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ARTICLE

INFERENTIALIST PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF PHILOSOPHY¹

Kevin J. Harrelson

This article considers the implications of inferentialist philosophy of language for debates in the historiography of philosophy. My intention is to mediate and refine the polemics between contextualist historians and ‘analytic’ or presentist historians. I claim that much of Robert Brandom’s nuanced defence of presentism can be accepted and even adopted by contextualists, so that inferentialism turns out to provide an important justification for orthodox history of philosophy. In the concluding sections I argue that the application of Brandom’s theory has important limits, and that some polemics by contextualists against presentists are therefore justified.

KEYWORDS: historiography; contextualism; Robert Brandom; inferentialism

Historians of philosophy have sometimes reacted unsympathetically to perceived intrusions of scholarly terrain, arguing that certain species of interpretive project, when these align too easily with contemporary concerns, do not constitute ‘real history’. Many others have recoiled from such polemics, assuming instead a deflationary attitude towards the issue.² The latter set of scholars proclaims that nothing deep underlies divisions such as that between contextualist historians and analytic historians. In neither case does the response to perceived methodological differences do justice to the philosophical nuances of the dispute. The current essay attempts to improve this issue somewhat by proceeding according to the conviction that disagreements in the historiography of philosophy indeed express

¹I wish to thank Robert Brandom, Luca Corti, David Glidden, David Marshall, and an anonymous referee from BJHP for their insightful comments on this article. I also wish to thank my colleagues Ingrid Albrecht, David Concepción, Kalumba Kibujjo, and Juli Thorson for their patient discussion of a very early draft.

²Schmalz, ‘JHP and the History of Philosophy Today’ provides a helpful and recent outline to the relevant debates. He seems to lean in the direction of the deflationary view.

important theoretical decisions about language, meaning, and interpretation. They also express divergent conceptions of the purposes for which a modern reader studies classic texts, and this fact plays a central role in my conclusion. My intention is not to encourage crude disciplinary disputes about what constitutes real history, such as sometimes take place, but rather to explain and refine the relevant arguments with the assistance of recent developments in the philosophy of language.

The relevance of the philosophy of language for historiography is now a fairly familiar topic due to the work of numerous philosophers and historians.³ Among these, Robert Brandom has most often been the target of polemics by contextualist historians. Brandom's reputation in this matter, however, derives more from his actual histories than from his methodological reflections on history.⁴ In the former texts he subjects his philosophical heroes to analysis according to the categories of his inferentialist theory of meaning, and as a result he has constructed a history of a confessedly Whiggish sort.⁵ Rather predictably, contextualists have been highly critical of his aggressive exegeses (see especially Nuzzo, 'Life and Death'; Baynes, 'Gadamerian Platitudes'; and Houlgate, 'Phenomenology and *De Re* Interpretation'). Brandom's Hegel, for instance, does not resemble the Hegel of the contextualist historian, but looks rather remarkably like a student of Sellars. In this essay I argue that defensive postures by the historian are nonetheless unnecessary in these instances. I propose that historians instead accept and adopt much of Brandom's methodological argument, if not also his actual histories, since these serve to underwrite a compelling defence of orthodox contextualist historiography. The appeal of Brandom's theory, I conclude, consists mainly in its overturning the common conception of the history of philosophy as a kind of secondary literature, so that inferentialism is in its spirit – if not its current letter – friendly to the contextualist.

At the same time, however, I do not lend a full endorsement to Brandom's defence of what I label 'presentist historiography', or the translation of textual sources into the terminology and conceptual divisions of currently dominant discourses. I hope rather to defend the relative autonomy of the history of philosophy by isolating certain practical limits to Brandom's argument, even while I acknowledge that historians should engage the findings of twentieth-century philosophy of language. I propose that historians accept in particular much of the argument that Brandom derives from what Quine

³The philosophy of language was integral already to Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding', and to a greater extent Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Kremer, 'What Is the Good of Philosophical History?' offers a more updated approach.

⁴The initial arguments in defence of Brandom's historiographical method appeared in a prefatory essay to *Tales* called 'Pretexts'. Recent essays that develop the arguments include 'History, Reason and Reality' from RP.

⁵See especially *Tales*, RP, and PP, although Brandom began his historical work already in MIE.

called the indeterminacy of translation, or the insight that it is specious to designate a certain set of sentences (in historiography, a ‘commentary’) as an accurate representation of another set (in historiography, a ‘source text’). This problem has led Brandom to conclude that since all interpretation is subject to various contexts of assessment, there are no privileged, exclusively correct accounts of the great texts of philosophy. While I accept this general conclusion, I argue that presentist norms in historiography do not follow from it. In the final sections I argue that contextualists often have good, practical reasons to reject presentist histories, and that in doing so they need not appeal to indefensible theories of meaning.

In these first two sections I outline some of the consequences of Brandom’s inferentialism for the historiography of philosophy. My intention is to isolate the argumentative dilemma in which inferentialism places the overly protective contextualist. I treat inferentialism as a broad tendency in philosophy, appealing to Brandom’s arguments mainly for their currency.⁶ My strategy is first to acknowledge the cogency of his general argument about interpretation, and only then to criticize the conclusions that he wishes to draw from it. I thus endorse what we could call ‘philosophical presentism’, which includes the negative thesis that no particular context from the past (e.g. authorial intention, the audience contemporaneous to the text, etc.) has necessary interpretive privilege. But I argue that historiographical presentism, viz. the view that contemporary discourses should frame how we interpret the content of older texts, does not follow from this position. In setting up the argument I also reject the protective tendencies of many contextualist historians.

The argument for philosophical presentism reduces to two straightforward moves, neither of which require Brandom’s esoteric terminology. The first move generalizes the interpreter’s situation, so that history appears as a mere species of linguistic exchange. The second move requires a more specific doctrine in the philosophy of language, according to which sentences and texts are inferentially expressive rather than referential. From this last point Brandom argues that diverse contexts of interpretive specification stand in principle on a par, precisely because correctness of interpretation is an erroneous concept (see Rorty, ‘On the Historiography of Philosophy’, 55). The practical implication is then that idiomatic commentaries in contemporary language are not in principle less valid than are contextual studies. On this pluralistic view, presentist histories have a place beside contextualist studies, and the two endeavours stand in no conflict. There are many ways to interpret texts, and the propriety of such interpretive acts cannot be adjudicated *in abstracto*. There is thus no general strategy of interpretation that is more rational or more scholarly than its competitors.

