

Wittgenstein and Brandom: Affinities and Divergences

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ABSTRACT

It is not difficult to find both affinities and divergences in the work of Wittgenstein and Brandom but this particular text explores several key issues beyond first impressions and reveals hidden divergences in supposed similarities and occasionally less profound dissimilarities where their philosophies seem to differ radically. Both Wittgenstein and Brandom (as well as Dewey), while agreeing that representations cannot be taken to be primitive, would not approve of Rorty's drive to jettison the very idea of representation along with that of truth. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, "is averse to any attempt at general, explanatory, theories of how language works" while "Brandom is much more positive about the possibility of general, systematic and explanatory theories of meaning." The divergence about the builders of *Philosophical Investigations* § 2 and their language use is traced back to Wittgenstein's being essentially a worldly pragmatist, while Brandom's practice is essentially intralinguistic. In the second part, the text takes issue with Brandom's theory of making explicit, and in the final sections, the paper questions the supposed contrast between expressivism and the 'motley of language' and takes a look at Brandom's strive for a normative realism that distinguishes him from other expressivists.

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§1. Embodiment, Action, and Causation

THERE IS NO DIFFICULTY about seeing broad affinities in the work of these two remarkable philosophers. Brandom himself pays handsome tribute to (the later) Wittgenstein as the towering figure behind the ‘conceptual sea change’ of replacing concern with semantics by concern with pragmatics: the insistence on seeing our linguistic capacities in the context of human activities and practices (Brandom 2011, p. 160). It is his emphasis on the *use* of terms as (generally speaking) a key to their *meaning* that justifies calling the later Wittgenstein a pragmatist, and Brandom is of course happy to present himself as following the tradition as it descended through Sellars, Quine, and Rorty. Wittgenstein liked Goethe’s saying “Im Anfang war die Tat” (in the beginning was the deed) and Brandom’s Locke lectures came out under the title *Between Saying and Doing*. But although according to some kind of priority to practice over semantics suggests a particular tradition, it is far from defining one. Virtually everyone would suppose that if it were not for human activities that put them to use, words would mean nothing. Any distinctive approach down this road needs to specify both how our activities are to be described, if they are to give life to our words, and how the life of our words is to be described, if activities account for them.

Against this background affinity between Brandom and Wittgenstein it is also easy to identify at least one divergence between them. Whereas the later Wittgenstein is averse to any attempt at general, explanatory, theories of how language works, preferring instead to insist upon the kaleidoscope of different things we might find ourselves saying in different contexts, Brandom is much more positive about the possibility of general, systematic and explanatory theories of meaning, and takes himself to have provided such a theory, or at least to have paved the way for such a theory to follow. Brandom’s theoretical ambitions include providing ‘transcendental’ argument that any language must

show a certain logical structure; Wittgenstein not only avoids, but counsels against any such ambition. For Brandom language has an essential core, a “downtown”, but for Wittgenstein it is like an old city, a ‘maze of little streets and squares’, and has none (Wittgenstein 1953, § 18).

On this second question a useful landmark might be a number of negative claims, whose most flamboyant expression comes not in Brandom himself, but in the hostile semantic eliminativist writings of Richard Rorty. These counsel us to avoid describing the powers of words by using any typically semantic vocabulary: the vocabulary of representation, reference, or truth. This ban is not an immediate consequence of the pragmatist emphasis on practice. After all, our practices include innumerable activities such as charting the coastline, making a timetable, drawing up a menu, or erecting signposts, and these charts, timetables, menus and signposts are quite naturally described as representing, describing, or signifying other things: the shape of the coastline, the times of the trains, the lunch offerings, or the way to some destination. And truth is in the offing, since it is vital to us that these things can be right about their subject matter, or wrong.

It is of course one thing to avoid taking reference, representation, and truth as primitives, as unmoved movers in our theory of mind and language, but another thing altogether to refuse to allow them any place at all. So Rorty’s eliminativism is going to need some special motivation. In many parts of language there is indeed such a motivation: many authors, including Wittgenstein, have supposed that in selected areas philosophical understanding requires getting rid of the idea that every word refers to a correlated thing. But the intended width or scope of this suspicion is very different in different pragmatists. While for Rorty, it seems intended to apply everywhere and always, this is not at all the case in Wittgenstein and (in spite of his dedicating his Locke lectures to Rorty) it is repudiated in what Brandom presents as his own ‘analytic pragmatism’. For that is at least mainly the project of rehabilitating reference and representation on a pragmatist footing.

