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CRITICAL NOTICE

Brandom and Pragmatism: Remarks on a Still Open Question

A critical notice of R. B. Brandom, *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, and Contemporary*. Harvard University Press, 2011. Pp. 238. ISBN 978-0-674-05808-8. € 31.50 (hbk).

1. Brandom as Pragmatist

Brandom's work, in which an array of original views intertwines with themes from German idealism, analytic philosophy and pragmatism, has generated a sophisticated discussion and remarkable body of writings, attracting the voices of discord from the alleged purists of the various traditions surveyed and reworked – the pragmatists being by far the loudest crowd. In *Perspectives on Pragmatism*,¹ Brandom has added more fuel to the fire by offering a systematic survey of pragmatism: classical, recent and contemporary. The volume, in which a markedly historical imprint progressively leaves the floor to a more theoretical one, collects Brandom's writings specifically addressing pragmatism in its most diverse forms and shapes.² However, as is distinctive of Brandom's style, each of the two poles of reconstructive and speculative work relentlessly calls for the other, making the volume a challenging synthesis of intellectual history and theoretical insight. It is my contention that, upon close inspection, the two do not always chime in with each other as promised, betraying some tensions in Brandom's reconstruction of the tradition as well as in his own most positive project. Such tensions, though far from being hopelessly disruptive, need to be highlighted in order to grasp fully the potential of Brandom's work.

My assessment of Brandom's reconstruction of, and work on, pragmatism focuses upon his distinction between a 'narrow' understanding of pragmatism – championed in different ways by the triumvirate of Peirce, James and Dewey – and a 'broad' understanding – as variously advocated by Kant, Hegel, the early Heidegger, the later Wittgenstein and such post-analytic figures as Quine, Sellars, Davidson, Rorty, and Putnam. One central and lingering motif of the first part of the volume is that the classical pragmatists, despite having their hearts in the right place, were not able (either because technically ungifted or historically ill-suited) to fully work out the details of their philosophical project, since otherwise they would have noticed the shaky grounds and undesirable upshots of some of their assumptions. Because of their careful avoidance of such

glaring flaws, we should rather praise both pre- and post-classical pragmatists, and follow their philosophical steps in order to advance the pragmatist insights. Brandom voices this criticism by rehearsing (and expanding) one particular version of the story of the desired glorious overcoming of experience-based pragmatic accounts of meaning and normativity (both theoretical and practical) by means of language-based pragmatic ones.³

I see this maneuver as problematic, but for reasons quite unlike the ones variously offered by those who read the linguistic turn (and the eventual return to German idealism) as a retrograde movement.⁴ Rather, I find Brandom's reconstruction problematic as it draws a rather artificial distinction between classical and pre-/post-classical pragmatism that stops us from appreciating deeper and more significant continuities (and discontinuities) internal to the tradition. Brandom in fact offers a particular version of the now familiar 'experience vs. language divide' story that tends to blur more interesting distinctions that ought instead be given prominence. I here have in mind the metaphilosophical contrast between a quietist and a metaphysical anti-representationalist agenda: a contrast which is in a way much broader (methodologically speaking) than that between experience and language, and which enables us to rethink what I take to be the key notion of pragmatism: that is, *conduct*.⁵ My suggestion is that this represents a more interesting (and perhaps more fundamental) avenue along which to chart the pragmatist landscape and progress, and its appreciation would also allow us to reconsider the general philosophical coordinates of Brandom's own pragmatist project.

This being my goal, in what follows I shall thus not so much discuss the many details of Brandom's recounting of pragmatism (an effort already undertaken by other commentators)⁶ as focus on the metaphilosophical stakes and outcomes of his narrative. In order to do that, in the next section I will present Brandom's recounting of the pragmatist progress from Kant to the present time, and in the following one I will briefly articulate my concerns about this story with reference to Brandom's exchange with two kindred contemporary versions of anti-representationalism.

