

# From Conceptual Content in Big Apes and AI, to the Classical Principle of Explosion: An Interview with Robert B. Brandom

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**R**OBERT BOYCE BRANDOM (1950, BUFFALO, USA) is an American Philosopher, currently Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh and a member of the Faculty of Philosophy there since 1976. He completed his Bachelor in Philosophy at Yale and obtained a PhD under the direction of Richard Rorty at Princeton University. He has given the John Locke lectures at Oxford, the Hempel lectures at Princeton, the Howison and Townsend lectures at Berkeley, a William James lecture at Harvard, and the Woodbridge lectures at Columbia. He has held fellowships at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford and at All Souls College Oxford. In 2002 he was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in 2004 he received the Distinguished Achievement in the Humanities Award from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, in the amount of \$1.5 million.

Brandom is at home in the tradition of pragmatism and analytical philosophy, but he sees himself also in significant ways as an heir to the rationalist school



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of thought as exemplified by Kant and Hegel, as Jürgen Habermas<sup>1</sup> took note on the other side of the Atlantic soon after the publication in 1994 of Brandom's programmatic Masterpiece, *Making it Explicit*. While working out the details of his Normative Pragmatism and Inferentialist Semantics, he also builds on Frege and Wittgenstein, and he argues with contemporary thinkers such as Davidson and Dummett, as well as his teachers, Sellars and Rorty. Following an anthology put together by Bernhard Weiss and Jeremy Wanderer<sup>2</sup>, he might be the first to give a systematic and rigorous attempt to account for the meaning of linguistic items in terms of their socially norm-governed use, relying on a non-representationalist explanation of intentionality and rational pragmatics. A long list of books, articles and conferences followed after *Making it Explicit*, as *Articulating Reasons* (Harvard University Press, 2000); *Between Saying and Doing* (Oxford University Press, 2008); *From Empiricism to Expressivism* (Harvard University Press, 2014); or *Wiedererinnerter Idealismus* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2015). Brandom seems to develop new thoughts and put them to print faster than many of us can read. The reader will find a more comprehensive description of Brandom's life, work and interests in the General Introduction to this Monograph about the philosophies of Wittgenstein and Brandom.<sup>3</sup>

## §1. Introduction by María José Frápolli

I would like to provide some context to my Interview with Professor Brandom on the occasion of the Special Issue of the Journal *Disputatio*, devoted to the philosophies of Wittgenstein and Brandom. I don't intend to make an introduction to Brandom's philosophy. As you probably know, even a sketchy overview of Brandom's system would be a very difficult task. But I do want to give some clues that might help understand the main interest that have guided the choice of my questions.

<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Von Kant zu Hegel. Zu Robert Brandoms Sprachpragmatik," In *The same, Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung. Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1999), pp. 138-185.

<sup>2</sup> Bernhard Weiss and Jeremy Wanderer, ed., *Reading Brandom: On Making it Explicit* (London, New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> The interview was conducted via an Internet connection on July 28, 2018, with the idea to provide a personalised complement to the papers written mostly specifically for this Wittgenstein–Brandom Monograph. María José Frápolli had prepared a set of questions covering the topics of metaphysics and anthropology, pragmatics and semantics, epistemic expressivism and finally the philosophy of logic. During 1½ hours, Professor Brandom patiently answered a total of 10 questions by María José Frápolli and one complementary question by Kurt Wischin

Robert Brandom's contribution to contemporary philosophy, his "inferential pragmatism", is a complex combination of several intertwined theses: semantic inferentialism, logical and normative expressivism, methodological pragmatism, and normative pragmatism, among others. The central aim of inferential pragmatism is understanding and explaining what it is for a creature to be rational, and how the notion of conceptual content possessed by some of our acts, utterances, claims, and expressions can be articulated. I don't think that it is risky to say that the point of departure of Brandom's system is the idea that, being consumers and producers of reasons, i.e., being involved in actions with conceptual content, is what distinguishes us, "the ones who say 'we'", from other animals.

In Brandom's philosophy converge different philosophical schools and streams of thought that have defined modern and contemporary philosophy. And to focus on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a substantial part of analytic philosophy and of American Pragmatism flow into Brandom's system. Brandom has been enormously generous in stressing at almost every step of the development of his general view that he stands on the shoulders of giants like Kant, Hegel, Frege and Wittgenstein; and he acknowledges being impressed by the works of Dummett, Sellars, Rorty, Davidson and quite a few others. But still, his proposal involves a clear discontinuity with the standard approaches to language and normativity proper of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Inferential pragmatism implies a reinterpretation of almost everything that is important in philosophy. In particular, many classical dichotomies and terms of art, familiar to all of us, become, in Brandom's view, massively redefined. Some examples are, the contrast between descriptive and normative and the contrast between facts and norms and his expressive approach to logical, epistemic and semantic concepts such as negation, conditional, knowledge, belief, thought, reference and others. And in spite of this discontinuity, Brandom insists on the use of the old terms and the old dichotomies and some new ones, which might make it difficult to appreciate his proposal's radical turn. With this interview I aim at understanding and testing the limits of Brandom's pragmatism, and getting clearer about the depth of his revolutionary semantics and pragmatics which I consider to be unrivalled in contemporary philosophy.

I have prepared ten questions divided into four groups dealing with very general questions in philosophy.

The first group is metaphysics and anthropology, the second group pragmatics and semantics, the third epistemic expressivism, and the fourth philosophy of logic. After that, Kurt Wischin, the editor of the Wittgenstein–Brandom monograph for

*Disputatio*, will ask Professor Brandom one additional questions. Thank you very much for your interest and I hope that you enjoy this document.

