

Brandom on Hegel: A final Wittgensteinian Comment

Starting with a paper in 2014 I repeatedly criticized Brandom's philosophy from a Wittgensteinian point of view. I believe a Wittgensteinian conception of philosophy to be the correct one¹ – something, which does not exist according to Brandom. He sees philosophy as a language-game of argumentation extracting inferential consequences from a welter of premisses, thereby pursuing an inferentially regimented quasi-Wittgenstein goal: a survey of inferential possibilities that helps one to find one's way around. The goal is understanding, not knowledge or true belief.² In contrast the Wittgensteinian takes philosophy to be methodologically *reflective conceptual clarification*, starting with the (formal) concepts the web of which are the rational infrastructure of normal discourse. I argue for this conception with facts from the history of philosophy which show the methodological strain of reflective conceptual clarification to have been present in European philosophy almost from its start in ancient Greece.³ For this conception there is a standard of correctness: It is (it makes itself) responsible to represent the 'given' concepts⁴ correctly. Therefore I claim that the Wittgensteinian conception is the correct one.

Now, Brandom's latest reflections on Wittgenstein⁵ show that he is not willing to address the fundamental insight of Wittgenstein which is present already in the *Tractatus* (4.014): the insight into the internal relation of language (sense) and world as presupposition of the external relation of language (reference) and reality (which deals in the alternative of truth and falsity or satisfaction and non-satisfaction respectively). The operational specification of this insight is the internal relation of meaning and meaning-explanation. Brandom eschews to account for this tenaciously. So I stop bothering about Brandom any longer. But for conclusion I here want to give a final Wittgensteinian comment.

1 'Wittgensteinian Commitments in Brandom' *Al Mukhatabat* 2014, also on *acedemia.edu*. - I presented the Wittgensteinian conception interpretatively in *Wittgensteins Revolution* and systematically in *Philosophie*; both on www.emilange.de.

2 Cp. the end of *Between Saying and Doing*, Oxford UP 2008, 225 sq.; *A Spirit of Trust*, Harvard 2019, 307-312. Cited as BSD; AsoT.

3 Cp. Heraclitus fr. 101.

4 Wittgenstein's conception is an heir to Kant's, who in the context of his *Logic* explicitly stated that the philosopher's task is nothing but the clarification of *given* concepts: „Der Philosoph macht *nur gegebene* Begriffe deutlich.“ (A 95, italics mine)

5 'Some Strains of Wittgenstein's Normative Pragmatism, and Some Strains of his Semantic Nihilism I.' On *academia.edu* 2020.

I.

Brandom's conception is a constructive fusion of ideas of Sellars, Kant and Hegel. To get hold of and a perspective on this complex construction it is useful to contrast strains in it with the contexts from which they originate. These I believe should be interpreted in a historical hermeneutical manner. Brandom acknowledges the primacy of hermeneutical understanding for the beginning of philosophy (BSD 213), but not for the interpretation of philosophical texts (ASoT 308 sq.). Concerning them he subscribes to the manner of *de re* interpretation which combines views of the interpretee with collateral premises taken to be true by the interpreter. I do not believe that results of *de re* takings on historical texts should be called *interpretations* – but there is no use to quarrel. The view in the vicinity of claiming primacy for historical interpretation that Brandom accepts is „to be clear about what sort of an interpretation one is offering.“ (ASoT 308) Concerning that he leaves no doubt. But I shall have to return to the question of *de dicto* versus *de re* interpretation at the end, because I want to show that Brandom's privileging *de re* interpretation is inconsistent with one of his other theoretical commitments inspired by Hegel.

II.

The main teaching of Sellars's *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* has been that the look-and seeming-talk of modern epistemology is not an 'autonomous stratum' of language which is why traditional ideas of empiricist foundationalism are definitely wrong. There is nothing immediately given in the empiricist sense; for to be cognitively relevant everything has to be caught up in a web of inferential relations constituting a 'space of reasons'. And look-talk *withholds* assertational force of a claim and therefore *presupposes* the use of claims with assertational force. Brandom loves to translate Sellars critique of a dreamed-of autonomy of look-talk with the 'no autonomous stratum'-thesis by: it is not a language-game that could be played though no other would. The wide implications of this I take to be the starting point of Brandom's inferentialism – a semantics that takes inferential relations to have precedence over representational ones.

The other main strain of Brandom conception: the social-perspectival pragmatics of

language use in book-keeping terms is motivated in contemporary philosophy by views of David Lewis and Donald Davidson, in traditional philosophy by a conception ascribed to Hegel and what he made from Kant. But before addressing them Brandom's take on Sellars has to be characterized a bit further.

