicit knowledge claims, stands in contrast to Bourdieu’s characterisation of language. For Bourdieu, official forms of language ‘imposes itself on the whole population as the only legitimate language’ (Bourdieu 1992, p.45). So, whilst Bourdieu places individual exchanges at the heart of his characterisation, there ‘are also relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized’ (Bourdieu 1992, p.37). It is here, in his characterisation of the nature of language that a problem lies. It lies in his inability to adequately account for the nature of power relations, the genesis of power relations, and the location of the affective role of power. The issue is that, if there is any aspect of meaning for which we cannot account, we also cannot for agency. Fatally, in describing language in this way, he weakens the very

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4 The referenced section here is part of Bourdieu’s criticisms of early structuralist accounts of language discussed previously in this thesis. The separation of abstract language and the performance of language, for Bourdieu, should be rejected as it does not acknowledge language as a social construct. He believes that ‘authors who have the authority to write, fixed and codified’ (Bourdieu 1992, 45) versions of language are in truth legitimising the position of the powerful and their ability to impose their own ideas on peoples, demeaning those who do not conform to these ideals. This is what Bourdieu refers to as symbolic violence.
possibility of challenging social inequality. If there is an affective force which is not actively engaged with, then there will always be some level of determinism.

We will again return to focus on Bourdieu’s own characterisation of *habitus*, giving a more nuanced explanation of this complex concept. It is fair to say that Bourdieu’s ambitions for this concept were grand: he sees it as a way to express the relation between the individual and the social world which exist in a symbiotic relation whereby both are structured and structuring, both mutually constitutive. He wishes to use *habitus* as a bridge between the objective and the subjective, wanting to explore *habitus* as being both a result of, and constituent of, social structures or *fields*. ‘It is worth emphasising that this way of working requires a dialectical thinking, where identifiable structural relations are always seen as being both *structuring and structured*’ (Grenfell 2012, 27). However, sometimes the specifics of the nature and functioning of the *habitus* are vague in critical areas, in particular, in explaining the *how of habitus*. How is *habitus* generated, moulded or conditioned? How does *habitus* contribute to, maintain and/or challenge *fields*? How can we conceptualise the relation between *habitus* and *field*? Where does one concept end and the other begin? In order to begin addressing these questions the work of the sociologist Diane Reay (2004) will be considered as she provides a neat critical breakdown of the concept, which can be used to evaluate its
place within educational research. Furthermore, some of the limitations of Reay’s interpretation will also be explored. It will be suggested that her reading in places oversimplifies and thus reifies aspects of this concept, providing an account which feels static and insufficiently nuanced for the purposes of educational research, or indeed, for the purpose of retaining the potential dynamism of the original concept.

**Habitus as Embodiment**

When evaluating *habitus*, Reay aims to clearly outline the boundaries of the concept by identifying within it four distinguishable yet interrelated features which she feels are recurrent strands throughout Bourdieu’s extensive writings on the topic. The first of these features is *habitus as embodiment*. It is very easy to think of *habitus* as purely cognitive, or as ‘solely composed of mental events, attitudes and perceptions’ (Reay 2004, 432); it is easy to think of *habitus* as thought. However, Bourdieu repeatedly emphasises that the embodied nature of *habitus* is inclusive of an individual’s dispositions in ways ‘of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking’ (Bourdieu 1990b, 70). The body is not neutral or natural – the body is social. This is an important feature to appreciate as it has implications for the use of the concept - *habitus* is something expressed by the body. It includes varied cultural actions, it is the
raising of a hand in the classroom, the averting of the eyes as a mark of submission, or the differences in an individual’s use of voice in different spaces. It is in essence pragmatic – it is action, it is behaviour; it is the socialised and habituated routines undertaken at each moment by actors in given contexts and thus, it is often unreflective. Indeed, the dispositions of habitus seem invisible, or natural. Habitus is thus a conservative force, tending towards normative conformism. Consequently, one can see habitus most clearly when someone’s habitus is at odds with their social environment. For example, when individuals travel, they can find situations difficult to read or to respond to. They have to think about ways of behaving. For example, they may have to think about whether their clothing or mannerisms may offend others – their instinctive habitual behavioural responses inscribed through field socialisation no longer fit.

This aspect of habitus is undoubtedly central, and any analysis of habitus which is not centred on behaviours is deeply flawed. As applications of the concept should recognise, ‘it designates a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination’ (Bourdieu 1977, 274). However, there is a further point to be made here relating to the relationship between embodied dispositions of socialised, normative behaviours and the nature of human reason. Bourdieu himself, in Practical Reason, gives a particularly powerful analogy for this aspect of
habitus as being a pragmatic embodiment and thus being an unreflective form of knowledge. He compares habitus to the knowledge of and participation in a game of tennis. The tennis player, as a result of much practice, has internalised many of the actions she undertakes; whilst there may be overall strategy, she is not thinking about many of the basic physical actions she is undertaking. There is a further interesting corollary to this, and that is that each of these unreflective practical actions being undertaken at each moment contain within them the anticipation of the next moment – something Bourdieu referred to as a feel for the game. Actions anticipate future action – they are not isolated acts but enactments of implicit historical chains of practical action. Bourdieu refers to this as the logic of practice. What this means is that actions are not random, they are rooted in cultural norms and these norms will affect current and future actions. He argues that practice follows a logic which links past and present actions; ‘practice has a logic which is not that of [formal or abstract] logic’ (Bourdieu 1998, 82, my brackets). This essential pragmatism is a key feature of commonality between Brandom and Bourdieu. However, what Bourdieu misses in his account is that, whilst practice does follow its own logic, agents are responsible for accounting for the practical logic of their actions. It is not unreflective, but something which we can and often must account for. Practical logic is still normative and therefore explicable within a rational framework. As in the
example of tennis given above, the actions may be instinctive, however, if asked to account for them, an agent would appeal to the norms governing the game. They would use a rational model of deontic scorekeeping whereby, to justify their actions, they would refer to their understanding of the rules of the game.

So, one of the four features of habitus described by Reay is that habitus is embodied, characterised by Bourdieu as following its own logic of practice which drives the disposition of agents to act in particular ways. Habitus is ‘the generative (if not creative) capacity inscribed in the system of dispositions as an art, in the strongest sense of practical mastery’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 122). It is in our bodies, movements and gestures. Habitus has ‘a definite manner of constructing and understanding practice in its specific “logic”’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 121). However, the suggestion here seems to overfocus on the feel for the game which undermines the rational capacity of the agent. From this view, the agent seems to have no control over their dispositions, nor the need to account for these.

**Habitus and Agency**

The second interrelated aspect identified by Reay is habitus and agency. As has been discussed in some detail, this area is arguably the most problematic area for Bourdieusian researchers
to deal with, and has featured most prominently in criticisms of Bourdieu. This section will develop previously discussed ideas by elaborating on the ways in which agency is characterised within the Bourdieusian model, and then considering the advantages of placing the concept of agency within a model which acknowledges the necessity of constraints, as Bourdieu does. It will then go on to link these arguments to Spinoza, introducing his epistemic principle of an adequate idea.

Many feel that the issue of agency has been exacerbated by the fact that ‘Habitus now also has a life beyond the work of Bourdieu, one that sometimes runs counter to its purpose and nature within Bourdieu’s approach’ (Maton 2012, 49). Lots of commentators feel that, despite claims to the contrary, agency has been lost in both Bourdieu and Bourdieusian scholarship more widely, undermining the potential of this research to support meaningful political action and social development. As discussed in the previous section, a central tenant of habitus is that it is embodied and therefore must be characterised as action in its widest sense, from directed political action all the way to the seemingly simple action of the holding of a fork or pair of chopsticks. The question that then poses itself in relation to Bourdieu’s theory of action is: are our actions entirely dictated or encompassed by habitus, eliminating individual agency? Are our actions entirely dictated by our feel for the game, rather than choice?
Unsurprisingly, the answer is not straightforward. Human life is inevitably complex and environmental aspects are incalculably diverse. Thus, the potential courses of action in given situations are always varied – apparently opening up the possibility of choice. However, ‘while the *habitus* allows for individual agency it always predisposes individuals towards certain ways of behaving’ (Reay 2004, 433). This account of agency clearly stands in need of development. At the very least, it needs to sufficiently account for the balance between volition and determinism, as well as what is involved in choosing to act in a given way. It is clear that any account of behaviour will involve constraints, but to what extent and nature? Without an account of agency, an understanding of the extent and types of impact that we can have within a social development context are undermined. There needs to be a much clearer account of what it is that leads individuals to break established behavioural norms and challenge the accepted hegemony, particularly if research aims are emancipatory in character. It is in coming to understand the process by which agents can reflect, challenge, change and ultimately choose, that real social change can be initiated. Whilst a fuller account will follow, what Inferentialism can offer is an account of agents as acting with *insight* and *knowledge*, with these forming the basis of dispositions rather than a mysterious *social force* or *structure*. The *game of giving and asking for reasons* is an epistemological game and one which is inseparable...
from practical action and decision-making. In brief, the issue of how to provide a more coherent account of agency within habitus can be resolved with an inferential approach to understanding and exploring practical reasoning which explains rational choices as embodied in the *game of giving and asking for reasons*.

The account, therefore, given by Bourdieu and paraphrased by Reay is only partial, and will need further bolstering to allowing readers to accept that the concept of habitus does allow some form of agency. Their argument is that the dispositions of the habitus will not be altered or circumvented unless there is a significant environmental change which challenges or negates its normative functioning, thereby denaturalising behaviour, making it the object of reflection. Therefore, generally, habitus tends to be conservative, unless faced with exceptional circumstances, meaning ‘the operation of the habitus regularly excludes certain practices, those that are unfamiliar to the cultural groupings to which the individual belongs’ (ibid). It is easy then to sympathise with critics who consider Bourdieu as presenting a very limited concept of agency which cannot act or adapt on its own volition but only in response to its environment. From this reading of Bourdieu, it is not always clear where that agency lies. If agency is, as implied by Reay’s reading, simply a response to external stimuli, then how is it truly agency? In reality, does this reading not just simply provide us with a description of the ways in which the habitus
reacts and adapts to a novel social situation, representing not a choice per se, but more an evolutionary reflex or a readjustment of some cognitive algorithm?

However, this is perhaps a rather harsh and unsympathetic reading of Bourdieu which fails to appreciate that this concept does provide a more nuanced account of the relationship between individual behaviour and social spaces than had previously been provided by the overarching grand theories of the structuralist tradition. It does encourage researchers to focus on specific aspects of behaviour. Whilst, ‘sociologically, social practices are characterised by regularities [...] Bourdieu asks how social structures and individual agency can be reconciled’ (Maton 2012, 49). This approach encourages researchers to focus on the dispositions of the *habitus* and an agent’s *interaction*, rather than *reaction*, to social structures. It seeks to understand the correlation between dispositions and social inequality. There are trends, and we do not always reflect on our behaviours. ‘A full account of *habitus* [is] a rich and multifaceted discussion touching on a wide-ranging series of profoundly significant issues and debates (Maton 2012, 48). Bourdieu is a social-philosopher who views the human subject in situ; as being, as discussed above, both *structured* and *structuring*. Furthermore, whilst his account of agency is limited, and agents are seen as being ‘largely determined by the social and economic conditions of their constitution’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 136), his ideas about
agency legitimately represent an attempt to move away from the notion that freedom is in some way abstract, as something which is characterised as freedom from constraint - a type of freedom and unlimited agency which is simply unattainable. ‘Habitus is a structuring mechanism that operates from within agents, though it is neither strictly individual nor itself fully determinative of conduct’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 18). He tried (not entirely successfully from our view), by characterising the agent as being both structured and structuring, to outline a notion of agency which was not entirely subject to social forces but which was, synonymously, constrained by them. From this view, it is potentially possible for an agent to be both constrained, and as being capable of expressing agency if it is accepted that freedom is characterised as the freedom to act rather than freedom from constraint.

Both Brandom and Bourdieu present their readers with agents that experience constraint, and for whom agency is expressed as a form of positive freedom – the freedom to act. Indeed, it is incoherent to suggest that there is ever a context in which individuals are not, in some sense, constrained. Critics who claim that Bourdieu is deterministic are, therefore, to some extent, correct. Actions and choices are constrained, in Brandom’s case by normative (social) semantics structures, and in Bourdieu’s case by social structures. However, as stated, this is only an issue if we take the view that agency can only exist
without constraint – a point of view that is clearly unsustainable. For Bourdieu, the agent is partially structured (constructed) by their environment, whilst for Brandom, agents are constrained by normative objectivity. Both consider ‘how we carry within us our history, how we bring history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others’ (Maton 2012, 51). So, to accept any account of agency from either thinker, an understanding of the concept of freedom and constraint needs to be established - particularly as it is the nature of constraint that causes Bourdieu so many problems. If freedom is to be characterised as the freedom to act in accordance with our desires, to act without constraint, then no account of agency given here will be sufficient.

One way in which to view the issue of agency and constraint is with an appeal to Spinoza’s discussion of freedom, here drawn from the arguments presented by Derry in her defence of agency in the work of Vygotsky. Here, she summarises the Spinozian view as presenting a notion of agency and free-will as being characterised as a sense of self-determination rather than freedom from constraint (Derry 2013). The reason for the appeal to Derry’s reading at this point is that the concept of adequate ideas as found in Spinoza reminds us that truth is rarely accessible to an agent (and if it is it is only so in a constrained way) a claim which would be endorsed by both
Brandom and Bourdieu, ‘only an omniscient being could follow a rule enjoining practitioners to make only true claims’ (Brandom 2000, 197), and this idea makes explicit the epistemological scope of their concepts of freedom and agency. It reminds us that a god’s-eye view is never possible, thereby underscoring the way in which agency works. This helps readers to avoid oversimplifying these thinkers and the concepts of Brandom’s objective normativity and Bourdieu’s determining social structures.

The notion of self-determination then has less to do with freedom from constraint and more to do with a genuine, or, as Spinoza terms it, *adequate* idea of the necessities presented to us by our environment. In understanding those things which affect me, my choices and actions are thereby guided by a greater or lesser understanding of what must be the case – thus truth is equivalent to rightness. When my actions are guided by my understanding (which can, like Brandom’s normative attitudes, never be complete - there is no god’s eye view), I cannot be acting wrongly, I am not, in any sense deluded or misguided. I am not governed by my passions, my instincts or superstitions – I can recognise that these do not belong to me, they are not my choices. Thus, ‘free will arises through the development of the intellect’ (Derry 2013b, 89). Therefore, truth is not characterised in opposition to falsehood, but rather as something which we possess in gradations. I am not wrong or right but somewhere
between the two ends of an epistemological continuum\textsuperscript{5}. So, the
concept of the \textit{adequacy} of an idea contains the notion of
gradation, thus precluding the possibility of finite knowledge
which is fixed through time. Truth is not fixed in any absolute
sense. It is not a ‘thing’ which we can access regardless of
particular contextual constraints. It is our best appraisal of
situational constraints and an assessment of the best course of
action within these bounds.

This reading of the Spinozian view of free will connects to
the implied potential that agents have to initiate political change
via agency. It necessitates a practical approach, one based on
the reality in which we are embedded. It foregrounds a practical,
rational approach to freedom and concurrent action. This
excludes extreme forms of idealism within policy and politics as:

‘…change can only be brought about in conjunction with potential
for development. Development cannot be imposed according to an
abstract \textit{ratio} whose “ideas [are] not real, but yet to be realised”.’

(Derry 2013, 89)

Social change cannot occur via working towards an abstract
ideal, it can only be based on an assessment of where we are;
we need to understand the limitations, as well as the potentials,
of a given situation. Only from this position can we be said to truly
\textit{act} rather than \textit{react}. Returning to the criticisms of Bourdieu

\textsuperscript{5} The word \textit{continuum} implies linearity. This is a characterisation of semantics and
rightness that I do not endorse. It is an expression to demonstrate a point simply.
discussed earlier, any criticisms levelled against Bourdieu based on the idea that the concept of *habitus* limits agency as a result of its emphasis on the impact of social structures on the development of the individual could potentially be addressed if we adopt a Spinozist approach. Further, the criticism that Bourdieu fails to account for the *process* of agency, the way in which agents come to judge the adequacy of their ideas can be addressed when placed within the ontological context of Inferentialism, in which the act of judgement is represented as participation in the *game of giving and asking for reasons*. Here ‘giving and asking for reasons for *actions* is possible only in the context of giving and asking for reasons generally’ (Brandom 2000, 81). In this way, Inferentialism can be seen as a complement to Bourdieu by providing a model which can account for agency within a model of social constraint.

Spinoza’s conception of freedom when used in relation to *habitus* represents one of the ways in which these two thinkers complement each other and can begin to account for the scope of agency and action. It suggests that freedom and agency should be viewed as an agent’s control over choices which are necessarily constrained. Consequently, free agents should act as a result of their best attempt to gain an *adequate idea* of these constraints in a given situation. If we accept this, then we can see the value of *making explicit* implicit normative assumptions made
by agents and begin to understand the cultural and historic normative implications which constitute our *feel for the game*.

The appeal to Spinoza should encourage educationalists to approach questions relating to political apathy, prejudice and human action more productively as they have a clearer understanding of how agents develop. It is not a simple choice between determinism and freedom – action is not an all or nothing at all subject. Human beings have the capacity to act in response to reasons, however, such a capacity does not necessarily consider the adequacy of those reasons. Very often those acts are simply directed via habit, are based on reasons which have not been evaluated since their adoption, or which may simply be guided by reasons as simple as: because that is what we, the collective of a particular social *field*, do; or because that is what I need to do to gain a capital with a *field*. By introducing the idea that agency is related the development of the intellect through particular modes of expression and justificatory dialogue, we can begin to see a way to break some of the habitual behaviours evident in society and social actors. Such a position in many ways echoes the central tenants of Robert Pippin’s defence of a broad, liberal education in his 2000 *Aims of Education* speech (Pippin 2017). Here he argues that the purpose of a broad education – one not instrumentally driven – is to combat what philosophy has traditionally viewed as ‘the only real form of genuine unfreedom or true slavery…ignorance’
Interestingly, his justification for the development of a broad knowledge base and critical approach to learning within education is directly linked to an individual’s ability to be able to provide reasons for their beliefs and behaviours. Its varied strands of discourse as an ideal ‘is a general condition for some event being considered an action of yours at all’ (ibid).