## §2. Metaphysics and Anthropology

**1. Good Morning, Professor Brandom, hi Bob! As you know I have prepared ten questions, divided into four groups. The first group is metaphysics and anthropology, the second group semantics and pragmatics, the third group is epistemic expressivism and the fourth group is the philosophy of logic. My first question has two related parts: It is about the distinction between sapience and sentience. So the question is whether the distinction between sapience and sentience is, in classical terms, normative or descriptive, that is, whether it could be modified as the result of part of some developments in ethology, biology, animal psychology, for instance. The point of my question is not whether we are allowed to attribute conceptual contents to animals, to big apes, but whether, given what we now know about the complexities of their communities—in which they seem to use norms, they seem to acknowledge the social status of different members of the group—given this situation, if you think that we could say that in their communicative activities they sort of entertain some kind of conceptual content. This is the first part. The second part is whether the distinction between sapience and sentience is absolute or admit fuzzy borders. The answer to this second part is surely related to your kind of holism. Because a moderate holism would allow a soft division and a gradual approach to the full category of sapience, whereas a radical holism, a complete holism, would make the divide sharp. I would like to know what is your position at this point?**

There is a tension, methodologically, in my work between my pragmatism and my rationalism. The pragmatism generally counsels not making sharp distinctions, but seeing intermediate cases, seeing everything as up for grabs in principle. The rationalism, on the other hand, depends on, sort of, making sharp distinctions, say, would this follow and this other doesn't. And there is a tension between these. But this is one point on which I am a rationalist. I think of the line between sapience and non-sapience as a sharp, bright line. The question just is whether the practices or activities that the creatures in question engage in, exhibit the right structure. It is a very complicated structure; they have to engage in norm-governed practices, they have to attribute to each other normative statuses, adopt normative attitudes towards one another – that's something that I think more capable sorts of non-human animals are able to do. They can engage in a norm-governed activity. This is something I talked about at length with Michael Tomasello when he visited in the

University of Pittsburgh for a year and I think he has shown the normative character of the interactions of some of the primates that he talks with. But the sort of structure that is needed for that norm-governed practice to be discursive practice is very complicated. It is basically the one that I describe in *Making it Explicit*. So, for instance, it is not enough that creatures distinguish between what is appropriate and what is inappropriate, that is, those two normative statuses. They have to distinguish between commitments and entitlements, two different kinds of normative status. And in particular, the question of whether one is entitled to a certain commitment has to be something that they can practically make sense of. Those statuses have to be inferentially articulated. So it has to be part of their practice that undertaking one commitment has consequences for other commitments, consequences for what else you are entitled to, that you have to distinguish between what would and what would not entitle you to a particular commitment, so the commitments and entitlements have to be inheritable in these various, broadly inferential ways and they also have to be inheritable by testimony. So pragmatically what structure a set of implicitly normative social practices has to have to count as discursive practices it is *wide open*, but it is also a bright line. I think it is no question that non-human primates do not exhibit practices of the right sort of complexity to be discursive practices. I don't think there is any evidence that they keep separate track of commitments and entitlements of the inheritance of them in this inferentially articulated way. Again, in these discussions with Michael Tomasello, he agreed that the sorts of things that he is seeing as proto-linguistic among chimpanzees, for instance, don't yet get into the territory that I count as required for it to be a genuinely linguistic, discursive activity.

**2. Thank you very much. Now my second question is more or less the same question but at the other end of the spectrum. Not about great apes, but about artificial intelligence: neural nets and supercomputers. The question again is whether you think that artificial neural nets can deal with some kind of conceptual content and, as in the former question, whether the distinction between them and us could be fuzzy or gradual and could be modified as the result of some developments in computer sciences. But let me elaborate a little bit the context, focussing on three parts: on inferential semantics, on the social normative aspects and on updating. I think the classification at the level of inferential semantics seems to be easier, because we say that the computers make inferences, that they can draw conclusions from premises, and so on and so forth, and that they follow the program, determine the steps which are reachable (and we might understand this**

ability as entitlements, for instance) and the steps of the derivation that are precluded. So there is a sense in which we could individuate information by its place in an inferential network. Less natural is to identify the social normative aspects that would justify the attribution to computers of normative statuses, of course. Although we can think of groups of interconnected computers, neural nets, server farms, as units that exchange information, that given information from other computers and also from human users and, I am sure that the algorithms could detect the relative reliability of the different sources and also sort of recognize the authority of some sources, for instance, the authority of the programmers because they use the password, some password, to intervene in the system. And the third aspect is learning or updating. If I understood you correctly, your criticism in *Between Saying and Doing* against the whole project of artificial intelligence has to do with your impression that computers are not sensitive to contextual information. But it seems that currently experts in computers and neural nets seem to think otherwise. A standard negative answer, of course, would appeal to consciousness or something like that, but you have rejected this kind of answer for the cases of the parrot and the thermostat, and for good reasons. So, what is your point here? Because, in this case, the neural nets do have much more complexity, probably, than the communities of great apes do. What is your opinion?

As you suggested, one of the consequences of sharply distinguishing sapience from sentience is to reject the sort of argument that John Searle has made, that artificial intelligence without sentience is unintelligible. That's what I take the basis of the appeals to consciousness to be; that they are thinking that sentience is an essential presupposition of sapience. As you point out, I would reject that and so, in principle for me there is no reason why electronic computers could not be discursive creatures. The mere fact that they are not biological organisms does not entail that for me. There are two questions that I think it is important to separate: one is whether a computer could become a practitioner or participant in our discursive practices and the second is whether a group of computers or a group of interacting programs within one physical machine —that doesn't make a difference— or whether they could interact in such a way as to confer propositional and consensual content on the messages they send back and forth to each other, independently of any interaction with us. That is: could they do, what we do in that sense? In the sense that their practices were sufficient to confer meanings; to institute consensually contentful discursive statuses. So that's a much more challenging question than the question of whether they could come to be participants in our practices; that is, able to use expressions that we have made meaningful, even though the computer wasn't capable of making it meaningful. I don't see reasons in principle why either of those is

