

Should Wittgenstein have been more Hegelian?  
Remarks on Robert Brandom: *A Spirit of Trust*<sup>1</sup>

Wittgenstein has been a point of reference for Brandom's philosophy since his first magnum opus *Making it Explicit*. I commented critically on his reading of Wittgenstein and tried to assimilate some of Brandom's ideas concerning a social-perspectival pragmatics in a Wittgensteinian framework.<sup>2</sup> For the sake of completeness I here look also at the references to Wittgenstein in Brandom's latest book.

*A Spirit of Trust* is an interpretation of Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Wittgenstein shows up in this voluminous undertaking for two reasons. Brandom interprets Hegel as semanticist *avant la lettre* with conceptual means taken from the philosophical movement that leads from Frege, Wittgenstein and Quine to himself. And he sees Hegel addressing centrally a problem of determinacy of conceptual content that is said to be the subject of Wittgenstein's rule-following-considerations too. He claims that Hegel solved the problem with his conception of recollective rationality, whereas Wittgenstein, remaining somewhat 'alienated', stopped short of a solution in „semantic *Gelassenheit*“ (659<sup>3</sup>). In effect Brandom holds that Wittgenstein should have been more Hegelian. In the following discussion I am going to express doubts and give reasons for them.

I

As an interpretation of Hegel's first magnum opus *A Spirit of Trust* is an illuminating imposition. The book is about a third longer than the text it comments on. The first three of sixteen interpretative chapters are dedicated to a close reading of the eighteen paragraphs of Hegel's *Introduction*. Since it naturally touches many of the themes in the following VII long chapters of Hegel's main text, the longer expositions in the later chapters of Brandom's book are often repetitive of central points and this several times so. And, of course, there is the anachronistic theoretical semantic meta-language, which, in the end, cannot really assimilate Hegel's metaphysical master idea of 'identity of identity and non-identity'. Brandom rather

---

1 Harvard UP 2019

2 'Wittgensteinian Commitments in Brandom'; 'Grammatical Persons and Semantical Ideas'; *AlMukhatabat* 2014; 2020. (also on academia.edu)

3 This is the new and friendlier expression for the 'theoretical quietism' that former texts of Brandom accused Wittgenstein of.

writes of 'identity through /constituted by/ difference' and in several places admits that Hegel should better have written of 'unity of unity and disparity' : „There is room for skepticism about whether the general concept (sc. of holistic structures defined by and at the same time defining the relations of their elements, presented „under the heading of a new 'speculative' conception of identity“ ) is so much as intelligible.“ (797) But a reading of Hegel under this threat of unintelligibility has done away with Hegel's encompassing claim of giving a metaphysics of All-in-One/One-in-All (Alleinheitslehre). Untamed Holism has, to be made intelligible at all, to be restricted to surveryable wholes from the start.

Nevertheless, the resultant reading of Hegel is most illuminating. Not the smallest achievement of rigorously transposing Hegel's more encompassing metaphysics into a semantic key is that this procedure makes also details of Hegel's philosophy available for discussion in the context of Analytical Philosophy.

One point more has to be touched in advance. Brandom reads Hegel as occupied with the problem of determinacy of conceptual content. And one repeated thesis of this reading is it that we can be sure of what we talked about all along not before some end is reached, i.e. only retrospectively. The recollection achieving this is said always to be embedded in a structure of recognitive relations among cognizing subjects. And this structure is said to be headed to a completely symmetrical form. This understood in social terms means: to be headed to a new form of Sittlichkeit, which integrates the modern independence of subjects. That again is to say: Brandom presents Hegel not only as having an „edifying semantics“ (636-9), but as a social utopist of a „third age of Geist“ (738)<sup>4</sup> too (even if the ideal is said to be proleptically anchored in the presuppositions of rational discourse – cp. 658). That cannot be correct. Hegel explicitly warned against philosophy turning 'edifying'<sup>5</sup> and Recollection was the form of his philosophy leaving no room for *philosophically* addressing future developments. Brandom's reading is at best left Hegelianism in metaphysics.<sup>6</sup>

## II

Hegel's conception of concept-use Brandom explains as developing from Kant's insight into its normativity. Hegel's main objection against Kant is said to be that he unfoundedly took the

4 Because of 'Third Reich' German readers should be sensitive about all 'thirds' in a context of a philosophy of history.