2. A Pragmatist Sonata in Norm Major

In the 'Introduction', written specifically for this volume, Brandom sets the stage for his ambitious reading of, and work in, pragmatism. He identifies in the *normative turn* and the *pragmatist methodology* the two core themes of pragmatism: that is, the idea that exercises of judgment and agency of sapient creatures like us respond to rules and are subject to normative assessment (of which he offers a careful account in *Making It Explicit*: Brandom, 1994); and the idea that the discursive contents of such normative structures should be understood in terms of the practical performances of the subjects endorsing or applying them (which he articulates in detail in *Between Saying and Doing*:

Brandom, 2006). This would be, according to Brandom, the blueprint of the pragmatist revolution sung in a normative key. Kant, who according to Brandom started it all, had a rather individualistic and rationalistic understanding of this model, which Hegel attempted to naturalize by describing norms as the ‘ongoing social, historical process of “experience”’ (p. 4). Classical pragmatism, principally at the hands of James and Dewey, completed this process of naturalization by describing it as the outcome of our transactions with the environment, through a process in line with scientific accounts of their time. The sciences on which classical pragmatism relied (and in part helped to forge) were Darwinian evolutionism and statistical reasoning, which were working under the new modalities of the *contingent* and the *probable* (rather than those of the *necessary* and the *certain*). Normativity became a function of habitual response, itself described as a process of goal-directed adaptive and selective learning. This amounted to new conceptions of nature, experience and reason: natural laws are statistical and selectional, experience is a process and a practice in which we exercise our abilities, and reason amounts to the intelligent coping with one’s environment by means of a practical understanding of it.

These are the essentials of what Brandom calls Fundamental Pragmatism, which is at once normative, empiricist, and naturalist: according to this approach *knowing that* is to be understood as a form of *knowing how*, with the implicit context of human practices functioning as the background for the meaningfulness of our explicit norms of judgment and action. The early Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein offered versions of fundamental pragmatism, as did Quine and Sellars. This breed of pragmatism marked a contrast ‘between something on the implicit, know-how, skill, practical ability, practice side and something on the explicit, conceptual, rule, principle, representation side’ (p. 9), and had the programmatic aspiration to ‘exhibit discursive intentionality as a distinctive kind of practical intentionality’ (p. 10). Price, whose variety of pragmatism is discussed by Brandom later on in the book, aptly labeled this shift as a passage from ‘object naturalism’ to ‘subject naturalism’: that is, a passage from a semantic representationalist account of the objects and properties involved in a certain discursive practice to a pragmatic, anti-representationalist account of the doings and practical abilities involved in the implementation of such a practice.

When it comes to cashing out the normativity that is implicit in practical intentionality so described, classical pragmatism appeals to the selective-adaptive structure common to evolution and learning. Brandom reads classical pragmatism as variously endorsing an instrumentalist conception of semantic norms, that is, in terms of utility:

truth-evaluable states such as beliefs are thought of on the model of tools, which can be more or less apt or useful, in concert with others that are available in a concrete situation, relative to some desired end or purpose. (p. 16)

Instrumental Pragmatism can be spared from the charge of subjectivism (or of Vulgar Pragmatism) if it acknowledges (for example with Dewey) the functional character of normativity and rules, according to which the organism and its environment jointly contribute to the establishment of what we take to be a true idea or good plan of action. The human factor should always work itself out in cooperation with the environmental factor in order to achieve a picture of knowledge as both correspondence and satisfaction. Brandom remarks how this is the congenial concept of experience as *Erfahrung* with which classical pragmatists were working.

Common wisdom has it that with the advent of the linguistic turn classical pragmatism was soon considered obsolete because of its focus on experience (despite the precious philosophical work on this key notion) and its failure to take language as the metaphilosophical focus of reflective inquiry. Yet Brandom envisions two aspects under which pragmatism did advance the philosophical discussion even after the linguistic turn. Pragmatists focused on the uses (rather than on the meaning) of natural (rather than formal) languages as part of the natural history of a certain kind of beings: in particular, they focused 'on discursive practices, skills, and abilities, on what one must be able to *do* in order to count as saying or thinking *that* things are thus-and-so' (p. 23). In particular, two principles govern fundamental pragmatism's understanding of the relationship between semantics and pragmatics: Methodological Pragmatism and Semantic Pragmatism. According to Methodological Pragmatism, the point of associating meaning, contents and other semantic interpretants with linguistic expressions is to codify (that is express explicitly) proprieties of *use*. According to Semantic Pragmatism, in a natural language all there is to effect the associations of meanings, contexts, or other semantic interpretants with linguistic expressions is the way those expressions are *used* by the linguistic practitioners themselves: it is the way practitioners *employ* expressions that makes them *mean* what they do. The joint outcome of Methodological and Semantic pragmatism is Linguistic Pragmatism, according to which

in order to understand natural languages, we have to understand how the *one* thing we do, *use* the language, can serve at once to settle the meanings of our expression *and* determine which of them we take to be true. (p. 25)