impossible. Now, I do think that the most challenging barrier to get over in doing this is the non-monotonic character of our reasoning. The way in which, though a certain inference may be good, when we're given a new piece of information, that may make the inference no longer good. In the largest sense I think this is what the discussion within computer science of the frame problem has been getting at. In order to reason, and so, to think, one has to ignore a lot of things that are going on, a lot of beliefs that one has, precisely because the inferences that matter are non-monotonic. So, one has not to be worried about the possibility of infirming additional premises until and unless they are actually brought out onto the table, to be discussed. Strange as it may seem, this capacity to ignore potentially relevant considerations until they become actually relevant, that capacity not to pay attention to things, but to not pay attention to things, that's very difficult to implement in a way that will allow one to reason in a proper, non-monotonic way. We don't have good formal representations of the non-monotonistic features of material inference. And this, I think, is the biggest technical challenge to getting computers either to be able to participate as full-fledged members of our discursive communities or, us, programming them to be able to form their own communities which would confer content. Now I said that I thought the first of those was easier because computers are already second-class members of our discursive community. We can use them for all sorts of helpful purposes and surely that's going to continue apace. Just using them and their recognitional capacities to extend our senses, treating them as reporters of phenomena, this is already something we made great strides with. I do think it's important to temporary enthusiasm for the neural network form, the deep learning form of artificial intelligence, it has been very exciting because that form of parallel distributive processing, when combined with big data, has turned out to be able to address topics and solve problems that classical von Neumann architectures, that require explicit programming and formulation of rules were very bad at. On the other hand, it is not clear to me that the issues that arise from the non-monotonistic character of material inference, it is not clear to me that those issues are well addressed by the neural network pattern. It remains to be seen. It may be so, in which case exciting things will happen then, but it is possible that it is not a problem of the right shape for them to be good at. But, you know, I think we don't understand the structure of our own capacities in that regard well enough to be able to say. But the fact that the computers are machines with on/off switches, etc., is not the problem.

### §3. Pragmatics and Semantics

**3. This is the second part on semantics and pragmatics and I think the questions here are easier or quicker. My third question is: As a pragmatist you support the logical and chronological priority of propositions over concepts, which derives from the central status that assertion, language downtown, has in linguistic practice and also, because you are a pragmatist, the dichotomy between semantics vs. pragmatics is no longer a basic distinction in your view, even though you make a profuse methodological use of it. The preeminent status of assertion in your view has made some authors —I'm thinking of Huw Price— accuse you of some kind of monism which contrasts with the pluralism attributed to Wittgenstein. My question is: Do you consider your view monist from a semantic or pragmatic point of view and, if the answer is affirmative, in which sense, and if it is monist, how your monism would account for the obvious plurality of the speech acts.**

This is another area where my pragmatism and my rationalism are in a certain tension. Wittgenstein has the picture of language as being a motley. There are many things we can do with it. It is not so that there are just a small number of speech acts that we can perform. It is an indefinitely extensible pragmatics that he sees. Language as a motley. Whereas I have what I think is fairly close to a monistic view, at least at base. I think what makes something a discursive practice, is that you can say something in it, in the sense of making an assertion. Anything is a discursive practice if in that practice you can say that things are thus and so. That is, what is required to confer that content on some speech act to make it in the proper sense a speech act, a claiming, that is very complicated. But that is necessary and sufficient for something to be a discursive practice in my understanding. All the other speech acts, I am committed to understanding as a superstructure that we can make sense of ultimately in terms of our capacity to assert, to claim that things are thus and so. So, for instance, if we think about the slab–Sprachspiel that Wittgenstein opens the Investigations with, in my sense it's a vocal game, but not really a verbal game. It's not a language game, properly so called. Because the commands that are given in it, are not orders. They are vocalisations that are appropriately responded to by doing something, for instance, bringing a slab. But to be an order it's not enough to be an act or performance that is properly responded to in some ways and not in others. It has to be that by saying how it is appropriate to respond to it. You cannot say "shut the door!" unless you can say "the door is shut." You have to be able to assert that things are thus and so for some speech act to have the significance of commanding someone to make things thus and so. Similarly for questions; you have to be able to give the answers in order to understand questions. The proper



semantics of questions I think is a matter of what are responsive answers to different kinds of questions. I will be taking the very strong commitment that I claim to be able to make sense of discursive practices that only have assertions in them. And I am committed to making sense of all the other things you can do with language as something that we can understand as built out of and built on top of the capacity to make those assertions. I think of this as good Popperian methodology because it is the strongest most easily falsifiable claim that is compatible with what you know is true. This is how we will make progress. I would not be surprised to have people show me that you got to have some other basic speech acts involved as well. I am really pretty confident that no one's going to show you don't need assertion to be in the game. But you might need a lot more than that. I make the stronger claim, because I don't see what the others are needed for. But I am entirely open to finding that out. As I say, in the spirit of Popper.

**4. My fourth question is the following: in the notion of correct material inference that lies at the core of inferential semantics there is, as I see it, no room for a principled distinction between descriptive and normative terms, a distinction on which the bifurcation thesis as defined by Rorty and Price, for instance, rests. That is, there is no strict line to be drawn between descriptive and non-descriptive terms, or uses of terms as Price prefers to say. Your normative pragmatism also assumes that the normative notions, commitments and entitlements, are more fundamental than non-normative ones, which goes, in my opinion, again against the classical intuition that supports the bifurcation thesis. Instead your approach to the meaning of normative terms makes use of a different dichotomy because your normative expressivism needs a distinction between ground level content in material inferences, and the expression of attitudes towards normative statuses in inferential connection which is then made by means of higher level expressive terms. Now the question: Do you think that the standard formulation of the bifurcation thesis say something interesting, do you think that we should keep this bifurcation thesis, and if the answer is affirmative, what would you say is the relationship between the classical bifurcation theses and your distinction between ground level and expressive terms.**