So, what do we mean by the development of the intellect in this context? The intellect should be equated with the ability to evaluate, through inferential articulation, the adequacy of our ideas because it is our ideas which guide our actions. As discussed above, due to the inferential nature of language and its impact on behaviour, the development of the adequacy of our ideas relies on an understanding of language, both on the development of individuals’ verbalisations of their responsiveness to reasons as well as an understanding of the history of the concepts represented by language.

**Habitus: Individual Trajectories and Time**

The third characteristic of the *habitus* defined by Reay is *habitus as a compilation of collective and individual trajectories*. This aspect of *habitus* is important as it gives voice to the personal histories of agents. Thus a ‘person’s history is constitutive of *habitus*, but so also is the whole collective history of family and class that the individual is a member of’ (Reay 2004, 434). This
is a key aspect to bear in mind when considering *habitus* if it is to retain its complexity. It can be very easy when dealing with *habitus*, as some of the arguments above have suggested, to oversimplify the concept, viewing the human agent as simply structured only by large, bounded social *fields*, begging the question as to why behaviour is not more uniform. Rather than viewing it in such a way, Reay rightly underlines that we need to consider individuals as coloured by multiple and overlapping *fields*, including smaller cultural groups such as the family. Furthermore, individual histories, shaped by the necessarily spatial-temporal specific quality of experience, are also relevant to the *habitus*. These features are easily lost within research as they are difficult to isolate and do not lend themselves easily to investigation – particularly on a large scale. As a result of this, some educational studies which have included the concept of *habitus* have not always considered the individual trajectory and how this leads to a personalised set of dispositions. Indeed, to do so would arguably lead to problems in relation to the validity and reliability of educational research. Sometimes ‘this is too many *fields* altogether! It may be better to do as Bourdieu did himself in relation to education, and reduce the number of *fields* at play at any one time’ (Thomson 2012, 77). Thus, the interpretation given here by Reay carries real strengths, but again, only if the complexities of the theoretical suppositions are maintained in the consideration of data and the
development of method. If this cannot be achieved, then a reductive view of the human agent will result.

**Habitus: Complex Interplay Between Past and Present**

The final feature identified by Reay is *habitus as a complex interplay between past and present*. This feature of *habitus* is important to us as it underlines Bourdieu’s understanding of the reason that a person’s *habitus* is not static but evolving and responsive, thus this is central to Bourdieu’s understanding of choice and the decision-making process. *Habitus* is not something we are born with but something we acquire. Thus, it is not always historical, it has, at some point, been present. *Habitus* develops through the internalisation of the present into our existing understandings, and it is these internalisations which will guide our future present moments (it will contribute to our *feel for the game* and the *logic of practice* discussed above). Thus, childhood is a particularly important time for the development of *habitus* – meaning that schooling can play a vital role in shaping the future of a child. Reay claims to:

‘...envision *habitus* as a deep, interior epicentre containing many matrices. These matrices demarcate the extent of choice available to any one individual. Choices are bounded by the framework of opportunities and constraints [both of physical space and the social
Thus, the past choices we have made form a kind of algorithm for current behaviour. The *habitus* is a *matrix*. However, this metaphor clearly suggests a form of determinism - it suggests that agents follow a set course which is responsive rather than reasoned. The metaphor feels akin to those found in extreme forms of behaviourism whereby we are viewed as no more than complex computers. The ways in which agents make choices are not made clear, meaning that choice seems mysterious or reduced to a passive response. For choice not to be volition, an explanation of the process of *judgement* is needed and the way in which an agent can be said to base action on *knowledge* and *insight*.

In order to give a clearer and more fine-grained account of this aspect of *habitus*, it would be better to dispense with such metaphors and to relocate the argument within a rational, normative context. On this occasion, we are not simply relocating the argument in order to supplement or strengthen Bourdieu’s existing arguments, but to bring out a sense of the concept which is arguably implicit in Bourdieu as a result of Wittgenstein’s influence on his ideas – something often overlooked by Bourdieusian commentators. The deterministic understanding of Bourdieu’s description of the *habitus* can potentially be answered with reference to Bourdieu’s own reading of Wittgenstein. The
issue could simply be a communication issue, it could be that Bourdieu’s expression of his ideas obscured his own thinking. By exploring his debt to Wittgenstein, in particular his ideas about normativity and rule following, we can dispense with the notion of matrices to explain the complex interplay between past and present, replacing it with something much more theoretically robust and supportive of the integration of Bourdieu and Brandom presented here.

The debt Bourdieu owes to Wittgenstein has been considered by a variety of commentators, although the interpretations of the relationship between the two are varied – as, of course are the interpretations of Wittgenstein himself. However, most interpreters of Wittgenstein tend to agree that ‘Wittgenstein intended to emphasize two main elements of rule-governed activities: first, they need a “pragmatic history” […] second, one’s following a rule requires no intellectual mediation’ (Croce 2015, 333). Put simply, Wittgenstein’s view of rules is that they are unobservable – they are not things, they cannot be seen or traced or studied. The pragmatic aspect of rule-governed behaviour means that Wittgenstein views ‘rule-following as the mastery of a practical technique that sets standards of public correctness’ (Croce 2015, 334). However, Wittgenstein was sceptical of the idea that social science could find the foundations of normativity – instead believing that there was something which represented the ‘bedrock’ past which the theoretical ‘spade’ could
dig no further (ibid). Thus, by extension, if Bourdieu himself were looking for the rules guiding normative behaviour, he would be unsuccessful – no such rules exist within people – just a pragmatic history of public accountability.

Croce (Croce 2015) believes that Bourdieu did indeed appreciate this, and that discussions and applications of Bourdieu which emphasise social behaviour as governed by explicit laws are fallacious – as are, therefore, discussions of matrices and algorithms in relation to *habitus* with their implicative sense of physicality. For her, these discussions led back to charges of objectivism, in particular in that the theoretical framework described legitimates the interpretation of the theorist, who here has privileged access to the motivations of agents, over the agents themselves; this is a position he voraciously claims to have avoided. In support of Bourdieu, Croce argues that both Bourdieu and Wittgenstein require us to consider two distinct perspectives of rule-governed behaviour and the ways in which these two perspectives support the explanatory claims of the analyst/observer: ‘a *first-level perspective*, that is, the attitude of the agent to the rule that is supposed to govern her actions, and a *second-level perspective*, that is, the position of someone who aims to account for an agent’s actions’ (Croce 2015, 335).

The first-level perspective, that of the individual following the rule, is true to the anti-intellectualism of both Wittgenstein and
Bourdieu in that it is not a considered activity but pre-reflexive and habitual – thus we can consider that this aspect of rule-following behaviour is highly determined as many critics have attested to. However, it is the second-level perspective on rule-following which is of interest. This perspective takes into account the essentially social and public nature of rule-following which will allow us to save some notion of agency. The notion of a rule only makes sense if we can account, justify or give reasons for the following of it. Rather than looking to external factors for the origins of normativity, we need to look to a subjective accounting of behaviour within a public space. This, Croce believes, is the sphere of the analyst. However, it is also, and this is crucial to the argument, not the privileged role of the analyst. In this game of reason and taking responsibility for our actions both the analyst and the agent are on an equal footing.

The characterisation of the *habitus* by Bourdieu as algorithmic is one which should be rejected and arguably belies Bourdieu’s own position. Although it does partially capture the notion that prior experiences and historical capital will determine a person’s actions, as a metaphor it distorts the process by which this happens. Furthermore, normativity is more complex than the algorithmic metaphor allows for in that it is suggestive of the potential for a linear retrospective account of action leading to the ‘first causes’, which, as Wittgenstein teaches us, is unattainable. Interestingly, the description of ‘algorithmic’ is one
which also applies to Brandom. Within the context of Brandom's philosophy it can be used to describe the inferential structure of semantics and the way in which claims can be understood and accessed through a process of amplification. However, what will become clear is that Bourdieu's understanding of the nature of rule-governed behaviour lends itself to Inferentialism. The public nature of rules and the characterisation of a rule as being something to which an individual can refer to both to explain and justify their behaviours and beliefs reintroduces the principle of rational judgement into Bourdieu and his conception of habitus, even if it is an aspect which is not clear within his own writing. Individuals can be held publicly accountable for norms.

So, we should not think of the habitus as an internal matrix; it is not an algorithm or software program. It is something which can only be made sense of within a public theoretical space, it is embodied social reason which can only be understood through the process of publicly making explicit. In exploring the boundaries of choice through the process of giving and asking for reasons, agents can improve the adequacy of their ideas, and begin to ask questions about the interests and historical biases inherent in the development of these behavioural norms.

Concluding Comments
This chapter has given a reading of habitus which primarily focuses on the issue of agency. The concept has many strengths demonstrated in its attempts to counter the types of determinism found in previous sociological models, such as structuralism. It also effectively highlights the impact of powerful discourse on individual agents with much more specificity than previous theories via the concept of dispositions and their relationship to fields, allowing for more focused educational research. However, despite this, the concept has been divisive within the context of education primarily as a result of the issues of agency that Bourdieusian scholarship has struggled to overcome. The relationship between habitus and field and the characterisation of an agent’s dispositions as being the result of a kind of algorithmic matrix has led to fierce criticism. Defenders of Bourdieu make recourse to his relational ontology; however, this position still fails to isolate the reasons behind choice, which remain, within Bourdieu’s ontology, at best mysterious and at worst mechanistic within a Bourdieusian model. However, the concept of habitus and its related concepts should not be rejected but recontextualised within an inferential framework which can posit choice within a pragmatic rationalist framework. The account of agency presented here is one which is said to be able to account for itself and the adequacy of its ideas through an understanding of the binding nature of norms. It can even be argued that these ideas are implicit within Bourdieu’s thinking, but his use of
metaphors has obscured the complexity of his ontological approach.
Chapter Eight

An Inferential Re-reading of *Habitus*

This chapter will outline the benefits of an inferential re-reading of *habitus*, considering what such a re-reading can offer to the field of educational theory and research. The phrase *inferential re-reading* is intended to suggest that Inferentialism is not being used to discredit Bourdieu, but to strengthen his ideas. To recap, the implied passivity of the Bourdieusian subject is a result of his understanding of semantics. When considered within an inferentialist ontology, a truly affective agent can emerge. Without such a shift, the persisting issues surrounding determinacy and agency found in his writings and those of his followers cannot be resolved within the theoretical paradigm of Bourdieu’s *structural constructivism* and the symbolic account of meaning associated with it. As has been discussed, the Bourdieusian model fails to overcome the subjective/objective divide it sets out to transcend. His model perhaps over-focuses on the effects of domination, encouraging a view which considers action as a response to external forces, rather than as rational engagement with meaning, making him sceptical of the emancipatory power of individuals. According to Deer ‘this leads him to consider that the ability of the socially dominated to effectively act upon their condition is either limited or weak’ (Deer 2014, 118), seemingly undermining, or severely curtailing, his
belief in the possibility of individual agency as a tool for social development. Deer sees this as a limitation which ‘is related to the difference Bourdieu makes between any expression of awareness and understanding of social constraints by lay people and the systematic unveiling by the scientist of misrecognized forms of social limits and symbolic domination’ (ibid). Somewhat patronisingly, Bourdieu seems to suggest that only the scientific exploration of society (his view of sociology) can recognise and challenge the inequalities of the social. Knowledge is the realm of science. Lay people will only recognise and initiate change in times of social upheaval.

However, what Bourdieu misses is that agents have access to knowledge in the form of reasons involved in judgement. They are able to articulate understanding within a normative framework, and so are not passive. The agent is in the world and has reliable knowledge of the world, demonstrated by their normative know-how, by their ability to act within the world and make coherent assertions which are recognisable to others. If we consider the central inferentialist premise – that concepts contain claims – it follows that when an agent uses a concept, they must have some understanding of the claims made in the use of the concept. Further, as agents are capable of the type of discourse that can make explicit their knowledge of claims, we can say something about the relationship of knowledge to action. The content of concepts and their application is a practical
activity. Inferentialism is not analytic, but *analytical pragmatism*. ‘Persons are selves – flesh and blood human beings who have acquired a second nature […] persons are open to the world through experience and thought, capable of *knowledge* and rational action’ (Bakhurst 2011, 66 [my emphasis]). It is this rational capacity, this epistemological status, which is most relevant here. In re-reading the notion of *habitus* in this way, in viewing rational agency as central to practical action and the driving force of dispositions to act, a more positive approach to social development is offered. By foregrounding the centrality of knowledge and understanding in our dispositions to act, rather than seeing dispositions as in some way reactive, the importance of teacher knowledge, for example, as an affective force can be recognised. *Teacher habitus* is bound by the norms of the *field* which they assent to, but also dynamic. This is not just true of teachers, but this applies to all agents within education whatever the aim or focus of researchers, policy-makers or institutions. Change comes from within agents, from their practice. In adopting such an approach, we retain habitus’ purposefully emancipatory intent and the rich potential that a nuanced discussion of some of habitus’ associated concepts such as *interest* and *symbolic violence* (see Chapter Ten), but place them in a more positive model of the social in which agents themselves have transformative potential.
In considering the relationship between knowledge and practical action, Brandom gives an example of wanting to get ball through a hoop. Before the intension or the action of getting the ball through the hoop can be formed or achieved, a prior understanding of what it means to get the ball through the hoop is needed. I must know ‘what must be true for the intention to succeed’ (Brandom 2000, 82). ‘Giving and asking for reasons for actions is only possible in the context of the practice of giving and asking for reasons […] practical reasoning requires the availability of beliefs’ (Brandom 2000, 81). This view of practical action supports the argument that social development and the understanding of social action can only be achieved through rational engagement and an appreciation of the importance of thinking through the concepts which are used within an educational context. Understanding is inextricably linked to intentional action. Practical action and choice cannot be characterised as ‘dispositions or tendencies to choose some options rather than others’ (Maton 2014, 51-52). Agents act for reasons, even if these remain implicit. However, these ideas seem lost in Bourdieu’s account which talks about agents having dispositions to act. Although incorporating an element of practical reason, he suggests a passive agent and, further, renders any potential model of choice mysterious as it does not consider the place of knowledge in choice. In some ways it bears a relationship with the basic principles which guide simple
behaviourist models whereby subjects are trained through practice and rewarded through the accumulation of capital and field position.

However, in forwarding the idea that social action is synonymous with understanding, and that claim-making concepts guide practical action, the aim towards which Bourdieu worked for so long is within our grasp. This characterisation of practical action as ‘acting for reasons, which is the case when reasons are causes, when acknowledgement of practical commitment is elicited by proper reasoning’ (Brandom 2000, 96) allows for a better understanding development of habitus. As inferential understanding develops, so too do our behaviours and our choices. Brandom offers an ‘account of the will as a rational faculty of practical reasoning’ (Brandom 2000, 79).

The issues with Bourdieu’s concept of habitus are not only theoretical, but will impact on research. In fact, Bourdieu believed that his thinking tools must always be considered in relation to their relevance with social research. Bourdieusian research typically presupposes that ‘disparities in the material conditions of the existence of different social classes explain why cognitive and normative dispositions to act vary systematically between individuals from these different classes’ (Tarabini & Curran 2019, 54). Bourdieu believes that it is material conditions which are primarily responsible for behaviour. The implication here within
the context of education is that the only way in which we can address social inequality is through changing the material conditions of students. In the short (or long) term, this is a tall order. Whilst it is absolutely imperative that material inequality be addressed, and the link between material conditions and life chances remain a central concern, this is not the only way in which the lives of children can be improved. Environmental changes based on the understanding and compassion of agents within educational settings is key. The choices that teachers make everyday impact the lives of children in very real ways.

As Inferentialism shows, the dispositions of habitus are not 'passive' responses to a given external world or an algorithmic response to external stimulus – agents are active knowers. This does not mean that the issue of power is therefore redundant. What it does mean is that it needs to be considered in a way which retains agency. It needs to consider power over normative content, rather than symbolic power. Unlike Bourdieu's ideas about the symbolic nature of language and power, Brandom offers a view of language as normative. There is the potential here for both power and agency to be explained together by considering why and how some agents have greater normative rather than symbolic power, thereby giving rise to particular behaviours. Consider, for example, the differential impact that social influencers, or Amazon, have over the way we make our judgments. Social influencers can assume the role of experts in
the practical judgements of those who accept them as authoritative. Brandom discussed the concept of *reliability* in relation to epistemology, whereby he claimed that agents are more likely to accept the claims of some agents over others in given contexts. He argues that ‘reliability inferences play an absolutely central role in the *game of giving and asking for reasons*’ (Brandom 2000, 120). So, for example, I will generally judge a doctor’s knowledge as being more *reliable* than mine in medical issues. There are obvious questions relating to power here and the potential for exploitation of the individual who uses the opinions of an expert as reasons for action. The faith put in perceived ‘experts’ may be misplaced. Furthermore, it is also clear that experts have potentially more power over linguistic and, therefore, conceptual norms as their own practices are more visible and broadly circulated within social contexts. Therefore, it is worth remembering that whilst the model of social change and development presented by Brandom is a necessary result of practical engagement with the world, this does not mean that it is divorced from issues of power and control, nor can it ever be.

The adoption of an inferential outlook necessitates a moving away from treating external social factors, policy interventions, and the ways in which these things impact on agents and their environments, as prima facie within research. Policy and intervention should aim to develop agents’ knowledge and understandings of exactly what they have
committed themselves to and what these commitments entitle them to so that their choices are informed. This shift of focus can guide educational research and practice in new directions, providing a refreshed approach to social development and the promotion of human agency. This would have a variety of implications within the field of education. In addition to the evaluation of the way in which policy and research is implemented within schools, it can also help educationalists to reconsider the ways in which behavioural trends could be challenged, and the ways in which teachers approach reflective practice and the interrogation of their own beliefs and motivations. The habitus of agents within education can be better understood and developed if we consider agents as knowers.