What is important about the linguistic turn for Brandom is that those pragmatists who subscribed to it thought that the most important feature of the natural history of creatures like us is that we have '*come into language*', that is that we have come to engage in distinctively linguistic practices and to exercise distinctively linguistic abilities, which *should* be the very focus of philosophical inquiry. According to Brandom, there are in fact three problems at issue in linguistic pragmatism: those of *demarcation* (what distinguishes language users from non-language users?), *emergence* (how did language develop in the first place?) *and leverage* (how are we better off with language?). Brandom takes the demarcation question as central and offers a rationalistic criterion

of demarcation of the linguistic and the discursive: the activity of giving and asking for reasons (properly characterized in terms of commitments and entitlement to commitments) is what characterizes creatures such as us. Engaging in specifically *linguistic* practice so conceived is an essential necessary condition for having thoughts and beliefs in a full-blooded sense. Assertion is the downtown of language, and declarative sentences are the basic syntactical structures. Asserting a sentence is taking it to be *correct* in the specific sense of being *true*, hence being prepared to offer a reason for it, reinforce it or revise it the light of other considerations.

Now, significantly enough, the classical pragmatists (along with Wittgenstein) claimed that there is no such downtown. While they can still be said to partake in the fundamental pragmatist project together with the rationalistic inferentialism Brandom is interested in defending, this marks a not so small difference – actually, in my view, almost a parting of ways. Unlike Brandom, the classical pragmatists (and Wittgenstein) focused on the leverage problem, granting it conceptual (as well as ordinary) priority. They take it to be significant that we do talk in different ways for different purposes, and that this ability allows us to understand and re-describe ourselves and others in ever more sophisticated ways so as to address new needs and purposes. From this point of view, the normativity of our linguistic commitments much emphasized by Brandom and central to any anti-representationalist agenda would thus have the central role we grant it not because these commitments are essentially (i.e., metaphysically) different in kind from mere natural dispositions, but because in describing what we say in normative terms rather than as sheer drives we are interested in marking a practical difference in the way we conduct ourselves in accordance with, and as a consequence of, such sayings.

This difference of emphasis is telling as it conveys Brandom's fundamental deference to metaphysical-ontological considerations, only dressed in linguistic-inferentialist clothing: according to Brandom we should ultimately respond to how the world tells us to speak about it. In contrast with this depiction of our linguistic practices as the implementation of normative rules the world requires us to employ in order to word it correctly, I think it is important to place the emphasis on the normative *practice* and *activity* involved in wording the world at the core of pragmatism. The difference between saying that we *are* a certain kind of beings doing things *with* language and that we do practically *conduct* in such and such ways *in* and *through* language makes a great difference: namely, the difference between focusing on what we *are* and talk *about*, and what we *do* and the *talking* itself.

3. Varieties of Anti-Representationalism

I think that this contrast is well represented in the second half of the book, where Brandom critically engages with Rorty and Price (I will leave Sellars to

the side), together with sketching the theoretical bare bones of his own analytic brand of pragmatism. I shall focus here on a few telling disagreements with Rorty and Price over the best strategy for implementing the anti-representationalism at the core of pragmatism, primarily in order to articulate my concerns about Brandom's reconstruction and continuation of the tradition.

Despite applauding Rorty's re-description of metaphysical problems as problems pertaining to vocabularies (rather than to objects and events accountable for from outside such linguistic normative practices), Brandom differs from his mentor in the philosophical implementation and the metaphilosophical consequences of this acknowledgment and shift. Whereas for Rorty there is no 'correct' language to account for our encounter with the world, but rather only an unbroken historical unfolding of metaphors that enable us to 'cope' with it, according to Brandom representational language still retains a certain priority in its guiding us through the world so as to fulfill whatever goals we might have. For Brandom there is in fact a theoretical philosophical project of reconstructing and justifying such priority by means of a positive inferentialist story.