I think it is entirely compatible with a broadly Wittgensteinian pragmatism which sees expressions as playing quite different expressive roles, nonetheless to try and say accurately and in so far as possible systematically what those expressive roles are. One of the things I've always found frustrating in reading the *Investigations* was Wittgenstein's well-taken examples to make us realise that not every use of

declarative sentences is in the fact stating line of work; that not every use of singular terms is in the object referring line of work. I thought, all of these points are well taken, but I wanted him to tell me more about, what the fact stating line of work is. What is it to use a singular term as purporting to pick out a particular object? Maybe pain talk doesn't do that, but doesn't do what, exactly? And that's the sort of question that I set out to at least begin to answer in *Making it Explicit*. So when I look at the different expressive roles that vocabularies can play, it seems to be there are a number of quite different ones, in particular, Kant, I think, was the first one to realize that besides concepts whose basic use or expressive function is to describe and explain empirical goings on there are other concepts whose principle expressive role it is to make explicit features of the framework that makes it possible to describe and explain. And chief among the vocabularies that have that different, framework explicating role, I think, are alethic modal vocabulary that is making explicit the subjunctive robustness of material reasoning, on the one hand, and normative vocabulary on the other hand, the normative vocabulary that I see as making explicit our commitment to the goodness of, our endorsement of patterns of practical reasoning. And it seems to me that it is the distinction between theoretical and practical reasoning, that is, reasoning whose conclusion is something assertible, on one hand, and reasoning whose conclusion is straightway to do something, as Aristotle more or less says, that is, to perform some action which is not basically a claiming. And I see the distinctive expressive role of normative vocabulary being to endorse patterns of practical reasoning. So the different senses of "ought", for instance, the prudential or instrumental use of ought, the social practical use and maybe a moral use, all correspond to endorsing different patterns of practical reasoning. So it seems to me that a pragmatist can distinguish theoretical from practical reasoning by distinguishing assertions from other things. And then it is more or less a question of fact, do we use normative vocabulary to express the goodness or at least to endorse the goodness patterns of practical reasoning? If that is something we do with it is that function sufficient to distinguish normative vocabulary as such. I think the answer to these questions is yes. So I think it is a mistake to assimilate what we are doing when we use normative vocabulary to fact statements, to saying, how the world is. That is not to say that there can't be any fact stating role for normative vocabulary, but that is not the home language game of normative vocabulary.

**5. Deeply related to this question is my following, fifth question: As it happens with all other classical dichotomies, your use of fact and factual vs. norm and normative is non-standard. Facts, what it is to be a fact has to be explained in normative**

**terms. Then, if fact is a normative notion, what is the relevance of the standard distinction between factual and normative meaning, if any? Is it a different way of looking at the same problem?**

I have an extremely relaxed and elastic notion of fact which simply reflects the notion of assertion. To be assertible is to be, in the broadest sense, in the fact stating line of work. A fact is a true claim in the sense of true claimable, not in the sense of a true claiming, and so to understand the notion of fact one has to understand claimability. Which one can't understand without understanding what one is doing in claiming something. One can't understand what one is doing in claiming something in non-normative terms. Claiming *is* undertaking a commitment. So, one is not going to understand claimables without understanding claimings, and that is a normative notion. So, behind our descriptions of the empirical world, our non-normative claims, there is this normative pragmatics, what we are doing in making those claims has to be understood in normative terms.

**6. Thank you. The last question of this block: Semantic inferentialism is essentially holistic. In order to possess one concept, one has to possess many. Semantic holism has been standardly criticised for the risk it involves of making communication impossible. You answer this criticism by stressing the role of anaphora in the task of securing the stability of contents. Now we are here in front of another radical dichotomy: The dichotomy between semantic atomism, that you reject, and complete holism, that you seem to embrace. You seem to have weakened your semantic holism introducing the idea of the robustness of some material inferences. As I see it, radical holism is a very strong thesis that, to my mind, you don't need, as it cannot be founded on our real practices —and I will insist on this point in my last question. Could you explain what your kind of holism yours is, whether radical and complete, or gradual and moderate?**

This is a very complicated issue and there are at least three things I'd like to say about it. The first is, Sellars, my inspiration for the inferentialism, said that only some of the inferences that a concept is involved with are semantically constitutive of that content. It is all and only the counterfactually robust, counterfactual supporting inferences that are essential to the content of the concept. And he says so in the title of one of his essays "Concepts as Involving Laws and Inconceivable without Them"<sup>4</sup>. He thought of that subjective robustness of the inferences as underwritten by laws

<sup>4</sup> See, Wilfrid Sellars, «Concepts as Involving Laws and Inconceivable without Them». *Philosophy of Science* 15, no. 4 (1948): pp. 287-315. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/184962>.

and so it is only the laws that articulate the concepts that are semantically essential. Now I think that was a perfectly intelligible response to the total holism that says that all the inferences that a bit of vocabulary are involved in are equally essential to its vocabulary. So, he said, only some of these, the counterfactual supporting inferences are essential to it. And I don't think that subjunctive robustness always traces back to some law underlying things. I think, statements of laws are limiting cases of subjunctive robustness, which is a ubiquitous phenomenon of material inference. That is, I make a certain inference, I say, it is raining, so the streets will be wet. Now, it is an important part of understanding that, that I have some view about the range of subjunctive robustness of that inference, that if people had built awnings over the roads it wouldn't go through but if it is Tuesday that is not going to infirm the inference. I think that the right way to think about it is in terms of the ranges of subjunctive robustness, that every inference is robust under some additional premises and, outside of mathematics and certain fundamental physics where the reasoning *is* mathematical, that no inferences are universally subjunctively robust, as all of them have some conditions of defeasibility. That is a matter of more or less. So, I don't think that Sellar's criterion draws a bright line and says, "Oh, only these inferences are part of the meaning, these others are not". I would rather say that the ranges of subjunctive robustness are part of what you need to master in order to master the use of a concept, but that is a matter of more or less, not again a bright line. So, that is one point.