⁶For a fuller account focused exclusively on Brandom (but not oriented towards the historiography of philosophy in particular), see Marshall, ‘Implications of Robert Brandom’s Inferentialism’.

This pluralistic conclusion allows Brandom to deflect any broad polemics about authentic history. If an historian of philosophy responds that presentist histories are illegitimate because they do not accurately represent the past, then Brandom can explain how these historians misunderstand language and meaning. His strategy thus has the effect of shifting the terrain on the dissenting contextualist, forcing the debate about historiography into the uncomfortable territory of the philosophy of language. The actual practices of historiography are not at stake in the dispute, since Brandom even supplies nuanced explanations of historical practices from within his philosophy of language. But the historian who wishes to engage him in methodological debate nonetheless confronts a dilemma, and it is the burden of this section of my essay to explain and navigate this dilemma. In one passage Brandom goes as far as to insist that any general objection to presentist history requires an ‘independently motivatable’ theory of conceptual content, and I wish to take this suggestion seriously (*Tales*, 94).

The chief terminological distinction by which Brandom executes the first, generalizing move derives from the theory of language that he proposes in *Making it Explicit*: he calls traditional contextualist readings of historical texts ‘*de dicto* specifications of conceptual content’, whereas more aggressive, presentist translations of old texts into contemporary terms are referred to as ‘*de re* specifications of conceptual content’. Historical and interpretive strategies comprise, on this reading, a special case of ‘ascribing propositional attitudes’, and are thus divisible according to the methods distinguished in the final chapters of *Making It Explicit* (MIE, 495–613). When we explain the meaning of a passage in Kant by reference to relevant passages from Baumgarten or Wolff, then we specify the meaning *de dicto*, or by reference to the circumstances of utterance. When we translate the same passage into a currently more acceptable idiom, then our interpretation is *de re*. This important advance for hermeneutics avoids treating the interpretation of philosophical texts as if it were some *sui generis* activity: the various methods of interpreting philosophical texts are simply instances of the ways in which we attribute beliefs, sentiments, or intellectual tendencies to persons. To specify what a dead philosopher means is just a special case of specifying what people mean *tout court*.

Treating historiography as a special problem of the philosophy of language provides Brandom with an impressive range of explanatory power in regard to textual interpretation. The theory explains the so-called Gadamerian platitudes (meaning relativism, meaning pluralism, etc.), which he acknowledges in a perhaps condescending reference to hermeneutics and literary theory.⁷ More importantly for my purposes, this theory explains and justifies some common methods of interpreting philosophical texts and composing histories of philosophy. Contextualist historiography (‘*de dicto* conceptual specification’) as such is not rejected, but can even

⁷On this issue, see Baynes, ‘Gadamerian Platitudes’.

be said to have its own set of linguistic rules (a type of ‘deontic scorekeeping’) according to which historians (‘players’) perform the language game of writing history. Most substantive histories of philosophy, like most complex acts of interpretation, do not consist exclusively of either *de dicto* or *de re* attributions. Even the most extreme contextualist histories, excepting perhaps short encyclopaedia entries, will not elaborate the author’s context to the exclusion of all idiomatic evaluation. The practices of professional philosophers reflect rather hybrid categories such as *de traditione* or *phenomenological*, in which cases the contexts of interpretation are not limited either to data pertinent to the author’s life (e.g. which books Kant read and when) or to inconsistencies with currently accepted doctrines or positions.

Brandom enacts these explanations of historical practices via the dominant metaphor of ‘inference’ that pervades his corpus, a metaphor that he over-takes from the Sellarsian tradition.⁸ Following the basic tendency of the Pittsburgh philosophers, he privileges inference over reference.⁹ We specify content (re: interpret) only by placing it in an inferential context: ‘to be conceptually contentful in the most basic sense is to play a role as premise and conclusion in inferences’ (*Tales*, 94). In other words, in saying what someone means we indicate to some extent either what it follows from or what follows from it. Meaning is always inferential, from certain implicit conditions of application to certain consequences. In the peculiar case of interpreting a philosophical text, we can say what the text means only by constructing a complex multipremise inference. We appeal throughout to premises (e.g. historical data) from which the text follows or to consequences (e.g. desired or undesired implicates) that follow from it, refining these meanings all the while within the complex contexts of what we call philosophical traditions.

The second, anti-representationalist phase of the argument derives from a foundational claim of inferentialist theory, one that concerns the extent to which the notion of reference can be extended from singular terms to sentences. In the early chapters of *Making It Explicit* Brandom accuses a broad tradition in twentieth-century philosophy of conflating two senses of intentionality, viz. ‘propositional contentfulness’ and ‘object-representing contentfulness’ (MIE, 67–84). The failure to distinguish adequately between these has led philosophers from Brentano to Searle to understand propositions on the model of objects. By contrast, Brandom follows Quine in arguing that sentences are not denotational (MIE, 68). If that is the case, then strings of sentences do not denote objects (viz. propositions in the Russellian sense), and the notion of reference does not extend to those long and peculiar sequences of sentences found in texts of philosophy.

⁸For a review of Brandom’s relationship to Sellars, see Redding, *Analytic Philosophy*, Chap. 2.

⁹For a very basic account of this, see the ‘Preface’ to AR.

The chain of sentences that comprises the *Critique of Pure Reason*, for instance, has no referent (although historians often seem to assume the contrary). Assuming that a statement or string of statements could be well defined or unitary only if it referred to some object, Brandom takes this to imply a meaning relativism for such items. The details of inferentialist semantics thus underwrite the first Gadamerian platitude, the principle of meaning relativism: ‘there is no such thing as the meaning of a text in isolation from its context’ (MIE, 68).