Sellars was a stout scientist subscribing to what Brandom calls the thesis of *scientia mensura*. Brandom is rightly critical of it.⁶ But he remains at one with Sellars in believing that philosophy is a cognitive discipline which even shares with the sciences the form of being progressively accumulative. Descriptively this is the case only in part. That is shown even in Brandom by the fact that the progress centrally has to be *rational-recollectively reconstructed*. The means for the respective moves are taken from Hegel and from Brandom's own ideas about *de re* interpretation (which again are inspired by Hegel).

III.

Kant is read by Brandom in a Hegelian perspective from the start. In a sense both philosophers in his reading are mirrored in one another. He claims that Hegel's critique of Kant's epistemological frame of reference invests four constraints on the acceptability of epistemological theories, of which two are particularly important. The first is the Genuine Knowledge Condition (GKC) requiring that a theory must not make semantic presuppositions that preclude genuine knowledge, real contact to how things are in themselves. The second (in Brandom it is the fourth) is the Rational Constraint Condition (RCC) which requires that for *comprehension* of a fact (in contradistinction to merely responding differentially to its presence or absence) the fact must have reasons and must have the potential to serve as a reason (for further claims) itself. A good impression of this can be given by a longer citation which resumes „the logical flow“ from Kant to Hegel that Brandom explicates:

›1. The starting-point is Kant's *normative* conception of judgement, which sees judging as endorsing, committing oneself to, taking responsibility for some judgeable content.

2. The idea is made more definite by the Kantian account of judging as integrating a new commitment into a constellation of prior commitments, so as to maintain the rational normative unity distinctive of apperception.

3. That idea in turn is filled in by understanding the synthetic-integrative activity as having the tripartite substructure of satisfying critical, ampliative, and justificatory task responsibilities.

4. To this idea is conjoined the pragmatist-functionalist strategy of understanding judgeable contents as articulated by the relations they must stand in to play the role in that activity, as what one is endorsing, committing oneself to, or taking responsibility for.

6 Cp. *From Empiricism to Expressivism* – Brandom Reads Sellars, HarvardUP 2015, Index s.v. *scientia mensura*.

5. In light of the tripartite substructure on synthesizing a constellation of commitments exhibiting the rational unity distinctive of apperception (intentionality), this thought yields a conception of judgeable contents as articulated by rational relations of material incompatibility (appealed to by the critical task responsibility) and material consequence (appealed to by the ampliative and justificatory task responsibilities). The result is Hegel's conception of conceptual contentfulness in terms of determinate negation and mediation ...

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6. Alongside Kant's normative conception of judgement, a normative conception of representation is discerned. A judgement counts as representing some represented object insofar as it is responsible to that object for its correctness, insofar as that object exercises authority over or serves as a standard for assessments of its correctness.

7. The strategy is then to apply the pragmatist idea again, to understand representational content in terms of the activity a subject must engage in so as thereby to count as treating something as a normative standard for assessments of the correctness of judgement, as an aspect of the synthetic process of integrating those commitments into constellations of antecedent commitments exhibiting the rational unity distinctive of apperception. (AsoT 71 sq.)

This is a clear presentation and admirably so. But still it leaves out some of the interpretative commitments undertaken. Two of them are made explicit in other places. The first in ASoT 68:

›Apperception is cognitive or sapient awareness, awareness that can amount to knowledge.

Apperceiving is judging. Judging is the form of apperception because judgements are the smallest unit for which one can take cognitive responsibility.‹

This amounts to reading into Kant already the propositional context principle first formulated by Frege and Wittgenstein.⁷ It is by no means clear that already Kant had such a principle, for his *Logic* preserved the Aristotelian frame of a logic primarily of concepts. The problem relates to Brandom's reading of Kant's formulations about concepts as 'functions of judgements' (German: *Funktionen von Urteilen*). In Kant's text there are also formulations 'functions in judgements' (German: *in*) and 'functions to judgements' (German: *zu*). This is due to the fact that his concept of a function differs from Frege's, Russell's and the early Wittgenstein's. Its general explanation I take to be the one given at CPR B 93 as 'the unity of action to order different ideas under a common one' (German: „die Einheit der Handlung, verschiedene Vorstellungen unter einer gemeinschaftlichen zu ordnen.“) This explanation applies to concepts and judgements alike which is the reason, why Kant did not clearly anticipate the propositional context principle even in view of the fact, that one of his many explanations⁸ of the concept 'the understanding' is 'the capacity for judgement'. (After all, another is 'the capacity of rules', which seems to apply to concepts only.)

⁷ *Die Philosophie der Arithmetik* § 62; *Tractatus* 3.3.

⁸ Cp. CPR A 126.