The Inferential Habitus and its Place Within the Philosophy of Education

This section will briefly consider some contemporary work relating to Inferentialism within the Philosophy of Education in order to demonstrate the benefits of an inferential re-reading of habitus. Additionally, it will develop some of the theoretical arguments presented so far, which will in turn demonstrate the contribution that an inferential re-reading of habitus can make to the Philosophy of Social Science. The work on Inferentialism within the context of the Philosophy of Education, and its application to
education, has been driven largely by Jan Derry. Her work challenges the foundations of social constructivism by considering the implications of Inferentialism for epistemology. Specifically, Derry challenges the representationalism underpinning various approaches to pedagogy. She rejects the idea of ‘thought or mind being something inner’ (Derry 2020, 6), as separate from the world. ‘Following from this, rather than actions being comprehended in terms of behaviour seen as an outer sign of an inner state, meaning and our capacities to perform particular actions are seen as being actualised in activity’ (Derry 2020, 11). Behaviour is pragmatic and agents are responsive to reasons. What this section will show is the way in which these ideas can feed into the re-reading of *habitus* as well as briefly touching on the wider consideration of the relationship between Inferentialism and the Philosophy of Social Science. Derry also acknowledges that Inferentialism can accommodate those ‘concerned with [issues], such as access and social justice’ (Derry 2020, 7). However, she is referring to the idea that enhancing the quality of education in relation to pedagogy has emancipatory consequences. This is no doubt true. However, the quality of education can also be improved through the development of teachers themselves, who learn in just the same way as students.

In Derry’s *Vygotsky: Philosophy and Education* (2013), she argues against readings of Vygotsky which interpret him as a
constructivist by emphasising the influence of Hegel and Spinoza on his thought. Whilst this thesis will not consider her key theses, her insights on flaws inherent in constructivist approaches are relevant. She argues that the issue with constructivist approaches is that they are built on a representational model of meaning (a theme considered in relation to Bourdieu’s approach to language earlier in this thesis) meaning that they are still working within a Cartesian model. ‘The representationalist paradigm presents the relation of mind and world as one in which knowledge caused by sense perception is made meaningful by constructions put upon it’ (Derry 2013, 32). This model of meaning and knowledge is fundamentally flawed as it cannot explain how we come to have knowledge about things, or where these meanings come from, i.e., how meanings link to that which they represent. Meaning is clearly not arbitrary; a cat is a cat. The inferences within the word cat are true inferences. The word cat carries with it knowledge claims in terms of being governed by norms that decide the correctness of application. The process of communication may be a shared one, one in which we can hold each other accountable, but surely this is not meaning which is arbitrarily constructed during the exchange. Words are concepts which contain real knowledge which cannot best be accounted for within a representationalist account of meaning. Whilst it is not being suggested here that Bourdieu’s theoretical model is underpinned by a simple, basic form of representationalism, the
symbolism inherent in his model has more in common with representationalism than he perhaps would wish. In constructing meanings, agents are responding to external causes. What is being suggested is that the criticisms made by Derry in relation to the inherent (although disavowed) representationalism in these approaches forecloses understanding of the sociogenesis of meaning and therefore, ultimately, of agency.

As we know, Bourdieu’s position is one in which he represents the agent as a structuring structure. In other words, the social external forces both shape individuals and are shaped by them. External forces act as causes. In doing this, as has been explained in previous chapters, he falls into a dualistic position that he cannot seem to overcome as the separation between the agent and social structures is presented in stark terms with insufficient recognition of the agent’s assent or dissent in relation to the maintenance or development of social structures. Brandom says that ‘I take it that a distinction becomes a dualism when it is drawn in terms that make the relations between the distinguished items unintelligible’ (Brandom 2012, 8). These issues inherent in Bourdieu do not only represent an problem for those working within Bourdieu’s theoretical model. The philosophical arguments forwarded by Derry and her understanding of the radical potential contribution that Brandom has to make can contribute to the Philosophy of Sociology more widely, specifically in regards to the ongoing individualism-holism,
agency-structure debates. The ‘agency-structure debate has significantly focused on the issue of whether – and how – social structures restrict, or even compromise, individual agents’ autonomy’ (Zahle and Collin 2014, 10). These contemporary debates are clearly still grappling with the influences of the discipline of sociology’s founders such a Comte and Durkheim who strove to explicate the clear trends in data created by an increasingly administrative society ‘by displaying the social forces at work among us’ (Pettit 2011, 78). Durkheim ‘took those forces to operate on us cohesively’ (ibid). Whilst the kind of functionalist-structuralist accounts forwarded by Durkheim and Comte are generally not endorsed today, and ‘nearly everyone agrees with [some form of] ontological individualism, believing it to be the only alternative to the crazy idea that social facts are autonomous spirits, lurking in a separate metaphysical realm’ (Epstein 18, 2011), the arguments continue as to the relative constitutive or casual power of each. Martin Collis has pointed to the apparent insolubility of the problems posed by the dualism underpinning the Philosophy of Social Science, concluding that there are still very significant challenges to overcome. He argues that none of the main paradigmatic epistemological positions within the Philosophy of Social Science have sufficiently addressed the pressing question of developing ‘a notion of autonomy’ necessary to describe ‘the free citizen and the norms of a just society’ (Hollis 2007, 260). Like Brandom, he believes the deterministic
implications of empiricism are still embedded in modern sociology and philosophy. ‘They are buried perhaps, but not dead. They are buried in the roots of the very theories which purport to reject them’ (Hollis 1977, 2). He too considers that ‘Descartes, in founding modern philosophy, also founded some of its hardest puzzles’ (Hollis 2015, 7). Unsurprisingly, therefore, his discussion covers some familiar themes. He argues that theories ‘claim[ing] that social structures are systems which are external and prior to actions and determine them…[are] grossly blind to the scope of human manoeuvre’ (Hollis 2007, 248). However, he similarly rejects what he terms subjectivist models as he does not see how they can account for the influence of ‘natural conditions, material scarcities and the physical state of technologies’ (249). For him, ‘the problems of structure and action have led us a fine dance’ (Hollis 2007, 248). Hollis does not offer us clear answers but rather invites us to consider the contradictions at the heart of a debate which characterises a discipline. He points to a flaw which is bigger than a single thinker or perspective. Arguably, the individual-holism debate, with all of its subtleties and nuances, is a conversation whose very existence demonstrates its inherent inability to reconcile the theoretical problem it discusses. The debate itself represents a false dichotomy within which theorists are focused on relations between agents and social structures. The problem that the Philosophy of Social Science faces is, in truth, not one of bringing two different aspects or sides of the
debate together. It is of dissolving the divide. One way of doing this is through considering meaning in inferentialist rather than representational terms, thereby revising what is meant by knowledge.

Derryl explains the difference between a representational model and an inferentialist model with reference to causes and reasons. She does this in order to demonstrate that distinctly human behaviour can only be understood within an inferential model. ‘By cause, I mean a relationship in which no conscious purpose on the part of the agent is involved’ (Derry 2013, 36). She uses Brandom’s example of an alarm perceiving a fire. The alarm will be much more efficient than a person in doing this, however, it is responding only. If a person were to shout ‘Fire!’ it would not simply be an alarm—it would involve responsiveness to reasons, not solely causes, and in doing so involve a form of knowledge, e.g., that fire is hot, that it is dangerous, etc. Interestingly, she highlights the fallacy made deliberately above, that of saying that an alarm perceives a fire. ‘This is already an anthropomorphism’ (Derry 2013, 37), and one which implies that causes are at least partly responsible for meaning and therefore are in some way repositories of knowledge. Arguably, Bourdieu’s idea of a structuring-structure acts in a similar way, ascribing something which causes as having agency. If we are interested in meaning and the basis of knowledge, the focus needs to move from cause to reasons. From an inferential perspective, the basis
of knowledge, and agency, is in reasons not solely causes. In considering the reasons for actions, the reason for shouting “Fire!” for example, we can gain knowledge and an understanding of the choices that agents make. The argument that Derry is presenting here does not reject representationalism entirely, ‘representationalism and inference are not polar opposites but implicated in each other’ (Derry 2013, 39).

This very simple example demonstrates why it is that we should be wary of the characterisation of the agent as a structuring-structure. It seems to imply that behaviour is a response to causes, rather than a response to reasons. Whilst I am not claiming that Bourdieu’s ideas are as simple as this, we can see that the causal model suggested by this metaphor suffers from the kind of fallacy identified by Derry, that of negating agency by neglecting the idea of reason.

Representationalism in Bourdieu

In Bourdieu’s account, agents’ material, objective contexts and resources, and the symbolic value that these have, dictate their field positions in relation to others. The ‘distribution of socially efficient resources that define the external constraints bearing on interactions and representations’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 11) are central to Bourdieu’s ontology. Bourdieu ‘replaces the meaning of speech with a question of value and power (Bourdieu
Meaning and language are symbolic, they represent the value placed in arbitrary forms of capital (cultural, social and symbolic acquisitions which are perceived as having value by a particular social group, for example, money within the field of business) which place agents within social structures, or fields. Meaning is projected onto practice. The arbitrary nature of language is therefore suggestive of a dualistic approach whereby objective stimuli are given symbolic value; language is representing the world symbolically and, from Bourdieu's view, in such a way which reflects the interests of powerful groups. He reinforces this view via the idea of doxa, a concept used to describe a state of misrecognition on the part of the agent, of a failure to recognise the arbitrary value projected onto forms of capital. He uses this concept to explain agents' acceptance of the arbitrary symbolism which places value in forms of capital, thereby reinforcing social inequality. Bourdieu believes that 'language and linguistic exchanges and the misrecognized arbitrary classifications, categorisation and differentiation…contribute to the legitimation of doxa' (Deer 2014, 117). The issue here is that, in claiming that language is symbolic, constructivists are supportive of the implicit power relations within society, it rejects the possibility of truth and, therefore, of the objectively binding nature of the social. It unwittingly promotes a representational ontology and therefore, by extension, a dualist ontological position.
Much of the work on Inferentialism within the Philosophy of Education focuses on the ways in which children develop knowledge (Marabini & Moretti 2017; McCorey 2017, Bakker & Husmann; Causton 2019; Derry 2016; Noorloos et al 2016; Bakker & Derry 2011). The analyses, while tending to focus on pedagogy, still give an insight into the developmental nature of understanding. This is relevant to our assertion that change needs to be driven by an agent characterised as a knower, i.e., of the agent as a learner. ‘Normativity is important in this game in that the correctness of what one says in it depends on the reactions of one’s interlocutors and one’s reactions to those reactions’ (Noorloos et al 2016, 447). However, the insights of Inferentialism should not simply be considered in relation to student understanding; all understanding, all action is based on the same principle. Inferentialism can focus our attention on the process of learning and, therefore, the understanding of concepts through the mastery of their application. As Inferentialism is a pragmatic theory and concerned with action and reasons for action, the sounder a practitioner’s or researcher’s grasp of educational concepts, the more reasoned and, therefore, effective their actions will be. Inferentialism:

‘...is able to account for this feature of learning, because learners can be said to perfect their capacities to give reasons, make inferences, navigate and explore the space of reasons, and know how to apply concepts. Inferentialism, therefore, is equipped to
emphasise the developmental content of learning’ (Taylor et al 2017, 778).

To introduce an example (which will be used to interrogate inferentialism’s relevance in Chapter Eleven), consider the application of the Pupil Premium\textsuperscript{6} (PP) policy in England at the time of writing. The government suggests a \textit{tiered approach} to PP intervention, including teaching, academic support and wider approaches (Department for Education, 2020). An inferential approach to this policy drive would need to consider this very carefully, particularly the first of these. If \textit{teaching} is going to be an effective strategy in targeting PP students, then teachers themselves need to be able to account and \textit{take responsibility} for the ways in which this is happening in the classroom. This \textit{does not} mean that they should simply repeat the school policy or give a vague overview of generic interventions. Teachers need to understand the kinds of barriers that disadvantaged students may face in relation to learning and how to address these in order to help them understand the \textit{reasons} that underpin their actions. Indeed, this is similarly true in relation to the ways in which money is spent by senior and middle leadership. Without a clear understanding of the concept of PP in an inferential sense, in the sense of having mastered the implications and commitments made in the application of this concept, then it

\textsuperscript{6} Pupil Premium is a category used within the England’s education to classify children who need additional help and support as a result of their economic background.
cannot be addressed with any precision. Clearly then an approach to policy implementation which is not thoroughly embedded in this way, in a way which prioritises teacher understanding and concept development, will be lacking in efficacy. Research and policy would benefit from clearly acknowledging the centrality of inferential reason.

**Bourdieu, Language and Social Research**

Bourdieu, as we know, did not consider *habitus* or any of his thinking tools fit to be dealt with on a purely theoretical level. Whilst we are working within the discipline of the Philosophy of Education, we still need to be able to consider the concepts with which we are working in social contexts. Whilst it has been argued throughout that the concept of *habitus* is open to numerous and wide-ranging criticisms, it does have potential ‘as both empirical object (*explanandum*) and method of enquiry (*modus cognitionis*)’ (Wacquant 2014, 3). The remainder of this chapter will begin to develop these ideas by considering some of the ways in which *habitus* has been applied in research and the issues relating to these applications. Through this discussion we will begin to suggest some ways in which an inferential re-reading of habitus has the potential to address some of these concerns. Specifically, it will build on the inferential re-reading of the notion of the *dispositions* which constitute *habitus* introduced
earlier, and the way that this also has the capacity to enrich and rejuvenate existing approaches to social research. Again, the centrality of the role of language will be reinforced and, in ‘giving pride of place to practices of giving and asking for reasons’ (Brandom 2000, 11), this chapter will lay the groundwork for an appreciation of the transformative power that an inferential re-reading of Bourdieu can have.

One of the recurring issues that researchers have faced when applying the concept of habitus is that of how to identify, characterise and understand the dispositions which they view as constituting the habitus. They need to consider how to track the relationship between field and individual which lead to particular dispositions manifesting themselves as behaviours, thereby allowing them to understand the structuring structures which develop these dispositions. Typically, then, the beginning of research which utilises the thinking tool of habitus is seen as necessitating the identification and explication of these dispositions. Thus, ‘applying habitus as a methodological tool means devising mechanisms through which social agents’ dispositional schemes can be identified within the fields in which they originate or transform’ (Costa & Murphy 2015, 8). Much of the research undertaken in this field has been heavily influenced by the work of Loïc Wacquant, outlined in his collaborative work An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology (1992), but also in his subsequent works. He has suggested three ways in which
researchers could ‘detect the architecture of the stratified system of schemata that compose habitus’ (Wacquant 2014, 6). The first of these three lends itself most clearly to an inferential re-reading. It is what Wacquant describes as the *synchronic and inductive* approach. This methodological approach aims to ‘trace out connections between patterns of preferences, expressions, and social strategies within and across realms of activity so as to infer their shared matrix’ (ibid). This synchronic and inductive approach lends itself most strongly to an inferential re-reading of *habitus* as it explicitly sets out to explore social action within the context of *social practice*; it lends itself well to a conception of *habitus* that is essentially normative. In coming to identify similar patterns of practical action between agents placed similarly within particular *fields*, researchers will have a clear starting point for research from which to understand these behaviours. Wacquant believes that the identification of correlations allows for an exploration of the ‘shared matrix’ of dispositions shared by agents in the *fields* in which they operate, or, in Bourdieu’s words, ‘the space of social positions [...] retranslated into a space of position-takings through the mediation of the space of dispositions (or *habitus*)’ (Bourdieu 1998, 6).  

However, without the type of ontological shift argued for throughout this thesis, the correlations and their relation to agents becomes static with no room from agency. If Bourdieusian research sets out to understand the ‘preferences, expressions,
and social strategies’ (Wacquant 2014, 6), it cannot base its understandings on social structures, viewing these as dominant. Agents are not passively responsive; they are possessors of knowledge. However, from the matrix model of human activity, the agent is presented very much like this, as responding reliably to things as a result of forming habits during social practice. However, from an inferential reading, belief and understanding are necessarily prior to practical action. The claims agents endorse entitle them to make further claims – agents act with both knowledge and insight. Agents are responsive to reason. Practical action is based on conceptual understanding, on beliefs which are self-consciously justifiable and rational and for which agents, rather than the social, are responsible. Practical actions, rather than reliable responses, occur ‘when that responsive capacity or skill is put into a larger context that includes treating the responses as inferentially significant: as providing reasons for other moves’ (Brandom 2000, 17). The ‘shared matrix’ metaphor should be replaced with the more subtle and fine-grained idea of being responsive to reasons.

The next approach suggested by Wacquant to support identification and explanation of the manifested dispositions which constitute habitus also has the capacity to be strengthened by an inferential ontological shift of focus which foregrounds the agent as being responsive to reasons, rather than as having predispositions to act. This second approach is what he terms
the *diachronic and deductive* approach. The *diachronic and deductive* approach sets out ‘to map the social trajectories of agents so as to reconstitute the sequencing and sedimentation of layers of dispositions across time’ (ibid). This approach seeks to understand the ways in which *habitus* develops as a result of shifting placements within given *fields*. It is concerned with the development of *habitus* over time. This approach lends itself to rich descriptive data which demonstrates clearly that *social position* has a direct link to an agent’s dispositions. Its strength is that it places emphasis on the shifting and developmental aspects of *habitus*. It does not present the *habitus* as static, but rather as having the potential to change and adapt to the environment in which it finds itself. Nevertheless, as it is working within the Bourdieusian model, it still fails to give an account of what drives development without sacrificing agency. The model is a responsive one which views the development of *habitus* as the result of the demands of *field* rather than as a result of reasoning. Whilst it may be the case that *field* demands impact on an agent’s social actions (thereby justifying an approach which considers the issue of power) they are still the result of reasoning. Action is not simply a *response* to *field* norms over which an agent has no control and cannot, therefore, be considered either responsible nor accountable for. It is important to remember that, for Bourdieu, the *habitus* is a *durable* set of dispositions meaning that an individual agent has very little
capacity to significantly change other than as a result of the drive
towards the accumulation of capital and field status which is
*arbitrary*. For Bourdieu, change is not the provenance of the
individual. However, it is clear that when any changes in the
dispositions of the *habitus* do occur, the power of the *matrix* of
dispositions remains strong in Bourdieu’s model. ‘Because its
dispositions are embodied, the *habitus* develops a momentum
that can generate practices for some time after the original
conditions which shaped it have vanished’ (Maton 2014, 58).
This position clearly falls prey to the criticisms which have
run throughout this chapter, namely that it presents agents as
responsive to social forces and habits of practice rather than to
reasons.