For the inferentialist there can be no trans-historical, intellectual object such as ‘the philosophy of Kant’, or ‘the correct meaning of the *Critique of Pure Reason*’, a doctrine that follows somewhat plainly from Quine’s conclusion that there is no matter of fact about whether any two statements are equivalent (see Quine, *Word and Object*, Chap. 2). Even inferentialists who have recoiled from Brandom’s more extreme moments will have to embrace this consequence, since we have no experience or intuition of a purely linguistic object such as ‘Kant’s philosophy’ (see especially Kremer, ‘Representation or Inference’ and McDowell, ‘Comment on Robert Brandom’s Some Pragmatist Themes’). Something like the *Critique of Pure Reason* has meaning only when it is read by an interpreter, and in each such case the text (qua definite sequence of declarative sentences typically printed and bounded in book form) is only one term in the meaning process. The other terms include various things about the interpreter’s education, the reception-history of the text, the medium of interpretation or commentary (journal article, class lecture, café discussion, etc.). Meaning is generated by the entire interpretive context. The meaning, for instance, of Kant’s philosophy is a conceptual content that I might specify in subordinate clauses of sentences that have the form: ‘Kant believed that arithmetic judgments are synthetic.’ This content will consist of a rather large set of such clauses, which could be called variously ‘Kant’s philosophy’ or ‘my reading of Kant’s philosophy’ – another interpreter will perhaps introduce a distinction where I see none. In either case the philosophy is nothing apart from such interpretive specifications, so that the appearance of an opinion/fact distinction is a misleading one.

Inferentialism thereby puts the contextualist, if she wishes to articulate a competing theory of historiography, at the horns of a dilemma. The conservative, right horn of the dilemma demands an improved semantic theory of history: she could attempt to articulate a theory of objects such as ‘Kant’s philosophy’ as distinct from both the specific, material sequence of sentences associated with the Prussian professor and the many presently extant interpretations of those sentences. One option would be to defend what Jorge Gracia has called ‘the ideal text’ (Gracia, 196). This names an interpretive construction presumed by any interpreter who treats a text as an imperfect formulation of a position, argument, or whatever we wish to call the basic units of philosophizing. If careful and methodologically self-aware, an interpreter will distinguish this meaning from other closely related

contents such as the actual words on the page ('the historical text') or what one Immanuel Kant, son of a saddle-maker, wanted those words to express ('the intended text'). When I argue with a student or colleague about, for instance, the structure of the B Deduction, the disagreement often seems to be referential. Disagreements over the meaning of old philosophy texts are rather common, and philosophers of historiography like Gracia have constructed semantic theories in order to explain these disagreements. Taking her lead from these arguments, the contextualist could dismiss presentist histories on grounds of historical inaccuracy – what Brandom writes about Hegel, for instance, does not correspond to that semantic object 'Hegel's philosophy'.

Granting Brandom's initial generalization, however, the contextualist would need also to defend a propositional theory of meaning. This would require a general argument for the independence of meanings from utterances, as well as answers to vexing questions about which forms of discourse include such meanings and which do not. Gracia did not bring the argument nearly this far, and my suggestion is that we not try to do so for him. Even if we were to present a plausible general argument for the expression-independence of meaning, that would only secure a subordinate status for the historiography of philosophy. Historiography in that case would be somewhat immune to intrusions from analytic philosophers, but our security would come at the expense of philosophical relevance. The 'history of philosophy' would name those particular meanings aimed at by philosophers of the past, and historiography would be an activity as distinct from philosophical evaluation as many analytic philosophers have desired it to be. My argument will be that inferentialism is favourable to contextual historiography precisely because it does not separate the historical act (*viz.* attributing claims to dead people) from the philosophical act (*viz.* evaluating those claims).

This more attractive, second horn of the dilemma suggests rather an acceptance of the deflationary potential of an inferentialist theory like Brandom's. This would lead only to a re-examination of interpretive disagreements in what we call, in an unhappy concession about the merits of historical work, 'secondary literature'.¹⁰ Below I argue that inferentialism promotes contextualist historiography to the role of a philosophical paradigm that is in many respects superior to the so-called contemporary subdisciplines. In that case the history of philosophy, rather than sacrificing its relevance in a declaration of independence, appears as at least the equal to any other area of philosophy. The only obvious cost of this move is that we need to revise our implicit understanding of disagreement. If there is no referent to decide our common disagreements, as Brandom argues and I grant, then

¹⁰Brandom does not do enough dismissive work on this topic, although Rorty's notion of 'doxography' (Rorty, 'On the Historiography of Philosophy', 61ff.) and its proposed banishment go further.

we should refrain from common articulations of contextualist goals such as ‘getting Kant right’.

In the previous section I outlined Brandom’s argument against a representationalist understanding of historiography, and by extension against my caricatured ‘protective contextualist’. If we take the philosophy of language seriously, then we historians of philosophy would even do well to consider eliminating from our lexicon some evaluative concepts such as ‘accurate’, ‘correct’, or ‘faithful’. Brandom does not need to make any such suggestions along these lines, since for him all historical pursuits are explicable mainly through translation into his philosophy of language. But concepts such as ‘faithful’ and ‘accurate’ at least seem to rely on assumptions about language or meaning that are not independently defensible, and any historian who employs them in a broad polemic against presentists falls victim to Brandom’s dilemma. It does not suffice, on my reading, to accuse presentist interpreters of ‘getting Kant wrong’. Such expressions are at best awkward, inarticulate gestures of disagreement. At worst they actively call upon implausible assumptions about pre-existent or expression-independent meanings. In this section I argue that accepting these general points about language and meaning does not lead to relaxed standards in historiography: what Brandom offers is not a licence for saying whatever we wish and attributing our view to famous dead people. Philosophical presentism rather supports rigorous standards in historiography, and my goal is to separate those standards from implausible assumptions about meaning. I conclude this section by explaining how, in light of Brandom’s arguments, historians would need a specific, practical reason for dismissing any approach to historiography. In the later sections I then offer such a reason in the case of some, but not all, presentist histories.

