In his book *Making It Explicit*, Robert Brandom has presented us with a fresh vision of how a pragmatist inferentialist might try to tackle many substantial philosophical problems: so many that the expectations of even the most daring of the inferentialist creed are surpassed. But we all also know that a great philosopher possesses the qualities of being imaginative and thought-provoking, not necessarily the quality of being right. In this paper I draw attention to one of the central thoughts of Brandom’s book, the one the author himself acknowledges to be in danger of circularity. This concerns how to explain the content of a concept. I will argue that the threat of circularity is indeed real, going on to suggest one possible way of resolving the matter without jettisoning Brandom’s pragmatist and inferentialist insights.

I

One of Brandom’s truly original contributions concerns his systematic treatment of two central inferentialist notions: that of a *materially-correct inference* and that of the *content* of a concept. To see these notions as closely connected is not absolutely novel, of course. Brandom here draws primarily on the work of Wilfrid Sellars and on his pioneering idea of a “logical space of reasons”, whereby some of the very central philosophical notions like that of knowledge are treated in a thoroughly normative fashion – their *inferential* substance is sought.¹ If we ask what it is for someone to know something, we should not look, according to Sellars, for an answer that would specify a kind of *state* that the person is in, but should instead look for inferential *grounds* that lead the person to the given conclusion.

Brandom starts with the Sellarsian picture and develops it into its full pragmatist-inferentialist form. Concerning the two notions mentioned, he seeks to *explain* the notion of the content of a concept by means of the notion of a ma-
terially-correct inference. First, then, we must be clear about what exactly a materially-correct inference is. This notion is distinct from the notion of a formally-correct inference in that it deals with the non-logical content of the concepts used in the given inference. Thus, to infer from the fact that a house is painted red to the fact that it is coloured is to engage in a piece of materially-correct inference, even though from the formal point of view there might be nothing to say about this inference. We could just as well say that whereas formally-correct inferences preserve the truth of the propositions involved in them, materially-correct inferences are, in addition, content-preserving. Now, it is obvious that Brandom needs a way of explaining the notion of a materially-correct inference without relying on the notion of the content of a concept. Otherwise he would be trapped in a circle: he would be presupposing precisely what he wants to explain. To this end, he introduces a third crucial element into his picture. This is the deeply-pragmatist notion of a practical attitude towards an inference, being carried out by a member of some discursive community; this attitude splits into the acceptance of an inference and its refusal. Brandom then suggests that we define materially-correct inferences as such inferences that are treated as correct in the actual discursive practice of its users. The inference that ‘if a house is painted red then it is coloured’ is materially correct because it is taken as correct in the actual practice of the speakers of English. This explanatory move clearly indicates why Brandom takes himself to be a member of a distinguished tradition of pragmatist thought: the crucial features of human rationality manifested in our use of linguistic expressions and concepts are, on his account, traced back to what we actually do.

So far, so good. It is only when we start to wonder why it is that people actually do endorse some material inferences and reject others that we begin to feel rather uneasy in the framework of explanation just sketched. The crucial question becomes this: What kind of abilities must be granted to discursive creatures like ourselves? As far as I can see, one could reply to the question in two different ways. One could declare that (1) materially-correct inferences are taken as correct due to their content. This would mean crediting speakers and their interpreters with a grasp of the content of concepts that is prior to their actual discursive moves. This, however, is a position Brandom is clearly not entitled to take, on pain of circularity; his approach is rather to secure the emergence of the content of a concept as a result of the discursive moves. Alternatively, one could try a much bolder claim that (2) by endorsing some material inferences and rejecting others, people are not applying an already