ABSTRACT. While according to the inferentialists, meaning is always a kind of inferential role, proponents of other approaches to semantics often doubt that actual meanings, as they see them, can be generally reduced to inferential roles. In this paper we propose a formal framework for considering the hypothesis of the "general inferentializability of meaning". We provide very general definitions of both "semantics" and "inference" and study the question which kinds of semantics can be reasonably seen as engendered by inferences. We restrict ourselves to logical constants; and especially to the question of the feasibility of seeing the meanings of those of classical logic in an inferential way. The answer we reach is positive (although with some provisos).

1. THE INFERENTIALIST TRADITION

Contemporary theoreticians of meaning can be divided, with a degree of oversimplification, into those seeing the meaning of an expression as principally a matter of what the expression denotes or stands for, and those seeing it as a matter of how the expression is used. A prominent place among the latter is assumed by those who seek the basis of meaning in the usage of an expression, in the "language games" we play with it; and a prominent place among them is assumed by those who claim that meaning is a matter of the role of the expression w.r.t. the rules of the language games, especially the inferential rules, which are, as Brandom (1994) points out, crucial for our all-important game of "giving and asking for reasons". From this viewpoint, the meaning of an expression is, principally, its inferential role.

Brandom (1985, p. 31) characterizes the inferentialist tradition (which, according to him, can be traced back to Leibniz) in the following way:

The philosophical tradition can be portrayed as providing two different models for the significances which are proximal objects of explicit understanding, representational and inferential. We may call "representationalism" the semantically reductive view that inference is to be explained away in favor of more primitive representational relations.
... By “inferentialism”, on the other hand, one would mean the complementary semantically reductive order of explanation which would define representational features of subsentential expressions in terms of the inferential relations of sentences containing them.

Various degrees of commitment to inferentialism can be found also within the writing of some of the founding fathers of analytic philosophy. Thus, Frege’s first account for the concept of “conceptual content”, which he presents in his *Begriffsschrift* (1879, pp. 2–3), is distinctively inferentialist:

The contents of two judgments can differ in two ways: first, it may be the case that [all] the consequences which may be derived from the first judgment combined with certain others can always be derived also from the second judgment combined with the same others; secondly this may not be the case ... I call the part of the content which is the same in both the conceptual content.

Similarly, Wittgenstein assumed a distinctively inferentialist standpoint in a particular stage of the development of his thought from the Tractarian representationalism to the more inclusive use theory of meaning of the *Investigations*. In his *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics* (1956, pp. 24, 398) we can read:

The rules of logical inference cannot be either wrong or right. They determine the meaning of the signs ... We can conceive the rules of inference – I want to say – as giving the signs their meaning, because they are rules for the use of these signs.

Recently, the philosophical foundations of inferentialism have been elaborated especially by Brandom (1994, p. 144):

It is only insofar as it is appealed to in explaining the circumstances under which judgments and inferences are properly made and the proper consequences of doing so that something associated by the theorist with interpreted states or expressions qualifies as a semantic interpretant, or deserves to be called a theoretical concept of a content.

Hence, according to Brandom (2000, p. 30), the inferentialist semantic explanations beginning with proprieties of inference ... explain propositional content, and in terms of both go on to explain the conceptual content expressed by subsentential expressions such as singular terms and predicates.¹

All of this indicates that the idea of identifying meanings with inferential roles is worth investigating. However, its viability has been often challenged (see, e.g. Prior 1960/1961, or Fodor and LePore 1993). The most straightforward challenges amount to claiming that the meanings that some of our expressions clearly seem to carry cannot be envisaged as creatures of inference. This invites the general question, which I would like to address in this paper: