REASON, LANGUAGE, HISTORY:

PRAGMATISM’S CONTESTED PROMISE

*Abstract*: Despite a number of shared converging themes there is, at present, no single doctrine that all pragmatists share in common, and the differences and divisions within the tradition often play a more prominent role than the points of agreement. Currently, one of the most interesting points of contestation among the pragmatists highlights the challenge posed to the pragmatism’s traditional naturalist orientation by Robert Brandom’s *rationalist pragmatism*. The paper examines some points of agreement and confrontation between the two positions urging the conclusion that the argument between the two revolves around the role of language (rather than experience, as is frequently asserted) and, more specifically, around the role of systematicity and formal analysis in our conceptions of rational inquiry and discourse. It is further suggested that Brandom’s approach may be more suited to a retrospective integration and assessment of the rational learning processes as opposed to the anticipation of their prospective dimension usually emphasized by the naturalist pragmatism; moreover, that it seems most appropriate in learning contexts which depend on the continued transmission of epistemic authority open to rational correction, and may not be suited for the conceptualization of the less formally structured domains of discourse.

Philosophers generally believe that having an argument is the best way to get at truth. Because of this, examining the rifts within a philosophical tradition can be more instructive than examining the points of consensual overlap. Robert Brandom, without a doubt, is presently the most visible and the most polarizing figure working in the pragmatist vein. Some call him a neo-pragmatist; and some (with good reason) say that he is not a pragmatist at all. Reactions of this sort cannot be written off as trivial within a tradition which, above all, is agreed to be "deeply contested" (Bacon, vii; cf. Spencer, viii), with no essence (Pihlström, 2015, 3), no commonly accepted doctrines (Talisse and Aikin, 1), without so much (even) as a common "methodological center" (Margolis, 2002, 2). Brandom, nevertheless, managed to cross some kind of an invisible line, thereby revealing that, all along, there has been more coherence to the tradition than previously thought. Apparently, he did so quite deliberately (or at least consciously) when he advanced his *rationalist pragmatism* as a corrective, alternative, or complement (it is not entirely clear which) to what (following Dewey) one might call the conventional pragmatism's commitment to *cultural naturalism*.[[1]](#footnote-1) For pragmatism this move was advantageous; because (regardless of the intrinsic merits or demerits of the rationalist proposal) it inadvertently has brought the central theme of the contemporary pragmatism into focus: namely, the question of how to configure the relationships between nature and culture, language and reason once it has been granted that the human mind or human cognition substantially is an artifact of human historical experience. Brandom and the conventional pragmatists offer opposed, although not necessarily *exclusively* opposed, responses to this question.

To get an early sense of the guiding thread of the narrative and argument in the remainder of the paper, one could recall the point once made by Rorty: "In a culture that had given up on Platonism," i.e. a culture in which the idea of eternal forms would be replaced by the idea of man-made concepts, "it would be history rather than science, philosophy, art, or literature that would be central to intellectual life” (2016, 59). Rorty, of course, thought of history as an edifying conversation with the past. But, he continues, this conversation with "the accumulated experience of the species cannot be the product of specialized quasi-scientific inquiry. *It cannot be conducted systematically or rigorously*" (60).[[2]](#footnote-2) Rationalist pragmatism is meant to question this latter point; cultural naturalism, to find the resources to productively cope with its acceptance. The territory that is contested between the two determines the range of options prospectively available to philosophers currently working in the pragmatist tradition.

As a result, the account presented in this paper – of classical pragmatism as well as of Brandom’s “neo-pragmatism” – invites a reconsideration of the usual construal of their differences in terms of an opposition between experience and language. In fact, following Brandom’s revision of his initial stance on experience (Brandom, 2011, 2013, 2019), one may be warranted in claiming that what pragmatists generally share is the rejection of the traditional empiricist conception of experience as the unconceptualized given, and the replacement thereof with the distinctive notion of experience as the historical process of experimental cultural learning, whereby one becomes more *experienced*, in both empirical and conceptual terms. From this perspective, the present division between the naturalist and rationalist currents in pragmatism can be best understood as a contest about a) the appropriate conception of human rationality – as being either continuous or discontinuous with the animal intelligence, construed (correspondingly) in terms of either adaptive inventiveness and practical success or systematicity and obedience to logical norms b) the appropriate conception of the relationship between the historically articulated norms of formal reasoning and the historically formed resources of the spontaneous expressiveness of natural language. The conclusion of the paper recommends attempting an irenic approach to these choices.

*Pragmatist Naturalism*

Conventional definitions of pragmatism usually refer to the work of its three founding exponents – C.S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey – as well as the contributions which had influenced or have been influenced by them, directly or indirectly. As mentioned already, there is no one set of doctrines to which all pragmatists subscribe; rather they can be said to share something like a philosophical "temperament" (Margolis, 2002, 9). In the first place, pragmatism was intended as a critique of the traditional abstract academic philosophy in the name of a) life b) scientific reasoning. Therefore, its initial orientation could be described as substantially naturalistic in two senses. First, pragmatists believed philosophy "should take direction from our best scientific understanding of the world",[[3]](#footnote-3) and took science (and reason) to be a “a *natural accomplishment* that is grounded in our problem-solving activity and the problem-solving activity of countless generations that came before us” (de Waal, 54). Secondly, pragmatists considered the exercise of reason to be, above all, an intelligent mode of *coping* with the world; and were committed therefore to understanding "scientific (and nonscientific) rationality as a part of our human, inevitably ethically problematic existence" (Pihlström, 2015, 8): gradually transforming our conception of what knowledge is and what is worth knowing; altering both our interests and the structure of our values.