This allies Brandom with Wittgenstein, for in my view Rorty misunderstood the main pragmatist attitude to representation. For Wittgenstein, as for Dewey, and Peirce, it is not that the very ideas of semantic representation and truth that must be jettisoned. The only claims are that we cannot take representation as primitive, nor as useful everywhere and without question. Dewey for example wrote that:

The basic fallacy in representative realism is that while it actually depends upon the inferential phase of enquiry, it fails to interpret the immediate quality and the related idea in terms of their functions in inquiry. On the contrary it

views representative power as an inherent property of sensations and ideas as such, treating them as “representations” in and of themselves. Dualism or bifurcation of mental and physical existence is a necessary result, presented, however, not as a result but as a given fact...psychological or mental existences which are then endowed with the miraculous power of standing for and pointing to existences of a different order (Dewey 1968, p. 514–515)

The ‘inferential phase of enquiry’ here refers to the activities setting the scene in which an observation, be it of a thing or of a feature of a situation, becomes involved in inference, enquiry, and absorption into our view of the world. The complaint is that by making representative power a miraculous, self-standing property of ideas or concepts or any ‘thing’ either in the world or the mind, we simply generate mystery. Then, since physical things like inscriptions and sounds evidently do not have these magical powers, we add the false idea of a dualism of mind, where there must reside things such as ideas or concepts that do have such powers, and the inert world where nothing does. It is the intrinsicness of semantic properties to some thing or other that is the target, not the propriety of semantic terminology itself. A similar message is found in Wittgenstein: we should remember his swift destruction of the idea that we can only obey the order to bring a red flower by first imagining a red flower, and then using what we imagine as a pattern to follow (Wittgenstein 1964, p. 3). Here the imagined flower is supposed to give us the redness of a real flower directly, whereas no word can do so.

A rejection of semantic ‘intrinsicism’ has wide implications. It means that we can no longer unthinkingly suppose that linguistic form is a straightforward guide to reality, nor even a guide to what we are supposing reality to contain. The subject matter of thought can no longer simply be assumed to be things correlated straightforwardly with words, or states of affairs conceived of as structures of things. Brandom thus applauds three of Rorty’s targets. They are semantic atomism, which means taking words in abstraction from sentential or other contexts, the idea of intrinsic semantic powers, and semantic nominalism, or the modelling of all meaning on naming. But although Brandom does not himself go the way that Rorty did, wrongly drawing eliminativist consequences from the repudiation of these errors, he is not always forthright in condemning the eliminativist turn either (Brandom 2013, p. 95–97).

If it is odd to find the intensely serious Dewey, whose favourite words included ‘inquiry’ and ‘education’ saluted as leading the way to Rorty’s ironic, post-modern world, it is equally strange to suppose that the Wittgenstein of “philosophy leaves everything as it is” should be in the business of exorcising any

family of terms that have perfectly satisfactory and useful everyday functions, even if philosophers have made a mess of identifying what those uses are. Perhaps Wittgenstein could just about get tarred with the eliminativist brush because of the first thirty or so paragraphs of the *Philosophical Investigations*, which could perhaps be read as an attack on the “Augustinian” picture of words representing things, root and branch. But closer inspection shows that Wittgenstein is advancing no such embargo. Right at the outset, in paragraphs §2 and §3 Wittgenstein conceded that ‘Augustine, we might say, does describe a system of communication’ and one that might be appropriate for a ‘narrowly circumscribed region’ of our own language. The system that conforms to Augustine’s description is illustrated by the communication between builder A and assistant B, whereby A calls out ‘block’, ‘slab’ ‘pillar’ and so on, and B brings such an object to him. This is, Wittgenstein says, a language ‘more primitive than ours’ but he allows that it is a language nonetheless, and we might be reminded of Karl von Frisch’s famous discovery of the language or system of signalling of honeybees.

Brandom refuses to allow that these builders are using even a primitive ‘language game’. He argues that there is a bright line drawn only when we have practices of inference and assertion, and since these builders make no inferences and need not be regarded as asserting anything, only as signalling or calling for things, they are on the wrong side of the line (Brandom 2008, p. 42). Wittgenstein differs: he explicitly tells us that we are not to be troubled that the primitive language game consists only of orders (§18). Neither does he deny that we can use semantic descriptions of their terms: “Of course, one can reduce the description of the use of the word ‘slab’ to the statement that this word signifies this object” (§10), but he warns us that such a description is apt to conceal important differences: In §7 and §8 he imagines augmenting the builders’ repertoire with colour terms, numerals, and indexicals referring to place. His evident concern is to insist that there are differences of function here. The discussion culminates in §12 with the well-known comparison between words and the various handles in a locomotive, so that in §13 he announces that “When we say: ‘Every word in the language signifies something’ we have so far said *nothing whatever*; unless we have explained exactly *what* distinction we wish to make”. The concern, in short, is with pluralities of function, not with it being somehow wrong to say that, for instance the word ‘slab’ in the primitive language, let alone in our own more elaborate language, signifies (refers to/represents) slabs. After all, if you “say nothing whatever”, then you do not say anything wrong, either.