The second point is that the people who see semantic holism as potentially a threat to the intelligibility of communication are not thinking in normative terms. They are thinking about our dispositions to make inferences. And they are saying: "Well, because you have different collateral beliefs than I do, just because we carve out different trajectories through the world, now because we have different collateral beliefs we are going to be disposed to endorse different inferences", and, so they think, mean different things, according to the holistic principle. But meanings are not a matter of our dispositions, they are a matter of the norms that we bind ourselves by. You and I can bind ourselves by exactly the same norms when we say the coin is copper, even though your conception of what you are committing yourself to by saying "it is copper" may be very different from mine, and neither of us understands what we are really committing ourselves to as well the metallurgist does. Those norms, that we are binding ourselves by, those could be completely holistic in a radical sense, and wouldn't keep you and me from communicating with each other, as long as we are binding ourselves by the same norms. That is the second point.

The third point is: It seems to me that the notion of conceptual content is a

ladder that we should climb up, and then throw away, after we climbed up on it —to use Wittgenstein’s metaphor. The practical capacities to understand each other, that we have, are navigating between your conception of what you are committing yourself to by saying the coin is copper, and mine. I need to be able to extract information from your remark, you are looking at the coin and I am not. And you tell me that you see it is copper. Well, I need to be able to use your claim as a premise in my reasoning. And for that, the fact that you bound yourself by this public norm in playing the counter “copper”, using the English word “copper”, that tells me a lot about what inferences I can make from it. But I am going to appeal to everything I know about the world and about you in order to make the practical judgement as to which of the things that I would take to follow if I were calling something copper, are actually conclusions that I can draw from your calling it copper. This is a practical capacity to navigate between our different doxastic perspectives, and we are both committed, as I would say, to there being something that “copper” means, some norms that we’ve bound ourselves by, but it is not actually that much help in the practical navigation. What we want to do is understand that practical capacity. For instance, if a computer is going to get to be even a second class interlocutor with us, not only do we have to be able to make inferences from its utterances, which we can already do pretty well, for we also know what’s behind the utterance of the computer or —you know— Google, when it tells me its answer to some question, but it is also going to have to be able to make this judgement what inferences can it make from the things that we have said, that practical capacity to navigate between the perspectives. That is what is required for communication and it is not clear to me why people think that, for instance, thinking of a proposition as a partition of an accountably infinite universe of possible worlds, into those in which the proposition is true and those in which it is not. Why does that make it more intelligible that you and I can navigate across this gap when you say the coin is copper?

#### §4. Epistemic Expressivism

**7. Thank you. This is now the third block, epistemic expressivism: Epistemic concepts express attitudes toward normative statuses, either belonging to the speaker, or attributed to a third party. The difference in the normative attitudes to statuses entertained and attributed in attributions of knowledge and of belief accounts for the difference in meaning between these two concepts. Attributing knowledge to someone is attributing to her a commitment and an entitlement to this commitment in undertaking oneself the commitment to the content which means taking the content as true. By contrast, in the attribution of belief the**

**attributor does not undertake the commitment to the content and she does not need to take the content as true, even though this is not excluded. Now, let us focus on first–person assertions. Assertions are a way of expressing beliefs and beliefs are the content of assertions. At the same time you claim that placing assertion at the centre the linguistic practice that institutes significances and confers contents is, I quote, “to treat the sort of claim involved in asserting as an implicit knowledge claim”<sup>5</sup>. All this together means that assertions are implicit knowledge claims in which beliefs are expressed. If we combine the roles of knowledge and belief with what you say about assertion, it follows that there is a sense in which an agent cannot distinguish between his assertion that he believes that *p*, his assertion that he knows that *p* and his assertion that *p* is true because in all these cases there is a commitment to *p* and there must be at least a presumption of entitlement for these assertions to be successful. The result at this point is something like a semantic or pragmatic version of Gettier's insight, that the agent cannot distinguish between the circumstances in which he is entitled to a certain knowledge and the circumstances that authorise him to merely claim belief. And the same goes for the consequences he is committed to by his assertion of knowledge and belief. You are aware of this consequence of your expressivist account of epistemic concepts. My question is: If the meaning of knowledge and belief can only be seen in third person attributions, what is the role of those first–person claims that include epistemic terms. In particular, do you think that epistemic terms in first and third person claims have the same meaning?**

Well, “same meaning” is not one of my words. I mean, I think there are first and third person versions of one claim, and it is essential to the terms like knowledge and belief, meaning what they do, that they have those first and third person uses that are related in just the way they are related. Maybe an example would be, there is a sense in which, when I say something, “I am confused”, and when you utter the same words, there is a sense in which we are expressing the same thought and a sense in which we are not. When you say meaning to be a same–sayer with me, “you are confused”, when I’ve said that I am confused, well, do these two statements have the same meaning or are they just intimately related in what they mean, in such a way that we can understand both of them. I don’t think it in any way matters which of those we say, as long as we can describe the practices. That’s basically what you have asked me to do here for the case of, let’s just say, of knowledge and belief. I think we can address the question along two fronts: pragmatic force and semantic content.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 200

You have got me quite right in thinking that knowledge and belief, what you are doing in attributing knowledge and belief is distinguishable only in the third person case. The fact that to learn to use these words one needs to learn the third person use means that when one has that available in one's own case. Crucially to talking one's past beliefs so I can in my first person case say, "look, I used to believe that copper had a higher melting point than aluminium, but now I know that it does not". That is basically a third person attitude towards my own beliefs because it's not my current beliefs. But, because I am able to take up that third person point of view and make a distinction to other people, I can make it in my own case too. And because I can do it for my past commitments, that is what makes it possible for me to entertain the possibility that, though I believe it, it might not be true. What I am doing is imagining my future self being in a position with respect to my present self. This is all at the level of force. But at the level of content I can distinguish really quite apart from the considerations I was just rehearsing, when I have the expressive resources to make ascriptions including first-person ascriptions of belief and knowledge explicit and so, ascribing them, not just attributing them, as I use the terms in *Making it Explicit*, now we can see a difference between  $p$ , the claim that  $p$ , the claim I believe that  $p$  and the claim I know that  $p$ . Let me just talk about the claim "the coin is copper" and "I believe that the coin is copper". To grasp the content of those claims is to know what follows from them and what is incompatible with them. But very different things are incompatible with the claim "the coin is made of copper" and the claim "I believe that the coin is made of copper". For instance, "Brandom never existed" is incompatible with the claim "I believe that the coin is copper" but it is not incompatible with the claim "the coin is copper". So those two claims "the coin is copper" and "I believe that the coin is copper", those have very different meanings for me. Different things follow from them, different things are incompatible with them. So, even at the level of content, when I look at "I believe that  $p$ " and "I know that  $p$ ", well, from "I know that  $p$ ", it follows that  $p$ . If I know that the coin is copper, it follows that the coin is copper. It does not follow from "I believe that the coin is copper" that the coin is copper. As I said, different things are incompatible, different things follow. So these different epistemic statuses are distinguishable at the level of force, and they are distinguishable at the level of content as well; and in the second half of the eighth chapter of *Making it Explicit* I show that the way that I introduced explicit ascriptions confers different inferential roles on them for all ascriptions than any of the underlying claims. So that even though it is a social practice account of what you are doing in claiming, it confers content on those claims that is not equivalent to the content of any claims about what anybody believes.