It is clear that the essential issue the *diachronic and
deductive* approach faces when trying to explain the shifting
nature of *habitus* is its failure to recognise that the human agent
is one which is responsive to reasons. Although it does recognise
the fact that social practice and interaction is key to changes in
the development of *habitus*, this model characterises changes in
practice as a response to field demands, expectations and the
pursuit of capital. These changes are therefore limited in scope
and responsive. However, a more effective characterisation of
the role of interaction and social practice in the development of
the *habitus* would place an inferential model of social discourse
at the centre. Changes would thereby be understood as resulting
from the development of a knowing agent’s inferential understandings socially through the game of giving and asking for reasons. The transformative power of this game and the intentional drives of an agent would be placed at the centre of interpretations of agents within research contexts. Whilst Bourdieu rightly underscores the issue of socio-historical power which, as we have seen, is also intrinsic to the game of giving and asking for reasons, his characterisation of agents needs an inferential shift, a re-reading, to fully explain why change occurs whilst retaining agency. This shift, the reasserting of agency and the capacity for rational action, will allow researchers working within the field of education to approach social development more positively whilst working within a Bourdieusian model. Inferentialism, whilst accepting the binds of history, is essentially expressive (in the sense that the game of giving and asking for reasons demands the making explicit the implicit claims in assertions) and therefore transformative. Behaviour is transformed by changes in belief. The power of making explicit implicit claims for which agents are responsible provides a realistic and coherent view of social development and the development of the dispositions which constitute the habitus. This account is an account of development rather than change which can provide a more empowering account of changes in habitus. Whilst it is clearly true behaviours change as
a result of social upheaval, change and development are still possible.

Finally, Wacquant suggests that researchers can approach *habitus* using a third approach, which he describes as *experimental*. This ‘consists of studying the dedicated institutions and focused pedagogical programmes that forge a specific *habitus* by submitting to them in the first person’ (Wacquant 2014, 6). This original approach is used by Wacquant in his study of boxers published in his book *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. This approach is an immersive approach, in which the researcher places themselves within the field of study. In Wacquant’s case, he trained for three years as a boxer, providing unique insights into the changes in his own *habitus* through a first-person perspective. Again, this approach, whilst fascinating and fruitful, has less application here as it self-consciously adopts a descriptive, qualitative approach which is the explicit aim of the research design.

The remainder both of this chapter and Chapter Nine will focus explicitly on the nature of language, claim-making and agency, giving a more fine-grained account which will provide the necessary detail to inform the consideration of a given methodological and/or interpretive approach to research. A closer understanding of language will also allow for a more thorough critique of the ways in which socio-historical meaning
translates into behaviours, and the ways in which history influences thinking. This is at the heart of coming to understand the ways in which cultural behaviours are enacted. It can explain why, for example, prejudices continue to be enacted implicitly. Further, a close discussion of inferential semantics shines a light on the human capacity to transform and transcend.

**Language and Bourdieu**

Before embarking on an account of inferential semantics, it is important to revisit the role of language within Bourdieu and Bourdieusian scholarship as language was and remains an absolute central concern for those applying Bourdieu’s ideas within the field of education. Recapping the strengths and weakness of Bourdieu’s account of language will allow us to see more clearly the ways in which an inferential re-reading can address some of the weakness in Bourdieu’s approach.

The central claim made by Bourdieu is that ‘the currency of education is language and it is the medium of knowledge transmission’ (Grenfell 2011, 39). Whilst language has always been central to the work of Bourdieu – indeed linguistic capital is perhaps one of his most well-known ideas, particularly within the field of education – some of his writings and the subsequent work
that his writings have influenced have often over-simplified the concept. The assertion that particular types of language have symbolic value as forms of cultural capital (i.e., that different uses of language are symbolic of social prestige, success and/or belonging) is often lacking in both clarity and depth. This use of economic metaphors often seems to simplify the role that language plays in practical action. The acquisition of linguistic capital seems somehow mysterious, and unless we have a thorough account of this, we cannot see clearly how individual agents relate to their fields of power. Whilst Bourdieu does clearly acknowledge that language is essentially about competence, about pragmatic mastery, he sees it as thereby acquiring a symbolic meaning. His use of economic metaphors undermines the ontological complexity of the pragmatism inherent in his position, one which recognises that language is synonymous with practice and social positions.

‘The constitution of a linguistic market creates the conditions for an objective competition in and through which the legitimate competence can function as linguistic capital, producing a profit of distinction on the occasion of social exchange’ (Bourdieu 1991, 55).

There is a clear problem here: Bourdieu is characterising language as a thing, as well as practice.

What is missing from this account is a recognition that language is not a code, it is not capital, even if the application of concepts and the dispositions that result relate to social
positioning. The language that agents use is inferentially structured and reflects deontic, practical commitments. As we have shown, language, and the beliefs and commitments implicit in its use, result in practical action. A simplified reading of the concept of linguistic capital loses the essence of practice within discourse – language is reduced to a purely symbolic entity. Therefore, if we do not deal with Bourdieu’s concepts with subtlety and care, Grenfell argues that we ‘run the risk of reifying the concepts themselves, making any particular interpretation of them its own orthodoxy, and to end in that ultimate act of Bourdiesian mauvaise foi – to treat the concepts as more real that the things they are meant to represent’ (Grenfell 2012, 269).

The problematic uses of metaphor within socio-constructivist pedagogic models with education has been discussed by Taylor, Ruben and Bakker in ‘Mastering as an Inferential Alternative to the Acquisition and Participation Metaphors for Learning’ (Taylor et al, 2017) and the points that they make in this article are clearly relevant here. Bourdieu’s conception of language ‘places the emphasis on possession, where possession is the outcome of a process of “construction”, “internalisation” or “development”’ (Taylor et al 2017, 770). What this kind of metaphor cannot adequately account for is the process which allows this to take place, nor can it provide an account of the binding nature of history on genuine agency. What is needed within the field of education is a metaphor which can
account for both agency and social normativity; it needs to be a metaphor which is capable of unifying competing epistemological claims resulting from the residual dualism in constructivist accounts of meaning. There ‘is a need for the introduction of a new metaphorical framework which attempts an even more explicit and perspicuous reconciliation’ (Taylor et 2017, 773) of the cognitive and the social. They suggest a metaphor based on an inferentialist model – that of mastery. Here, ‘someone who is able to navigate the space of reasons has acquired practical mastery over the inferences – and hence concepts’ (Taylor et al 2017, 776). From this view, the economic metaphor of cultural capital, is problematic. Language is not acquired. It is not possessed. It is a kind of knowing how. It is pragmatic, normative mastery over the application of concepts and the inferential relations entailed which, in term, will guide practical action. One of the reasons for the recurrence of this act of mauvaise foi is the lack of specificity relating to exactly how language can be said to relate to social practice, and how it relates to dispositions to act. If this can be achieved, researchers would more coherently be able to explore the nature of the habitus, its construction and its relationship to fields of power. We need a conception of language that places greater emphasis on language tokens, i.e., the specific and unique occurrence of a linguistic act, and the claim-making nature of these acts. It is here that we can turn to Brandom for a more fine-grained account of language via the
structure of inferential semantics. This will allow us to examine more closely an individual’s commitments through an explanation of the way in which individuals apply norms through language.

It has been suggested both here and in Chapter Seven that an inferential approach to Bourdieusian educational theory can enrich researchers’ and practitioners’ understandings of language and, therefore, of dispositions to act. It can shed light on the nature of human agency through a description of the kind of reasoning that is central to being human, by giving ‘an account of being human that does justice to the kinds of consciousness and self-consciousness distinctive of us as cultural, and not merely natural, creatures’ (Brandom 2000, 35). This chapter has also attempted to demonstrate the reasons that an inferential re-reading of habitus is necessary, claiming that it would strengthen the coherence of the concept and, therefore, its application within the context of educational research. Primarily, it has set out to demonstrate that the dispositions which constitute habitus cannot account for agency, nor explain the reasons for the development of the habitus in a coherent way on an orthodox reading. The problem is that it sees dispositions as being responsive to social forces, forces which are responsible for alterations in social practice. However, an inferential re-reading of the habitus demonstrates that belief and knowledge are inseparable from practical action. Agents are characterised as
knowers that have insight and are, in this way, responsive to reasons. Once this has been accepted, many of the issues of the Bourdieusian model can be resolved. Finally, this chapter concludes by reinforcing the importance of language to any approach seeking to understand practical action.
Chapter Nine

Historical Reason

The previous chapter sought to demonstrate the benefits that an inferential re-reading of habitus can bring to educational contexts. Centrally, it argued that the issues surrounding dispositions to act could be strengthened when viewed as a form of practical action based on belief, and, therefore, as being essentially rational. Changes in the habitus, in dispositions to act in a particular way, occur as a result of the development of an agent’s inferential understandings, of the game of giving and asking for reasons, rather than as a result of external change. As such, development is not passive, but can be seen as the result of thinking through and mastery on the part of the agent. However, as Bourdieu would support, it is clear that reason and the reasoning agent are not ahistorical. Our decisions, beliefs and behaviours are conditioned and shaped by the beliefs and behaviours of those who have come before us. Thinking and action are socio-historical and the rational agent needs to be understood as such. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which socio-historical meaning is inherited, this chapter will introduce some of the more technical aspects of Brandom’s inferential semantics, demonstrating the ways in which the structure of language facilitates reasoning. It is this more forensic approach to language which is Brandom’s
strength and the reason that he can more effectively account for agency than can Bourdieu. The precision of his description allows for a nuanced understanding of discourse and reason, providing a clear and structured model to use within education. We will see that it is the structure of language itself which governs the process of meaning creation as being socio-historical in nature. However, the structure of language not only conservatively preserves meaning, but also enables the creation of novel sentences. In other words, whilst all meaning is inherited, and so necessarily socio-historically bound, it also has the capacity to allow agents to create new sentences and new meanings. It is the combination of these two aspects of language which allow for a clear account of the historical nature of reason to be given without compromising agency. Previous chapters have introduced these ideas and now this chapter is going to demonstrate exactly how these ideas, how reason, works. It will de-mystify the ways in which meaning develops and the ways in which past meanings underpin new ones. Meaning on the level of linguistics within Inferentialism is more about process than content, avoiding reification. A key advantage of coming to understand meaning in this way, and the examination of the processes involved in reasoning historically, is that it can help us to understand semantic separation that can exist between agents. The way in which we actively engage with concepts which are socio-historical is necessarily perspectival, and agents will make
different claims when reasoning. Whilst this idea is not novel, over the course of this chapter, this issue will be explained from the perspective of Inferentialism. An inferentialist explanation is forensic and can, therefore, suggest some novel ways to bridge this gap. These ideas will provide the cornerstone for the practical applications of Inferentialism within education discussed in Chapter Eleven.

As has been argued, the social and the individual are not separate. However, understanding that each agent’s use of concepts is socio-historically bound can also mean that agents are often in conflict. Agents’ understandings of the claims that they commit themselves to when they use concepts may differ. Often, these differences in understanding remain hidden. Within the context of education this is problematic to, for example, the successful implementation of unified policies as agents may have different commitments when using the same concept (again - explored in detail in Chapter Eleven). This idea supports the argument made here, namely that educationalists need the opportunity to think through ideas to ensure that they are aware of the concurrent claims which are socio-historical. Agents working within the field of education need to be aware of the ways in which they may be committing themselves to the prejudices of the past, and the differences between the claims of individuals. Essentially, they need to be given the time and space to think, discuss and make explicit the implications of their commitments
and the potential impact that these may be having on their practical action. Teachers in particular, who do not have time within a professional context to engage with concepts relating to inequality critically, would benefit from understanding that the terms themselves may lead to implicit prejudice. In demonstrating the way inferential semantics works with greater precision, we not only understand how and why language has the potential to lead to conservative behaviours, but it also gives us a way to transform these behaviours. These ideas can open up further avenues for research, some of which will be explored in Chapter Eleven.

**Habitus and a Unity of Apperception**

An inferential understanding of the socio-historical nature of reason and, therefore, of the beliefs and actions of agents, is rooted in Brandom’s understanding of the inferential structure of meaning which he supports with a detailed analysis of both syntax and language. The ideas presented here provide a very simplistic overview of some of his key ideas. Brandom’s writings are extensive and often highly technical and, therefore, difficult to access without specialist knowledge. As such, the overview given here is simplified, lacking the intricacy and subtly of Brandom’s own explanations. Nevertheless, it is sufficient to our needs and purposes, and will introduce the basic principles.
One of the most important and foundational concepts which comprise Brandom’s semantic system is that (common within linguistics) of *term-tokening*. This simply means the way in which words themselves are used by speakers within sentences, within specific utterances. This is important because it is in understanding *term-tokening* that we can understand the process through which words inherit meanings which are socio-historical in nature. He characterises occurrences of *term-tokening* as being the result of *anaphoric chains* of meaning. In characterising words as being part of an *anaphoric chain*, Brandom is able to explain the relationship between the use of a word and the way in which that word can be said to make claims within the frame of reference of wider cultural practices and their historical development. ‘Anaphora is a word-word (horizontal) relation; tokenings are linked to other tokenings in a chain. According to this account each tokening inherits its meaning from the previous tokening’ (Wanderer 2008, 141). To put it more simply, this means that when we use a word it links to all other previous uses of the term. When I judge it appropriate to use the term *dog* (an act of term-tokening) to describe a quadruped mammal with a wagging tail and a lolling tongue, I am basing that judgment, the selection of the term, on previous uses. The word is not plucked from thin air. This is what is meant by *anaphora*, by the ‘word-word (horizontal) relation’ (ibid). This demonstrates the ways in which past uses of a word guide the present application of a word.
and our understandings of it. It gives a more nuanced frame of reference, specifically a linguistic frame of reference, in which to place the concept of *judgement* which plays such a central role in Inferentialism and in this thesis. This will, in turn, allow us to see more clearly the ways in which dispositions to act are responsive to reasons which are socio-historical. However, this explanation of anaphora is not sufficient as it stands because it still implies a linear development of concepts (the monologic development of concepts) closer to a categorical-representational model. Furthermore, the concept of anaphora requires further qualification in order to explain how it is that ideas are not simply moved from one sentence to another when words are, i.e., why it is that meaning does not remain static when a word is used in different contexts. How does the historical dialectic of meaning work on a linguistic level? As we know, previous applications of concepts have authority over us, but this does not undermine agency. As demonstrated in the analogy between concept application and common law judgements discussed previously, whilst agents are bound by previous applications of concepts, the present application is a question of the judgement of the agent. In common law, a judge makes a decision on a case based on decisions made by other judges in previous cases. She will look for commonalities between the case at hand and previous cases. The rules of application are not absolute and a direct application of previous uses of a concept may lack coherence,
the reasons for the application of the concept may no longer fit. Thus, the judge is not immutably bound, ‘past judgements constrain perhaps, but not determine’ (Wanderer 2014, 204). Agents are therefore responsible for the application of concepts. They should be able to justify their application. Furthermore, ‘In making her judgement, she exercises authority over future judges’ (ibid) and in this way the process of judgement is possessed of both constraint and agency. She is both responsible for her judgements, and the reasons for her judgements lend authority to them. The process of reasoning then involves the evaluation of competing claims, and coming to a judgement which aims to synthesize beliefs in such a way as not to make contradictory claims. This activity, therefore, needs to be ‘seen as part of the larger sociohistorical process of discursive activity among the community of rational beings, [which] gradually institutes and determines the very norms of reasoning governing this process’ (Loeffler 2018, 204). However, the question that this chapter will answer is: What is it about language that allows judgement to take place? What does it mean to judge? Ultimately, it will return to, and further justify, the advocation of enabling education professionals to be able to think through ideas, and the need to recognise that a justificatory approach to development prefaced on the process of giving and asking for reasons will help to foster social development. Social development is this process. Furthermore,
understanding the details of the ways in which language is characterised within Inferentialism will demonstrate the uniqueness of the approach being forwarded, ensuring that it is not viewed as a typical form of expressivism.

Within the context of education then, the value of thinking through, of engagement with concepts and their repeated application over time, should be considered relevant to social development projects and educational research. Issues of inequality within the current education system can be partially addressed through a more thorough understanding of the educational concepts and social issues which affect the actions of both teachers and pupils, actions which constitute the inferential habitus of agents. This point is strengthened by Brandom’s assertion that norms are objective, agents cannot change them, the past constrains us. The issue here is the tension which can potentially be caused by a discrepancy between the way we think things are – between our belief that we are acting in support of students - and the socio-historical normative bounds to which we willingly submit, thereby implicitly endorsing content. ‘The contrast between what the norms of reason are and what a scorekeeper takes them to be under particular discursive circumstances – being right vs. taking right’ (Loeffler 2018, 205) can hamper the emancipatory aims of educationalists at every level. This is why, as referenced previously, ‘Brandom thinks, such that it must be possible for the
entire community of rational beings to go wrong with respect to it’ (Loeffler 2018, 205). Considering this view, researchers and practitioners can come to understand and address issues of inequality through recognising that there may be substantive errors in their understandings of educational issues and concepts, in the way in which they understand and use language in specific contexts. They need to consider whether they are reinforcing and propagating inequalities through false belief. The questions posed here are: Is the continued failure of English schools to close the gap between under-privileged children a result of false belief about the contexts, behaviours and beliefs of these children? Do policy makers allocate the time and resources to allow practitioners to think through interventions, coming to understand the reasons for these? Do they recognise practitioners as rational agents whose actions are based on beliefs, rather than on the dictates of more powerful agents? There is a need to address the 'social contrast between what one scorekeeper acknowledges as her commitments and entitlements vs. what other scorekeepers attribute to her as commitments and entitlements’ (ibid). The contrasting beliefs of agents form barriers which need to be understood and addressed. However, within a sociological rather than philosophical context, it needs to be recognised that agents and researchers will not be able to access objective standards of correctness against which to judge complex social issues. Whilst
the use of the term *dog* is a simple judgement to make, the inferential web governing the use of educational concepts relating to social inequalities, as well as their historical development, are too complex to make such strong claims. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the idea has no relevance. Striving toward greater unity and harmony between agents will provide a stronger starting point for social development than is currently seen within the context of education. Whilst constrained by the past, we can move forward more effectively via a shared understanding of the past.

