

Review of Robert Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas*

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Humans have a predictable liking for theories of what makes humans special, far above mere beasts and machines. Robert Brandom backs one of the most popular candidates, reason, in a specific form indicated by the word ‘reasoning’: making inferences, reaching conclusions from premises. Are we really the only reasoners? A dog traces its quarry to a place where it could have gone any of three ways, sniffs at two of them and rushes off along the third *without sniffing*. The Stoic Chrysippus interpreted the dog as reasoning ‘It went this way, that way or the other way; it did not go this way or that way; therefore it went the other way’. Far more complex logic is routine for computers. Such examples would not convince Brandom. For him, they lack a normative dimension essential to genuine engagement with reasons. When humans make a judgment, we incur both a responsibility to provide our reasons if challenged and a commitment to endorse consequences of what we claimed or else withdraw the claim. Dogs and computers incur no such responsibilities or commitments. Brandom labels his view ‘normative rationalism’.

Distinguishing humans from others is just one of many achievements attributed to normative rationalism. Brandom is going for broke. In the first half of this short book, ‘A

Semantic Sonata in Kant and Hegel', he depicts normative rationalism as the rightful inheritor of the best and deepest in the German idealist tradition. His argument ranges boldly over norms, selves, concepts, autonomy, community, freedom, history, reason, reality. Selves come in because they incur the responsibilities and commitments. Since contradicting oneself is bad, unlike contradicting someone else, rational norms demarcate the boundaries between selves. Concepts are rules for applying words; they give specific shape to the norms. Those concepts are ours because we make the rules. Our autonomy is that power to bind ourselves with self-given norms. Since it would amount to little if one always acted as judge and jury in one's own case, we must make and maintain the rules as a community, rather than each of us drawing up our own personal rulebook. In particular, concepts are expressed by words in a public language. It is in such a language that we request and supply reasons. The rules develop as a system of case law, not statutory law, for words have meanings in virtue of how we use them, not by a once-for-all act of stipulation. Thus normativity and reason have an essential historical dimension, because applications of rules must be judged by the standard of past applications and in turn modify the standard for judging future applications. Since retrospective criticism is possible too, the process works backwards as well as forwards. We grasp the concept of objective reality by reflecting on that history of self-correction. This does not make reality itself as mind-dependent as the process of self-correction; Brandom's idealism is more semantic than metaphysical. He makes no pretence at detailed exegesis of Kant and Hegel's crucial texts. Rather, he self-consciously engages in a selective rewriting of the history of philosophy as a triumphant progress up to his own views, including the view that so presenting one's views is a central philosophical task.

The second half of the book, less dense with abstractions than the first, is intended to be accessible to non-philosophers, although one wonders how they will get there. It contains five independent essays, two of them previously published, in which Brandom applies his normative rationalism to the nature of philosophy, the value of the philosophical life, the role of truth, problems for an empiricist conception of concepts, and philosophy's lessons for cognitive science. The volume feels slightly miscellaneous and repetitive. There are no big surprises, given his previous four books. However, it offers useful material for assessing his grand programme.

Brandom repeatedly argues that reasoning is what matters by contrasts like this: a human assertion "That's red" with a similar-sounding noise made by a parrot or a tape recorder attached to a photocell. Even if the latter two have no concept of red, they may be just as reliable as the human at producing the noise in the presence of red objects. The crucial difference, Brandom argues, is that only the human can do things like reasoning from "That's red" to "That's coloured". Although a dog or computer can do things which look like reasoning, he denies them the normative status of reasoning. But if one is going to play the normative card, one could just as easily have played it straight off, contrasting the human judgment "That's red" in normative status with the noise made by the parrot or tape recorder. If it isn't red, the human is getting it *wrong*, unlike the parrot or tape recorder. Although Brandom insists that the normative role of the judgment depends on its inferential connections, his evidence does not support that conclusion. At the critical point, he is using a normative difference between humans and non-humans to justify restricting genuine *reasoning* to humans, but since the normative difference is no worse a

justification for restricting genuine *judgment* to humans, it provides no non-circular basis for privileging reasoning over judgment, as his normative rationalism demands.