The first point to consider is that inferentialism does not imply any broad scepticism about historical knowledge, but suggests only that we need more nuanced methodological justifications for distinguishing good history from bad. For his part, Brandom allows that there are various species of evidential standards in textual interpretation. He does not indulge a more sceptical mood of the later Rorty, who lamented the lack of a general criterion for employing biographical evidence in the interpretation of texts (see Rorty, ‘Pragmatist’s Progress’). Brandom’s methodological pluralism operates, by contrast, only at the level of generality at which he executes his argument: there is no method of interpretation that is *in principle* superior. What follows from this thesis is not an empty pluralism, as Brandom sometimes seems to suggest, but rather what I call hermeneutic particularism: each historiographic endeavour should be evaluated in terms of specific textual, contextual, and rhetorical factors. This point allows for the presentist acknowledgement that the context of the interpreter is not in principle less important than is historical data about the author.

Brandom’s own theory turns out, however, to have strongly contextualist implications, due chiefly to his thesis that inferences are materially specific.

The material circumstances of specific texts, contexts, and audiences call for diverse sorts of interpretative inference. From a given set of texts certain things follow and others do not, so that there will always be particular reasons to include or exclude interpretive premises. To indulge the metaphor of inference yet further: to a given set of premises certain other premises can be added to yield fruitful conclusions, whereas some other premises might be trivial or excluded. Likewise, for the interpretation of a given philosophical text, some auxiliary texts will be more relevant than others, so that biographical reports will sometimes yield cogent inferences.¹¹ If a reliable medical report were to surface, for instance, attesting to Kant's poor mental health in the middle 1780s, then this could (the requisite textual circumstances being given) serve as a legitimate premise from which to draw inferences about the meaning of the B Deduction. On this theory, the history of philosophy is just a normal empirical science, the standards of which rely upon evidence, induction, hypothesis, etc. Arguments justifying a particular historical study should appeal, as in my example, to both textual and contextual circumstances.

The material theory of inference suggests that several additional contexts also play a role in determining what approach is appropriate to a given text. Interpretation is a communicative act with dative valence, a point that representationalist theories of meaning obscure. The interpreter's audience thus inevitably and rightfully structures her work, and all interpretations are addressed to specific communities. In our current context, certain texts (e.g. Locke's *Second Treatise*) lend themselves to contextualist readings, certain others (several by Kierkegaard) to autobiographical readings, whereas yet others (perhaps Hegel's *Logic*) stand in need of aggressively anachronistic translation. These observations accommodate the harmless premises that, for instance, the fact that we live in modern democracies affects our reading of Locke, the fact that we are familiar with post-Fregean logics impacts our reading of Hegel, etc. A generation from now some texts will have shifted from one category to another, depending upon political arrangements, academic trends, philosophical trends, etc. Any good argument either for or against a particular hermeneutic endeavour should depart from these specific historical premises about the text, its various contexts, and the audiences of the interpretation. If there is to be a good objection to Brandom's analytic and pragmatist appropriation of Hegel, then, this will appeal to historical evidence about Hegel, analytic philosophy, neo-pragmatism, Robert Brandom, etc. It takes vast historical knowledge to begin to theorize about how a given history should be written.¹²

¹¹Compare this issue to Brandom's remarks on systematicity in *Tales*, 116.

¹²Nuzzo thus appropriately asks of Brandom: 'why does analytic philosophy – which in its youth was hostile to history – see the need to appropriate a tradition that goes back to Hegel?' She wishes to imply, wrongly I think, that Brandom has no answer for this point of self-analysis.

This view allows that the meaning of Locke's political philosophy is in some respects relative to our current political institutions, and it begs us to forsake the notion that there is a single historically valid meaning of the *Second Treatise*. But none of this implies that we should write about dead philosophers in a manner that privileges more recent discourses. Brandom's argument cuts rather in the other direction: if diverse interpretive strategies stand in principle on a par, then there can be no broad philosophical dismissal of contextualist approaches. Our recognition that we can only read Locke as citizens of the twenty-first century (implied by what I have called 'philosophical presentism') thus does not require us to update Locke into Rawlsian terms, nor does it require us to assume that Rawls' theory is superior to Locke's. It begs us only to consider various contexts before we dismiss a given approach as 'not Locke', including the facts that we have read Rawls, that we vote in elections, etc. There are good and bad ways for us to write about Locke, and these can be distinguished with precision neither by the philosopher of language nor by impatient and dismissive historians.

Brandom's argument also fails to identify any particular philosophical school, at the expense of others, in relation to which the past should be assessed. Responsible, methodologically explicit history of philosophy may indeed translate old books into parochial idioms, but it can accord no privileged status to any one idiom. I note this only to guard against the apparent leap from a simple premiss to a contestable conclusion: all interpretive acts are indeed context-specific, but this observation provides no licence for treating the interpreter's native context as 'what is really the case.' Brandom's terminology provides an obstacle here, since he employs the expression '*de re* conceptual specification' as a name for presentist histories. This move misleadingly suggests that presentist historiographers appeal to facts in a manner that contextualist historians do not (a problem I discuss at length below).

Finally, the request for pragmatic justifications of interpretive endeavours accords with standard editorial practices of giving reasons for why we pursue a given historical project. If we are to embrace anachronistic readings of historical texts, then these readings should be given for explicit and well-justified purposes. If Hegel is to speak the language of Quine, to use one of Brandom's examples, there needs to be a publicly available reason for this other than that Quine is a more recent writer and a more respectable analytic philosopher. The acknowledgement that all interpretation is relative to a specific community (audience) implies, however, that there are probably some justifiable instances of such presentist history. For instance, if Quineans could benefit from Hegel and yet lack the hermeneutic capacity to interpret the third book of the *Science of Logic*, then this could constitute a perfectly good reason to write about Hegel in a manner that makes him sound rather more like Quine. Publication norms provide an interesting case here: an editor's question about the audience of a given text does not

appeal to an extrinsic matter, but rather concerns the very heart of historiography. In the later sections of this essay I argue that there are indeed some illegitimate contexts of presentist interpretation. Here, however, I point only to the need for a specific, practical reason for excluding any historiographical method.