**Autonomous and Non-Autonomous Discourse and the Social Agent**

In order to understand the process of anaphora, the process by which socio-historical meaning is inherited, there are two foundational concepts which first need to be grasped as they underpin Brandom’s semantics. Specifically, these two concepts provide an explanation of the possibility of agency and the ways in which language is structured in such a way that individuals can become responsible for their actions. Additionally, it is from this conceptual base that the expressivism outlined in Chapter Ten is based. These two concepts are *autonomous* and *non-autonomous discourse practice*. 
Autonomous discourse practice is a basic form of discourse which is sufficient for communication. It stands without need of justification through the use of logical vocabulary to be understood. Brandom sees this as the starting point of human discourse as we know it. Although it is not a complete picture of how we communicate, it does demonstrate clearly that pragmatism is the basis on which more complex formulations and expressions of concepts that agents use are generated. For example, if the assertion *I am wearing a red dress* were made in conversation it would be an example of autonomous discourse; it stands alone and does not need logical vocabulary to validate it. It can be understood by others exactly as it stands. ‘Participation in the semantically simplest possible conversations requires the smallest possible set of pragmatic skills needed to participate in any conversation’ (Loeffler 2018, 18). Speakers do not need logical vocabulary such as *therefore* or *then* to make statements which others can understand. Returning to the example given above, if I were to tell you that I was wearing a red dress, you would not need me to demonstrate this via logical reasoning, it is self-evident. We know it because we understand (through the process of *material inference* introduced in Chapter Three) that red is not blue, our experience, application and *mastery* of concepts means that we know it is a dress and not a skirt. It is important to remember that this is not simply representational semantics, although Brandom
does not deny that there is some representational content. The normatively correct application of a concept is sufficient for communication. We both understand how the concept is used, and so we can communicate. As argued by Sellars in Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind, ‘all awareness, even of particulars, is a linguistic affair...immediate experience is presupposed by the process of acquiring the use of language’ (Sellars 1963).

The purpose of introducing the idea of autonomous discourse practice is to demonstrate that Brandom is arguing that meaning is pragmatic, it is possible to understand each other without the use logical vocabulary. However, expressive agency of the kind in which we are interested is reliant on logical vocabulary, which is the vocabulary which endows humans with the power to make explicit ideas and beliefs. Language which is inclusive of logical vocabulary is central to our rational capabilities, and is what is referred to as non-autonomous discourse. This capacity which is central to the expressivism discussed in Chapter Ten. The salient point is that logical vocabulary is not necessary to make intelligible claims. According to Brandom ‘what distinguishes specifically discursive practices from the doings of non-concept-using creatures is their inferential articulation. To talk about concepts is to talk about their role in reasoning’ (Brandom 2000, 10) and the beginning of understanding this discursive practice is
understanding the nature of the simple assertions of autonomous discourse.

Brandom’s claim that it is possible to dispense with logical vocabulary in relation to meaning is a radical move. As discussed in Chapter Three, Brandom has developed an approach to language which unifies both analytic and pragmatic approaches to the philosophy of language and therefore, ultimately, of the way to approach epistemological questions relating to the validity of claims. Brandom does not reject the relevance of logical vocabulary, such as if and therefore. This language is at the centre of the human ability to reason, to make explicit the links between concepts and the justification for their application. He is not rejecting outright the relevance of logical vocabulary. He is, instead, arguing that concepts are developed pragmatically and must, therefore, exist before the expression of their content via logical vocabulary; concepts are not pre-existing singular entities but are developed pragmatically. This is because ‘in order to master any concepts, one must master many concepts’ (Brandom 2000, 49), meaning that any simple linear expression of truth, or the more complex logical expressions of truth found in contemporary analytical linguistics, need to acknowledge that pragmatism is necessarily prior.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Brandom is not simply his adoption of a pragmatic approach to concept
development, an approach which already underpins much of education’s understanding of concept development via the profound influence of Vygotsky (2012) and Piaget (1969). It is that, whilst the pragmatic development of concepts is necessarily prior to logical vocabulary, the concepts are *structured* inferentially, and logical vocabulary has a central role to play in *making explicit* these relations. As we will see, analytical linguistics remains central to his understanding of language and the structure of the content of concepts, central to an agent’s ability to act with agency. Brandom claims that ‘one might hope that a new approach to the philosophy of logic such as logical expressivism would not only explain features of our *old* logics but ideally also lead to *new* developments in logic itself’ (Brandom 2018, 70).

Whilst the implications of Brandom’s understanding of the place of logical vocabulary, of non-autonomous discourse, within language is more properly the subject of the next chapter, a brief outline of the central ideas will be presented here. It will place the subsequent discussion of language, and the way in which it inherits socio-historical meaning, in the context of the central focus of this thesis, namely the transformative potential of human agency. Brandom argues that, because logical vocabulary is reliant on autonomous discourse practice, on simple pragmatic assertions which can be understood without the use of logical vocabulary, language should be seen as being governed by
**Logical expressivism.** This is the idea that the inferential structure of language and the distinctly human capacity to use logical vocabulary means that we are not simply limited by the constraints of the shared normative application of concepts necessary for the possibility of communication and sociality. We can unpick, reflect upon and move on from the constraints of socio-historical norms which are developed anaphorically. Every utterance, every conceptual norm is bound by socio-historical practice. Within the context of education, this is highly relevant, particularly within Bourdieusian scholarship which seeks to understand the social agent and the constraints placed upon them. To facilitate our understanding of socio-historical normative constraints it is first necessary to understand the basic structures of language before considering the place of logical vocabulary within this. This gives greater clarity as to what it means to *think through* an idea, and the form that this should take. Once this has been established, we will see more clearly the impact of the expressive and transformative power of logical vocabulary, of the human capacity for non-autonomous discourse. ‘We sapients are self-constituting beings [...] One of the central tasks of philosophy is to craft vocabularies we can use to interpret, understand, constitute and ultimately transform ourselves’ (Brandom 2009, 149). Considering this, researchers need to reconsider the site of social development, seeing it as laying with the agent and to recognise that it is us as educators,
as rational agents, who will ‘ultimately transform ourselves’ (ibid) and the social world within which we reason. Methods need to find ways in which to nurture this transformative capacity, developing a form of expressivist logic within educational practice and research. By this, it is meant that educationalists should consider the benefits of acknowledging that development can only result from an understanding of the nature of reason and practical action, as well as exploring the ways they can incorporate Brandom’s notion of expressivist logic within educational settings. The central idea underpinning the advocation of utilising this concept is that discourse and expressivism can lead to the transformation of selves, and thereby communities, and that this transformation must be enacted in accordance with reason, via the game of giving and asking for reasons.

**Material Inferential and Incompatibility Relations**

Brandom’s argument that it is possible for the content of assertions to be validated without recourse to logical vocabulary within semantics, relies on what he terms material inferential and incompatibility relations (a form of which was introduced in Chapter Three to explain the development of concepts). We are now going to deepen our understanding of how these relations work within a linguistic context by considering them with reference
to three additional concepts: simple autonomous discourse practice, anaphora and sentence structures. Essentially, we are going to move on from the idea of a concept in general to the place of concepts within a sentence. In doing so we can deepen our understanding of the implications of the socio-historical nature of the norms that bind us. It will also demonstrate the way in which prejudices can not only be enacted, but also resolved, allowing agents to transcend these constraints and become aware of the nexus of claims that stem from their own use of concepts. Therefore, whilst autonomous discourse does not represent a complete picture of human discourse practice, it forms the basis upon which the rest relies. It demonstrates, for example, the ways in which educational concepts can be said to bring with them particular claims which, without recourse to the process of making these explicit through the use of logical vocabulary, can mean that agents may either be making claims of which they are not fully aware, or are making claims which are at odds with other agents.

As stated at the beginning of this section, two central concepts which help us to understand the process of the transferal of meaning from one sentence to another are *material inferential compatibility and incompatibility relations*. To recap, the concept of *material inferential compatibility and incompatibility relations*, the process of reasoning, of validating claims, is governed by the rational process of evaluating the coherence of
our ideas. This is important because, as argued throughout, it is this ability which involves agency. As we know, from the view of Inferentialism, we are responsible for the coherence of our claims. However, it is the syntactical structure of language, of material inferential compatibility relations, which enables judgement, accountability and agency. Material inferential relations refer to the relations between concepts. These relations allow an agent to make claims which are coherent, the relations stand as reasons for making assertions, they entitle an agent to make adequate claims to knowledge for which they can take responsibility. Incompatibility relations are the opposite to these. These relations give an agent reason to reject given claims as an adequate claims to knowledge, they are reasons not to assert. Brandom discusses what is known as the bent-stick example to demonstrate this. In this example, he refers to the idea that a stick in water may appear to an agent’s consciousness as bent, meaning that the agent will endorse particular claims about the object. However, ‘seeing its behavior when the half-immersed stick is fully removed from the water, the subject discards her commitment to its being bent, and substitutes a commitment to its being straight’ (Brandom 2011). These incompatibility relations are key to understanding practical action as they form the basis of an agent’s beliefs which, in turn, lead to practical action. The capacity of an agent to make these relations allows them to consider reasons for action. The underlying
principle here is ‘the notion of the incompatibility of commitments and entitlements [...] which captures one dimension of the performances’ propositional meaning qua inferential role’ (Loeffler 2018, 160). So, for example, an agent should recognise that a fox is not a dog, not as a result of the referential function of language, but because they recognise that when a concept is misapplied, it loses coherence in relation to other prior commitments. However, the understanding of such commitments will differ between agents. This raises the issue that, whilst we are aware of the fact that agents have different understandings of the same terms, insufficient attention is placed on the rational processes of agents which lead to these understandings.

This practical understanding of concepts qua material and incompatibility inferences is what forms the basis of autonomous discourse practice. To return to a previous example Brandom:

‘As examples [of material inferences], consider the inference from “Pittsburgh is to the west of Princeton” to “Princeton is to the east of Pittsburgh,” and that from “Lighting is seen now” to “Thunder will be heard soon.” It is the contents of the concepts west and east that make the first a good inference, and the contents of the concepts lighting and thunder, as well as the temporal concepts, that make the second appropriate’ (Brandom 2000, 52).

These statements stand without recourse to logical vocabulary because the move from one claim to another is coherent, the two claims are compatible. Agents do not select a concept and then
apply it to the world, instead in using a concept we ‘thereby somehow gradually determine the content of the concepts used’ (Loeffler 2018, 90). Through action, through the application of concepts, an agent begins to see that some ideas are compatible and others are incompatible. Pragmatically, my concept of fire is compatible with the idea of warmth but ice is not. This basic premise which underpins Brandom’s inferential semantics reminds us again that Brandom’s model is not primarily referential. For Brandom, the essential unit of meaning is ‘specifically assertion – the central type of linguistic performance in autonomous discourse – [which] is characterised as a type of performance to which a participant can become committed or entitled (or both) under certain circumstances’ (Loeffler 2018, 84, my emphasis).

However, if this is all which is required for basic autonomous discourse, it begs the question as to why language is complex. Although asserting in the way described above is all that is necessary for simple autonomous discourse practice, for basic communication, the syntactical rules which govern language as we know it allows for an infinite variety of expressions to be created by agents through the ability to compose and decompose sentences. Further, it is the syntactical structure which necessitates the socio-historical development of concepts in which we, as educationalists, are interested. In coming to understand the way in which socio-historical reasoning
works, we can better understand the ways in which they stand as reasons for practical action. This, in turn, will allow us to demonstrate that an understanding of the social and of social development should be considered in the light of the conceptual, recognising that the process of reasoning is central. So, whilst the following sections include some technical arguments, these are necessary and will allow us to understand the ways in which norms are socio-historically bound. Demonstrating the way in which norms are socio-historically bound will also open up the idea that the different understandings of terms held by different agents are the result of rational activity, they are the result of the practice of giving and asking for reasons.

Brandom claims that it is the complexity of language which warrants the use of logical vocabulary. The syntactical complexity and language variety means that the very structure of our language will allow us:

‘...to rise in part above the indistinct realm of mere traditional, or evolution according to the results of the thoughtless jostling of the habitual and the fortuitous, and enter the comparatively well-lit discursive marketplace, where reasons are sought and proffered, and every endorsement is liable to being put on the scales and found wanting’ (Brandom 2000, 158).

The implications of this quotation are profound and the emancipatory aspect of the game of giving and asking for reasons emphasised. Brandom’s belief that Inferentialism can allow us to
critically examine the world in such a way begins with his explanation of how it is that the *game of giving and asking for reasons* is itself possible and how it comes to be the defining characteristic of sapience. His answer to this is that the game, and thereby agency, is enabled through our unique linguistic capacity. The way in which we use language necessitates judgement through its analytic formulation, through the way in which we use and build sentences. The human capacity to both create novel sentences and to be able to consider, weigh and provide reasons for novel assertional commitments represents a type of positive freedom. The structure of language enables both a creative and reflexive capacity which is agency.

Much of the complexity of language is a result of the fact that its syntactical structure means that words can be substituted in a sentence. Syntax and grammar are, in this sense, sentence frames in which particular types of words can be substituted, allowing for the creation of novel sentences. The rules mean that nouns can be replaced with other nouns, verbs with other verbs and so on\(^7\). However, we are here not simply concerned with the formal possibility of substitution (although this is discussed by Brandom in some detail). It is entirely possible for a speaker to make the substitutional move from *I ate the cat* to *I ate the

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\(^7\) This is not identical to the language used by Brandom himself. The technical expressions associated with his argument are not appropriate here, where the intention is to give a more accessible overview.
dog. Formally, these substitutions hold. Looking at the sentence frame, I can substitute the noun cat with any other noun, and the sentence still makes sense. Sentence frames allow for the substitution of what Brandom refers to as singular terms within a sentence. However, it is clear that this substitution is not in any way truth-preserving and, therefore, not something which an agent would endorse as it may potentially contain incompatible claims. So, when considering the normative content of concepts, substitutional inferences need to be taken into account. This means that we need to understand the rules which govern an agent’s ability to legitimately substitute one word for another in a way which can be considered coherent and, in this sense, truth-preserving insofar as it does not overtly contain incompatible claims. An agent’s understanding of the coherence of their substitutions will have implications for understanding both the socio-historical nature of meaning and, going forward, the ways in which this process opens up the possibility of miscommunication and divergent understandings of the conceptual content and their corresponding claims. It can also provide the basis for more situated work on the ways in which particular models of discourse could be used within professional contexts. In order to have a strong ontological foundation to reflect on in the context of these ideas, we will now consider some examples of substitution and which kinds of substitution can be considered as truth-preserving.
Let’s consider three pairs of sentences used by Loeffler to demonstrate his ideas about substitutional inferences:

1) Benjamin Franklin invented bifocals

And

2) The first postmaster general of the United States invented bifocals

are one pair, as is

3) Benjamin Franklin walked

And

4) Benjamin Franklin was mobile

And finally

5) Benjamin Franklin was tall

And

6) Benjamin Franklin was short

These examples represent the three possible semantic outcomes which will result from the proper use of substitutional variation to create new sentences. The moves made in sentences 1) to 2) and 3) to 4) are what Brandom terms substitutional inferences. What we mean by this is that the move from one assertion to another does not force the speaker to abandon,
violate or restructure her nexus of assertional beliefs. However, the example pair 5) and 6) do not constitute *substitutional inferences*. Thus, semantically, they are incompatible – Benjamin Franklin cannot be both short and tall. Within discourse, these types of pairings would be challenged. They violate our sense of entitlement to the claim and thus will be rejected on rational grounds. These types of incompatibility are therefore straightforward and will not feature further in this argument. It is the *substitutional inferences* which are of interest here – when we choose a term, why do we do so? What are the rules that have governed it previously? What assumptions have we moved from one example of discourse to another? The substitution of words is rarely as straightforward as the example given above - consider the example the substitution of *headteacher* for *principle*. The substitution is formally correct. However, the extent to which the substitution is *semantically* identical is far from certain and it is complicated by the fact that every specific term-tokening is unique. The use of singular terms within assertions and the semantic inferences therein are governed by the principle of *anaphora* and it is through an understanding of anaphora that we can attempt to track some of the inferences which result from the substitution of singular terms.

A more detailed discussion of our examples will help to clarify the concept. The example pairs a) and b), c) and d), are
representative of two different kinds of substitutional inferences. The first is the simpler of the two possible semantic moves. The first pair represent what Brandom refers to as a symmetric substitutional inference, whilst the second pair represent an asymmetric substitutional inference. What is meant by this is that the substituted term within a symmetric substitutional inference can be substituted both ways and both assertions will remain truth-preserving assertions. Benjamin Franklin and the first postmaster general are both singular terms whose rules are governed by the same rules of application. As long as the speaker is aware that Benjamin Franklin was the first postmaster general, then they will feel entitled to hold the view as the other claim is also seen as truth preserving. However, in example pair c) and d) the two predicates cannot be exchanged both ways and necessarily produce two truth-preserving assertions. So, the move from the predicate, was walking to was mobile is truth preserving. The norms governing the use of the term mobile are subsumed within the range of norms governing the use of the term walk. However, this relationship is asymmetric because it is not necessarily, although it may be, the case that to be mobile means to be walking. One may be using a skateboard, a wheelchair or car, for example. Thus, we see again through these examples the centrality of singular terms, of words, within Brandom’s semantics. The central point to make here is that the
commitments made by agents when they are using words may differ. It is these differences that are crucial within the context of education as commitments will vary from agent to agent. For example, the understanding of one teacher may be different from that of another teacher, or the understanding of a concept by senior leadership teams may differ from that of educational research. Teachers may potentially have a very different interpretation of non-standard English than educational researchers. Often when the term non-standard English is applied, there may be an implicit assumption that the individual is less academically capable, or that they are more likely to engage in deviant activities. If these claims are not thought through, if the relations of compatibility and incompatibility are not considered, then social development will be hindered.

So far, we have focused on the analytic influences on Brandom’s theory, however he endorses *analytical-pragmatism*. The two sides cannot be separated. If he is to retain the pragmatism which is the central premise of his theory, then we need to move from abstract examples of how meaning and terms may be caused and move onto a discussion of how they actually occur in practice. Therefore, we need to move our attention to *linguistic performance*, asking what makes an occurrence of a term-tokening in one performance the same as the linguistic performance in another act (Loeffler 2018). It is now that Brandom turns to the linguistic concept of *anaphora* which, due
to its association with *performance* means that through it we can critique the ways in which situated agents use language in social contexts.

Traditionally, within linguistics, anaphora refers to the use of a word which refers back to another word in a sentence, from which it derives its meaning – classically pronouns. For example:

*Nneka was clever. She was always reading books.*

Thus, *she* derives its meaning from the original noun, not from the context of the performance, although it may relate to it. However, Brandom takes the concept of anaphora and broadens it to include every example of term-tokening, of the use of a word or term in discourse. For Brandom, all term-tokens stand in anaphoric relation to other term-tokenings, both previous and potential. ‘Brandom thinks that, metaphysically, there are no term-types over and above anaphoric chains of term-tokenings at all. A type of term simply *is*, metaphysically, a chain of anaphorically related term-tokenings, crisscrossing discourse’ (Loeffler 2018, 109).