**8. Related to this question —I am thinking of Ramsey— a possible answer to the previous question is to acknowledge that terms such as knowledge and belief are ambiguous, let's say, between an absolute semantic/pragmatic sense, used to make explicit attitudes, on the one hand, and a, let's say, a "psychological" sense in which they would present something like Ramseyian degrees of belief, whose function might be expressing the subjective confidence of the agent in his reasons or evidence. Would you be prepared to accept this alternative meaning for first-person epistemic claims? If so, how would you say that the two senses the semantic/pragmatic, proper of attributions, and the psychological, related to first person claims, are related?**

Of course, officially "belief" is not one of my words, "commitment" is, and I don't think of commitment as coming in degrees. It seems to me that what the Ramseyian talk about degrees of belief is, the phenomenon that it is trying to capture, is the phenomenon that I referred to earlier under the rubric "range of subjunctive robustness of an inference". So, when I make a claim, let's say, as the conclusion of an inference, I am aware that there are many things that could infirm the inference that I made. I have not surveyed, made a study of all the potential defeasers, so that I can say "look, I know that none of the defeasers hold". I think of what Ramsey is trying to express by saying "I am not very confident in this belief, I have only a certain small degree of belief in it", is trying to cover with, trying to represent with real numbers between zero and one, this much more complicated algebraic situation in which the inferential procedure that led me to this conclusion is defeasible by lots of other things that could turn out to be true. I think, what we need to do is get a better way of representing than we have now those ranges of subjunctive robustness which I am acknowledging when I say, well, when I use a *ceteris paribus* clause or say "This is the conclusion I draw, but it might not be right I really doubt, you're going to have looked into all the possible defeating circumstances and ruled them out". And I rather talk about that actual range of possible defeaters rather than put a probability or a credence measure on something. So I think there is a real phenomenon there, but "degrees of belief" is getting at the wrong algebraic structure.

## §5. Philosophy of Logic

**9. We have finished now the first to the third part and we have only two questions left on philosophy of logic. My first question about philosophy of logic is the following: I would like to study the effect of considering inference a more basic notion than truth in the philosophy of logic. In the philosophy of logic there is a basic distinction between valid arguments, those in which the conclusion is a**



necessary consequence of premises and sound arguments, those valid arguments with true premises. In semantic inferentialism the notion of inference is more basic than the notion of truth, being taken as true is being usable as a premise and/or being the notion of a correct material inference. Naturally, we must maintain the difference between being true or being correct and being taken as true or as correct as Wittgenstein stressed but this can only be done from the third person perspective in which the attributor expresses the attitude towards commitments and entitlements of the subject which is carrying on an inference. An attributor can reject an inference endorsed by a third party for several reasons: for instance, she might see that the attributee is entitled to his commitment to his premises, without being committed herself to them. And she can reject the normative connection between premises and conclusion by rejecting that commitment to the premises entitles the agent to the commitment to the conclusion, etc... All of this is clear, there is no problem here. Nevertheless, in the realm of logic the contrast between first and third person perspective disappears. We might again, in a Ramseyian vein, distinguish degrees of assertive character. That is, we might support some premises merely as conjectures, only to see what follows from them or, on the other end of the spectrum, as something about which the subject is absolutely sure, etc. But I cannot see how this graduation could be projected to the realm of logic. Do you think that within the realm of logical theory the distinction between valid and sound inferences is a relevant one and, if so, how could inferentialism explain it.

Dummett had already argued that it was a mistake to think of logic in terms of truth, as a study of a distinctive kind of truth, logical truth, that the traditional understanding of logic as a study of consequence was surely the correct one and he points to the fact we are familiar with logics that have the same set of theorems and different consequence relations and we think of them as different logics in that case. I think he is perfectly right about that. But he then goes on to characterise logic as the study of a particular kind of consequence, namely, logical consequence. And I think that is wrong. I don't think that logic is the study of logical inference and I don't think that it is a canon of right reasoning for any inferences. I think that logic is the study of the use of vocabulary to make inferences explicit. That is, vocabulary that has this distinctive expressive role of letting us reason about reasoning. But its job is not to tell us of this non-logical reasoning which it helps us to express, its job is not to tell us which are good and which are not. Its job is just to let us to make explicit, make claimable, assertable, claims about what follows from what, and what is incompatible with what. That is why I think the conditional and negation are the fundamental bits of vocabulary of logic. The conditional lets us talk about inferential consequence relations and negation that lets us talk about material incompatibilities of things. The

distinction between logically valid reasoning and reasoning that is not logically valid does not come up for ground level material inferences. What we have there is the distinction as you suggested in your question between counterfactual reasoning, reasoning, saying “well, I am under some supposition” where I am not endorsing the premises, I’m exploring them. Let’s see what one would be committing oneself to if one were to assert this claim. And in that distinction between reasoning under supposition, counterfactual reasoning, on the one hand, reasoning where one endorses the premises and may not endorse the conclusion because some material reasoning is permissive rather than committive, but in any case, where one endorses the distinction between reasoning where one endorses the premises and reasoning where one doesn’t, that is a real distinction at the ground level. I know, you remember that Frege claimed that you could not make inferences from premises that one did not regard as true, that what one was doing in that case was considering true conditionals that add the apparent premises as the antecedents of them. I think that it is at the level of conditionals that we see what is common to counterfactual reasoning and indicative reasoning, because we can formulate both of them in the form of conditionals and look at the different behaviour of those conditionals. I don’t think that the principal philosophical interest of logic is in logically good inferences. For me, those are just the inferences that articulate the inferential roles of logical vocabulary. But what is important about the logical vocabulary is not so much its inferential role, as its expressive role with respect to non-logical vocabulary. So, I am not much interested in logical consequence relations, I am interested in the logical expression of material consequence relations.