We return to the shared concern with pluralities of function later. First, however, how great is the potential divergence between Brandom and

Wittgenstein here? Elements that Brandom considers crucial to language and thought are missing from Wittgenstein's primitive language: there is no mention of social–deontic norms as a foundation for anything worth calling meaning, and there is no network of inferential practices to cement the builders' meanings in place. Nevertheless, the signalling behaviour of builders A and B, like that of Karl von Frisch's bees, is an essential part of a *practice* and *technique*—the practice and technique of building together with slabs, beams and pillars in the one case, and of having fellow members of a hive coordinating in the activity of gathering pollen in the other case. Brandom is within his rights to query whether in primitive and inflexible cases we should talk of communication, and within his rights to draw a line below which the builders and the bees fall, but an important point remains. Wittgenstein's notion of a practice is essentially *worldly*, identifying a function of embodied, practical creatures coping with their environment. Brandom's by contrast is essentially intralinguistic: it is the practice of users of language, witnessed in their own inferences and the norms to which they hold themselves and others. For Wittgenstein a notion of reference, or of a primitive ancestor of reference, swims into view when we have the builders' successful communication as part of their technique of working together with beams, slabs and the rest. The builders are *intelligently engaged* with the elements of their trade, and for Wittgenstein this is critically important. For Brandom, insofar as he remains an inferentialist, intelligence is exercised intralinguistically, in the movement from one commitment, expressed by a sentence, to another, rather than in engagement with things. Reference, for Brandom, either is, or at least is nearer to being, a syntactic or proof–theoretic notion, visible in the patterns of inference to which users are committed, than any relationship of a word to a part of the world.

We might sum up this difference by saying that Wittgenstein was fundamentally an engineer, not an inferentialist.

The builders are not shown deploying norms and normative language. But there is, of course, space for characteristic normative behaviour to enter their primitive world—after getting beams by saying 'beam' builder A is likely to be annoyed if B brings what A regards as the *wrong* item such as a slab instead of a beam, just as a teacher introducing numerals may feel like *giving up on* the learner who cannot get the sequence right. But this is going to be true whenever someone disappoints expectations or fails to do his part in the joint exercise of a technique. Normative reactions bubble up whenever some cooperative behaviour is expected but not delivered: arriving with a slab when signalled 'beam', saying 'six' when prompted to continue the number series beyond four, or in general mislabelling and mistaking things. Indeed, as Gideon Rosen has emphasized,

normative reactions can be found not only when we are supposedly cooperating, but whenever we have actions of any kind. Spitting is a behaviour that gives rise to normative reactions, but is not itself constituted by an element of normativity Rosen (2001, p. 622).¹

Alongside Wilfrid Sellars, Brandom certainly makes room for entrances into language, and exits from it. But at least for the most part he seems to conceive of these in purely causal terms: our engagements with our environment are just matters of differential causal relations, comparable with the changes in a piece of iron wrought by damp or magnetism. Intelligence on this view is only exercised inside language, as we give content to words by the networks of inferences we make. It is this that motivates Brandom's wish to build a viable notion of reference out of materials visible only within the linguistic habits of subjects, such as having their inferences shaped by relations between pronouns and their antecedents, giving us a proof-theoretic or syntactic foothold on a notion of co-reference, and thence, perhaps on reference itself.² While Brandom also brings to bear our own commitments as we describe subjects in 'de re' terms, it must be that anaphoric relations are his primary ingredients, since otherwise we simply have it that we, ourselves able to refer, can interpret others as doing the same. In any pragmatist programme that disallows a fundamental or primitive place for reference and representation, our own abilities to refer to things cannot be the fundamental unmoved mover.³

Brandom is not in the end as pure an inferentialist as I have so far implied. In Chapter 6 of *Between Saying and Doing* rather different materials are introduced and welcomed. Here Brandom addresses the worry that in his approach to language "all that is in play is words and their use" and he imagines a critic

¹ Rosen argues that this throws into doubt the very meaning of the debated question 'whether meaning is normative', and I agree with him.

² There is an ambiguity in this. Brandom cannot evade results showing that if any set models some sentences then so does any other set of the same cardinality, implying that reference to one thing rather than another cannot be conjured from the proof-theoretic structure of any text, however large. All he can claim is a syntactic fix on whether an expression is grammatically referential. See Arif Ahmed, "Quine" in C. Misak (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 321, n. 18. See also section 2.3.2

³ There is another similar question in the offing here. Brandom seems to give an account of what it is to *have* a commitment in terms of what it is to *attribute* a commitment to another. Although there are behavioural expressions of this, such as the imposition of punishments when what is interpreted as error comes about, the threat of a regress still looms. A 'Martian' who sees behaviour but not commitments cannot see disappointed commitments either, even if he can see punishing and sanctioning behaviour. See Anandi Hattiangadi 'Making it Implicit: Brandom on Rule Following' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Mar., 2003), pp. 419–431.

complaining that “if the *world* is left out of the story, what justification could there be for saying that *meaning* has not been?” (Brandom 2008, p. 177). His answer to the complaint is that the practices that establish semantic relations between words and the world are themselves essentially world-involving. It is the “practical involvement with objects exhibited by a sentient creature dealing skilfully with its world” that brings about, or even constitutes, the fact that the terms of its language have semantic relations with the elements of that world. The practical involvement is further described as “an open-ended sequence of feedback governed performances” —here one might think, for instance, of the kind of alert responsiveness to every movement of its intended prey that can be witnessed in the behaviour of a hunting predator. Brandom also goes on to insist that we often cannot think of practices without “referring to the actual objects incorporated in them in different ways” (Brandom 2008, p. 179). This is surely right, but it raises the question of why the joint practice of the builders should not similarly be described in terms of asking for, delivering, and in the process referring to, beams, slabs and bricks, in spite of there being no inferential relations obtaining between elements of their linguistic repertoire. It also raises the question of whether it is wise to dissociate the essential nature of linguistic practice from the essential nature of the object-related practices and activities that make up the major part of the lives of the users of the language.