It is here that we begin to see again the originality of Brandom’s position. Whilst he is avowedly a normative pragmatist who views concept development as being synonymous with the practice of *giving and asking for reasons*, he does accept what he refers to as the *rigidity* of names within anaphoric chains of reference which necessarily shape the rules
of the game. Thus, in the case of a proper name, there will be different tokenings of the same lexical type. Brandom gives the examples of the names George and Aristotle. How can lexical items which are proper names be used in term-tokening and what are the semantic implications of this? Brandom here focuses his reader on the socio-linguistic contexts in which the term-tokening occurs. It is worth quoting Brandom at length here, before beginning to unravel some of the implications of his ideas within the field of education.

‘In such cases [as multiple occurrences of ‘George’] there are just multiple anaphoric chains; the multiplicity of people who can be referred to as ‘George’ is a phenomenon to be understood by analogy to the way in which many people can be referred to as she. Investigations of the roles played by socio-linguistic context and practices, or conventions, on the one hand, and an individual name-user’s intentions, on the other in determining what previous uses a particular tokening ought to be considered beholden to should be understood as investigations of which anaphoric chain particular tokening ought to be considered to be part of’ (Brandom 1998, 470, my brackets, my emphasis).

To paraphrase, when considering the way in which using the singular term George inherits its meaning, two things need to be considered. Firstly, it needs to be understood that the word George can and is used in multiple contexts. The action of term-tokening in relation to the word George is governed by previous uses of the word George. When it is used, assumptions based
on previous uses may, and indeed must, be made for an agent to use the term, remembering that the ability to use a concept is based on a practical know-how, on pragmatic mastery. So, for example, a speaker will likely assume that the word George refers to a human being who is male (although these assumptions can, of course, be wrong – it could be the name of the family hamster). The second thing that needs to be considered is the intention of the term-tokening performance, of the reasons for its use. History informs our reasons for actions in this way. It is not a force; it is not external. It is the semantic structure which enables human expression and thought and, as such, can only be worked within. Challenging historical normativity will necessitate a thinking through informed by the discursive practice of giving and asking for reasons, of practice and of making explicit the implicit assumptions that novel assertions may inherit. As we have said, every term-tokening performance should be based on reasons in addition to inherited meaning.

Loeffler gives another example of how this may work in practice via the use of the name Caesar. The name Caesar, when referring to the Roman emperor, will have inherited its meaning anaphorically from earlier term-tokenings. However, any uses of the term today will have inherited its meaning in some way from the anaphoric chain of reference. In the case of the term Caesar, other uses of this lexical type, such Cesar Chavez and Julio Cesar will be governed by different inferential
commitments and entitlements, whilst being linked anaphorically to earlier uses. In the case of a name such as Caesar, it is not difficult to analyse the semantic implications which such a term may bring with it. Thus, if a current ruler decided to change their name to Caesar, they would be deliberately emphasising what they hope to be the normative similarities between the use of that term for the Roman emperor and the use of the term to describe themselves. They are doing it to imply a whole nexus of inferential commitments and entitlements. The name is not merely referential, and ‘the meaning of the tokening does not depend on lexical co-typicality with any other anaphoric chain, but the way in which in the tokening is linked anaphorically to other tokenings’ (Loeffler 2018, 111). Brandom believes that the meaning of the terms relies on previous uses.

Brandom recognises that there is a necessary socio-historical dimension to semantic content by virtue of the structure of language (or, more properly, of sentence frames). Whilst the revelation that language is socio-historical is not new, what is unique about Brandom is his ability to account for history as being an objective binding force. However, through his characterisation of agency as being responsive to reasons, it can be seen as expressed in the act of term-tokening, performances for which we are accountable. The borrowing of terms through the process of substitution brings to the fore incompatibility relations that impose a requirement to reflect on what our commitments and
entitlements are. Within education, there needs to be a commitment to providing time and space to be able to think through ideas expressed as the game of giving and asking for reasons, thus giving the agent epistemic status. In recognising that transformative power resides in the individual, we recognise that every person within education is a driver of change – including the student body. Successful social development relies on understanding that changes in practical action and the dispositions of the habitus are synonymous with changes in belief, with the evaluation of the reasons for the application of socio-historical concepts.

There is a final point to be made in relation to anaphora. Brandom makes a distinction between what he terms interpersonal and intrapersonal anaphora. Anaphora within language can occur in two contexts, interpersonal and intrapersonal. In the case of intrapersonal, anaphoric links exist within a single individual’s performance. See the example below.

/This organism is a mammal. After all, it is a vertebrate/

Here the second bold tokening gains its meaning intrapersonally from the first. However, if we bring in an additional speaker it changes. Consider:

Fred: /This organism is a vertebrate/

Sue:/Oh! So, it’s a mammal
This is an example of interpersonal anaphora (Loeffler 2018, 113). This, on the surface, looks like an inconsequential difference. However, what it does demonstrate is that, whilst it is self-evident that speakers hold vastly different personal beliefs about the world, they rarely argue over the legitimacy of anaphoric referencing. For example, in the example of interpersonal anaphora, it looks as though the two speakers agree, as though their commitments and entitlements are the same. In the example given above, Sue and Fred could have very different understandings of the word vertebrate. Sue may think that it means a spine made of chalk, whilst Fred could believe that it is a spine made of steel. If this were so, the commitments that they were making would be radically different, although they would not recognise it. ‘In other words, different speakers usually hold vastly different beliefs and differ in their views about the inferential roles of even the beliefs that they share – and, accordingly, they understand the corresponding linguistic performances in different ways’ (ibid). Nevertheless, despite these profound differences in our understanding of performances, we generally agree on the use of terms themselves. Indeed, it is a necessary feature of communication – without this ability to have some rules governing anaphoric substitution, we could not communicate. However, differences in speakers’ levels of normative mastery over concepts means that they will seldom be in accord. While we may speak the same language, we certainly
do not mean the same thing. This is a crucial to the justification of the centrality of the process of *thinking through* within the field of education. If those working within education want to impact meaningfully on social development, they need to close the gap between their understandings of these concepts and the understandings of others in the field in order to adopt consistent, unified and thought through approaches (see Chapter Eleven). Key to affecting changes in *habitus*, changes in behaviour within the context of social development, we need to address not only the material distance between agents, but also the conceptual differences, the differences which inform reasons for action.

So, as we have seen, much, or indeed most, of what we say within an utterance, is implicit, rooted in vast, multi-layered, interconnected webs of time and meaning. While Brandom focuses on language’s capacity to enable speakers to ‘communicate successfully despite their differences in linguistic understanding’ (Loeffler 2018, 114) the implications of these ‘differences in linguistic understanding’ are clearly relevant within a practical context. The apparent coherence of the occurrence of singular terms within assertions masks the nexus of the beliefs of individual agents in which a term is embedded. As a result of this, misunderstandings and conflicts can occur between speakers who cannot understand the reasons behind the actions of another. Differences are masked through the similitude of a
common language. As well as considering the discrepancies between the understandings of those working within education, another potential area for further enquiry is the discrepancies between teachers and pupils. Whilst not a direct focus here, it is worth considering that these types of discrepancies could potentially lead to conflicts which, in turn, can lead to disengagement with education. If both are speaking the same language, but have different understandings then conflict may arise when the agents act. Whilst the utterances are the same on the surface, the behaviours manifested by each party may seem illogical or deliberately wrong to the other party. The reasons on which they base their actions, on what each party takes to be the state of affairs, will differ. Even though it appears that they inhabit the same semantic space, they do not. From this view, the dispositions that constitute the *habitus*, and the ways in which it comes into conflict with the *habitus* of other groups, can be explained and considered in terms of rational misunderstanding. If genuine and effective strategies are to be developed to enable agents to address educational issues, conceptual consensus is key. Anaphoric chains of reference should therefore also be considered within this context. Children will not have the same level of experience, nor the same experiences, as the adults with whom they interact. It is therefore likely that the language we use excludes the children we teach, and, conversely, teachers will not fully understand the particularity
and rationality of the language moves made by the children we teach.

**Concluding Comments**

This chapter has given a more detailed account of Brandom's inferential semantics in order to give a precise demonstration of the binding nature of socio-historical meaning on agents. This was provided through an understanding of the processes by which agents are able to construct novel sentences. This process is enabled by the syntactical structure of language which allows for the substitution of singular and general terms within sentences. As well as this syntactically facility, the construction of novel sentences is reliant on an agent's mastery of previous uses of terms, and on their ability to justify their use in a given situation with reference to previous usage and the demands of the context.

There were several points of relevance for the field of education underscored within this chapter. Firstly, the reasons upon which we base our actions are directly and necessarily shaped by history. However, we shall see in the next chapter that it is these binds themselves which enable freedom and are necessary for the very possibility of expression and communication. Further, the kind of complex discourse practice needed in order to create novel sentences necessitates the use
of logical vocabulary in order to judge and justify claims. Not only do the binds of history enable communication, they also, therefore, provide agents with the structures within which they can transform themselves, within which they can weigh, judge and evaluate. From the point of view of education, this means that we have a responsibility to acknowledge and challenge these bounds. However, this kind of practice can only happen in a context in which agents have the time and opportunity to *think through*, to give and ask for reasons.

Secondly, inferential semantics and the process of anaphora demonstrates that, necessarily, agents inhabit different semantic spaces. Experience and relative mastery will lead to dissonance. This means that education needs to consider how far understandings of key concepts accord within the field seen as inclusive of policy, research and practice. As we have seen, this dissonance also has implications for our understanding of the relationship between teachers and pupils. Differences in beliefs, leading to different dispositions, can cause conflict, potentially leading to the alienation of less powerful agents, affecting both the educational and economic well-being of students. Again, this suggests that the site of social development and change needs to be seen as laying within the agent. If action is based on belief, then dispositions can only be addressed in relation to rational practice and thought. As such, the kind of account of the human subject provided in Bourdieusian research, is flawed unless
placed within the context of Inferentialism. Whilst it does recognise the centrality of practice, history and dispositions to act, it has insufficient resources to account for agency therefore undermining the possibility of understanding meaningful social development. ‘Being the product of history, it [*habitus*] is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 133). Such research can never explain the process of change, it can only ever describe it, making correlations. It cannot explain it as it has not given sufficient credit to the profundity of the human capacity to reason.
Chapter Ten

Expressivism and Education

This chapter is the culmination of the theoretical arguments presented in this thesis and therefore can be seen as a drawing together of the central strands of the ideas of agency and the human capacity for change. Whilst Chapter Eleven will consider some potential practical applications of these ideas, here we will focus more clearly on the kind of shift that inferential semantics demands within the context of educational theory, research and practice by considering more closely the role of logical vocabulary within Brandom’s semantic framework. Previous chapters have demonstrated the socio-historical nature of reason and the binding nature of semantic normativity on reasoning and, by extension, practical action. The example of the constraints placed on judgement were demonstrated through the common law analogy whereby a judge must consider past uses of a law when applying it to a current case. However, this chapter will show that, whilst socio-historical norms are binding and objective, the game of giving and asking for reasons is essentially an expressive one, and that this expressivism enables agency. Indeed, it is the very binding nature of socio-historical normativity which is the necessary condition of human expression and expressivism. Reasons are not hidden from us, we can
explore, consider and make them explicit. Crucially, we can characterise *agents as knowers*. We are responsible for our beliefs and our actions. This responsibility means that individual belief and practical action are central to social development. It is only in coming to appreciate and respect the essential rationality of agents, placing expressivism at the centre of innovation, that substantive educational change can take place.

Brandom’s account of expressivism is distinctly inferential in that it is based on his account of inferential semantics. Therefore, the role of logical vocabulary will be more closely considered, focusing specifically on what it contributes to human reasoning and the human ability to *express* and make explicit conceptual content. When this is understood, the benefits of developing a cultural shift within educational theory, research and practice based on an understanding of the *expressivist logic* underpinning inferential semantics will become clearer. Expressivist logic, as we shall see, demonstrates that agents are intrinsically expressive creatures, it is part of what it is to be human. Further, this capacity is a transformative one. Philosophy’s task ‘is an *expressive, explicative* one. So, it is the job of practitioners of the various subfields to design and produce specialised expressive tools, and to hone and shape them with use’ (Brandom 2009, 126). An appreciation of the specific characterisation of logical vocabulary within Brandom’s semantics will support those working within the field of education
to develop these tools. It will then be clear that this type of vocabulary can and should play a vital role in the way researchers approach the analysis of Bourdieu’s *habitus* and educational research and theory more broadly. Crucially, it can play an important role in challenging and critiquing agents’ judgements, holding agents to account. ‘My authority to commit myself using public words is the authority at once to make myself responsible for and authorize others to hold me responsible for determinate conceptual concepts about which I am not authoritative’ (Brandom 2009, 73). Building on these points, this chapter will move on to discuss specifically the role that Brandom believes that logical vocabulary plays in inferential semantics, and the ways in which his approach differs from the typical approaches of analytical linguistics. The inclusion of a simplified overview of some of Brandom’s technical arguments will also be given. The reason for this is that, firstly, it provides a defence of the overall epistemological method being advocated, providing a more focused and coherent account of both the possibility and process of the *game of giving and asking for reasons* within discourse. Secondly, a full explanation of the role of logical vocabulary is necessary as it is this that allows agents to reflect and reason metacognitively: it allows agents to reason about reason, which is the very definition of agency as defined in previous chapters, characterised as the development of *adequate ideas*. It is also key as the description of logical vocabulary given
here allows for a more nuanced epistemological approach to claim-making which dispenses with limiting binaries of valid and invalid which are so divorced from the actual process of reasoning and knowledge, and replaces it with the idea of judgement via counterfactual robustness.

**Logical Vocabulary**

The study of logic and the role of logical vocabulary in relation to semantics, assertion, truth-claiming and metaphysics is a difficult and technical branch of linguistics, most of which will not concern us here. Whilst Brandom himself does consider the minutiae of arguments which comprise the existing theories surrounding the role of logical vocabulary, the details of his discussions and his thorough considerations of logical theorems both contemporary and historical will not concern us. The aim of this section is to select some of the more foundational concepts, giving an overview of these ideas in an accessible and transferable form. It aims to provide a summary of the key conceptual components which should underpin the project of developing expressivist logic, whereby ‘we can see not only how beliefs can be used to criticise concepts, but also how concepts can be used to criticise beliefs’ (Brandom 2009, 24). In doing so, we will explain how this can focus our existing understanding of the way in which the concept of the game of giving and asking for reasons can be used
to make explicit some of the implicit claims in discursive practices within education.

As has been established, essentially, Brandom’s position is that traditional conceptions of logic and the place of logical vocabulary within philosophical enquiry and semantics is too limited. Brandom wants to challenge ‘the classical project of philosophical analysis’ and the ‘sort of logically articulated elaboration of what they see as basic’ (Brandom 2010, 31). Traditional analytic philosophy sees logical vocabulary as the heart of semantics and necessary to validate the truth of any particular claim. It is a key measure of the coherence of semantic content, of the content of concepts. However, the problem is, according to Brandom, it can only validate monochronic chains of reason, chains of reasoning which are linear and isolated from other claims. Monological chains of reasoning cannot accommodate or account for the complex material relations which are part of everyday decision making. Traditional logic can only represent a very limited number of examples of deductive reasoning, thereby severely curtailing the truth-claiming ability of logic, limiting its ability to evaluate everyday material judgements about the world in which we live. Monochronic expressions of semantic content are ‘not a plausible constraint...outside of mathematics almost all our actual reasoning is defeasible’ (Brandom 2018, 72). In other words, our application of concepts, and the actual content of concepts, is validated by an agent’s
ability to defend them, to defend the claims that they make in using a concept. Rightness is assessed through the *game of giving and asking for reasons*, not through an abstract elaboration of isolated claims. It is important to understand and appreciate the point that Brandom is making here. Agents themselves have the ability make judgements on the rightness of a claims demonstrating agency in an everyday context. The act of defending and justifying is, in this sense, the only way in which meaning and rightness can be established, implying that the reasoning processes of agents should be given epistemic priority.

Brandom’s development of *expressivist logic* and its associated concepts can offer something more to our understanding of the *game of giving and asking for reasons* within education. As we have argued, the application of concepts can be critiqued; the implicit nexus of claims for which agents are accountable can be explored taking the *game of giving and asking for reasons* as a model of analysis. Within an educational context, particular words such as *cultural capital, progress* or *disadvantaged* (Ofsted 2018) are key concepts which are employed by practitioners at every level. A given agent’s understanding of these concepts will have a direct impact on their practice as they are concepts for which they are not only responsible, but *accountable*. So far so good, but the notion of an *expressivist logic* reliant on *logical vocabulary* adds something new.
‘Logical vocabulary, normative vocabulary, and vocabulary to explicitly ascribe beliefs and intentions to someone are the most important expressive resources used in reflective thought and talk, and Brandom offers a unified pragmatist theory of all such vocabulary, according to which all such vocabulary is *universally elaborative and explicative*’ (Loeffler 2018, 172).

It is this that represents the contribution that this chapter is making to the argument as presented so far. We should not simply view *the game of giving and asking for reasons* as encouraging a *thinking through* of ideas within education. It also invites us to consider the relationship between the *structure* of language in order to appreciate the *kinds of discursive practice* we want to foster. Brandom’s expressivism is very specific in its form, which is why we are considering it in this depth. Referring back to a quotation given at the beginning of the chapter, it ‘is the job of practitioners of the various subfields to design and produce specialised expressive tools’ (Brandom 2009, 24). It is through the project of exploring Brandom’s ideas in an innovative and creative way that the full depth of his contribution can be understood. This is a potential next step in relation to this work.