The norms of judgment are not those of reasoning. To reason is to move from premises to a conclusion. A central norm of reasoning is *validity*: the conclusion should follow from the premises. Thus “Shergar was a racehorse, so he was kidnapped” is invalid, even though Shergar was both, for most racehorses are not kidnapped. The corresponding norm for judgment is *truth*. If you simply judge “Shergar was kidnapped”, the question is whether Shergar *was* kidnapped. Since we can use valid reasoning to expand our stock of true beliefs, for instance by applying mathematics in science, it is natural to explain validity in terms of truth: *if* the premises in valid reasoning are true, the conclusion must be true too.

That is not how Brandom sees it. He acknowledges a fundamental norm of validity for reasoning, but no fundamental norm of truth for judgment. He allows truth no important explanatory role in philosophy; in particular, he does not explain validity in terms of truth. On the theory he endorses, “true” is merely a linguistic device similar in function to a pronoun. Just as I sometimes use “he” instead of “Brandom”, one can sometimes use “That’s true” instead of “Yes, Shergar was kidnapped”. Truth is no ‘metaphysically weighty *property*’ (whatever that means). For Brandom, any norm of judgment derives from norms of reasoning.

Brandom’s downplaying of truth shapes his theory of meaning. On current orthodoxy, the meaning of “Shergar was kidnapped” demarcates circumstances in which Shergar was kidnapped from all others; the judgment is true if made in the former circumstances, false otherwise. This simple idea has been basic to the massive

development of mainstream formal semantics over recent decades, in both linguistics and philosophy of language, for natural and artificial languages. If Brandom is right about truth, that development is profoundly wrong-headed. Semantics will have to be done again from scratch. To illustrate the difficulties: when Brandom applies his approach to the semantics of “if”, “necessary” and “possible”, all three of his proposals are vitiated by logical errors (p. 46). Although his previous book *Between Saying and Doing* (2008) contains a better developed attempt, it remains an isolated fragment by contrast with mainstream semantic theories.

Is Brandom right about truth? He makes little attempt to construct criticisms of orthodoxy sharp enough to worry its defenders. That would not be decisive if his positive account had significant advantages. Its economy is attractive, but cuts can go too far. For example, Brandom’s account implies that the probability that the sentence “Snow is white” is true simply equals the probability that snow is white (see p. 164). That sounds good, until we remember that we can talk about how probable something is for someone else. The probability for us English speakers that “Snow is white” is true equals the probability for us that snow is white, if we are certain that “Snow is white” means that snow is white. But consider a monolingual Inuit who sees the sentence “Snow is white” on a fragment of philosophical text blown by the wind, without knowing what it means. On Brandom’s account, the probability for her that the sentence “Snow is white” is true equals the probability for her that snow is white. Since she knows better than we do that snow is white, the probability for her that snow is white is high. But the probability for her that the sentence “Snow is white” is true is not high, since she has no evidence that

the sentence means that snow is white rather than that blood is green. Thus Brandom's account is incorrect, and no improvement on orthodoxy.

Even if Brandom is wrong about truth, how much explanatory work can his norms of reasoning do? He does not intend a purely formal or *a priori* standard. Perhaps for that reason, he avoids the word "validity", preferring "good material inference". "Material" signals that the norm can be satisfied by an informal, *a posteriori* connection between premises and conclusion. He emphasizes that 'what is *really* a reason for what depends on how things *actually* are'. That pushes his norms of reasoning closer to an orthodox norm of truth (what is *really* true depends on how things *actually* are).

Brandom often prefers to work with a relation of material incompatibility in terms of which he can define good material inference. The corresponding norm is to avoid incompatible commitments. As an example of material incompatibility, he gives the triad "A is a blackberry", "A is red" and "A is ripe". The incompatibility depends on the actual nature of blackberries. Avoiding such incompatible commitments is not unlike avoiding false commitments. Presumably the norms are not quite equivalent, since one can avoid incompatible commitments without avoiding false commitments, for example by committing oneself only to "A is a blackberry" and "A is ripe" when *A* is actually an unripe blackberry. Brandom does not make the standard for material incompatibility explicit, but seems to intend some kind of natural impossibility: it is a natural impossibility for *A* to be a ripe red blackberry (freak cases apart?). This suggests that one has materially incompatible commitments whenever one misidentifies fruit, for if *A* is a raspberry then it is a natural impossibility for *A* to be a blackberry. The reader is left guessing how far 'material incompatibility' is supposed to extend.