The scientific strand of pragmatism originates with Peirce, who wanted to replace the *seminary philosophy* with the *laboratory philosophy* (CP 1.129)[[4]](#footnote-4) by focusing on the analysis of concrete processes of inquiry and learning. The purpose of all inquiries, according to Peirce, is to adopt the promising modes of reasoning, in the proportion to the “frequency with which arguments of those kinds lead to the truth” (EP2, 76). “That which constitutes science, then, is not so much correct conclusions, as it is correct method. But the method of science itself is a scientific result. It did not spring out of the brain of a beginner; it was an historic attainment and a scientific achievement” (CP 6.428, 1893). Logic itself (even), on such a pragmatist view, cannot be finally reduced to a-historical a-priori reasoning: instead, it rests upon "analysis of the best methods of inquiry … that exist at a given time" (Dewey, 14).

Focusing on the concrete logic of inquiry, with a special emphasis on hypothesis formation and experimental intervention, allowed the pragmatists to escape the trap of philosophical scepticism by embracing a principled fallibilism (Hookway, 21).[[5]](#footnote-5) What matters for truth and knowledge, on this view, are not indisputable foundations or a mythical confrontation with reality, but rather the *process* of reasoning which is self-correcting (22). "Foundations," as Aikin and Talisse note perspicuously, "are neither possible nor necessary, since the complete rational reconstruction of knowledge is not an issue that arises in the use and production of knowledge" (27). What matters, rather, is the perpetual openness to fair criticism, captured in the attitude of pragmatist fallibilism. The point is nicely expressed by Sellars when he says that science is "rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once" (Sellars, 79). Moreover, this conception of rational inquiry as self-correcting can, in turn, be interpreted as the ground of the founding principle of *pragmatist semantics*. In order to be self-correcting, a thought-process must be self-accountable; in order to be open to testing it must specify the conditions under which it can be meaningfully tested. Hence, to understand the meaning of a statement we must treat it as a statement of a hypothesis and then ask what can be expected if this hypothesis were to be true. As Peirce puts it, the "rational purport" of an expression "lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life": "if one can define accurately all conceivable experimental phenomena which the affirmation or denial of a concept could imply, one will have therein a complete definition of the concept" (EP2, 332).[[6]](#footnote-6) Or, in a less strenuous paraphrase, the rational content of an utterance depends on what is believed to follow from it, both logically and empirically.

The second, humanist, strand of pragmatism can be described (in the first place) as an existential one. It is the Emersonian strand, which at the center of all histories locates a fragile hero – a finite struggling person – whose thought, nevertheless, can casually upend, at certain moments, "all thy creed, all creeds, all the literatures of the nations."[[7]](#footnote-7) This strand of thought emphasizes our inevitable *situatedness* as thinking beings; sanctioning Rorty's description of pragmatism as, above all, a "philosophy of finitude" (57). With respect to the first (scientifically-oriented) line of thought, this commitment to situatedness underscores the main reasons why there can be no rational alternative – for us, human beings – to the fallible, self-correcting process of learning that pragmatism recommends. On the side of the context for learning, it extends attention to the ethical, social, and historical conditions of knowledge-production. From this vantage, pragmatism emerges as a kind of *philosophical anthropology*, insofar as it stands committed to considering "every philosophical issue in terms of human practices and habits – of human culture, generally speaking" (Pihlström, 2015a, 254).

The two strands come together almost seamlessly in Dewey's thought, who agrees with Peirce that the rational purport of any statement must consist in its conceivable bearing on the conduct of life, but conceives of *conduct* in more broadly social, cultural, and historical terms (LW 2.4).[[8]](#footnote-8) The role of science, of inquiry, of knowledge for Dewey is always that of posing and solving problems and doing so in the light of specific purposes and ideals (Hildebrand, 58). Dewey contrasts this conception of knowledge directed by the human interest with the traditional "spectator theory of knowledge" (LW 4.19) aspiring to represent reality "as it is in itself" – as it would appear from a disinterested and a disengaged point of view that transcends all perspectives. For a pragmatist, as Brandom explains, *representing* is inseparable from *intervening*, because both are conceptualized as correlative phases in the process of learning as *adaptation* (2011, 54).

A Darwinian at his core, Dewey underscored the continuities between the natural and the human by insisting that knowledge must, first and foremost, be understood as a strategy of *intelligent coping* with the surrounding world. The posited continuity between cultural and natural, however, was not to result in the reduction of the former to the latter (Dewey, 23). The continuity consists in the natural organism’s propensity to integrate its experience with a view to appropriate action or response; the difference, in that the properly human way ofaccomplishing this integration depends not on "organic structure and physical heredity alone" but largely upon "the influence of cultural heredity” (43). Human beings, in other words, belong above all to the social and cultural world, and this social dimension of their being can only be appreciated properly within a historical perspective (501). Culture, constitutive of the characteristic mental habits of its inhabitants, is thought of here as a "dynamic system of meaning, a social memory that endures and changes historically" (Alexander, 191). This is the view Dewey called "cultural naturalism" or a "naturalistic humanism" (LW 12.28 and LW 1.10). As such, it gathers together some of the principal themes of classical pragmatist thought: the belief that intelligence and knowledge are always and everywhere social and grounded in shared experience; that all valid approaches to knowledge must be fallibilist, perspectival, and methodologically pluralistic; and that all knowledge must incorporate a moment of systematic reflection regarding the historical conditions of its own emergence, with its self-understanding substantially elaborated in the light of that history.

The eclipsing of pragmatism within American professional philosophy between 1950s and mid-80s may have different explanations; however, it is undeniable that much of it had to do with the rise of the so-called analytic philosophy, with which pragmatism was methodologically at odds, despite a number of shared commitments, themes, and prominent lines of continuity (evident, for instance, in Quine’s seminal work). One could say that it all came down – more or less – to the differences of philosophical temperament. Dewey famously said that "philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men" (MW 10:46). Meanwhile, Scott Soames, in his highly influential account of the rise of analytic philosophy, says that its key values have been "the ideals of clarity, rigor and argumentation" (xiii); that it did not aim at "moral and spiritual improvement" and was not designed "to provide a useful recipe for living one's life" (xiv). It is not difficult to see why such rationalist aspirations would conflict with the pragmatism’s defining commitments.