In the previous two sections I drew some consequences from Brandom's suggestion that the theory of historiography is a species of the philosophy of language. In this section, I wish to reverse the relation between these endeavours by considering the old historicist thesis that all philosophy is history of philosophy.¹³ My reason for this move is that it will frame (in the subsequent sections) a rationale for contextualist historiography. Contextualist historiography will then no longer appear as a kind of secondary literature, but will prove to share many characteristics with what is called, just as unhappily, 'contemporary philosophy'. Brandom's theory, as I interpret it, thus promotes rather than threatens contextualist history, precisely because it provides a theoretical justification of contextual work as paradigmatically philosophical.

My argument proceeds from a premiss that Brandom defends: although all species of interpretive specification stand in principle on a par, differences among strategies of interpretation are a matter of degree (*Tales*, 107–110). The reason for this is that every act of interpretation contains an interplay between *de dicto* and *de re* moments, hence the importance of Brandom's hybrid species of interpretation. Brandom thus follows Rorty in insisting that presentist and contextualist hermeneutics differ only in emphasis, and that one can err by excessively neglecting either end of the hermeneutic circle.¹⁴ All philosophical history – like all interpretation of what other humans have said – requires both a sympathetic grasp of another's utterance as well as a distinct context of interpretation or restatement. The major differences among approaches to historiography will derive from the ways in which an interpreter may emphasize these extremes.

However drastic the differences in detailed philosophical expositions may appear, between for instance Wolfson's Spinoza and Strawson's Kant,¹⁵ contextualist research presumes persistent idiomatic evaluation. Wolfson and Strawson are thus less far apart than we otherwise believe, given that even the most devoted contextualist begins from evaluative premises,

¹³The classic version of this thesis is defended by Collingwood, *Autobiography*, 53–76.

¹⁴In an uncharacteristic slip, Nuzzo, 'Life and Death', 36–7 takes Brandom to pose these as mutually exclusive options.

¹⁵Rorty, 'On the Historiography of Philosophy', 52 and Brandom (*Tales*, 104) both approve of Strawson's Kant, whereas Rorty, 'On the Historiography of Philosophy', 53 shows less approval of Wolfson. But these particular evaluations, on my account, are independent of the general argument for philosophical presentism. Contextualist historians may still, as they often do, reject Strawson, Bennett, and others as presentist historians of philosophy. My argument implies only that they should not attempt to do so solely on the basis of general considerations about language and historiography.

employs parochial idioms, etc. Idiomatic evaluation likewise presumes that the evaluator has first attended to the utterances of another person. Strawson could not have made Kant into a mid-century Oxbridge philosopher (the presentist move) had he not learned German and struggled, like a good contextualist, through the rigours of the *Critique*. Rorty had pursued this basic point only in a footnote about Davidson's then-current studies of interpretation, but Brandom moderates the central distinction (presentist/contextualist, *de re/de dicto*) in several ways: he preserves the Gadamerian analogy of 'dialogue', and he also offers extended meditations on the conceptual pair authority/responsibility (RP, 78–110). One might phrase the point by saying simply that all interpretive acts require multiple trips around the hermeneutic circle: one must both listen sympathetically and reflect critically. Contextualism simply places its emphasis on the former, whereas presentism stresses the latter.

I wish to emphasize more than Brandom does the dismissive implications of his argument, since any theory of interpretation is trivial if it does not exclude at least some options. In a perhaps overzealous attempt to justify his own presentist histories, Brandom often writes as if all histories are acceptable. This is both more than he needs and more than he should seek: there will sometimes be good reasons, within specific communities, to offer presentist readings of some philosophical texts. This conclusion is compatible with a more wholesale rejection of some approaches, and Brandom does endorse a principled objection to both excessively presentist and excessively contextualist approaches. Solipsistically postmodern interpretation, for instance, should be rejected on the grounds that it fails to recognize this mutual implication of *de re* and *de dicto* moments (*Tales*, 92). One does not inject one's own ideas into a text, but rather one negotiates among publicly debatable meanings of familiar words or phrases when these are placed in novel sentences and contexts. Texts are material, and so not mere occasions for the ideas of their interpreter. To treat them as such is to make the contrary error to the originalism of religious fundamentalists and nineteenth-century Kant scholars (who both in their turn exhibit indefensible hermeneutic strategies). The latter groups imagine themselves to travel through time and uncover an original truth, whereas the former seek a vain originality free of all tradition.¹⁶ Pure historicism is impossible, as is pure presentism (or ahistoricism).

One further deflationary consequence of this problem that Brandom, in all his benevolent pluralism, does not wish to draw is that the purely ahistorical methods of philosophy should be rejected out of hand. One does not philosophize *ab initio* in private, but rather we vary between *de dicto* and *de re* specifications of the utterances of other people. Philosophy, on this

¹⁶Fischer, *Kritik der kantischen Philosophie* opens with the following representative proclamation: 'We have reached the right conception of the system, as it was present to the mind of its author.'

reading, is a species of linguistic exchange, which is Brandom's way of salvaging Rorty's famous emphasis on conversation. If all linguistic exchanges have an historical structure (to the extent that they involve at least partly *de dicto* specifications of the meanings of sentences uttered by other persons), then all philosophical utterances are likewise historical. All philosophy is in this basic sense 'history of philosophy', with only differences of degree in interpretive emphasis – as well as material differences such as the age of the texts we interpret and the biological status of their authors. Philosophical exchanges require sincere consideration of the utterances of other people, with some appreciation of the context in which they speak or write. As in all genuine conversation, we depart from and repeatedly revisit this consideration, and a very good (empathic, perceptive, and flexible) interlocutor is perhaps one who emphasizes this aspect more than do others. It is one very short inference to the rejection of any distinction between philosophy and its history, and yet another (though I wish to make it) to the judgement that good philosophy is always in important respects also explicit and self-aware history of philosophy. Brandom's more recent works such as *Reason in Philosophy* and *Perspectives on Pragmatism* merge history and systematic argument, which merger I take as having been required but not met by the arguments of *Tales* and *Making It Explicit*.¹⁷

Defending contextualist historiography then becomes a matter of assessing its consistency with the basic criteria of interpretation, as well as identifying its public virtues and purposes. If, as the inferentialist informs us, all philosophy is partly historical, then why should there be such a thing as the historiography of philosophy as a distinct intellectual endeavour? If no philosophy is entirely historical – since we cannot recount the meanings of the dead *wie sie eigentlich gewesen sind* – then what is the justification for insisting upon narrow contextual standards? To put these questions more practically, what is the collective purpose of any community of interpreters whose epistemic standards tend towards the contextual? The answers to these questions should perhaps account for why historians of philosophy react so negatively to some anachronistic interpretations – or they should provide us with reasons not to react in such a manner.