I suspect that Brandom thinks that the worldly side, the ‘open-ended sequence of feedback-governed performances’ does not itself take us outside the ‘space of causes’ (it is an elaboration of what Huw Price calls ‘e-representation’, or causal sensitivity to the environment). On this view the hunting animal is in effect no different from a heat-seeking missile; a poor candidate for intelligence although similarly going through a sequence of feedback governed performances. But if that is an objection, one needs to ask what the words ‘sentient’ and ‘skillful’ are doing in specifying the intended range of cases. Unlike the iron passively rusting, the hunting animal and we ourselves are indeed sentient and skillful, but as a result our transactions with things are not confined to passive reactions to the causal impacts the environment generates. Our sentience and our goal-directed natures come into play. On both the input and output side we can be, amongst other things, educated, quick, acute, industrious, subtle, discriminating and in many other ways variable for better or worse, and notably we are in command of what we look for and find. This is where our embodied skills in dealing with our world are shown. We are not merely differently responsive to whole causal fields, for our intentionality, our attention and our actions are selectively directed at particular elements of such fields, and

this is where reference gets a foothold.⁴

An intelligent exercise such as builder B's search for a missing beam, is a practice designed to increase the probability of the occurrence of an experience enabling B to say that it is in some particular place X, and increasing towards certainty the probability that if she does say that, she is right. It is not *merely* a question of extralinguistic causation; it is rather that no intralinguistic, purely inferential movements of B's mind would substitute it. Brandom is fond of saying that 'experience' is not one of his words, but I am not sure this is an advantage at this point. It is the experienced builder who is particularly skillful at looking, recognizing, selecting, the required tools and objects needed for the task at hand.⁵

Wittgenstein has no sympathy at all with a Sellarsian dualism in which the 'space of causes' is distinct from the 'space of reasons'. When in §85 of *Philosophical Investigations* he considers the case in which we are directed by a signpost, he is not concerned to contrast being caused by it to go in a certain way with being justified in so going. On the contrary he is more concerned to *identify* these, as we unthinkingly react in the way we have become used to, which is typically the *right* way or the *intended* way. When a person is guided by a signpost we can say that the signpost causes his going one way rather than another, but it is also true that, habituated as he is, it gives him a reason to go one way rather than another. On seeing it he becomes justified in supposing that his goal lies this way or that, just as a trained map reader who can interpret the cartographer's symbols is both caused by the presence of a symbol for, say, a pond, to expect a pond in the landscape, and justified in so expecting.⁶

As Wittgenstein says, doubts *could* arise about whether we are interpreting the signpost rightly, but often enough they do not, and he dismissively adds that whether they do or not is "no longer a philosophical proposition, but an empirical one". In fact, the whole thrust of the "rule-following considerations" is surely that, although there is no hidden, magical state of the mind, nor a state of affairs in Frege's third world or *Begriffshimmel* that guarantees, in the sense of

⁴ It is also, tellingly, where the interpretation of non-linguistic creatures as nevertheless believing and desiring gets a foothold. The case is wonderfully made in Jonathan Bennett, *Linguistic Behaviour*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, Ch. 2.

⁵ The case that Brandom uses too thin a conception of practice was argued in Steven Levine, 'Brandom's Pragmatism' in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce society*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Spring 2012), pp. 125–140.

⁶ Thinking that the reason-giving, justificatory power of the process of observation derives only from the beliefs to which it gives rise, so that its observation is on all fours, epistemically, with any other causal process such as a knock on the head, leads to the disaster of a coherence theory of truth.

logically forcing, the correct uptake, the common dispositions of mankind stepping in to close any gap that this might be thought to leave. The thrust could be described as making the ‘space of causes’ *into* the space of reasons, just as Hume supposes that our natural bent interprets a world of regularities as a world of causal necessities, or for that matter makes a world of natural happenings describable in moral terms. The vocabulary of causation differs from the vocabulary of reasons, because the second involves an element of appraisal that the first lacks, but their reference is the same. The metaphor of disjoint spaces, with nothing in one that is in the other, is a calamity, and we need instead something like “the space of intelligent practice” which smoothly amalgamates doings and reasonings.⁷

§ 2 Functional Pluralism

As we have seen, *Investigations* §12 foreshadows the way that throughout his later work Wittgenstein is intensely concerned to destroy the idea that all words or sentences function in essentially the same way. In a different paper I have given a list of the cases in which he puts this idea of functional pluralism to work (Blackburn 2010). Examples include modal and logical language, ethical and normative language, mathematical sentences, psychological ascriptions, religious commitments, attributions of knowledge, and no doubt others. In all these cases Wittgenstein thinks that we miss the plurality of functions, and hence fall into philosophical confusion, precisely because the “clothing of our language makes everything alike” (Wittgenstein 1953, II xi, p. 224). Expressivists about the ethical, the modal, and other things, have thus saluted Wittgenstein, alongside Ramsey, Ayer, Ryle and others as both a pioneer and a companion-in-arms.