Pragmatism was revived in the last decades of the twentieth century, in large part owing to the singular contributions of Richard Rorty who, in a series of exchanges with Hilary Putnam, managed to bring pragmatism to bear on some of the central emerging issues within analytic philosophy itself, including the problem of realism and relativism, the relationship between fact and value, problems of knowledge and justification under conditions of history (Margolis, 2002,2; also Malachowski, 2013a, 10). Rorty's pragmatist turn has usually been described as a revolt against analytic philosophy; but it can also be interpreted as an extension of the analytic paradigm itself, privileging *argument* over *clarity*, at least in cases where the human interest requires an answer, yet the desirable degree of clarity cannot be secured without sacrificing adequacy. His cast of pragmatists gave pride of place to prominent analytic figures, such as Wittgenstein, Sellars, Davidson, and Quine. It's true that Rorty's own proprietary blend of analytic naturalism and cultural postmodernism found few adherents in philosophy departments (Margolis, 2002, 4); and his interpretations of the classical pragmatists were, on the whole, judged to be misleading (Hildebrand, 76; also Malachowski, 2013, 207). Yet, he succeeded in giving the pragmatist intuitions a contemporary linguistic form, thereby bringing pragmatism into a conversation with the chief currents of twentieth-century philosophical thought. Perhaps the most notable upshot of this rendering, was Rorty's critique of the notions of representation and correspondence. There is no way to make sense, he explains, of language (i.e. statements in language) somehow “fitting” the world (Rorty, 1989, 28). Language can never merely record; never provide a neutral protocol of the transacted affairs; even in describing it always expresses and analyzes, positioning its pronouncements within some relevant space of intelligible relationships. Hence, Rorty argues, we must give up on thinking about representation in terms of correspondence and admit, following Quine and Sellars, that "justification is not a matter of a special relation between ideas (or words) and objects, but of conversation, of social practice” (1979, 170). All norms, including the norms we employ in supporting our claims to knowledge are a matter of social practice; and everything social is historical and changeable; hence, contingent. This thought ended up having a profound influence on Rorty's successor, Robert Brandom (Brandom, 2019, 760).

*Rationalist Pragmatism*

Brandom calls his philosophy *linguistic pragmatism*, and, as such, it is commonly believed to sever ties with some of the defining themes of classical pragmatism (2000, 6 and 2011, 55). As Bernstein puts it, linguistic pragmatism is a "pragmatism *without* experience" (128); *experience* being one of the few fundamental notions featured by conventional pragmatism in all its variations. Brandom, at one point, concurred with the charge: "'Experience' is not one of my words," he declared, "I did not find it necessary to use it in the many pages of *Making it Explicit*" (2000, 205 fn.7). Defining his own work it terms of generating metavocabularies for talking about the functional roles performed by the "nondescriptive concepts such as modal, normative, and ontological ones" (Brandom, 2015, 5) in ordinary, "ground-level" use of expressions (37) within the context of discursive social practices suggests a clear place for Brandom's work within the standard canon of analytic philosophy, but hardly warrants an attribution of continuity with the pragmatist tradition. His cast of fellow linguistic pragmatists includes Davidson, Sellars, Quine, Dummett, and Wittgenstein (6); none of them pragmatists in any usual sense. None of them called themselves pragmatists. Nevertheless, they do share a unifying theme. Namely, they all derive the notion of conceptual content from a theory of conceptual activity (Brandom, 2011, 4), from the *role* statements and concepts play in our transactions with others and the world (20), thereby asserting the primacy of pragmatics over semantics (3).[[9]](#footnote-9) Linguistic pragmatists, in other words, guide us towards the thought that norms governing the use of concepts are instituted in the actual process of their social, historical application (Brandom, 2019, 638). The connection to pragmatism in the conventional sense, nevertheless, remains somewhat thin; notwithstanding the fact that Brandom's inferentialist semantics, with its characteristic emphasis on inferential "consequences" of concept-application (Brandom, 2015, 41), i.e. the kind of "difference" that concept-use can make within a language game (2000, 191), remains distinctively reminiscent of the pragmatist (Peircean) propensity to understand beliefs and concepts in terms of inferential habits.

Brandom’s later *return to experience* followed the internal logic of his own philosophical development. In his earlier work, Brandom was primarily occupied with the question of how linguistic practitioners keep track of the conceptual commitments incurred within a conversation, while taking for granted the determinateness of conceptual content in the first place (2019, 766). But concepts do not function in a vacuum; most possess significance that goes far beyond the role of mere tokens or a medium of exchange in a language game. How do concepts acquire meaning? Kant, on Brandom’s view, failed to offer “a convincing account of concept acquisition" (2002, 30); whereas Hegel succeeded by tying the notion of conceptual determination to historical development (2019, 766). By foregrounding the question of "how concepts themselves develop in the linguistic community" (2002, 31), Hegel enabled Brandom to recuperate in a systematic way what he, apparently, had taken to be Rorty’s most important philosophical lesson: namely that the "objective criteria do not drop down from heaven but are themselves historical products" (Rorty, 2016, 49).