The broad theoretical backdrop of Brandom's arguments sets high standards for hermeneutic theory, but defers the actual assessment of interpretive strategies to such pragmatic considerations as above. In order to justify or criticize an interpretive tendency, the argument begins, we need to consider hermeneutics in the light of a general theory of discourse. The philosophy of language then establishes the context-specificity of meaning, and thus underwrites a *prima facie* pluralism for interpretation. But it also follows from Brandom's argument, I have claimed, that the criticism or justification of any specific interpretive effort should appeal to particular, material premises

¹⁷Compare Nuzzo, 'Life and Death', 48, who rightfully objects to the distinction between the method and system implied by the format of *Tales*.

about dead persons, texts, our academic or cultural context, etc. The arguments drawn from inferentialist philosophy of language thereby support the case for rigorous standards in historiography, and I concluded the last section with a suggestion that some well-articulated communal standards might resolve the dilemma in which Brandom places historiography. In this section I attempt to strengthen the case for the relative autonomy of the history of philosophy as an intellectual endeavour by arguing that standards of inference are in large part locally defined. I then challenge the analogies by which Brandom defends his presentism, although I remain within the parameters of his arguments (*Tales*, 106).

As a particular species of discourse philosophy has differentiae that distinguish it loosely from other types of conversation, although Brandom does too little work in outlining the extent to which local discourses can vary. One suggestion lies in a premise he overtakes from the early Rorty, namely that authority is justified relative to public discursive practices (see especially ‘Linguistic Pragmatism and Pragmatism about Norms’ in PP 107–15). Discourses will differ, moreover, in terms of how authority can be defined. Some public practices license strong first-person authority, in which case they are called subjective discourses. In other cases, communities assume incontestable authority, so that we have some inexorably social discourses (PP, 110). In a third type of discourse, neither communities nor individuals exercise authority, in which case the discourse is considered objective. This threefold distinction is licensed by the respective social practices, so that the category of the social is ‘primus inter pares’ (PP, 111). Such a division allows, presumably, local discursive communities to warrant locally valid definitions of authority.

Some relevant differences can be observed in daily practices. In the course of a day each of us will encounter diverse definitions of authority as these are specific to the linguistic practices in which we engage. For instance, if we are engaged in a policy discussion, my specification of my previous statements might hold nearly no weight over your specifications of the same. I do not own the statements once I have spoken them, and the reasons may well be treated irrespective of any reference to facts about me. This indifference towards the speaker derives from a fundamental characteristic of professional policies, viz. that they are cooperatively authored in formal settings. But if we are discussing my recent romantic row, then somewhat more authority should be granted to me. Your analysis of my feelings will not stand on a par with my own (though as Rorty and Brandom have argued my authority never reaches the level of incorrigibility).¹⁸ In the case of your treating them as equal, you would be guilty of neglecting the ethical demands of friendly confidence, and you could rightfully be labelled a poor performer of this species of discourse (although you may excel in

¹⁸Rorty’s famous essay, ‘Incorrigibility as the Mark of the Mental’, 399–420. Brandom has published his reaction to this in ‘Vocabularies of Pragmatism’ and again in PP 107–115.

policy discussions). The differences in attribution of authority thus derive from ethical, material, and institutional considerations.

In order to determine what counts as good history of philosophy, then, we should consider some ethical and institutional justifications of historiography. This is the point at which contextualist historians should part ways with the presentist. The latter takes proving his opinions to be one legitimate reason to write a history, whereas contextualists have reason to dispute this.¹⁹ To do so, however, we do not need to deny the general principle that all interpretation bears relation to the purposes of the interpreters.²⁰ The dispute should concern instead the terminological decision that leads Brandom to designate presentist historiography as ‘*de re* conceptual specification’. Facts, for Brandom, are simply true claims (RP, 100ff.). He takes this equivalence as licence to a complex analogy between two relations: the relation between past philosophical claims and our own beliefs is akin to the relation between other people’s opinions and immediate perceptual appearances. If I think Kant was wrong in the B Deduction, then this opinion (for Brandom) is just like any case in which someone’s utterance appears to me to be disconfirmed, such as a prediction for rain on an ‘in fact’ sunny day. He does not consider that, independently of any theory of truth or meaning, there are decisive local differences between these contexts.

My objection to (Brandom’s defence of) presentist historiography thus pertains not to any general theory of truth or meaning, but rather only to the ethical implications of treating our philosophical opinions on a par with perceptual facts. At the level of a theory of meaning, perhaps, all discourses are in important respects alike. This we can acknowledge despite the many calls, by McDowell, Kremer, and others, for a weaker or less extreme variety of inferentialism (see McDowell, ‘Brandom on Observation’ and Kremer, ‘Representation or Inference’). Brandom and his colleagues all should grant that material and ethical concerns support important local distinctions. But Brandom overlooks these differences when he describes his ‘*de re*’ terminology with examples that are too far from philosophy. His recent book *Reason in Philosophy* abounds in judicial analogies, which are perhaps somewhat enlightening (see especially ‘History, Reason, and Reality’ in RP, 78–108). In *Tales*, however, Brandom became so enamoured with his generalization that he offered the following curious passage illustrative of *de re* interpretation:

If the colonel orders his soldiers to cross the river within twenty-four hours, he is, in effect, ordering them to do ... anything that is necessary, and something

¹⁹In Rorty, ‘Pragmatist’s Progress’, 138 states this plainly. After arguing that interpretations are always relative to the purposes of interpreters, he claims that ‘one thing we try to do is prove that we are right.’

²⁰For Brandom’s arguments on this point, see *Tales*, 106.

that is sufficient to bring about the result. If achieving that result requires cutting down sixty trees (and doing that is within the bounds of their authority, or the colonels), then in a real and practically important sense he has ordered them to cut down the trees, whether he has thought about the matter or would even accept that that is a consequence of his order.