**10. Thank you very much. And my last question is about the principle of explosion. In a recent paper commenting the book of Jarda Peregrin you reject the classical principle of explosion, also known as *ex falso quodlibet* and *consequentia mirabilis*. The principle says that from materially inconsistent premises everything follows. The principle is completely alien to a pragmatist approach to logic and semantics, and your rejection of the principle is very passionate. You consider the principle not only false but an embarrassment for teachers, proper of televangelists [I quite agree], and affirm that —I quote— “it corresponds to nothing whatsoever in ordinary reasoning”, that “It’s a pure artefact of classical logical machinery”<sup>6</sup>. Your position is the much reasonable one that from an inconsistent set of premises follows what follows from each one of its members and nothing else —and I agree.**

<sup>6</sup> Robert Brandom, “From Logical Expressivism to Expressivist Logic: Sketch of a Program and Some Implementations,” *Philosophical Issues* 28 (2018): end of Section II. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phis.12116>

Nevertheless you seem to accept a versión of it, proposed by one of your former students. Ulf Hlobil, “*ex fixo falso quodlibet*” [EFFQ]. The difference is that in EFFQ the premise-set is explicitly contradictory, i.e. it contains A and not-A, and thus not only it but also every superset of it is inconsistent.

I cannot see the gain of including this new principle EFFQ among our logical principles, either from a logical or a pragmatist perspective. I cannot see why you don't apply to this case what you say about the classical principle, i.e., that from contradictory premises follows what follows from one of them and from its negation and nothing else. Logical constants, negation included, have expressive meaning; they do not add any substantive information but their role is making explicit some attitudes. Then, —my question; there are three related questions— why the explicit representation of the implicit incompatibility changes the status of the classical principle? The second one is, which would be those ordinary inferential practices that correspond to the new principle, to EFFQ? And the third, in connection with my former question six: Radical semantic holism implies that A is inferentially related to everything that is not incompatible with it, and the same happens with its negation. Thus, A and not-A together exhaust the logical space, in Wittgensteinian terminology. Nevertheless, methodological pragmatism states that semantics must answer to pragmatics. So, if the classical principle, if *ex falso quodlibet* corresponds in your words “to nothing whatsoever in ordinary reasoning”, as you say, its stronger principle, the stronger new version should run the same fate. If we discovered that there is no ordinary practice that supports the new version, would you consider that this would be a reason against a radical version of semantic holism?

Very good question! It is quite possible that in the argument in the paper that you premise your question on, that I was misleading about the rhetorical situation, what I was taking for granted and what not. My own view is that nothing about logical consequence actually reflects anything about material consequence. That is not the level at which logical vocabulary is expressive of non-logical reasoning. Claims made in a logically extended language, a language which had added logical vocabulary to, those claims explicitly codify features of basic reasoning, the logical consequence relations just articulate the inferential roles of the logical vocabulary. In ordinary practice we don't use logical vocabulary, and so there isn't anything in our ordinary practice that they are answering to. Now, I was addressing my argument to the teacher of logic who is lying to their undergraduates and saying, “look, I'm going to teach you to reason better, by teaching you formal logic.” And so is thinking that somehow behind every good inference, materially good inference, there is a logically

good inference, a logically valid inference, hidden, somewhere in there, and the picture is, “I’m going to teach you to find that and you will be a better reasoner”. And now they say, “Oh, and by the way, if you have incompatible claims, then everything follows from it”. Well, from your point of view, from what you are claiming logic is doing, thinking there is a canon of right reasoning, thinking of good reasons as meaning “logically good reasoning”, you ought to be embarrassed by that, because that is not codifying anything about ordinary reasoning. Now the specific context in which *ex fixo falso quodlibet* comes up is we are using logic to counterfeit non-monotonic material consequence relations, and so, when we have materially incompatible premise sets it is entirely possible that that incompatibility, that the incoherence of that premise set, is curable. By adding further premises you may end up with something that actually is coherent. That is not going to happen if you accept explosion of the consequences. Well when could you accept that? Well, the strongest thing in the vicinity of what one could accept is if the material incompatibility you got is incurable, if nothing that you added into it as further premises would yield a coherent premise set, well, then it doesn’t matter what you take to follow from it. You are not going to be able to reason with it. Whereas, if it is curable, well, then we better keep track of what materially follows from it. So, the EFFQ is a sort of “don’t care”, those cases you can have explosion if you like, and this had the advantage that the system collapses to classical logic if the underlying material consequence relation is monotonic and you only look at implications that are persistent, that continue to hold, no matter what else you throw in with them. So in a logical system we introduce some modal operator, that says “if for a premise set you can conclude  $a$  indefeasibly” so that no matter what else you added to the premise set it would still follow, then what you say is not just  $a$  to follow but  $\Box(a)$ .  $a$  follows persistently from it. Classical logic turns out to be the module fragment of this larger logic. So it is a technical convenience to have the EFFQ in it, but I don’t assign any particular philosophical significance to it. It is just something we can put up with.