In his Locke lectures and afterwards, Brandom approaches this by developing the idea of a pragmatically mediated relation between vocabularies. This comes about when we first look at what we need to *do* in order to count as *saying* what some vocabulary *V* lets us overtly express. This gives us what Brandom calls practice/vocabulary or PV sufficiency. We then switch attention to the ways in which the practice may be described, enabling us to identify a vocabulary *V'* in

⁷ The amalgamation suggests the solution to the “rule-following considerations”. The problem they are supposed to pose is that natural dispositions are not in themselves “normative”, nor infinite in extent, so that you cannot identify the infinitely extensive, normative rules that are being followed, by means of them. Seeing that it is we ourselves who are confident of the ways our dispositions extend, and that it is we ourselves who implement and insist upon norms, enable us to deflect such worries. The Martian (footnote 9) might be unable to interpret sanctioning behaviour as expressing an attitude to a particular broken rule, but amongst ourselves we easily and naturally do so.

which we can specify the doings that are themselves PV sufficient, and this gives us an inverse notion of vocabulary–practice sufficiency, or VP sufficiency. The interesting thing is that V' may be different in various ways from V, although there is this pragmatically mediated relationship between them. Typically the idea is that V is the richer vocabulary, using notions like conditionals, necessity and possible worlds, or normative concepts, whereas V' does without them, in spite of being able to specify the practices that are sufficient to equip a speaker for mastery of V. This abstract description is taken to apply to the shape of expressivist treatments of, for instance, ethical language. The expressivist describes the practical doings of people, such as grading, choosing, preferring, planning, or endorsing, and argues that although these practices can be described without using normative terms, they equip people for deploying overtly normative language. Or, they permit us, interpreting them, to do so ourselves using normative terms: “they think that they ought to prefer B to A” for example, even if they use no such words. Normative language makes explicit what is embryonically there before or underneath its arrival.

Brandom gives a number of examples of this relationship and the work it can do.

- (1) Sellars’s approach to our saying that something looks one way or another provides one example. Brandom endorses Sellars’s view that to understand such a saying you must be able to say and think that things *are* one way or another, and then what is involved in the ‘looks’ locution is just a hedging or partial withdrawing that ‘evinces the reliable differential disposition to respond to something by claiming that it is [green], while withholding the endorsement of that claim’ (Brandom 2015, p. 126). All that is required then to understand ‘looks’ claims (V) can be described in terms of being able to understand ‘is’ claims, and nervousness about endorsing them, and these capacities are describable in the public language of objects, their properties, and our caution about them, V'.
- (2) In his most famous paper dealing with semantic issues Gilbert Ryle talks of the commitment of one who is prepared to infer B from A. (Ryle 1950). He talks of the relation between being so disposed, and saying things like “If A, then B”. A person might have inferential practices, and say things like “A so B”, without using the conditional form. But when he says “A so B” we can enquire

whether the conclusion, for example that tomorrow is Tuesday, is legitimately drawn from the premiss, for instance that today is Monday. And to ask whether the conclusion is legitimately drawn from the premiss is to raise the question whether it is true that, if today is Monday, tomorrow is Tuesday...what we have been taught, if we have been taught it, is in the first instance to argue “ p so q ” or else “not- q so not- p ”... To accept the conditional is not making a report on any inference or a comment on any inference. Nor is it recommending, exhorting, confessing, requesting, or commanding anything (p. 330).

The conditional is a kind of travel warrant (an “inference ticket”): accepting it is accepting a license to make the inference, and perhaps as well as a commitment to reject the position of those who refuse to make it.

Here the conditional form belongs to Brandom’s upper-class vocabulary, V. Our dispositions to move from A to B and perhaps to grade such dispositions and even to argue about them make up a practice P. This practice can be followed and described without actually using any conditional forms, in a vocabulary V'. But the practice of arguing from premiss to conclusion *equips* anyone for mastery of the V vocabulary: she needs no more in order to be able to understand the inference ticket, and to proffer it when need be. Brandom puts this by saying that the practice described by the lower-class vocabulary can be “algorithmically elaborated” into a practice of actually using the upper-class, V vocabulary.

- (3) A similar relationship obtains between inferential practices and their expression in modal and causal vocabularies. Brandom does not generally acknowledge Hume as an influence, but for Hume exposure to a world of regular events gives rise to the functional change whereby observers find themselves following inferential routes (and we might add endorsing such routes, to the point of being mystified by people who do not follow them) and this is enough to *equip* them to deploy the language of causality with its new implications of necessary connections between events. The idea can be extended to cover modality in general (here we might especially compare the Wittgenstein of *Zettel* §299 where the inexorability of the rules of multiplication are diagnosed in terms of the inexorability of our attitude “not merely towards the technique of calculating, but also towards innumerable related practices”).