(*Tales*, 102)

This instance of *de re* interpretation is contentious for its definition of authority, since it is dismissive of even subjunctive attribution: Brandom ascribes the order to the colonel, and insists that this is not concluded from the premise that the colonel would recognize that he did so. The inference rather results ‘from laying facts alongside the claims of the text’, in this case the fact of the arborous obstacle in the path of the soldiers. In a *de re* specification of military demands, then, we attribute to an authority whatever of her statement is consistent with the facts as these are available to us. While I find this to be debatable in the military case, the real problem lies with the stretched analogy between the military order and the historiography of philosophy. The interpretation is supposed by Brandom to be analogous to the case of Russell on Plato:

So if Russell can establish that there are at least two things one can mean by ‘x is a part of y’ – one corresponding to set membership and the other to inclusion as a subset – he is entirely justified in querying Plato to see what can be made of his various claims when we distinguish the two senses.

(*Tales*, 102)

The mistake that Brandom makes here is to infer from a characteristic of a specific discourse (viz. military orders) to a different, equally specific discourse in philosophical interpretation. The only characteristic that is common to all interpretive contexts, as far as his argument warrants, is the fairly trivial one about hermeneutic circularity. What counts as a good interpretation of a military order will perhaps fail as an interpretation of a philosophical text for reasons that are material to the needs of military campaigns as opposed to philosophy discussions. In similar fashion, some who excel in logic or philosophy of language will turn out to be substandard hermeneuts and inadequate historians of philosophy. It is widely believed by historians of philosophy that Bertrand Russell is in this class.

A quick glance at the material conditions underlying these two cases should be enough to raise a flag on Brandom’s argument: in the military situation there is an institutional relation that warrants the conclusion to cut the trees, and the colonel’s authority is defined in relation to this institutional purpose. Such a relation is lacking between Plato and Russell. The soldiers are also engaged in a task common to the colonel: their success is his success, and vice versa. The colonel cannot be vindicated in any manner except through the impromptu modifications of his orders by the soldiers, which

is again not the case with Russell. Plato is dead, his philosophy immortal, and its agreement with early Russellian philosophy a matter of tremendous indifference. Most important, however, is that Russell does not possess the same level of warranted confidence in his logical theory that the soldiers possess in their perception of trees. One practical reason for this is that Russell stands to benefit from allowing Plato to pose objections to modern logic, whereas the soldiers do not benefit (presumably) from allowing the colonel's orders to cast doubt on the existence of trees. To consider these cases analogous is to show a lack of sense for the subtlety and historical nuance of philosophical disagreements.

In this section I wish to extend the argument of the previous section by specifying a few criteria of good history of philosophy. I also hope to better characterize my understanding of the conflict between the contextualist and the presentist. Historians need a reason for any cold reactions to anachronistic history, one that makes no implicit appeal to an indefensible theory of meaning. Such a reason, however, need not involve isolating a technical error in a philosophy of language such as Brandom's, nor need it appeal to independent, free-floating meanings. The shortcoming of Brandom's argument is simply that it gives the philosopher of language licence for treating his philosophical opinions on a par with the existence of trees. Such a degree of self-certainty in relation to philosophical opinion is a practical flaw, one that historiography should serve to correct. The historian's judgement presumes rather that exiting the circle of one's native opinions is an ineliminable aspect of historiography.²¹

Another way of stating my suggestion here is that we should preserve the spirit of a famous argument by Quentin Skinner, but without his appeal to intention. Skinner argued that the purpose of historiography was to reveal the contingency of our beliefs and social arrangements, and that this goal requires that we travel in time to recover the intentions of the authors (Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding', 3–53). But the desired conclusion, viz. that awareness of our contingency is a primary goal of historiography, does not rest on the more questionable premiss that the object of history (intention) is a matter of the past. Historians of philosophy do not traffick in bygone intentions, but rather we interpret materially specific and presently extant sets of sentences. This is another way of phrasing the point of what I have called philosophical presentism. This kind of presentism does not imply, as Brandom sometimes wishes it to, that we should interpret older texts in light of more recently prominent ones. It is more important to historians that we allow the older texts to provide us with perspective on the newer ones. Rather than interpret the past in light of contemporary philosophy, this approach allows us to foster scepticism about contemporary discourses. We do not view Locke as an older, less sophisticated version of Rawls, but rather we understand Rawls as an unexceptional descendent of the revolutionary

²¹For a classic statement of this requirement, see Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 41–66.

Locke. The philosopher with historical knowledge is one who possesses, where appropriate, such a critical perspective on the latest developments.

This notion of self-critical perspective points to the crucial incongruence in Brandom's analogy: Plato can teach us to reconsider Russell's distinction – Platonic doctrine and Russellian distinguishing being of like sort – whereas nothing about the colonel's orders entitles us to reconsider the existence of the trees. The historiography of philosophy is thus a critical endeavour for the merely contingent reason that past philosophies are of great use in criticizing and contextualizing more recent philosophies. This is plainly not the case when we deal with perceptual episodes such as the observation of trees. One might go as far as to state a principle of historical pluralism, one that acknowledges the critical aspect of historiography: when bridging two distinct philosophical contexts, it is always possible (and often desirable) to reconsider any given premiss that belongs to only one context. We successfully read Plato, in that case, only when we are prepared to sacrifice even the neat little distinctions of modern logic. Philosophical interpretation has this very useful element of self-criticism – the encounter with a text forces us to reconsider our own assumptions – that is not always appropriate in the military case. This aspect of self-criticism supplies contextualism with a rationale that makes no appeal to an implausible theory of meaning, thus sidestepping Brandom's initial arguments.