5 „Die Philosophie aber muss sich hüten, erbaulich sein zu wollen.“ *Phän.d.Geistes*P, Meiner, p. 14.

6 Brandom remarks in his *Afterword* that Hegel left no first-rate students focussing on his logic and metaphysics (765) – that's why historical left-Hegelianism focussed on politics and economy.

determinateness of conceptual content for granted. One of Brandom's pet formulas is that Hegel is to Kant as Quine is to Carnap. Kant and Carnap both take it that conceptual content has to be determined at a first stage and then applied to reality at a second. Hegel and Quine are said to hold this for pure fantasy. According to them there is only one process of concept use that determines conceptual content by way of applying the concepts from the start.

Brandom tends to locate Wittgenstein on this issue with Kant and Carnap. Wittgenstein is praised for having rediscovered Kant's insight into the normativity of concept-use (654) and even for assembling many of the raw materials from which Hegel constructs his account (653), but criticized, because he did not use them for a constructive theoretical account as Hegel did. (661) I think that Wittgenstein would have objected to seeing relative conceptual indeterminacy ('vagueness') as a problem to be overcome. He held that sharp concepts in the Fregean sense would require uniform behaviour, but that simply does not exist – where the one is sure of the applicability of a concept the other may not be – as a matter of fact.<sup>7</sup> So, vague, but nevertheless sufficiently determined concepts are just what is needed for communication and other uses of language. Where they lead to an impasse or misunderstanding, Wittgenstein takes recourse to the resource of meaning-explanation, which for him is meaning-constitution.<sup>8</sup> I pointed that out in my first discussion of 'Wittgensteinian Commitments in Brandom' and still regard it as a descriptive ground-floor-mistake that Brandom does not take notice of and account for the internal relation between meaning and meaning-explanation.

So, in this respect Wittgenstein should not have been more Hegelian in offering a constructive account of conceptual determinacy. He simply saw no need to. Semantic *Gelassenheit* seems to stand undisputed. And rationally Brandom should not object because the implied maxim is a pragmatic one: solve problems when they show up and don't worry untimely. This is just an extension of the default-and-challenge structure of normal discourse to semantic questions that Wittgenstein described in *On Certainty* as the means against scepticism: doubt is in need of reasons (as everything else is). Brandom himself accepted it long ago in MiE (177).

Even these few intimations seem to me to change the dialectical situation. The question to put is no longer, whether Wittgenstein should have been more Hegelian but why Brandom (and Hegel!) are so much Hegelian, given their pragmatism? Since this is no live discussion I take

---

7 Cp. Zettel § 374: „Festbegrenzte Begriffe würden eine Gleichförmigkeit des Verhaltens fordern. Aber wo ich *sicher* bin, ist der Andere unsicher. Und das ist eine Naturtatsache.“

8 Cp. *Philosophical Investigations* § 560: „The meaning of a word is what the explanation of its meaning explains.“ („Die Bedeutung des Wortes ist, was die Erklärung der Bedeutung erklärt.“)

recourse to a rational reconstruction in the Whiggish manner recollective rationality according to Brandom and Hegel favors. Hegel characterizes the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* as scepticism accomplishing itself<sup>9</sup>. Whatever this means in detail it is a way of taking scepticism seriously. But to the pragmatist this should be the wrong start altogether. Scepticism cannot be taken seriously because it is meaning- or senseless. Wittgenstein, addressing Descartes' dreaming-argument, put it in a nutshell: „The argument ›I may be dreaming‹ is senseless for this reason: if I am dreaming, this remark is being dreamed as well – and indeed it is also being dreamed that these words have any meaning.“<sup>10</sup> Words with meanings only dreamed cannot be used to say anything, they are mere vocalizations. So the sceptic is condemned to speechlessness.