Some passages give the impression of sneaking a norm of truth back in by using the word “correct” in place of “true”. For example, Brandom writes:

what is represented must provide a standard for normative assessment of [representings’] *correctness*, as representings and

In [engaging in discursive practices], we bind ourselves by norms articulated by the contents of the concepts we apply. If I claim that the coin is copper, I have said something that, whether I know it or not, is *correct* only if the coin would melt at 1084°C and would *not* melt at 1083°C.

He does not say how he reconciles such passages with truth’s explanatory unimportance.

Brandom contrasts ‘horizontal’ relations between different ‘representings’ with ‘vertical’ relations between those representings and what is represented. Inferential relations are horizontal. Truth, as normally conceived, depends on vertical relations such as that of the word ‘copper’ to the metal copper. Sometimes he seems to hint at explaining the vertical relations in terms of horizontal ones, a highly ambitious form of inferentialism. But then he admits that he is explaining only the horizontal relation of *purporting* to refer to the same thing, which different utterances of ‘copper’ have to each other. However far you extend a horizontal, it will not turn vertical. Brandom’s demotion of reference elsewhere is analogous to his demotion of truth and faces analogous problems.

These tensions come from the attempt to have semantic idealism without metaphysical idealism. To put it schematically, Brandom’s semantic idealism characterizes meaning in terms of moves in a language game; which is attractive because

it ties meaning to speakers' practical abilities. By contrast, metaphysical idealism wildly asserts that there is no world independent of the game. Earlier forms of semantic idealism involved some form of metaphysical idealism too. The most logically sophisticated was the intuitionist school of Brouwer, Heyting, Prawitz, Dummett and others, which characterized the meaning of mathematical sentences in terms of the structure of their proofs, but in doing so assumed, implausibly, that every mathematical truth is provable by a finite mind. While ignoring such precedents, Brandom tries to avoid their defects. He accepts that a move in the language game can be a true or false statement about something independent of the game. He attempts to explain how the rules provide for such moves by making their legitimacy depend on the independent world. If he goes all the way, however, material incompatibility collapses into falsity, the norms of reasoning collapse into those of judgment, and everything distinctive of inferentialism is lost. The danger is that Brandom has gone far enough to disappoint the original motivation for semantic idealism, but not far enough for a satisfying rejection of metaphysical idealism. Since inferential relations can depend on facts about nature inaccessible to speakers, meaning has not been adequately tied to speakers' practical abilities. Since inferential relations do not fix truth and reference, meaning has not been adequately tied to the language-independent world.

All the erudite sophistication and laborious ingenuity with which Brandom tries explaining meaning in terms of inferential relations may ultimately help convince the reader that it cannot be done. Fifteen years after the publication of his magnum opus, *Making it Explicit*, Brandom's semantic inferentialism remains largely programmatic, unlike more orthodox semantic theories based on truth and reference. If you want an

explicit theory of how some particular linguistic construction contributes to the meanings of sentences in which it occurs, the inferentialist is unlikely to have one. Better try the referentialist.

Although Brandom can show awareness that the devil is in the detail, in philosophy as elsewhere, his more grandiose paragraphs discourage any attempt to put his theory into practice by working out and critically testing the details. For philosophical prose style, Kant and Hegel are not the best influences:

It is by placing both within a larger *historical* developmental structure that Hegel fits the model of the synthesis of an original unity of apperception by rational integration together with the model of the synthesis of normative-status-bearing apperceiving selves and their communities by reciprocal recognition so as to make the discursive commitments instituted thereby intelligible as determinately contentful.

(Bold type and italics Brandom's.) Although his writing isn't all as bad as that, its paucity of clear detail has increasingly concentrated his readership amongst those — not few in number — who prefer philosophy to come in vast, vague programmes, like the election manifestos of parties that know they will never have to govern. Brandom cannot want such marginalisation. This volume will not reverse the trend.