(4) In the case of indexicality Brandom holds that “in spite of the semantic irreducibility of indexical to non-indexical vocabulary, it is possible to *say*, entirely in non-indexical terms, what one must *do* in order to be deploying indexical vocabulary correctly: to be saying essentially and irreducibly indexical things” (Brandom 2008, p. 25). The rules he offers are straightforward: if a speaker *s* at time *t* and place $\langle x, y, z \rangle$ wants to say that *P* holds of $\langle x, y, z, t, s \rangle$ it is correct to say “*P* holds of *me, here, now*” and conversely if at the same place and time she asserts “*P* holds of *me, here, now*” she is committed to *P* holding at $\langle x, y, z, t, s \rangle$. The non-indexical vocabulary of reference to persons, places and times stands as *V'* to the indexical vocabulary *V*.⁸

(5) About normativity Brandom defends what he calls a Kant–Sellars thesis:

...the claim that in order to apply or deploy ordinary, empirical, descriptive vocabulary, including observational vocabulary—and hence, in order to deploy any vocabulary whatsoever— one must be able to do everything needed to introduce normative vocabulary (Brandom 2008, p. 110).

The idea is that deploying any vocabulary involves making commitments and the very idea of a commitment implies the possibility of defence, criticism, withdrawal, and endorsement: the practices that equip one to use the notion of what you *ought* to say or *must* infer or are *incorrect* to claim.

In the cases I have talked of we find practice that *equips* you for moving to the upper-class vocabulary *V*, the one which makes explicit the kinds of commitment that were in fact already embryonically present as we used the apparently more economical or less demanding vocabulary *V'*. This is my own interpretation of the matter, since I find Brandom’s own way of putting the relationship, in terms of PV sufficiency, a little obscure. Consider, for instance the case of normativity. As we have seen, expressivists are certainly going to hold that the practices of holding attitudes, endorsing choices, insisting on one thing or another are enough to equip you to use normative language. But they are not wedded to the

⁸ Brandom’s view about this is contested by John McDowell, ‘Comments on Lecture One’, in *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 36, No. 2, (2008), p. 53

thought that these abilities are by themselves *sufficient* to enable you to use that language. Once you have normative language at your disposal you can happily say such things as “if lying is wrong, then getting your little brother to lie for you is wrong”, and the notorious Frege–Geach problem is precisely that the ability to parse such sayings is *not* given by the simple possession of attitudes and preferences. Simple possession of practical stances might be evinced, it seems, simply through practical attitudes, and if these need voicing a simple “Boo–Hooray” language might perform the task. So even showing that these practices equip you for understanding the indirect context is not straightforward: it is the enterprise of crossing what I christened Frege’s abyss, and while I think the crossing can be made less mysterious than it has seemed to many to be, the opponents of expressivism continue to deny it. Brandom mentions the Frege–Geach problem but his discussion, it seems to me, does not demonstrate how he (or Sellars, with whom he associates himself) actually solve it, or whether they even think that it is a problem to be solved.⁹ We should notice as well that the notion of an algorithm does not in its natural use relate practices, so when Brandom talks of one practice being algorithmically elaborated into another he presumably has in mind that any transformation of the underlying vocabulary V' into the fully–fledged upper–class vocabulary V with its inclusion of the inferential practices we get when we put normative statements in indirect contexts, is in some sense a mechanical or computable transformation. But it is difficult to see what this could mean if it is not to imply a full classical reduction of V to V' . Algorithms require deductive relationships.

Another aspect of this relationship between vocabularies needs noticing. Suppose that V is the vocabulary of the “manifest image” or ordinary life with its abundant reference to people, places, landmarks, spatial relations, middle–sized dry goods, and so on. It is one thing to say, as Sellars and Brandom do, that an essential ingredient in using that language is the ability to make inferences, to adopt commitments and to behave normatively in appraising, accepting, or rejecting such commitments. But it is quite another thing to imagine a weaker vocabulary, V' that is anything like sufficient to describe mastery of V . As Brandom emphasizes the use of V will typically involve a capacity to make

⁹ The Frege–Geach problem is not indexed in *Between Saying and Doing*. In *Perspectives on Pragmatism* Brandom directs us to Section IV of chapter 3, but that section does not offer a clear approach to the problem. However Brandom could certainly follow the kind of approach I have sometimes suggested. If we think of having an attitude in terms of a commitment to endorse or reject other attitudes, and we have second–order attitudes, supposing that some such commitments require (or rule out) others, then we have the materials to hand to solve the Frege–Geach problem. Allan Gibbard’s similar approach goes via the notion of plans for acceptances and revisions of plans.

abundant and automatic *material* inferences. So consider as an example “if a house has foundations, it cannot be hoisted onto a truck”. Surely there is no prospect at all of a weaker vocabulary describing a set of inferential capacities that is *sufficient* to give anyone mastery of this. You can only make such an inference through knowing about houses, foundations, abilities, spatial displacement, and trucks. We can, I accept, isolate things you must be able to do in order to achieve this mastery, but that is describing *necessary* structural skills, not sufficient practices describable in a weaker vocabulary that eschews reference to houses and the rest.¹⁰ Skills with modality and normativity may well be describable in a vocabulary free of these specific references, but the full-scale inferential practices cannot be.