Brandom recovers the Hegelian conception of experience (*Erfahrung*)[[10]](#footnote-10) against the background of his own endorsement of Quine’s and Sellars’ well-known complementary critiques, respectively aimed at the two fundamental presuppositions[[11]](#footnote-11) of the *foundationalist conception of experience* associated with the conventional analytic empiricism (2000, 23). What Brandom takes away from Hegel is the idea that experience cannot be adequately understood in terms of grasping some immediately apprehended content, but must instead be theorized as a *process* through which our conceptual commitments develop (2009, 99); as something that “essentially involves a principle of *motion*, of *change*, of active, practical *doing*” (2019, 84). Experience, then, must be articulated from the perspective of the active, searching reason (*Vernunft*), rather than that of a settled understanding (*Verstand*) (2009, 89). Conceptual commitments, accordingly, can only be regarded as determinate in the light of “the functional role they play in the *process* of acquiring and revising commitments” (2019,80), because a concept “acquires determinate boundaries between correct and incorrect application (and so a determinate content) only through actual history of application, in concrete circumstances” (361).  “All the determinateness the content has,” Brandom concludes, “is the product of that activity" (2009, 93).

Experience for Brandom, then, is a “truth process” (2019, 102) in which error, friction become the necessary conditions of experience; and experience “a condition of conceptual progress” through which concepts acquire their properly developed determinate contentfulness (376). Knowledge is neither a static possession nor a fixed state. As Peirce once put it "all knowledge begins by the discovery that there has been an erroneous expectation" (CP 7.188). What is *given* in experience, in other words, is the *possibility of error* – of the frustrated expectations and mutually incompatible commitments – potentially setting in motion a process of inquiry which, when successful, represents the original experience of error and incompatibility “in its capacity as the engine of conceptual, cognitive, and practical *progress*” (Brandom, 2019, 602). A naturalist expression of this notion of experience (*Erfahrung*) construed as an active engagement, a process of deliberate testing and progressive amendment of commitments, is unsurprisingly found in the classical pragmatism which offers, on Brandom’s view, a new and better form of empiricism: "For the pragmatists,” he explains, “experienceis not an input to the learning process. It just *is* learning" (2013, 112).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Brandom’s reading of the classical pragmatism in terms of *naturalizing* the German idealist tradition (110; cf. 2011, 5) prominently features a complimentary characterization of the pragmatist conception of experience “as situated, embodied, transactional, and structured as *learning*, a process rather than a state or an episode” (53). True to their guiding Darwinian intuitions, pragmatists tend to construe experience in terms of adaptive experimentation (54), resulting in intelligent attunement to one’s environment. In fact, this naturalistic insistence on thinking in terms of a *cognitive continuum*, extending “from the skillful coping of the competent predator … all the way to the most sophisticated theorizing of contemporary scientists" is identified by Brandom as one of the central distinguishing features of classical pragmatism (2013, 111). Unlike analytic philosophers who focus on “formal, logistical languages articulated by explicit rules,” pragmatists are interested in *natural languages* (Brandom explains) of which they think *anthropologically*, “as aspects of the *natural history* of a certain kind of being” (117).[[13]](#footnote-13) This is a crucial point, for it also marks the difference between the conventional/classical and Brandom’s rationalist pragmatism.

*Rationalism*, in this instance, is meant to designate the kind of philosophical approach that emphasizes the *discontinuity* between rational and other animals, by featuring the notion of *conceptual* reasoning as a demarcation criterion (2000, 25 and 2009, 1). "I am more interested,” Brandom says, “in what separates concept users from non-concept users than in what unites them. This distinguishes my project from … the classical American pragmatists..." (2000, 3). Pragmatists are not the only ones with whom Brandom’s rationalism is deliberately parting company: the list of figures who oppose the rationalist demarcation criteria includes (besides Dewey) Heidegger and, perhaps more importantly, later Wittgenstein (34; cf. 2013, 124). Yet, Brandom does not seem to believe that his rationalism and pragmatist naturalism are irresolubly opposed: in fact, he is apparently looking forward to some kind of synthesis between the two (125). Still, in this formulation, Brandom’s motivations for resisting the pragmatist assimilation of discursive intentionality to practical intentionality (115) remain opaque. What reasons do we have for singling out what he calls the *discursive practice* from the general background of “various other kinds of skillful doing" (2000, 2)?

Brandom’s rationalist pragmatism is at its core a thesis about *language*. Conventional pragmatists, as already mentioned, tend to interpret human intelligence and rationality in terms of possession of natural language, somehow made possible at a certain point in the natural history of the species. Brandom, on the contrary, wants to define rationality, discursivity, and properly linguistic practice (as opposed to natural linguistic fluency and general intelligence) in terms of what he calls “the game of giving and asking for reasons” (14 & 161), i.e. the practices of “drawing conclusions and offering justifications” (17). Such games of giving and asking for reasons delimit the space of rationality and discursivity to the properly *conceptual* practices, with *concepts* understood in the Kantian vein, as essentially involving relationships to other concepts, with the applicability of one providing reasons for or against the applicability of others" (2002, 46). These games of reasoning are not *on pa*r with other language games we play, Brandom argues, thereby explicitly contesting Wittgenstein’s (pluralistic) view that language has no *downtown* (2000, 14; 2009, 120; and elsewhere).

Brandom’s rationalism, then, opposes linguistic egalitarianism of the "romantic opponents of logocentrism" claiming that all imaginative uses of language are "parasitic on the prosaic inferential practices" required to put proper concepts in play in the first place (120). Sometimes this view is presented by Brandom as a philosophically defensible option, and sometimes he is content to treat it as a mere “hypothesis” (2000, 190). The argument for it is meant to exhibit a roughly transcendental structure, advancing the claim that linguistic and discursive practices generally “are intelligible in principle only against the background of the core practices of inference-and-assertion" (15).[[14]](#footnote-14) The reason for this is that “at least a substantial part” of the meaning of claims is “their inferential role: what follows from them, what would be evidence for or against them, what they are incompatible with, and so on" (2019, 308). But (even) granting this certainly does not prove that all meaningful communication and understanding in language (broadly construed) depends essentially (or is “parasitic”) on the application of the inferentially articulated concepts or (maybe more to the point) the possibility of such an inferential articulation. Thus, for example, it is far from clear that the proper appreciation of Keats’ *Ode to a Nightingale* depends in any sensible way on knowing *what counts as a reason for what* when it comes to the “hungry generations.” Insisting on “making it explicit” may, similarly, not be the best (nor the most rational) strategy for conducting emotional exchanges with a friend.