In order to make room for an innocuous, 'modest' notion of systematic metaphysics whose aim is 'to codify the admittedly contingent constellation of vocabularies with which her time (and those that led up to it) happens to present her' (vs. a dangerous, 'maniacal' one whose 'project is to limn the boundaries of the sayable'), Brandom overstates Rorty's distinction between the naturalist vocabulary of causes and the historicist vocabulary of vocabularies, claiming how 'it would be a mistake to confuse, conflate, or run them together' (pp. 133–4). While for Brandom both vocabularies resolutely disavow any monolithic representational story (according to which there is but one purpose of language, which is to faithfully account for how things really are independently from our situated goals), the two serve different purposes because responding to different needs: respectively, accounting for how things are professed to be so to plan our actions accordingly and accounting for how we have contingently taken them to be so to envision novel purposes. However, if Rorty is right in saying that to use a vocabulary (hence to phrase a goal) means to change it, a feature that Brandom happily acknowledges (p. 150), then the naturalist meta-vocabulary of causes is nothing but a particular instance of the historicist meta-vocabulary of vocabularies, rather than an option coordinated with it and serving a different purpose. If in fact to envision a goal is to invent its conditions of satisfaction and to cope with reality is to shape it up anew, then our interest in 'getting things right' by surveying their causal impinging on our epistemic justificatory practices is just one way of dealing with them so to fulfill our interests and frame new ends. If this is the case, then, the 'pragmatist metaphysics' Brandom is keen to save from the Rortian anti-representationalist agenda by shaping it after the vocabulary of causes, which in his view is less subject to the 'more parochial features' of our historicist vocabularies, is nothing but one situated moment (or description) of the historicist meta-vocabulary: it is an

attempt to privilege one moment in the world's categorization over others for the sake of its alleged primacy, stability, and promises of progress over other more mutable categorizations. However, Rorty would decry, this move silently reintroduces an unwarranted dualism (although Brandom, as a pragmatist, doesn't like the word) grounded in metaphysical considerations about 'inbuilt ends' where indeed there is only a difference dictated by practical considerations about which ends to frame and pursue.

A second, related difference between the two thinkers that I would like to stress is that while for Rorty language is but one privileged angle on our practices from which we may assess them, for Brandom – exactly because we essentially *are* linguistic animals – it is a transcendental condition for having any practice in the first place. As is clear from a number of replies to some of his critics, Rorty never tried to textualize experience and our practices, but rather was interested in remarking the linguistic transactions with which we often describe and re-describe them as a strategy for emancipation from the 'experiential given' – vocabulary-talking is thus, for Rorty, a methodological rather than an ontological feature. Brandom, at least at the high pitches of his inferentialist theorization, is in contrast exactly suggesting such textualization.⁷

While some have lamented this attempt as *metaphysically* ill-suited to its task (for example, by listing all sorts of things that *cannot* be linguistically rendered), I would like to suggest that such an attempt is *methodologically* ill-suited, as it replaces one Given (experiential) with another (linguistic), hence jeopardizing the most interesting point of Brandom's inferentialist project: namely, that we *do* things with words. This is the Rortian sense in which by changing vocabulary we change the topic of what we are talking about: it is not a metaphysical change in the subject matter so much as a practical one in our conduct and understanding. What in fact changes are the things we do, which in turn justify our ways of talking about them. This better route, which is actually implicit in most of what Brandom says, claims that we should think of vocabularies as paths of *conduct*, hence abandoning the last residual bit of linguistic metaphysics (or lingualism), which Brandom still retains but Rorty discards. The conduct option in fact seems less prone to metaphysical temptations of various sorts because of its inbuilt active, transitional, and experimental character: it is a form of practical, experimental activity. If pragmatism can be thought of as celebrating the methodological primacy of practice (over theory, over fixities, over systematization), which better notion than conduct, then, to convey its message?⁸

A companion set of tensions can be spotted in Brandom's exchange with Huw Price on anti-representationalism and global expressivism (pp. 190–219). For Price, once we endorse semantic minimalism and functional pluralism about a certain area of discourse, then there is no reason not to extend the project of local expressivism globally, and treat our variegated ways of talking as modes of giving voice to our situated and interested points of view on things. Once

again, with this shift in mind, we can stop worrying whether our experiential and linguistic guesses are faithful to something beyond the practice in which they are framed, and rather acknowledge their function of being expressive of our ways of conducting ourselves. We should thus drop the business of figuring out a semantics in which to bracket our ontological commitments, and indulge in what Price, on the model of Wittgenstein, calls philosophical anthropology: no more high epistemological fences to prevent metaphysics from spreading once again in our philosophical meadow, but rather a resolute therapy aimed at silencing the very urges that made us think that metaphysics was the way to go in the first place.

If this is the case, then there is an important metaphilosophical lesson to register: according to this quietist strand of anti-representationalism we do not need to have a thick *philosophical* story of what these (experiential and linguistic) practices are and how they work, but rather a *genealogy* of the ways in which we have come to experience and talk – hence to conduct ourselves – in certain ways. The important questions to focus on are those of the emergence and leverage of one's linguistic practices, rather than the quasi-metaphysical one of demarcation, because what is important from an anti-representationalist point of view are the activities and conducts we engage in when engaging in our linguistic practices rather than their alleged justification with reference to human nature.