§ 3. Expressivism and the Motley of Language

When we try to compare Brandom’s approach with Wittgenstein’s functional pluralism, the ground becomes a little slippery. Brandom tells us:

I endorse a sophisticated expressivism with regard to logical, modal, and normative vocabulary. This is quite a different line of thought from that motivating contemporary expressivist treatment of normative vocabulary, for instance in Gibbard and Blackburn. I call my version a ‘sophisticated’ expressivism to mark the fact that the expressive role to be shared by both classical and modal logical vocabulary is one possible role picked out from a structured space of possibilities (Brandom 2011, p. 206–207).

It is unclear to me quite what this final sentence is suggesting, since it does not seem to introduce a contrast to which Gibbard and myself (or Ayer, Stevenson, or Hare) were blind, as we offered motivations for expressive treatments of normative vocabulary, such as a desire to protect naturalism, a concern for understanding the motivational nature of normative commitments, or worries about supervenience. Instead it turns attention to something Brandom wishes to say about classical and modal logical vocabulary, but although his expressivism certainly deserves admiration for its scope, and its detection of logical, modal and normative claims as universally present in any assertive practice, it remains obscure whether it is this generality, or some other feature, that increases its sophistication.¹¹

¹⁰ This point is also made in John Macfarlane, ‘Brandom’s Demarcation of Logic’, *Philosophical Topics*, Vol 36, 2008, p. 61.

¹¹ One factor that thickens the plot here is that Brandom is (rightly) an unqualified admirer of Huw Price’s ‘subject naturalism’, but Price sees his subject naturalism as very much at one with the expressivist approaches

Light may be cast on this by turning to the adjective ‘analytic’ in what Brandom describes as his own analytic pragmatism. This marks Brandom’s idea of rehabilitating semantic vocabulary by seeing it as a philosophical latecomer that is only to be ushered in via careful attention to inferential practices that serve to introduce it. So, as we have seen, reference is not conceived as a self-standing intelligible relation between words and things but as a piece of vocabulary whose utility derives partly from inferential practices associated with anaphora, and partly from a description of the social–deontic commitments of people offering *de re* descriptions of each other. Similarly truth, for Brandom is best explicated through the prosentential theory of Dorothy Grover and others. The prosentential theory, like Horwich’s deflationism, is presented as a descendant of Ramsey’s redundancy theory of truth, and each of them has the consequence that truth cannot be a substantive or robust or metaphysically heavyweight property or relation, bringing with it the kind of suspect “authoritarianism” that opened it to Rorty’s attack, and that might make it a proper target for eliminativism. On these deflationist views, truth and reference are on the one hand too *small* to bring suspect baggage with them and on the other hand too *catholic* for anyone to worry about whether they properly consort with the upper-class, V vocabularies of conditionals, normative judgments, or modal claims. Were it not for his desire to distinguish himself from it, I should have said that this shows Brandom aiming at the goal of quasi-realism, the enterprise of justifying and explaining the reason why all claims wear the same “everyday clothing” as empirical, or observational or other paradigm naturalistically legitimate claims.

If we read Wittgenstein as he sometimes asks that we read him, as a philosophical quietist, content with the higgledy–piggedly layout of our linguistic and cognitive city, and resistant not only to classical projects of analysis but to any idea of privileging one vocabulary over another, then Brandom will not seem like a true descendant of his.¹² But when we look at Wittgenstein’s own practice we see something rather different. Wittgenstein may have thought that philosophical enterprises were motivated largely or entirely by mistakes about language. But he also thought that it was intensely difficult to achieve a perspicuous view within which puzzles and difficulties would no longer appear. His functional pluralism was an essential tool in dislodging our mistakes and approaching the perspicuous view. The ‘motley’ of language is not just the uninteresting fact that we talk about a lot of different things and say a lot of

of Gibbard and myself. See *Perspectives on Pragmatism*, p. 191.

¹² This is McDowell’s reaction, in the paper cited in footnote 8.

different things about them. It is a motley of underlying activities and states, and different functional roles for the expression of those activities and states. This is what cements his close affinity with the project that expressivists have developed in most of the areas we have covered.

§ 4. Realism?

However, one twist in Brandom's analytic pragmatism sets him on a somewhat different course. Perhaps surprisingly Brandom is eager to present the upshot of his pragmatism as modal or normative *realism*. His excavations show that the upper-class languages for instance of norms and possibilities are *realistic*: and this is something he apparently identifies with the commitment to there being objective normative and modal facts (Brandom 2015, p. 195). So whereas others, including myself, have typically used expressivism as an alternative to realism, for Brandom it is a route to realism. This is something that prompts Huw Price, for instance, to complain that Brandom stands much further from Rorty or Wittgenstein than he seems to recognize (Price 2011).