Meaning-explanations constitute the meaning of words. They thereby effect an internal relation between language (sense) and world which is presupposed by the external relation of language (reference) and reality. For sense precedes reference and therefore the alternative of truth or falsity. After all, a proposition to be true *or* false has to make sense to begin with. The problem of realism, which the sceptic tries to answer with his pervasive doubt, is no problem, because it is cared for by the internal relation of sense and the world already and therefore cannot be disputed on the dependent level of questions about truth or falsity.

Now, worrying about the determinateness of conceptual contents seems to be an heir to taking scepticism seriously. As it were, it tries to answer the sceptic not globally, but locally for the conceptual contents individually. But if scepticism is senseless, this is vain undertaking. And Brandom cannot really object to the merely sufficient determinacy of concepts Wittgenstein claims, because he admits that Wittgenstein rediscovered the normative character of concept-use and, as one of his own formulations shows, some determinateness is implied in this rediscovery:

„If we are to talk at all, we have no choice but to do so by engaging in practices whose implicit norms are as they are ... (As to the alternative, recall Sellar's dictum ›Clearly human beings could dispense with all discourse, though only at the expense of having nothing to say.‹) Any account of discursive normativity that treats the fact of our semantic *Geworfenheit* as undercutting the legitimacy of those norms ... is to be rejected as incorporating an evidently mistaken metaphysics of normativity.“ (658)

---

9 Der „sich vollbringende Skeptizismus“, *Meiner* 67.

10 *On Certainty* § 383.

Norms that can and are to be followed have to be sufficiently determinate. Nevertheless, here is a point, where Wittgenstein could and should have been more Hegelian. As his own discussion of colour concepts shows he thinks that these concepts are the resultant of our spontaneous response to perceptually given differences.<sup>11</sup> Hegel's ideas about determinate negation in conjunction with his conceptual realism point to the fact that what is given to us shows more structure than Wittgenstein saw. There is more determinately structured regularity in what is given to us to absorb into normative rules than Wittgenstein saw and admitted. (After all, he thought that we just don't tolerate contradictions is all there is to contrariety and contradictoriness.<sup>12</sup>) But the Wittgensteinian could well assimilate Hegel's insight into that more of structure in the given because his general conception of the formation of groundfloor-concepts is it that we take over given regularities into normative rules. And this is long-standing wisdom because it is one possible reading of Francis Bacon's formula *natura non nisi parendo vincitur*.

### III

Finally I want to discuss a question on which Hegel, Brandom and Wittgenstein alike are open to criticism. It concerns a question which analytically would be rubricated as action-theoretical.

Not the least of reasons for writing *A Spirit of Trust* seems to have been that Brandom wants to recommend the conception of recollective rationality he ascribes to Hegel for reception in Analytical Philosophy. Model and center of this conception is the expressive theory of agency presented in Part II of the book.

To get a perspective on it some merely linguistic remarks are required. Hegel distinguishes between ›Action (Handlung)‹ und ›Deed (Tat)‹ and, subscribing to intentionality as the mark of action, apportions ›Purpose (Vorsatz)‹ to the action and ›Intention (Absicht)‹ to the deed. The deed is the action specified in terms of (some of) its consequences and so only retrospectively. Nevertheless Hegel claims – and this is, what the expressive theory consists in – that the Intention is implicit in the action from the start and only becoming explicit in the deed.

---

11 I take this to be the cash out of his enigmatical remark: „Wir haben ein System der Farben wie ein System der Zahlen. – Liegen diese Systeme in *unserer* Natur, oder in der Natur der Dinge? Wie soll man's sagen? – *Nicht* in der Natur der Zahlen oder Farben.“ (Zettel § 357)

12 On the insufficiency of this position cp. Laurence Goldstein: *Clear and Queer Thinking*, London 1999, 150-160, esp. 158.

Practically this reinstates a heroic conception of action for which Oedipus is the model: He was „father killer and mother fucker“ (727), although this was not his *Vorsatz*, it was his *Intention*.