While, as philosophers, we might want to sketch a pragmatic understanding of the various contexts in which conduct and practice take place (and here pragmatism has a rather complex story in terms of reinforced expressive habits), as well as their importance in overcoming the fixation with representationalism and its companion ontological concerns (what Price calls 'placement problems'), still we have to resist the temptation to take one more positive step and offer a theoretical categorization (in either experiential or linguistic terms) of the very content and limits of such practices, hence a justification of their aptness. If then there is a philosophical downtown, it is the methodological one of conduct, which we can describe with reference to its actual and historical implementations rather than to a theory attempting to capture its most general features. A good comparison here is with Wittgenstein's notion of a 'language game': quite congenial and useful as a methodological tool when seen at work, it loses most of its edge and interest when we build a theoretical edifice around it, severing it from its various contexts of use.

4. Concluding Remarks

Rorty's worked out a therapeutic elucidation of anti-representationalism, in which the acknowledgment of linguistic priority and the systematic application of the pragmatic maxim allow us to render perspicuous the implicit background of agreed upon norms structuring and ruling our practices – a background

which, however, is in need of no theoretical justification. Price's expressivist rendering of anti-representationalism is rather moved by the attempt to shift the very philosophical terrain from metaphysics to anthropology, from objects to vocabularies, in a semi-theoretical way. As I have briefly tried to show, both projects stand in critical tension with Brandom's systematic theoretical articulation of anti-representationalism. The latter is driven by the aspirations to account for and reconstruct semantics in terms of pragmatics, hence partially retrieving representationalism by means of a positive inferentialist story. Both Rorty and Price work with a quietist, conduct-centered conception of pragmatism more congenial to the temperament of key figures of pragmatism. In this respect we can read the contemporary vicissitudes of pragmatism as a clash between these two general strategies of anti-representationalism at the heart of the pragmatist tradition, of which the experience/language divide is only one battlefield. Brandom in this book on pragmatism has continued to dice with representationalism and metaphysics, of which his inferentialism represents an attempt in pragmatist theorization. Despite the evident brilliance of the attempt and wealth of results, I suspect that some of our fellow pragmatists would be rather suspicious of the underlying aspirations driving such an inquiry, as involving several 'concessions too many' to both representationalism and metaphysics.

I opened this critical notice with a plea for interpretative pluralism, and I hope that nothing in what I have said has spoken against it. I, in fact, neither think that the anti-metaphysical and quietist anti-representationalism inbuilt in the conduct option represents the *truer* core of pragmatism, nor that it is the necessary and sufficient condition of any would-be pragmatist position. Rather, I am interested in disclosing what I take to be an overlooked yet promising resource in and for such a tradition by engaging one of its most authoritative and imaginative representatives.

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Notes

1. Brandom, 2011. Unless otherwise noted, all references will be to this volume.
2. One might decry that Brandom does not frequent all the pragmatist quarters of the philosophical town, pointing one's finger at his telling exclusions; and yet Brandom's is hardly an introductory manual or (to keep the metaphor going), a Lonely Planet guide to pragmatism, nor does it aspire to be one. Brandom's *perspectives* are surely driven by a precise theoretical agenda motivating their tone and choices. Interestingly enough, though, I suspect that even those not featured in the story recounted by Brandom can learn a great deal about pragmatism and thus about themselves, if only by disagreeing and thus sharpening their competing accounts and implementations of the tradition.

3. Brandom is not alone in this, as many others took the experience/language divide as the key to unfolding the vicissitudes of pragmatism and assessing its progress (or lack thereof). See for example the papers collected in Hildebrand, 2014.
4. Brandom (2009) surveys the historical-theoretical fate of idealistic rationalism in modern and contemporary philosophy, thus functioning as an ideal companion to the volume under discussion.
5. While it is hard, almost impossible to disentangle anti-representationalism from kindred anti-essentialist maneuvers such as the anti-authoritarian campaigns in epistemology and ethics, here I will isolate the metaphilosophical stakes of anti-representationalism as they affect the very issue of the nature and point of philosophical investigation after the disposal of metaphysics – perhaps a victory sung too early.
6. See, e.g., Putnam, 2002; Hickman, 2007; Pihlström, 2007; Margolis, 2009; Bernstein, 2010; Levine, 2012; Miller, 2014.
7. Both lines of criticism – the plea for ‘leaving it implicit’ and for a de-textualization of experience and of our practices – can be found in Taylor, 2010.
8. For a fine reconstruction and implementation of the ‘conduct option’ see Koopman, 2011, 2014 – with more on the way.

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