Perhaps a more promising approach may start with a conditional statement: “*if* inferentialism is the right way to think about contentfulness, then the game of giving and asking for reasons *is* privileged among the games we play with words” (Brandom, 2009, 176).[[15]](#footnote-15) *If* inferentialism is the *right* way to think about content in language generally, *then* Brandom’s “downtown claim” concerning games of giving and asking for reasons becomes almost trivially correct. However, *being right*, in this context, would require much more than just endorsing inferentialism as merely “one way of selectively narrating our language use" (Marshall, 25). Instead, one would have to *demonstrate* that inferentialism is *not merely* one of the several plausible alternatives; that it is – at the very least – a *strongly preferable* one. Yet, a favorable philosophical consensus on this score has been slow in coming.

We might begin with a more tractable kind of question: namely, in what contexts can inferentialism most effectively advance its claim to preferential appropriateness? The remainder of this section will aim to show that Brandom’s inferentialism – and rationalism – appear especially appropriate in contexts where utterances made are meant to be *authoritative* *without being dogmatic*: simply because in *such* contexts (above all else) it is essential to have a clear sense of what exactly is being authorized by the utterance, and on what grounds can the authoritative pronouncement be rightly challenged. Plausible examples are not difficult to come by: the discourse of science, the discourse of philosophy, jurisprudence; in fact, any discourse to which the possibility of *systematic learning*, i.e. of institutionally structured *transmission of authority open to rational correction*, remains theoretically central.

We can develop this suggestion further by focusing on Brandom’s invocation of the *leverage problem*, which introduces a compelling motivation to think about (rationalist) demarcation in the first place. In brief, Brandom argues, while pragmatists have done an admirable job addressing the presumption of continuity between ourselves and other naturally evolved organisms (2013, 121), they have not done enough to underscore the specificity of the rational beings or to account for a drastic increase in the scope of their cognitive powers as compared to other animals (123). Language per se cannot offer a straightforward solution to this problem; however, the core linguistic practice of giving and asking for reasons can. Therefore, the designation of this practice as the “downtown” of language may itself be justified in the light of such considerations (124). Both animals and humans possess intelligence; only humans (as far as we know) possess language; and what interests Brandom about human language, primarily, is the special kind of (discursive) intelligence that it gives rise to. The point is echoed by Richard Rorty when he says that the capacity for imagination (also inherent in the use of natural language) is not a “distinctively human capacity”; but “giving and asking for reasons *is* distinctively human, and is coextensive with rationality” (2015, 15).

But what is *rationality* in this context? Following Kant, Brandom identifies rationality with a commitment to “integrating one's judgments into a whole that exhibits a distinctive kind of *unity*”; and it is this commitment that constitutes (for him) the characteristically sapient form of discursive awareness (2013, 108; cf. 2009, 35).[[16]](#footnote-16) But, to be “candidates for synthesis into a system exhibiting the rational unity” (2013, 109), the contents of our judgments must be understood in terms of broad “inferential relations of *in*clusion and *ex*clusion” to contents of other judgments (2009, 43). In other words, one must know what other judgments are entailed by the judgments we make; and what judgments are precluded by them in virtue of inferential incompatibility. Kantian norms of rationality, then, can be alternatively understood as “norms of *systematicity*” (Brandom, 2019, 68). Hegel’s accomplishment, then, was to interpret the relations of rational integration in terms of a diachronic structure of social integration (i.e. in terms of the relationships of *reciprocal recognition* embedded within an *historical* *developmental structure*) (2009, 66 & 81). Hegel, in other words, replaces the reciprocal answerability of beliefs within an abstract rational system by the concrete answerability of reasoning agents to other reasoning agents belonging to the same tradition of thought, naturalizing the relationship of rational answerability in the process.

Within such a rational tradition the content of the concepts is developed (and determined) through the on-going process of their probative application with a subsequent negotiation of the differences between divergent uses (Brandom, 2009, 82). The process is similar to what can be observed in the practice of *common law* (85): the applicability of a rule (in a specific case) is determined by the historical precedent of earlier authoritative applications; and, to the extent that the present judgment is deemed justified in the light of this history, it comes to constitute a further precedent, authoritative for the future applications of the rule. Here, the meaning of a rule, a judgment, or a concept (which is simply an abbreviated rule for judgment) becomes progressively determined by “*rational integration* that includes *historical reflection*" (16). Thus, for example, within the context of historical writing, deciding whether a certain episode in the past constitutes a *revolution*, requires a reflection on the prior uses of the term within authoritative historical literature, and a commitment to demonstrating that one’s own present use of the term constitutes a meaningful, rational extension of the earlier historical practice. To the extent that one is successful in accomplishing this task, future historians will say that they have learned something important and new about *revolutions* from one’s work.

Following Hegel, Brandom calls this process of historical integration *recollection* (*Erinnerung*). A recollective story of this sort shows earlier commitments regarding the issue of concern to be attempts, progressive approximations to how things actually stand *in reality*, with the reality itself understood in terms of how things *should* appear for consciousness properly speaking (Brandom, 2019, 424).[[17]](#footnote-17) This “sapience-constituting directedness at *truth*,” Brandom argues, “is the essence and the motor of our ascent" as a species (2009, 160). *Truth*, moreover, is not to be understood in the traditional (untenable) terms of *correspondence* to some antecedently given reality, but *inferentially*, in terms of proper weighing and ordering of reasons within the context of an ongoing systematic inquiry (168), thus vindicating the special privilege accorded to the game of giving and asking for reasons in explication of the nature of the remarkable human cognitive advancement over other animals.