The other point is not really made explicit, but only intimated, because it is a clear implication of much that Brandom says explicitly. Brandom early in the Hegel-book writes „of the most problematic aspects of ... (Kant's) transcendental idealism, such as the distinction between the activities of noumenal and phenomenal selves.“ (ASoT 11) This only intimates that Brandom with Hegel's reintegration of the phenomenal/noumenal-difference into the process of experience empiricizes the subject of cognition. For there is no activity of a noumenal self in Kant's text of CPR. On the contrary, it is taken to be 'the standing and remaining I (of pure apperception)' (A 123: „das stehende und bleibende Ich (der reinen Apperzeption)“ and to be 'originally synthetic' (German: „*ursprünglich* synthetisch“; italics mine), not to be the result of a synthesizing activity. In all his references to 'the rational unity distinctive of apperception' Brandom nowhere reflects on the implications of this static conception of the noumenal self. It is responsible for Kant's taking the thinking subject in the end as one and the same in all empirical thinkers, as „the subject thinking in us“ (CPR B 770, A /742; German: „das in uns denkende Subjekt“).⁹ This is a big step towards Hegel's ideas about an absoluteness of the subject, but it is completely free of Hegel's dynamism. Brandom covers the problems with this movement of thought by his 'rational recollective reconstruction' of projecting Hegel's dynamism back into Kant. This is, as it were, a pre-Hegelianization of Kant.

The mirroring of both authors in one another is the result of a converse re-Kantianization of Hegel. Brandom suspends Hegel's recollective rationalizing reconstructive method for categorical concepts themselves and replaces it with his strategy of semantic descent. This depends on the Kantian thought that the function of categorical concepts is to be elucidated by explication of what they tell us about grund-level concept-use.

The result of both operations is neither Kant nor Hegel, but only Brandom. But then he could as well have left it with *Making it Explicit*.

IV.

One of the most astonishing remarks in *A Spirit of Trust* is a footnote in which Brandom relativizes his first master piece. It reads: „... the pure social-status Queen's shilling sense of

⁹ In the discussion about solipsism in Wittgenstein David Pears coined the expression 'sliding-peg egocentrism' for this conception of the cognitive subject. (*The false prison*, 2 vol., Oxford 1988/9, vol. 2, 233, 276-7, 290). Cp. my 'Wittgenstein on Solipsism', in: Glock/Hyman, Eds.: *The Blackwell Companion to Wittgenstein*, Oxford 2017, 159-174.

›responsible‹ is: doing something that (whether one knows it or not) has the social significance of entitling others to attribute a responsibility. In *Making it Explicit* I try to make it go as far as it can all on its own. Such an enterprise can seem perverse, but it is adopted with Popperian methodological malice aforethought. The idea is to explore the strongest, most easily falsifiable hypothesis, to see what explanatory work it can do, how far it will take one, before its explanatory resources are exhausted.“ (ASoT 782 fn 7) This is in full agreement with Brandom's understanding of philosophy as an argumentative game. But can it be the whole truth? Not in the light of the confession that follows a comparable remark in the *Preface* of MiE: „Of course I take it that the claims made in what follows are true; I endorse those assertions; they express my commitments.“ (xii) How far then does the relativization of the MiE-strategy as expressing a Popperian malice aforethought go?

One would wish that Brandom issued a presentation clearly saying how far the inferentialist explanatory resources reach and whether or where they have to be supplemented by representationalist ones. In between I take licence to take his declarations at face value.

In ASoT Brandom subscribes to Hegelian recollective rationality and to the teleological directedness of Spirit to a coming „third age of *Geist*“ (738) characterized by completely symmetrical relations of mutual recognition instead of the asymmetrical cognitive relations in the history of Spirit before – the extreme of which is the 'pure independence' of the master from the servant in the vain attempt to claim (all) authority without any corresponding responsibility.

The question I want to put in closing is: Is not Brandom's own privileging of *de re* over *de dicto* interpretation a strategy coming near to that of 'pure independence'? I take it that the rules of historical hermeneutical interpretation, privileging the collateral beliefs of the interpretee over those of the interpreter, are made for compensation of the asymmetry of the interpreter in relation to the interpretee due to the historical distance which makes live communication impossible. *De re* interpretation cancels this compensatory arrangement and leaves almost all the interpretative talk there can be to the interpreter. Is this not an attempt to silence the interpretee as far as possible and does this not approach 'pure independence'? If so, it would be inconsistent with the commitments Brandom undertakes in his Hegel-book, if his words can and are to be taken at face value.

Brandom somewhere cites an old saying in the attempt to preempt a critique: „To one who has only a hammer, the whole world looks like a nail.“ (ASoT 267) Brandom surely does not only have a hammer. But he so firmly sticks to the whole bunch of tools developed in his

semantical writings that most of Hegel and Kant he explains make them look like having meant all along what Brandom means. Persons can be explained as animals capable to desist from themselves. Interpretors are persons who, when they interpret other authors and their work, should exercise the ability they are in command of already as persons.

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