This design of the problematic of understanding action is simply linguistic legislation. In German, both '*Vorsatz*' and '*Absicht*' come before the behaviour and this both conceptually and temporally. Taking a behaviour, about which the person executing it explicitly deliberates in advance as standard case, the result of deliberation could linguistically be both '*Vorsatz*' und '*Absicht*' – the only difference being that the first expression is a *linguistic*, while the second is an *optical* metaphor. If one would want to differentiate as Hegel does, it would even be better the other way round, at least from a point of view that respects the spirit of German language – what, if anything, becomes explicit in the execution of the action is, what the agent really achieved and this has to be formulated in a *Satz* and, when ascribed to the actor in advance, it should be the *Vorsatz*.

But far more important is that with the distinction between Action and Deed a distinction is elided that is firmly anchored in the logical grammar of action verbs. It was discovered by Aristotle already that these verbs behave differently with respect to the inferential relations among their tensed forms. As Aristotle put it in *Metaphysics* 1048 b: One can see and at the same time have seen already; but one cannot build a specific house and already have built it. This he codified as the categorical distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*, which in German could be rendered as *Tätigkeit* and *Handlung* and in English as *activity* and *action*. This fundamental distinction is elided in the differentiation between Action and Deed. But it cannot be put off without the threat of inconsistency, because *praxis/poiesis* are just a specification of a more general contrast in the language of time: the contrast between *processes* and *events*. Processes are entities in time having no internal end, events are entities in time resulting in a state of affairs (*Zustand*). To illustrate: swimming in a river for taking exercise is a *praxis/process*; swimming to the opposite bank of the river is an *action/event*. Now, actions as events are always taking place against a background of activities as processes: building a (specific) house belongs to the life (according to Aristotle: a *praxis*<sup>13</sup>) of the prospective house-owner and that of the persons executing the building, who are in the business of erecting buildings. The distinction between intentional versus consequential specifications applies to actions and activities alike. Both have to be intentional to count as action or activity and both

---

13 This categorization leads to problems when one thinks about so difficult concepts as 'the meaning of life'. They can be circumvented by understanding life and living as the presupposition of both activities and action. I discuss this extensively in *Das verstandene Leben* and, more compactly, in *Philosophie* (both on [www.emilange.de](http://www.emilange.de)).

can be specified in terms of consequences. In view of these grammatical facts Hegel's distinction between Action and Deed is a mutilation of the difference activity/action.

The model of recollective rationality is said to be the retrospective ascription of Absicht (in Hegel's mutilated sense) as having been implicit in the Action from the start, although it has become explicit only in the Deed. What reason is there for this ascription? There is none, if the task were only to have a descriptively working account of the action/Action. The reason in Hegel's context is his metaphysics of Reason, which according to his explicit statement can be expressed by saying that *Reason is the purposeful doing*<sup>14</sup>. But with this explanation one has bought recollective rationality already: „The result is the same what the beginning is only because the *Beginning is Purpose*.“<sup>15</sup> The acceptability of this metaphysics of Reason as Action depends on the acceptability of an identity-thesis concerning subjective (thought of) and objective (realized) purpose (Zweck).<sup>16</sup> But the subjective purpose is a thought (thinkable), the objective or realized purpose is an existing state of affairs. They can be identified only by misunderstanding the grammatical fact that both, subjective and objective purpose, can be specified by using a that-clause (he intended that ...; he made it the case that ...). To efface the distinction between thought and fact to me does not seem to be something acceptable to Analytical Philosophy. So the recommendation of recollective rationality should be declined.

As regards Wittgenstein, he seems to me noncommittal with respect to the structure of our language for activities and actions. But that means that he too did not make the necessary distinctions. Anyway, if I am right concerning Brandom and Hegel, the metaphysics of Action certainly is not a subject about which Wittgenstein should have been more Hegelian.

© E.M. Lange 2020

---

14 My translation of „dass die Vernunft das zweckmäßige Tun ist“ (*Phänomenologie d.G.*, Meiner, 22).

15 Own translation of: „Das Resultat ist nur darum dasselbe, was der Anfang, weil der *Anfang Zweck* ist“. Ib.

16 This thesis is one that Marx took over from Hegel and led to his talk of ›objectification (Vergegenständlichung)‹. I therefore criticized Marx' concept of Labour (Arbeit) analytically in the first chapter of my Habilitationsschrift *Das Prinzip Arbeit*, Berlin 1980.