The issues here are not straightforward, mainly because the word 'realism' is now almost useless as a label for any identifiable 'ism'.¹³ At the very least we will want to distinguish what I shall call full-blooded realism from anything that gives us the trappings or husk of realism without the substance. Full-blooded modal realism is nicely described as follows:

“The world is everything that is the case”, as Wittgenstein famously said. As theoretical speculators we might hope (as an ideal) to grasp the world by coming to know everything that is the case. But what role in this enterprise is played by our modal beliefs —our beliefs expressible by modal constructions? What is the point of having such beliefs and the means to express them? Central to modal realism is the view that having modal beliefs has exactly the same kind of point as having non-modal belief about, say, cabbages or kings. Just as someone lacking beliefs about cabbages or kings would lack beliefs about everything that is the case, so too would one who lacked modal concepts and beliefs deploying them (McFetdridge 1990, p. 140).

I do not think that this is a position that Brandom wants to endorse. Changing from talking about cabbages and kings to talking about possibilities is not simply sauntering to a different part of our surrounding landscape. Rather his view that

¹³ It is, after all, over thirty years since Arthur Fine complained that “the realist programme has degenerated by now to the point where it is quite beyond salvaging”. Arthur Fine “Unnatural Attitudes: Realist and Instrumentalist Attachments to Science”, *Mind*, Vol. 95, No. 378 (Apr., 1986), p 149.

there are objective modal facts surely has to be taken in the light of his deflationism coupled with his own expressivism about the modal (unlike Huw Price, Brandom does not present himself as an expressivist about cabbages and kings). It is to be something like an “elaboration” of the fact that we are fully committed to various inferential practices, including those expressed by counterfactuals denying that the inferences in question are good because of how we happen to be (this is how independence and objectivity are parsed). In other words, just as the figure I christened the quasi–realist gets to say things like “there are duties, and facts about duties, and these facts are often independent of how we happen to think”, or “there is a possibility that *p* but not–*q* which it would be wrong to ignore” so Brandom’s realist follows the same course to get to the same kind of commitment.

Does this deserve calling realism? Does the pragmatist, Ramseyan, Wittgensteinian, or Sellarsian revolution so quickly eat its children? It is many years since it was first suggested to me that quasi–realism might better be called queasy realism.¹⁴ But while it can be done, I still find it misleading. Expressivism does not take us to McFetridge’s realism as described above. It does not open the door to any quasi–geographical, metaphysical imaginings. It does not open the door to an “outside–in” epistemology whereby we are somehow sensitive to the facts about modality. It does not deal in aspects of reality about which it might be difficult to know anything, or about which our concern would seem entirely optional and rather puzzling. And it was certainly not at all congenial to “full–blooded” modal realists such as David Lewis.¹⁵ Perhaps it is nearer to the kind of “non–metaphysical” realism promoted by such writers as Parfit or Dworkin in the case of ethics, although that hoped to strut the title whilst avoiding any kind of engagement with metaphysics, epistemology, or semantic theory at all.

Because reference and truth are, for Brandom, deflated, minimalist, or quasi–syntactic notions, so is the notion of a fact. So if, protected by deflationism, and having a good story about why we use concepts like those of obligation, correctness, necessity and possibility, we find ourselves talking happily enough of truth, reference, description, representation, and facts in these domains, it is hard not to feel that we have been given something less than we might have expected, a realism with the core removed, a husk rather than the real thing that McFetridge describes. We might say of this “realism” what Wittgenstein said about every word signifying something, that until we know what contrasts and

¹⁴ By the late Bob Hargrave.

¹⁵ I know this at first hand, having tried unsuccessfully to convince Lewis of the virtues of expressivism in the nineteen–eighties, both at Oxford and at Princeton.

implications are in play, it tells us nothing. It is realism without any “...ism”.

Wittgenstein, I think, would not have been happy to end here. I do not think he ever showed any inclination to throw out all the contrasts—descriptions versus rules, statements versus avowals, ethics versus facts—that are so fundamental in launching his theorizing.¹⁶ He does not think that if we look behind the front of the cab all the handles turn out to do the same kinds of thing. He does not avail himself of the opportunity that deflationism offers, to throw the very notion of description into the minimalist pot.¹⁷ But, had he done so, then it would still have been important to see that the real philosophical achievement would lie not in any realist-sounding things he might end up saying, but in the marvelous journey that arrived at his saying them. And the same is true of Brandom.

There are many other avenues that could be explored to link and sometimes contrast the works of Wittgenstein and Brandom. One is that whereas Wittgenstein is intensely puzzled by things like the inexorability of logic, the queerness of ethics, or the mysterious nature of self-reference, Brandom is relatively untroubled, since for him we are always in charge of the ‘social deontic’ norms to which we owe fealty. They are like the rules of chess, which we control. This is a contrast of philosophical temperament that deserves more exploration than I can give it here, but one that should interest anyone who is to profit from these two major figures.¹⁸

¹⁶ Although philosophy leaving everything as it is, may be a close cousin of the revolution eating its children.

¹⁷ I mooted this strategy for Wittgenstein in “Wittgenstein, Wright, Rorty and Minimalism” *Mind*, 1998, pp. 167–8.

¹⁸ I owe thanks to Robert Kraut, and especially to Arif Ahmed, for acute and helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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