In recollection, our progress towards truth becomes reflected in the retrospectively integrative account of how we have arrived, in the course of time, at what we presently take to be the truth. On the conceptual level, it traces the *expressively progressive* trajectory (Brandom, 2002, 48) through the different stages of this diachronic inquiry, showing the way in in which we have gradually improved our grasp of the fundamental issues at stake, and did so invariably in the light of experience, rationalized at this final stage so as to exhibit the whole progression as a “process of *learning*” (2019, 680). Such *reconstructions* (for that is what they properly are) proceed on the assumption of determining a binding rational element within a tradition, resulting in narratives exhibiting the past as a “cumulative, monotonic process of revelation” – the form characteristic of “triumphalist textbook historiesof science and mathematics" (438). “False starts and wrong turns” are only included insofar as something of positive (progressive) value has been learned from them (685). During this process of retrospective rationalization, Brandom maintains, the *past* is turned into *history*, i.e. into something displaying the “edifying narrative structure of a *tradition*” (2019a, 18); with a rationalist reading (thereby) reserving the designation of *history* exclusively for narratives portraying the *self-conscious growth* of the structures of conceptually mediated authority open to revision and emendation through the course of experientially driven learning.

Importantly, despite stressing the need for unity and integration within the confines of a rationally reconstructed tradition, Brandom also reminds “tradition mongers” how limiting and distorting such reconstructed perspectives can be (2002, 91). The real processes of learning (or determination of conceptual content) are always “characterized by discontinuities, caesurae, radical reassessment of old commitments, and the unraveling of previous progress" (2009, 103). Every rationalist historical reconstruction must, of necessity, leave much out in forging its account of tradition as a learning process; and what is thus left out provides the foundations for future criticism of such reconstructive ventures (2019, 746). There have to be competing interpretations and rival cannons; and the inevitable one-sidedness of any one rationalist story must be remedied by "telling of *more* such stories" (2002, 16). As Brandom puts it, we need to be *pluralistic*: we need to learn how to “let a hundred flowers blossom" (104). "No integration or recollection is final at the ground level” (2009, 104), Brandom says, perhaps not even at the logical, metaconceptual level (2019, 726). Instead of striving to vindicate the unique authority of a single history, tradition, perspective, we need to learn “to *navigate* and *negotiate* between different perspectives"(2002, 109), the way in music one learns more about a melody by exploring the variations.

This, in effect, is Brandom’s way of combining his rationalism with pragmatist pluralism. James once observed that *rationalism* amounts to a preference for monistic unities, while pragmatist empiricism inclines towards pluralism (7-8). The point, said James, was not to deny that unity exists but to accept instead “the legitimacy of the notion of *some*”: some unity, some order, in certain regions; but not everywhere the same and always (79). Brandom apparently believes he can pay his dues to the notion of “some” by demanding a rational (inferential) integration within each perspective, tradition, or a line of thought, while conceding that there need not be any plausible strategy for a unifying, monotonic integration in the space *between* different stories, perspectives, and traditions.

*Pragmatism at the Crossroads*

From the perspective of rational integration through recollection, what has been learned (up to the present time) appears as a product of the *discovery* of what had been there all along (Brandom, 2019, 6). For example, our present understanding of inflation (say) appears, from within this perspective, as the truth gradually disclosed by the previous studies of the phenomenon, resulting in our present, much more adequate, conception thereof. This, in turn, gives rise to the temptation to think of the processes of inquiry in terms of *asymptotically approaching* antecedent objective facts (694), thereby locating both truth and determinateness in a fictional external entity (inflation) to which our conceptions always aim to correspond; ignoring thereby the pragmatist understanding of learning and experience as a “truth-process” within which alone truth has meaning and progressive determination of conceptual content is possible (ibid.). When positioned at the end of a well-told story of a seemingly completed learning experience it is easy to become trapped, Brandom warns us, in “one-sidedly mistaking one *aspect* of the process, one perspective on it, for the whole thing" (442). Doing so arrests the progress of the active investigation, associated with the growth of reason (*Vernunft*), precipitating its provisional results into fixed, settled categories of static understanding (*Verstand*).[[18]](#footnote-18)

The particular inadequacies of such ossified retrospectively centered perspectives can be usually seen from the space between perspectives, i.e. between alternative or successive recollections. At the level of theory, they become apparent whenever, instead of a retrospective, one adopts a *prospective* or a forward-looking attitude. At the outset, to continue with the example of inflation, it is only possible to specify what one means or intends in the most generic terms; meaning that the content of what is being investigated is not so much thought concretely as merely hypothesized, suggested, gestured at. It is only in the actual process of investigation and learning that the notion (of inflation) can accrue determinate content through probative applications. From the prospective point of view, then, the process of discovery appears as a process of *invention* (7), of focusing conceptual content in new ways suggested by the actual learning experience. A prospective conception is pursued because it has certain promise – a promise to *change* our conceptual practices for the better; and, because of this, the prospective dimension always points to the necessary limitation of any retrospectively settled and presently static perspective. Its suggestions, of course, point beyond the already established grounds, and are therefore always fallible; which is why they invariably require their earnestness to be credited in advance by a charitable (forgiving) attitude Brandom calls the spirit of *trust* (621).