The next stage in Brandom’s description of the use of logical vocabulary within discourse will provide greater specificity relating to the ways in which researchers can both apply and articulate the process described above. It will allow us to see the...
precise way in which agents challenge and amend their conceptual space of reasons through a consideration of the overall coherence of our claims. In order to achieve this aim, we will need to build on our understanding of the act of claim-making. As we have seen, claim-making within the context of Inferentialism is a complex activity which involves normative, pragmatic mastery of a multitude of related claims. An agent’s ‘discursive commitments [...] are distinguished by their specifically inferential articulation: what counts as evidence for them, what else they commit us to, what other commitments they are incompatible with’ (Brandom 2000, 81). Brandom is critical of traditional analytical approaches to truth, believing that logicians should account for the human ability to evaluate the rightness of non-monochronic chains of reasoning. In order to explain this process, according to Brandom we should stop considering truth and validity and begin to explore the counter-factual robustness of claims. Simply, the notion of counter-factual robustness is when an agent takes an assertion to be good if it can be seen ‘as remaining good under various merely hypothetical circumstances’ (Brandom 2010, 105). This, concept, developed further later on, will allow us to dispense with the limiting binary valid/invalid, enabling us to weigh claims in a more nuanced manner, recognising that claim’s robustness is constantly open to scrutiny and evaluation. The concept of counterfactual robustness has real potential within the field of
education. It highlights not only the aforementioned importance that should be placed on potential incompatibilities between claims made based on agents’ normative grasp of concepts, but also that this needs to be an on-going process. Examining our ideas via the idea of robustness is implicative of understanding that the justificatory process needs to be on-going and a given feature of educational practice. Research and practice which wants to promote educational success for disadvantaged groups needs to consider very carefully the compatibility of the keys concepts which are used within the given context. For example, it would be necessary to consider whether success defined in relation to economic prosperity is compatible with the claim that education should promote the welfare of young people. However, the consideration of these concepts needs to evolve in order to continue to meet the needs of particular groups. We need to consistently consider relationships of this kind, developing with the development of meaning. A closer consideration of the normative application of concepts such as welfare and success within a given context may expose that the two concepts are incompatible unless some adjustment is made. However, the adequacy of our claims have the potential to change. Concepts within all settings within education would be better considered in light of this. The relationship between concepts needs to be under constant review in relation to the inferential relations which exist between competing claims.
Now we have given a very general overview of where Brandom sits in relation to traditional logic and the place of logical vocabulary within the paradigm, we will move to considering the specifics of Brandom’s arguments and his description of the role and genesis of logical vocabulary. Brandom characterises logical vocabulary as relating to its role and function. It is not a prerequisite of autonomous discourse practice; agents do not need it in order to communicate. However, we do need it if we want to reason about reasoning. Brandom believes that the essential skills to self-consciously discuss reasoning are implicit within existing discourse practices. So, for example, the exchange:

*The water is boiling*

*No. It is not 100 degrees centigrade*

Already implicitly contains logical relations such as:

(1) *If* the water is boiling *then* it is 100 degrees centigrade

(2) *It follows from the fact that* the water is not 100 degree centigrade *that* it is not boiling

(3) *Necessarily* water which is 100 degrees centigrade *will* boil

As we can see, we do not need to employ the kind of non-autonomous vocabulary italicised in these examples to play the *game of giving and asking for reasons*. However, in doing so we
can make explicit our reasoning, justifying our ideas and holding others to account. Therefore, it is at this point in the development of discursive practice that philosophy per se comes into being, if we consider (as Brandom does) that the primary purpose of philosophy is the understanding of human reason. As Brandom put in *Reason in Philosophy*:

‘Philosophy is a reflexive enterprise: understanding is not only the goal of philosophical inquiry, but its topic as well. We are its topic; but it is us specifically as understanding creatures: discursive beings, makers of reasons, seekers and speakers of truth’ (Brandom 2009, 113).

Thus ‘merely autonomous discursive practitioners become non-autonomous discursive practitioners once their discursive practice begins to include thought and talk concerning this essential, universal, reason-constituting core’ (Loeffler 2018, 147).

This reference to a universal reasoning core refers to the idea that all autonomous discourse practice is comprised of the same essential elements which characterise the structure of reason. Autonomous discourse practices are all, as discussed previously, assertions or practical commitments (*shall* statements). These types of utterances are characterised by their compositional and pragmatic features, including their ‘distinct normative inferential roles and interpersonal pragmatic significances, they have distinct subsentential structures’
(Loeffler 2018, 147) and semantical significance. Therefore, each assertion made will be comprised of commitments and inferences for both ourselves and others based on the relationship between assertions and their substitutional inferences. As a result of this, participants must necessarily follow particular norms relating to these characteristics to be able to participate in autonomous discourse practice at all. These norms should be familiar to us by now: they are the norms which govern the *game of giving and asking for reasons*. Practitioners must be able to reliably attribute and acknowledge assertional and practical commitments and entitlements. Therefore, logical vocabulary will make explicit these inherent features of autonomous discourse practice. Logical vocabulary does have a role to play, although it is different to the one it has been traditionally taken to assume. Instead, its role should be seen as making explicit relations of inference, incompatibility, compatibility, counterfactual circumstances, disavowal and the attribution of assertions to other practitioners. Thus, ‘conditionals here are both *elaborative* from and *explicative* of inferential practices’ (Loeffler 2018, 149).

It is important that we recognise that all language users understand these relations implicitly. To utilise concepts at all, we must already have some understanding of how these concepts relate to other concepts. For example, to use the word *boiling* is to assert that something is *boiling*. In doing so I am
endorsing a whole range of other claims implicitly. Therefore, I already understand, perhaps, that liquid bubbles when it boils, or that water has to be 100 degrees centigrade to boil. The practice of autonomous discourse precedes logical vocabulary. What is meant by this is that the inferential knowledge expressed in the act of assertion must be prior to logical relations as logical relations express the speaker’s understanding of concepts developed pragmatically. For example, for a speaker to be able to understand or deploy the concept of *boiling* they must have developed this understanding materially, perhaps in conjunction with *hot* or *bubbling*. Without this intrinsic structural relation, the concept itself could not exist. Thus, the practice must come before the naming of the relations (or reasons) for committing to an assertion. Concepts must be placed within a structure of material inferences for them to be coherent. Or, to put it another way, logical vocabulary, in an inferential context, is a reflection of the normative practice of concept use itself. It is the linguistic expression of the pragmatic structure of material inference and embodied reason. To phrase it more simply, logical vocabulary has a metacognitive function. It is vocabulary that serves to *elaborate* and *explicate* our assertions. ‘Rather than describing how the world is, the expressive job of these concepts is to make explicit necessary features of the framework of discursive practices within which it is possible to describe how the world is’ (Brandom 2015, 38). They are the concepts which allow
semantic content to arise, they are the rules which govern the normative practice of discursive practice itself. The concepts are implicit within and therefore accessible to all autonomous discourse practitioners.

A further relevant feature of logical vocabulary and its relationship to discourse practice is its hierarchical nature. What is meant by this is that logical vocabulary is elaborative, it is a practice which moves away from an understanding of the types of norms and reasons governing specific and situated examples of practice, to more abstract ones. It is significant to note the word *elaborative* and to bear this in mind as the discussion continues. The hierarchical structure is *not linear*. He argues that this hierarchical structure should characterised as resulting from *algorithmic elaboration*. He uses this phrase as ‘algorithms generally say how some set of primitive abilities can be so exercised as to constitute more complex abilities’ (Brandom 2008, 32). It is an ability, not a response – the word is, therefore, being used in a very different way to the use of the word in Bourdieusian scholarship. ‘These elaborations are, however, hierarchically ordered. Some are further removed from the original discourse practice than others […] What appears in elaborated form at each higher level, according to Brandom, are the *pragmatic* features and abilities necessary and sufficient for engaging in the lower-level practices’ (Loeffler 2018, 150). The example given by Loeffler here is, if an agent makes the claim that, *if it is cubical*
then it must have corners, can only do so if they have practically mastered the concept of a cube in autonomous discourse. They must be able to apply, believe and act correctly in relation to cubes to be able to make this abstraction. This can be expanded further to include the even more abstract formulations such as \( p \) then \( q \). This kind of progressive elaboration (Loeffler 2018) can, therefore, be characterised as the use of logical vocabulary which allows agents to engage in higher order metacognitive thinking. The relevance that this facet of logical vocabulary can have within the context of education relates precisely to this metacognitive function. The game of giving and asking for reasons is one in which rational agents are engaged all of the time. However, the kind of rational activity necessary to the inferential development of an agent’s understanding of concepts in education needs to be more self-conscious than this to promote reasoning which is elaborative and more abstract than everyday reasoning. It needs to promote reasoning which makes explicit implicit assumptions and attempts to find commonalities between examples of practice characteristic of abstract thinking. This can allow educationalists to see the relations between their own situated practices and understandings to more general and abstracted understandings which can be shared and developed communally, promoting greater consistency between beliefs across various educational settings. This type of activity needs to be planned and considered. The process of thinking through
therefore needs to be understood as being elaborative in form, using the discursive model of *giving and asking for reasons*. This metacognitive activity is therefore essential to social development and should be central to any model which seeks to address cultured behaviours.

This does not mean that metacognitive practice does not take place already in classrooms; the literature surrounding metacognitive thinking and professional practice is vast. Pedagogical practice and research for many years has underscored the importance of *thinking about thinking* in relation to the development of subject-specific knowledge and skills, whilst the concept of *reflective practice* has profoundly impacted on practitioners’ awareness of their own practice and the efficacy of their pedagogical style on progress (Mockler and Sachs 2011) (Moon 2004) (Pollard 2018). The claim being made here is that these types of approaches are limited in scope precisely because of their focus on pedagogy, particularly those which are focused on the *progress* of students as demonstrated in *outcomes*, which is, essentially, the aim of action research and other professionally situated research. Furthermore, the reflective gaze often focuses outwards onto the classroom, rather than inward. Inferentialist analysis will enable practitioners to begin to unpick the associated beliefs inherent in their aims and to evaluate the adequacy of their ideas about education, exploring the link between wider social contexts and what appear to be unitary educational concepts but
which, in fact, are part of a unified and holistic semantic whole. However, the most crucial difference is that what is being promoted here is a shared practice, one which should take place within and between varied educational settings, including schools, universities and government. It is only in this way that social, rather than individual, professional development has meaning.

The possibility of algorithmic elaboration through the means of expressivist logical vocabulary underpins the very possibility of the development of a culture expressivist logic. The human ability to reason abstractly and engage in metacognitive thinking again moves the site of social development back to the thinking subject. The development of a culture in which ideas are elaborated and justified in a public space of reasons is enabled by the role that logical vocabulary plays in Brandom’s inferential semantics. The further practitioners can abstract from specific contexts the greater the capacity for social development. It is important to encourage practitioners to think beyond the confines of their own classrooms and schools, broadening and deepening their grasp on educational concepts and practices. This underscores the transformative ability of the agent. Their ability to express novel ideas and relations means that agents have the potential to expose new relations which can have a significant impact on social practice. ‘Self-conscious creatures accordingly enjoy the possibility of a distinctive kind of self-transformation:
making themselves to be different’ (Brandom 2009, 148). Abstraction is also creation; creation is transformation. This is the heart of what the development of 
expressive logic could mean to education.
Chapter Eleven
Applying Inferentialism

The preceding chapters have detailed the central tenants of Inferentialism and the ways in which these have the potential to address the theoretical issue of determinism many claim to be the critical flaw at the heart of the work of Bourdieu. The underlying problem of determinism stems from Bourdieu’s characterisation of the relationship *between* the individual and the social. The agent is acknowledged as ‘creative, inventive but within the limits of its structures and of the social structures which produced it’ (Wacquant 1992, 19). His ‘notion of habitus is often accused of a lack of agency, ruling out the possibility of social mobility and change’ (Li 2015, 128). In response to the problem of determinism in Bourdieu (and arguably in many other examples of educational policy and research) it has been suggested that Brandom’s account of meaning can make an important contribution. For Brandom, ‘having a rational will…can be understood as the rational capacity to respond reliably to one’s acknowledgement of a commitment’ (Brandom 2000, 94). Central to the expression of rational agency is the idea that knowledge is expressed as the making of claims and developed through the evaluation of the coherence of these claims, in being responsive to reasons. Claims are linked to other claims and it is our understanding of the related inferential structure of these
claims which form the basis of our knowledge. ‘Robert Brandom [...] explains concept formation and the establishment of knowledge-claims in terms of the inferences individuals make in the context of an intersubjective practice of acknowledging, attributing and challenging one another’s commitments’ (Taylor, Noorloos & Bakker 2017, 770). This practice (characterised as the game of giving and asking for reasons) and the expressive, transformative capacity of humans enabled by the structure of language, exemplifies agency. It is this capacity, and our understanding of the ways in which an agent’s knowledge develops, which has been the focus of this thesis.

Using Inferentialism in this way has the potential to impact educationalists’ understandings of prescient issues. In order to demonstrate this, two examples of educational issues current in England at the time of writing will be presented. The first case to be considered here was initially referred to in Chapter Ten.

This is the implementation of the Department of Education’s Pupil Premium Policy (Department of Education 2021) (henceforth PP) within schools in England. The second issue under consideration is that of the under-attainment of white working-class boys in England. The implications of the inferential re-reading of educational examples for researchers influenced by Bourdieu and their understandings of habitus within specific contexts will be considered. As we have seen, Inferentialism is
built around the interaction of agents because it is a ‘theory of
discursive practices’ (Brandom 1994, 641) and it is also a theory
which is based on the real-life practices of agents and so lends
itself to practical application. Further, its Hegelian influences
mean that it is a theory which allows us to consider critically the
historical development of culture in such a way that the agent has
a significant and active role. According to Brandom we actively
assent to concepts, the use of which we are responsible for within
a necessarily social context. The game of giving and asking for
reasons is a game which, as demonstrated in the common law
example referred to initially in Chapter Three, involves reference
to previous applications of a concept. The game of giving and
asking for reasons is played publicly, where mutually recognised
norms semantically link concepts to their previous usages. In
such a way we allow concepts to constrain us and so inherit the
activities and significance of those who preceded us. We ‘give
concepts a grip on us, place ourselves under their sway...in the
concrete practical tradition bequeathed to us by our
predecessors’ (Brandom 2002, 48). Coming to understand the
unique potential of inferentialist discursive practice, of the game
of giving and asking for reasons, within education will involve a
return to the concepts of intra- and inter-personal relationships
introduced in Chapter Nine, alongside the related concept of
recognition, both of which are crucial to understanding
communication between agents. Understanding the
Acknowledgement of meaning and action within educational settings can provide a tool through which to evaluate the efficacy of communication within and between institutions. Further, the importance of the efficacy of communication within the context of social justice is not only significant for communication between those working within education, but also of the communication between students and teachers. As is commonly accepted, attitudes and beliefs that teachers take into interactions will impact students’ beliefs and actions in turn. However, it is worth considering as an avenue of further research an Inferentialist approach to understanding the ways in which teachers’ views have the potential to either devalue or supress the voice of the child, or, to put it in Bourdieusian terms, commit acts of symbolic violence. An inferential approach can provide a clearer insight into the process of symbolic violence through considering the reasoning of powerful agents, i.e., the way they think about students and how this can lead to a lack of recognition of the agency of children. Symbolic violence is ‘an affective force that mediates feeling rules...that is, an affective force producing specific emotions and future practice’ (Threadgold 2019, 40). The inferential re-reading of Bourdieu presented here can enrich our understanding of symbolic violence, and empower agents to recognise the role that they may play in this act. The approach

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advocated here firstly suggests that education needs to consider the ways in which staff learn and expand their understanding of social issues as well as pedagogical ones. Whilst pupil progress is at the heart of education, the argument presented here is that, from the point of view of social development, continuing professional development (CPD) should aim to give all teachers a better understanding of vulnerable groups of children. The depth of their understanding of these groups relates to their action, which needs to be nuanced if it is to match the complex needs of individuals within these groups.

**Closing the Gap: Pupil Premium Policy**

There is no doubt that closing the gap between students from different socio-economic backgrounds should be of paramount concern at all levels of education. Indeed, closing the attainment gap is an increasingly pressing concern, as school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic that started in 2020 appear to have significantly contributed to a widening of the attainment gap between students from different socio-economic backgrounds in England. Whilst the rapid gathering of evidence taken at the time of writing means that data should be used only as a ‘rough guide’ (Education Endowment Fund 2022⁹), the research has shown

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⁹ The Education Endowment Fund will be referenced throughout this chapter. It is an organisation that collates research and presents it in a form which is easily
some alarming trends (Blainley & Hannay 2021; Department for Education 2021; Educational Endowment Fund 2022; Gore et al 2021; Juniper Education 2021; Twist et al 2022; Weidmann et al 2021). This includes students identified as being eligible for funding via the Pupil Premium Policy (PP). To recap, this policy is one which provides funding to schools based on the number of PP children that they have. ‘Pupil premium is funding to improve education outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in schools in England’ (DoE, Pupil Premium Guidance). The students are defined with reference to external socio-economic factors (although the policy also includes looked after students as well as students who have been adopted from care or have left care). ‘The gap in average attainment between those eligible for Pupil Premium and their peers continued to grow across the majority of year groups and subjects’ (Education Endowment Fund https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/guidance-for-teachers/covid-19-resources/best-evidence-on-impact-of-covid-19-on-pupil-attainment, 23/12/2021) as a result of school closures at the end of the academic year 20/21. With this in mind, it is crucial that government guidance, intervention and policy in general (Pupil Premium is simply an illustration of a wider point) are implemented successfully in schools to have the greatest possible impact on the development of these individual pupils.
From the perspective of Inferentialism, one of the key barriers to the effective implementation of policies is communication. The problems stem from a lack of recognition that communication is based on reciprocal agency; it is based on the game of giving and asking for reasons. In this section, the focus will be on the barriers that communication can pose to the successful implementation of policy, before reframing the argument to consider the problems that communication can cause in interactions with students.

Representationalism within language has been discussed previously in relation to the issues inherent in constructivist approaches to education. The discussion was epistemological, exploring the implicit dualism such approaches bring to education and the resultant problems of determinism. However, here we are instead going to consider the everyday ways language is used in lived contexts. The argument is that, in some cases, educators may use terms such as PP to designate, rather than to engage with, groups of children. The communication of policies to schools, and the discussion of policies within schools by SLT and teaching staff, have the potential to apply concepts without nuance. They may consider the concept as a solely instrumental, i.e., a concept used to identify an action to achieve an outcome, adopted without consideration of the needs of individuals. It can lead agents to respond to PP students in a uniform way, without consideration of relevance of the claims made by the concept and
the individual to which it is being applied. In saying that children are PP, without understanding that there are host of complex claims being made, is to think about this group without the nuance necessarily to accurately capture their position. Arguably, compounding this issue is the professional pressure that teachers are put under. Such a demanding profession, means that policy drives such as PP are in no way a priority and the implementation of such policies has the potential to become a ‘tick box activity’, i.e., simply implemented by teachers because they have been told to, without being given the time to think, reflect and explore. The pervasive culture of data-driven practice, accountability and outcomes tends towards an instrumental use of terms. The successful implementation of policies relating to social inequalities requires time that, in the current climate of education, schools simply don’t have.