**Thank you very much. That’s is all for my part. Thank you for your answers, they have been very illuminating. I have learned a lot. ... Now, Kurt Wischin, who is the editor of this issue of *Disputatio* would like to ask you something else, if it is possible.**

## §6. Kurt Wischin: Wittgenstein’s Quietism

**11. I am by no means as knowledgeable about your philosophy as María José. She just introduced me to your philosophy some two years ago. I am more of an old-fashioned Wittgensteinian. That paints my question to you. I will skip the first two, I think María José sent you, and I will just make the last one about the philosophical**

quietism, or semantical nihilism you address in the new article you wrote essentially for our review: "Some Strands of Wittgenstein's Normative Pragmatism and some Strains of his Semantic Nihilism". Essentially, in this article you say that there is one argument that is very shallow, that says that Wittgenstein is in anti-scientism and that he is against using theoretical terms in an ontological way and that this would be the reason that we cannot have a semantic theory, because this would have us introduce meaning as a theoretical entity. You say this is not a good reason and I think you are right because I don't think this is the position of Wittgenstein, actually. But then you say there is a much better reason for his semantic nihilism, that is, that what you call a "Procrustean Enterprise" of elaborating a semantic theory does not take into account the dynamism in which our language develops. But what *you* do is entirely different. That it takes precisely into account this dynamism and, what it does is, create a metalinguistic approach to studying our use of language. Now, what I doubt about this is that Wittgenstein was very anxious not to let us theorise about anything in philosophy. He was afraid that the very moment we lose contact with our real use in language, we will fall into traps that language sets up for us. I wonder, how you arm yourself against such traps in your metaphilosophical approach to linguistics.

I think there are various ways in which one can be in contact with the rough ground, that is so important to him. Contact is maintained by appropriate philosophical theorising, in my view, if one is introducing vocabulary with the specific expressive task of letting you say explicitly how ground-level expressions are used. Wittgenstein himself prefers to give us suggestive anecdotes that will remind us of features of the use of the expressions, and I would not claim that it was a reasonable aspiration to make explicit all of the use of any expression. But I do think it is a sensible aspiration to try and say explicitly, to make explicit, some features of the use of important ground-level expressions. To say something about their inferential roles or their pragmatic force that their utterance can have. In the way I would think about it, we keep control of that pragmatic metavocabulary by stipulating how we are using it in language that we take ourselves to understand well enough to do that. And then the expressive role that it plays in making explicit features of the use of ground level vocabulary keeps us in contact with, keeps us controlled by, those practices of using the ground level vocabulary. So it seems to me, we are not unusually in danger of this metalinguistic vocabulary going on holiday, because we have kept explicit control over the use of the new vocabulary by tying it to the use of the vocabulary that it has the expressive job of making explicit. So it seems to me that in that way, we can keep our use of the pragmatic meta-vocabulary from being metaphysically puzzling in the way that he diagnoses when we carry over an analogy of the way some bit of the language

works to the way some other bit of the language works when actually there are significant disanalogies.

**So, would it be fair to say that you don't really construct a theory in the way Wittgenstein criticises, but rather you take his descriptive ways to a new level, where you just include the expressive role of the meta-vocabulary; but you don't construct a theoretical building out of that.**

Right, I would like to think of it that way. Because, the task is not an explanatory task, but an expressive task. He wants us to describe the use of these things and I am suggesting that that is compatible with systematically using meta-vocabulary to do it. And that is the way I understand philosophical vocabulary, for instance, the logical vocabulary we were just talking about, to make explicit inferential commitments.

**Thank you very much, I have nothing else to ask at this moment and as soon as everything is prepared, we will stay in touch with you. Thank you, very, very much.**




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### **From Conceptual Content in Big Apes and AI, to the Classical Principle of Explosion: An Interview with Robert B. Brandom**

In this Interview, Professor Robert B. Brandom answered ten detailed questions about his philosophy of Rational Pragmatism and Semantic Expressivism, grouped into four topics. 1. Metaphysics and Anthropology, 2. Pragmatics and Semantics, 3. Epistemic Expressivism and 4. Philosophy of Logic. With his careful answers Professor Brandom offers many additional insights into his rigorously constructed account of the relationship “between what we say and think, and what we are saying and thinking about” around the human practice of asking for and giving reasons. A final, additional question pointed at a principal motivation for putting together the present issue: how to reconcile Wittgenstein’s assertion that philosophy must not proffer any theories with the very explicit system of explanations Brandom has constructed. This same issue is addressed to some extent already in Professor Brandom’s new article contained in this issue, but his answer, asserting that he does not proffer a theory but only makes explicit what is already there, might be seen as an unambiguous statement of the continuous presence of a contested Wittgensteinian principle in Brandom’s work.

**Keywords:** Metaphysics · Pragmatism · Semantics · Epistemic Expressivism · Philosophy of Logic.

### **Del contenido conceptual en los grandes monos e IA, hasta el principio de explosión clásico: una entrevista con Robert B. Brandom**

En esta entrevista, el Profesor Robert B. Brandom dio respuesta a diez preguntas detalladas acerca de su filosofía de pragmatismo racional y expresivismo semántico, agrupadas en cuatro temas: 1. metafísica y

antropología; 2. pragmatismo y semántica; 3. expresivismo epistémico y 4. filosofía de la lógica. En sus respuestas cuidadosas, el Profesor Brandom ofrece muchas detalles adicionales a su elucidación, construida con todo rigor, de la relación “entre lo que hablamos y pensamos y sobre lo que hablamos y pensamos” en derredor de la praxis humana de pedir y dar razones. Una pregunta final, adicional se concentra en uno de los motivos principales para proponer el presente número: ¿cómo conciliar la afirmación de Wittgenstein de que la filosofía no debería proponer ninguna teoría con el sistema muy explícito de explicación que Brandom construyó. Este mismo tema es atendido en cierto grado ya en el nuevo artículo del Profesor Brandom en este número monográfico, pero su respuesta, afirmando que él no propone ninguna teoría sino hace sólo explícito lo que ya está ahí, se podría ver como una aseveración unívoca de la presencia continua de un principio disputado de Wittgenstein en la obra de Brandom.

**Palabras Clave:** Metafísica · Pragmatismo · Semántica · Expresivismo epistémico · Filosofía de la lógica.

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