Pragmatism has traditionally been more interested in this prospective moment of promise, experimentation, and change than in the retrospective moment of rationalist integrative reconstruction; in invention more than in transmission and consolidation of authority. It thrives on *transitions*, on transformative suggestions that rise from the fringes of conscious thought (James, 283 & 288), opening up new spaces for conversation with altered rules. At its more poetic extreme, Rorty claimed that metaphor (rather than exchange of reasons) is "the engine of cultural history" (Malachowski, 2013, 221). But even Peirce, the austere logician, devoted much of his work to exploring and developing modes of reasoning that cannot be rendered amenable to rationalist, inferentialist paraphrase. Abduction, a fallible insight (CP 5.181) that results from an imaginative sense of how things must actually fit together is a prime example of an essential operation that cannot be reduced to a formalized structure (although it can be retrospectively schematized in terms of one). Yet, abduction is central to the formation of novel hypotheses, to intuiting a pattern of rational connection where none is readily apparent (CP 2.640 & CP 1.46); and is (less obviously) instrumental in guiding probative concept application, since without an intuitive antecedent sense of what applications *might* be appropriate, the selection by testing would have to sift through an endless number of pointless possibilities.

What we are faced with is the question concerning the proper place and value of *systematicity* in our conception of rational inquiry and discourse. Science, which had once served as a paradigm of systematic inquiry, has, in the recent decades, been shown to be more concerned with *opportunities* for extending knowledge than with *systematic representation* (Rouse, 15 & 28). There is also, as Brandom explains, a "near consensus on the explanatory heterogeneity and incommensurability of various sciences" (2015, 86). Furthermore, according to Brandom, dealing with contradictions and incompatibilities is a practical matter with various possibilities at our disposal, including “revising one’s view” that incompatible commitments are incompatible (2019, 444); with discursive stability being always at best a temporary achievement “doomed to disruption” (447). How much is gained by endorsing such a (pragmatically) weakened conception of systematicity, and at what cost?

Conventional pragmatism, as Brandom correctly observes, prides itself first and foremost on privileging “flexibility and adaptability” (2011, 41). Surely, we can agree with James that human beings tend to prefer “a rational world to believe in and live in”; but then we must also acknowledge (with him) that there many dimensions to rationality, including intellectual, aesthetic, moral, and practical; and that reconciling them all cannot be an easy matter (James, 112). If it is admitted, moreover, that human beings have no pre-ordained telos, nor even a natural niche, then (contrary to the intuitions of systematicity) one may be inclined to favor the spontaneous resources of natural language, precisely because it can be “distinctly and conveniently flexible” (Margolis, 2017, 41).

This line of thought goes well with the pragmatists’ naturalist propensity (which Brandom tries to resist) to think of knowledge as an intelligent coping mechanism. James, for example, argues that if experience did not present us with problems and existential impasses there would be no need for articulating any of its terms (350). Being able to *work* through things, to resolve practical entanglements, counts for more with the pragmatists that the ability to adduce a convincing justification; and because of this, the pragmatist sense of connection to reality remains instrumentally and existentially, rather than cognitively, grounded.[[19]](#footnote-19) As Misak explains, "there is a point or an aim to any particular deliberation – to solve a problem, to build a better piece of equipment, to decide what is just in the circumstances, or to confirm a hypothesis”; and the beliefs that happen to help us successfully accomplish these tasks count as rational (402-3). Or as Margolis puts it, all that we require is merely a "world we can live with" (2017, 88): meaning that questions regarding cognition must be “conceptually subordinate to the demands of life itself" (96). Certainly, this does not imply either dismissing or arbitrarily diminishing the role of reasoning, justification, formalization, regimentation, or inferential articulation in human experience and learning; but it circumscribes this role by programmatically insisting that “the space of reasons” must be always placed within the space of a *form* of life or *lebensform* (61).

It is possible to argue that making things explicit, a *codification* (Brandom, 2000, 8 and 2002, 9) of what is involved in our practices, makes these practices more intelligible to ourselves and to others. Taking note of the affinities between Brandom’s inferentialism and Davidson’s translational conception of rationality (4), one could argue plausibly that inferential articulation improves our ability to understand each other, to “navigate conversationally” between doxastic perspectives (6), while avoiding conceptual distortions and talking at cross-purposes. There is no doubt that such articulation could facilitate *systematic* understanding; yet it is far from clear that it must also always facilitate understanding in an ordinary sense. As Margolis argues, for example, on behalf of the conventional naturalistic pragmatism, what human communication requires is *fluency*, not clarity, nor articulation (2017, 51). In fact, in many situations, the imprecision, inconsistency, ambiguity, figurative allusiveness, and pliability of natural language allow us to continue meaningful conversation while avoiding awkwardness due to the uncertainty, the ignorance, and the limitations of our perspective. Language cleverly improvises the ways to go on productively, even when we lack the resources to clearly express what we intend.

Naturalist pragmatism, then, gravitates towards regarding natural language as the most fundamental and intrinsically intelligible medium of reasoning, with logic and the game of giving and asking for reasons being immensely useful but highly derived modes of reasoning; accomplishments rather than indispensable foundations. It may still be granted that these constitute the core engine of certain forms of learning; but an engine is not the whole vehicle; just like downtown (the administrative center) is usually not the most inventive or productive part of town. And when it comes to invention, transformation, conceptual change – to what Brandom calls the prospective dimension of a rational learning process – the vocabularies of precision, the regimes of formalization, may not be the most appropriate or advantageous.