‘Implementation is a key aspect of what schools do to improve, and yet it is a domain of school practice that rarely receives sufficient attention. In our collective haste to do better for pupils, new ideas are often introduced with too little consideration for how the changes will be managed and what steps are needed to maximise the chances of success. Too often the who, why, where, when, and how are overlooked, meaning implementation risks becoming an ‘add on’ task expected to be tackled on top of the day-to-day work. As a result, projects initiated with the best of intentions can fade away as schools struggle to manage these competing priorities.’ (Educational Endowment Fund 2022, online).
These ‘competing priorities’ mean that teachers, under pressure to focus on curriculum and assessment will not engage effectively with policies or give themselves the time to understand the issues which these policies are aiming to address. They do not have time to play the game of giving and asking for reasons which makes explicit the claims that are being made when talking about children.

As well as needing more time to make explicit the claims being made when implementing policies, there is a further issue of communication between agents within schools. At the heart of communication is the assumption of understanding. I cannot talk to you about a car unless we both agree on what a car is. Further, to use the language of inferentialism, I must recognise you as a potential player in the game. We are both score-keepers. In talking about a car, I must recognise that the person I am talking to has some knowledge about cars, and can make claims about them which we both share. I also accept that they may know things about cars which may change my view of cars, may change my understanding. In tracking each other’s commitments there is ‘an implicit recognition on our part of the doxastic and practical statuses and attitudes we attribute to others (Loeffler 2018, 186). We have to recognise others as being equal to ourselves. The term recognition is a term used by Hegel as the founding principle of his holistic ontological view. The central idea is that we must recognise the consciousness of another as being equivalent to
our own in order to achieve conscious awareness ourselves. This is the founding principle of meaningful communication. However, while we may agree on what we perceive words to refer to, we may also hold vastly different beliefs about them. When I identify a group of students as PP, we may agree on who these students are, but may have a very different understanding of what the attribution of PP means and this may in turn involve different claims about the group. For example, one teacher may consider this a vulnerable group who potentially need additional academic support to address, for example, language development; whilst another may consider this group as coming from backgrounds with low parental support, and in need of support to counter the negative values of the parents. This has the potential to affect the ways in which policies are implemented from school to school and classroom to classroom. Within the context of education, we can use these ideas critically, looking at issues arising from semantic discord, alongside a positive approach of affective action in relation to staff CPD and inter-institutional relationships. Whilst Brandom’s theoretical focus is on the expressive and transformative aspect of discourse, on the ways in which agents become closer semantically, there is value within the context of education to look more closely at implicit conceptual content and semantic discord.

…different speakers usually hold vastly different beliefs and differ in their views about the inferential roles of even the beliefs that they share
– and, accordingly, they understand the corresponding linguist performances in different ways. Yet they generally agree in practice as to which bits of their discourse count as recurrences of the same term. (Loeffler 2018, 113)

This kind of discord is necessarily involved in all linguistic performances, if only because of the unique experience interlocutors bring to each exchange. In everyday conversation these differences do not generally matter and semantic differences often bear no real weight. However, in the case of responding to the needs of students, the different commitments and entitlements underlying the application of terms involves presuppositions that are significant. If there are implicit misunderstandings between agents in educational settings, action on behalf of students may be less effective. For example, if a member of staff responsible for pastoral care understands a child in a different way to their teacher, then a holistic view leading to a more nuanced approach to supporting a child may not be achieved. Consider the word support itself, used daily in educational settings. Different agents with different areas of expertise will be making very different claims when using this word. Teachers, when they are asked to support a student or a group of students by pastoral staff, SLT or by external agents such as child psychologists or paediatricians, will see this within their own frame of reference. The use of the term by a teacher has the potential to tend toward pedagogical support through the use of, for example, differentiated resources. They will not
understand the more complex and individualised support that these children need. They do not have access to the kind of specialised knowledge required for them to expand their inferential understanding of concepts and, therefore, their actions. Teachers’ uses of concepts may make claims about individuals or groups which do not meet the required standards of correctness needed to implement the right kind of support needed in classrooms. The same principle applies to communication between senior leadership and staff, or government agencies and schools. In short, we need to explore commitments rather that assuming that providing teachers with a narrative about best practice will suffice. A way to achieve this could be through direct dialogue between schools and external agencies, including highly specialised discussions with, for example, child psychologists or social workers. This dialogue should not be limited to individuals or small groups of staff within a school (such as SENCOs\(^\text{10}\), pastoral leads, safeguarding leads, or those responsible for PP strategy). Specialist knowledge should be accessible to all staff. In any area of accepted knowledge there are certain standards of correctness that govern the application of concepts. These standards of correctness are what entitle me to make claims about things. However, my claims can be wrong, my experience

\(^{10}\) This stands for special educational needs coordinator, a role which exists in all schools in England at the time of writing. They undergo specific training in order to become a SENCO, and have regular professional development in relation to the needs of students identified as having specific educational needs such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, or medical needs.
not broad enough. Each area of accepted knowledge has experts that can help us to review the claims that we make. To return to an example introduced in Chapter Four, to develop my knowledge of copper as a metal, I have a responsibility to hold myself to ‘standards of correctness that are administered by metallurgical experts’ (Brandom 2009, 79). Transferring this idea to education, the standards of correctness of the use of terms, and hence their meaning and implications, within research and policy need to be established by experts, including drawing on the expertise of experienced teaching staff. Whilst there seems to be some recognition by the government for the role of experts in staff CPD whereby ‘professional development should be underpinned by robust evidence and expertise’ (DoE 2016, p.1), there is no support in relation to time or resources which would allow schools to implement this effectively. Agents need to have time to engage with each other’s commitments and entitlements in order for each to appreciate how their own application of a concept may differ from another and hence how their understanding of the meaning of the concept differs. High-quality teachers, and thereby high-quality support for vulnerable groups, requires high-quality CPD. Further, there needs to be a recognition that training must not be reduced to a focus on pedagogy alone.
**White Working-Class Boys: Thinking and Action**

Whilst the previous section discussed the example of Pupil Premium to illustrate the contribution that Inferentialism can make to the on-going discussion of the CPD of teachers, this section will discuss the under-attainment of white working-class boys in England to demonstrate a second point. It will underscore the importance of the relationship between the representational use of language and the recognition of pupils as agents in their own right, linking this to the Bourdieusian concept of symbolic violence in school contexts. The underachievement of white working-class boys is not a new issue in England. The persistence of this issue in England at the time of writing led, in November 2020, to the Education Select Committee to launch an enquiry into this problem. This was set up to ‘try to establish whether there is some kind of systemic under-privilege for white children from poorer backgrounds because the data show incontrovertibly that the white ethnic group mostly underperforms all other ethnic groupings with the exception of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities’ (Cook 2020, online). Inferentialism, with its emphasis on rational agency, demands that we focus on the claims of individual agents within education in order to support social development within these contexts, alongside a wider range of measures. *Systematic under-privilege* is arguably more than simply the financial context of a child, but also the way in which they are *thought about*. From the perspective of
Inferentialism, this problem should be considered in relation to the *role in reasoning* that such concepts play, i.e., not simply the views that agents adopt in relation to these groups, but the ways in which people’s beliefs and actions accord. Within Brandom’s rational framework, the rule bound normativity which governs the use of concepts involves ‘an account of practices that constitute treating something as conceptually contentful’ (Brandom xv, 1992). ‘This story amounts, then, to an account of the relations of mindedness – in the sense of sapience rather than mere sentience – to behaviour’ (ibid). To put more simply, practice understood as behaviour is essentially rational because it follows normative rules which, in Brandom’s Inferentialism, express claims. The significance of forms of categorisation arising from the application of concepts as referents discussed in the Pupil Premium example has a similar explicative role to play in this example. The ‘representational vocabulary we use to express intentional directedness’ (ibid), and the commitments therein, directly impact action. Hence, the implicit commitments made by teachers when talking about groups or individuals may mean that their actions do not meet the needs of the child. For example, if the concepts upon which their practical reasoning is based have either not been made explicit enough to demonstrate potential contradictions, or which lack understanding or knowledge of ad hoc claims (introduced, for example, by wider professional experience or CPD) could impede school-level drives to address
social inequality. To give an example, if schools analyse internal assessment data and find that it reflects the national trend in relation to the underachievement of white working-class boys, their actions and responses will be based on the commitments involved in their using of the concept. As such, they will use the concept based on their own normative understanding of its inferential relations to other concepts and the implications which follow on from its application. It may be that they understand the underachievement of white working-class boys as being the result of challenging behaviours. In using the term, they are making claims about individuals, and these claims will guide their actions in response to data. However, if they were given the time to explore their claims, there is the potential for teachers to broaden their understanding of concepts such as this one. In exploring their claims with experts and experienced teachers, they could consider behavioural issues within a wider network of claims, perhaps leading them to re-evaluate interventions, or implement them with a greater acknowledgment of the complexity of student behaviours – behaviours which are themselves responses to reasons. Inferentialism can help us understand this by showing that we need to look at concepts such as white working-class boys in relation to their role in reasoning.

The less nuanced approaches and understandings of concepts such as white working-class boys, or Pupil Premium, can also be viewed as negating the agency of these groups. This
issue can be directly linked to the Bourdieusian concept of symbolic violence. The concept, introduced in Chapter Six, is one of Bourdieu’s most influential and has been neatly summarised by Schubert:

According to Bourdieu, contemporary social hierarchy and social inequality, and the suffering that they cause, are produced and maintained less by physical force than by forms of symbolic domination…Language itself is a form of domination (Schubert 2012, 179).

Ultimately, meaning and the content of concepts are dominated and largely controlled by powerful agents. Bourdieu considered this within the context of education. Teachers and the ways in which their ideas are perceived as dominant devalue students. ‘Thus the modalities of practices, the ways of looking, sitting, standing, keeping silent, or even of speaking…are full of injunctions that are powerful and hard to resist’ (Bourdieu 1992, 51). If we return to the example of white working-class boys, from the Bourdieusian perspective of symbolic violence, their experiences within education (and working-class children more widely) typify this. Ingerstoll, summarising Diane Reay, writes that:

‘The sense of belonging that middle-class children are afforded in schools is sharply contrasted with the legacy of negative representations and othering that working-class children inherit from multiple generations of family history, where schooling is associated with failure and class derision. Lack of respect for the
working class in wider society translates into class condescension in the classroom...’ (Ingerstoll 2019, 2 – Studies in Social Justice 13, 2, 347-351)

These ideas are familiar ones within the context of education, and research. The lack of recognition of the practices and values of particular groups, and the potential that these attitudes have to damage educational outcomes, is generally acknowledged. However, inferentialism can offer a fresh perspective from which to characterise these ideas, and that is by considering the role that concepts play in reasoning. Often, when agents (i.e., those working within education) think about groups or individuals using language, they believe they use language referentially, without recognising the claims that they make. In education, there is the risk that in categorising and describing we are not thinking of students as capable of actively challenging our thinking in relation to them, or recognising their capacity to demand reasons. The implicit belief in the referential nature of educational terms, such as those relating to social class, fails to acknowledge the rational agency of those to whom they refer and in doing so present them as static, not open to change or able to resist attributions made of them. Consider the act of using language to make reference to a chair, whilst claims are being made about the chair, there is no recognition of the chair as an agent who can actively challenge; this excludes the possibility of the chair making judgements or acting rationally. In this example,
they exclude the possibly of the chair as able to change itself. However, people always have the capacity to change including through engagement in the game of giving and asking for reasons. This means that changes in action and the development of knowledge in relation to concepts such as white working-class boys will be limited without the recognition of the agency of these groups. The development of understanding rests on the challenging of claims, not only by those we consider to be experts in the sense of those engaged in teacher training, CPD or academia, but through the pupils themselves. This is a two-way dialogue based on recognition and respect, in which students can change and respond, rather than us changing in response to them. The type of two-way approach advocated here is different from the ways in which schools predominantly engage in student voice practices present in most schools at the time of writing. Such practices involve tools as questionnaires and interviews being used to record students’ views for schools to respond to. It is not genuine communication in the sense of engaging with each other’s application of terms and understanding what follows on from their application.

Returning to the place of these ideas within a Bourdieusian framework, it is the acknowledgement of the rational capacity of agents in this sense which can enrich Bourdieusian research. Re-reading habitus as agentic in this way involves an acceptance that all agents have the capacity for conscious and meaningful
change without recourse to the kind of social upheaval or academic discourse advocated by Bourdieu. The way we use language, (i.e., by using categories to group children), has the potential to negate the agency of pupils, undermining the capacity of students and adults to change. Social development has to include agentic dialogue which appreciates the complexities of the implicit claim-making nature of language. In undermining the epistemic status of students, we present habitus as a static entity, rather than recognising it as something with which children themselves are involved in taking responsibility for. Students can judge and justify the claims that they make, they can and do consider the coherence of their actions. They, as well as their interlocutors, will respond to engagement in the game of giving and asking for reasons. We need to ensure that we approach engaging with, and thinking about, groups and individuals with the assumption of equal reciprocity i.e., the assumption that, as both are players in the game, their actions and beliefs are similarly rational. It is at ‘this stage of expressive development we can become explicit to ourselves’ (Brandom 1994, 642).

Summary Comments

This chapter set out to demonstrate the relevance that Inferentialism has within education today. Inferentialism is a theory which has the resources to characterise agents as
dynamic and self-transformative, giving them an epistemic status
denied to them in other approaches. In playing the game of
giving and asking for reasons, agents are characterised as
knowers who make rational choices. This perspective offers
something new, and gives an account of reason which is
markedly different from common sense understandings. As
referred to in Chapter Six, the debates which continue within
contemporary Philosophy of Sociology still revolve around the
same question as that with which Durkheim, Comte and later
Bourdieu himself, were concerned: the relation between the
individual and the social (the individualism-holism, agency-
structure debate). In contrast, the holistic approach of
Inferentialism presents a model of rational agency which attends
to the human capability for change as a result of the
characterisation of rationality as involving judgements. Agents
have an active responsibility for the process of deontic score-
keeping whereby agents modify their judgements in response to
new knowledge. As such, in considering social development, it
becomes clear that much more emphasis needs to be placed on
giving teachers the right contexts in which to think things through,
thereby improving the efficacy of action. Further, it suggests that
development involves a proper recognition of the agency of the
groups of children that we are trying to support. Language is not
referential. In using terms, we are not identifying, we are not
categorising. When talking about groups of children we are
making claims about them. They should not be thought of in
terms of categories, but recognised as unique agents in their own
right who change of their own volition in response to reasons.

Inferential ontology can therefore do what Bourdieu and
subsequent constructivists (no matter which side of the
individualism-holism, agency-structure epistemic debate they
stand) cannot. It can account for agency as practical action based on rational belief, rather than habit. Therefore, if there were an ontological shift in Bourdieu’s approach, then a more coherent account of habitus would emerge. Such a rereading of the set of dispositions which define habitus would mean that rational activity, that agency, would account for the dispositions which constitute habitus, rather than these being habitual responses to an external social world. The second benefit that the type of ontological shift advocated here would bring to Bourdieusian scholarship is that it also accounts for the binding nature of socio-historical norms on reason. As has been argued, ‘Rules of this sort assert an authority over future practice’ (Brandom 2000, 76). Our judgements, the reasons that we give for our actions, stand in relation to other judgements. However, it is the expressive activity involved in making these judgements which allows agency. Socio-historical reasoning is a practice for which agents are accountable. Inferentialism offers a holistic view which is conceptual, which rejects the myth of the given. In this holistic, conceptual model action and normativity, rather than representation, are epistemically dominant. Post Descartes, the ‘result is a familiar, arguably dominant, contemporary research program: to put in place a general conception of representation, the simpler forms of which are exhibited already in the activity of non-concept using creatures, and on that basis elaborate more complex forms’ (Brandom 2000, 7). However, Brandom’s inferential model rejects this. For Brandom, awareness is always and necessarily conceptual, it is always based on an inferential recognition of the compatibility of competing ideas. As such, ‘the cognitive-practical subject or self that is identified with a synthetic unity of apperception’ (Brandom 2009, 41) is always in the process of weighing and evaluating the
coherence of their beliefs and appropriateness of their actions. It is practical rational agency whose practical action is based on beliefs which are compatible with their claims.

Some of the most pressing issues which these ideas can help address, i.e., the idea that agents need the space in which to reason, relate to the fact that professionals have insufficient time in which to think. The efficacy of social workers, teachers and others working with children in the education system are impacted on by administrative requirements. These shallow forms of thinking and accountability measures take professional precedence. However, the process of thinking is not attended to. It is important to stress that the point being made here is not simply the assertion that research and practice should be self-consciously elaborative. It suggests more than the necessity of driving forward social development through the practice of giving and asking for reasons and the clear recognition, not only of agency, but of what agency is and how it functions. It suggests more than a recognition of the agent as an essentially rational being. Focusing only on this practical application based on grammatical structures and the ampliative power that logical vocabulary plays in uncovering inconsistencies in thinking is, however, to miss the wider significance of Brandom’s Inferentialism and what he is telling his readers about what it is to be human. The real point to make in relation to the essentially expressive nature of language and, therefore, of reasoning, is more profound than this. It can be hard to see beyond the technicalities and complexities of Brandom’s extensive writings to the very simple and beautiful political heart of his philosophical project: freedom and autonomy. He presents his readers with sapient creatures that can ‘craft vocabularies rich with the possibility of redescribing, reconceiving, and (so) reconstituting
ourselves’ (Brandom 2009, 148). He challenges us to ‘understand the process by which expressive, self-interpreting, self-constituting historical creatures’ come to be what they are’ (ibid). It requires an ideological shift which acknowledges and celebrates the transformative capacities of agents. Projects within education are enabled by this capacity, and engaging in educational research and practice is an expression of freedom in and of itself.
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Content added here to underscore issue of meaning agentic change in Bourdieu