This rationale does not exclude presentist histories on principled grounds, but it does illustrate one potential pitfall for the presentist: a resolutely *de re* hermeneut would be akin to a military commander who happened upon a seminar on Plato, without making the required adjustments in terms of local discursive norm. The corresponding risk for philosophers is that we attach too firmly to the specific terms of our education – that we treat the distinctions, concepts, and terminologies of our undergraduate and graduate institutions as if they were perceptual facts or military commands. In the case of a Russellian logician – though not Russell himself – this might include the distinction between class membership and class inclusion. But the status of such a distinction changes over time, it will be contested in some contexts, and at the very least it depends on deeper philosophical decisions (in this case nominalism and set theory). An appropriately historical understanding of the distinction between class membership and class inclusion requires this breadth of context, so that anyone for whom the distinction is only a native one can be said not to understand the distinction (in a sufficiently historical-philosophical sense). A philosopher with historical perspective is one who is aware of the specificity of her context, and she can translate fluently into and out of her native context – an attribute that Robert Brandom exemplifies to an extremely rare degree, though he seems too reluctant to require of others. The historiography of philosophy is that set of activities by which we attain such perspective, so that it is only by reading (for example) Plato that we understand more recent distinctions. I take this account to be roughly consistent with many aspects of Brandom's

philosophy, although it is neglected by his defence of presentist historiography.

These worries of course do not suggest that all instances of anachronistic interpretations are unjustifiable. Anachronistic readings sometimes are justifiable, but such a justification would appeal to the pragmatic situation of philosophers; it should not rest simply in a refusal to historicize our native context. For instance, if today's philosophers find Hegel's *Logic* difficult to understand, then I (or better, Robert Brandom) will explain it to them in their terms. But in this we hope that they also learn that their own terms are not final, and that they can see that a good philosophical point can have been made in the stilted academic German of the 1810s. They might then, if they be good historically minded individuals and have the requisite time and resources, come to acquire that linguistic and conceptual capacity themselves. It is one thing to translate old texts into our provincial idioms, but another to assuage academic prejudices that our idioms are the true ones. In the latter case, one does not merely diverge from the standard aims of the historiography of philosophy, one acts counter to them. This is why, *pace* Rorty and Brandom, presentist history sometimes stands in conflict with contextualist history.

In principle Brandom could agree with much of the foregoing, even though his actual argumentative path overshoots the target. One might paraphrase my rejection of his analogies, and thus my condemnation of Russell as hermeneut, by saying that in philosophical discussion one ought to be more sensitive than otherwise to the context of the other person's utterance, and more aware than usual of the contingency of one's own beliefs. To achieve this kind of goal is a central purpose of the historiography of philosophy, and it is among the reasons why the 'history of philosophy' (as an academic endeavour) remains central to the study of any area of philosophy. It is also a reason why good philosophy is always historical in some fairly strong sense of the word. This principle is consistent with Brandom's pluralistic conclusion, but proposes a qualification: to say that some strategies are inappropriate in some instances is not to deny the value of a broad set of interpretive strategies. The difference here is rather that between a facile pluralism and a rigorously pragmatic pluralism. Although many historical strategies are justifiable, none of them can be justified by a general argument that all strategies are justifiable. In this conclusion I wish to extend this pluralistic gesture to the purported goals of historiography, and in doing so to deliver a friendly censure to historians of philosophy who become intolerant and protective when they read presentist histories.

Although contextualist historians should insist that the purpose of history lies with fostering broad perspective and a sense of contingency, they can also (like Brandom) accept that other philosophers will reasonably assert divergent pictures of the philosophical ideal. My argument in the previous section requires no steadfast and eternal ideal of philosophy, but rather only a practical norm established relative to the needs of a community of

agents. This goal demands, to some extent, that historians of philosophy sometimes react negatively to excessively anachronistic history. These historians do not need, as Brandom sometimes suggests, a semantic truth-maker such as ‘Kant’s philosophy’; they only need a purposive discourse with local standards, and historians of philosophy indeed have such a thing. Perhaps on some alternative accounts of philosophical ideals, the table-pounding polemicist better exemplifies the searcher after wisdom, and we historians of philosophy (not generally being of that sort) should be quick to supply examples of reputable authors who seem to have met this ideal. The interpretive pluralism underwritten by Brandom’s philosophy of language requires that one thus remain open to disagreement, and all criticism (such as mine of Brandom) remains relative to the articulated goals of certain shared activities.²² Brandom likewise embodies this attitude, though as I have been urging it rests uneasily with his presentism, his terminology, and his too-general defence of so-called *de re* interpretation.

My reference to Brandom’s pluralism raises a possible objection to my critique of his philosophy of history, inasmuch as I sought to license the occasional polemic against presentist histories: it should make little difference if Brandom or other presentists violate the local norms of philosophical interpretation, since his theory warrants a plurality of readings of the classics. Any appropriately pluralistic community embraces the interestingly abnormal, and Brandom never claims that other interpreters should follow his model. Like Rorty, Brandom had argued only that we should allow some relatively anachronistic interpretations in addition to the more careful, historically sensitive studies of the great philosophers.²³ His resolution to let a thousand flowers blossom in respect to reading the classics reflects the postmodern emphasis on self-creation defended by his *Doktorvater*, and my critique leans perhaps too heavily in the direction of saying that there is a (albeit locally and publicly defined) right way of writing the history of philosophy.

My response to this objection is thus to concede much of it: historians of philosophy should not react too defensively when philosophers of language provide anachronistic histories. To extend my earlier analogy: even if the table-pounding military commander (re: the stubborn presentist attached to his prior opinions) enters the seminar on Plato without adjusting his discursive norms, the seminarians ought to embrace his doxastic enthusiasm. It is one thing to acknowledge that such behaviour fails to fulfil some goals of the philosophic endeavour, and yet another to repeat the same errors by becoming intolerant. To put the point simply, if presentists violate some central requirements of historiography (viz. self-criticism), then so do intolerant and dismissive contextualists (viz. curiosity, patience, tolerance, pluralism).

²²The strongest expression of Brandom’s pluralism about history appears in ‘Reason, Expression, and the Philosophic Enterprise’ in RP, 111–29.

²³Rorty insists that ‘we should do [rational and historical reconstructions] separately’ (49).

There is indeed a sense in which presentists do not understand history, since they neglect to criticize or abandon their own views in the devoted study of long-deceased writers. My argument requires that we engage in appropriate historical criticism in these instances. But historical criticism and historiographical debate need not descend into defensive bickering. Nor do we have a plausible general strategy of argument against presentist histories that would spare us the trouble of assessing such works as Brandom's on their particular merits.

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