Turning back to Rorty’s Emersonian line of thought, one could say that the (philosophical) task of “making current intuitions coherent” (2016, 46) (or explicit), however important, remains only one of the modalities in which we engage with language, intelligence, and culture. Rationality, says Rorty is simply a matter of making acceptable moves within an already established language-game: “imagination,” on the other hand “creates the games that reason proceeds to play" (15). Emerson, here, appears as a doubly appropriate figure: both on the account of his conviction that natural language provides us with the best model of active and generative reason (*Vernunft*); and for his quip that “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.” Emerson, of course, believed in consistency of a higher order: the consistency of departure, experimentation; the consistency of perpetually “unsettling” all things. This way of thinking, of course, is congenial to Brandom’s own emphasis on truth as a characteristic of the unfolding process of experience and learning, bringing our discussion full circle.[[20]](#footnote-20)

*Conclusion*

Once the earlier disagreements about the role of experience in pragmatism are palliated by the shared endorsement of the concept of experience as an historical process of experimental cultural learning, the extant sources of principled division within the tradition can be construed as pertaining to the apparently conflicting conceptions of the role of language (and rationality) in this cultural learning process. Naturalist pragmatism favors the spontaneous formative role of the unregimented natural language in improvising adaptive solutions to the problems of social, collective living; rationalist pragmatism, on the other hand, gravitates predominantly towards the employment of formalized languages in vindicating the existing social practices and norms through retrospective historical recollection. (This contrast, of course, also has a direct bearing on the prospects of the rapprochement between classical pragmatism and contemporary analytic philosophy.) One of the possible ways to proceed, then, may plausibly involve a recognition of the divergent yet potentially complementary strengths of the two approaches in different contexts, by distinguishing (for example) between the contexts of discovery and invention and the contexts of the unforced discursive transmission of established authority – without, quite naturally, erecting any impossible fast boundaries between the two.

On the view presented, to be a pragmatist at present means (among other things) asking questions about the proper place (and limits) of systematic learning and rationality within the scope of human history and culture; it means wondering sincerely about the degree of rational autonomy that human beings are capable of exercising; and the extent of responsibility they can bear (without deluding themselves) for the traditions and histories to which they belong. Conventional pragmatism, in this regard, has aimed to promote an awareness of historical contingency, thereby emphasizing the limits and the limitations of the role that reason can play in history. Brandom’s rationalist approach, on the other hand, compliments this perspective with an emphasis on the role of history in grounding our narratives of learning, the advancement of self-consciousness and autonomy, and progress in pursuit of truth.

Pragmatism, thus understood, tends to be preoccupied with the problem of a proper conceptual economy: the right trade-offs between the sense of a rational authority and expressive initiative or experimentation; between the transmission of authority and its subversion and displacement. It encourages us to see justification and invention as coordinate species, instead of mutually exclusive options. It resists the delusion that we can somehow do away with either history or reason; it instead encourages us to suggest new and interesting ways of construing the relationships between the two. History is inescapable and reason is what makes the inescapable occasionally more bearable.

As Brandom explains, “one of the great goods for us is the availability of inexhaustible supply of new vocabularies in which to express, develop, constitute, and transform ourselves and our institutions, and for understanding the process by which we do that" (2009, 150). The spontaneous generative powers of natural language, give rise to the possibility of “radical semantic novelty” which enables us to formulate new unprecedented claims, desires, goals; the constraints imposed by the use of common language are repaid many times over in terms of virtually endless opportunities of expression and self-development (2019, 521). Freedom comes at a price; and expressiveness comes at the price of being constrained by norms; thus returning us to the problem of the proper economy of the rationalist and poetic, anthropological, existential elements in pragmatist thought. Brandom offers one very helpful suggestion in this regard: "The demand is,” he says, “that every aspect of the loss of negative freedom, of the constraint by norms that individuals take on, be compensated for many times over by an increase in positive expressive freedom" (522). This demand can be counted as an expressivist counterpart to Peirce’s classic maxim: “do not block the way of inquiry.”

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1. Brandom observes that the idea of a *rationalist pragmatism* would probably have struck Dewey as a "*contradictio in adjecto*” (2013, 124). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Italics are mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This sense of naturalism is outlined in Rouse, 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. CP 1.129. References to Peirce follow the standard scholarly format: CP for Peirce, Charles. 1932-1958. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Eds. Hartshorne, Weiss and Burks. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University. and EP2 for Peirce, 1998 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Fallibilism considers all conclusions and results provisional and open to revision, at least in principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Experimental phenomena for Peirce are not restricted to empirical phenomena. There are, for example, mathematical and (by extension) logical phenomena. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rorty includes the quote from Emerson's "Circles" to capture the Romantic view of the nature of progress as he understands it (2016, 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. References to the *Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953* are given as EW for *Early Works: 1882-1898*, MW for *Middle Works: 1899-1924*, and LW for *Late Works: 1925-1953* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. Brandom, 2019, 674 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. He calls it the “beating heart” of the *Phenomenology* (2019, 675). Here, we follow Brandom’s interpretation of Hegel without questioning its appropriateness. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Analytic-synthetic distinction and the “myth of the given.” See Brandom, 2015, 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Underlining is mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Italics are mine [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “Transcendental,” here, is meant to designate the style of argumentation employed in recent analytic philosophy by figures like, say, Donald Davidson. Basically, Brandom is claiming that in order to understand each other’s meaning we need to see what is entailed by the other’s sentences, suggesting that inferential practices are presupposed in (or are necessary for) the possibility of discursive understanding. As usual with such arguments, the sense of the postulated “necessity” may beg the question [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Italics and underlining are mine [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Italics are mine [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Brandom, *Spirit*, 424 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Generally, this distinction, borrowed from German Idealism is used by Brandom to highlight the difference between reason as a *process* of reasoning, resulting in the perpetual revision of its own underlying norms, and reasoning exercised *within* a particular set of categories (or a conceptual scheme). In the above case, however, we are dealing with an additional problem of premature dogmatism resulting from mistaking a partial perspective for a foundational one. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. As a result, pragmatist positions may be difficult to map onto the current realism vs. anti-realism debates; pragmatist views often tend to combine both realist and anti-realist elements [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cf. Brandom, 2019, 694 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)