

Robert Brandom

Interview

In January 1999 Robert Brandom has been invited to give a paper and a seminar at the University of Genoa. In that occasion we decided to have a short interview on general problems about his philosophy. The interview was initially supposed to be for general public; however, given the relevance of the topics discussed for epistemology, we decided eventually to publish it on *Epistemologia*.

<<http://www.dif.unige.it/epi/review.htm>>

Here you may find the original text of the interview.

Carlo Penco

Q: Many people wonder how much you have taken from your former teacher, Richard Rorty, and how much you have gone in a different direction. Which are the main difference from your philosophy and his?

A: I have taken from Rorty the normative pragmatist insight that all matters of authority and responsibility are ultimately matters of social practice, and never matters of ontology (that is, never just a matter of how things in fact are in the nonhuman world). Rorty draws from this sort of pragmatism some very radical conclusions: just as we should not look to ground our moral judgments in the nonhuman authority of a god, so we should not look to ground our empirical judgments in the nonhuman authority of an external world. For him, *all* there is to bind us is whatever is required for us stably to agree with one another and cooperate. In my book *Making It Explicit*, I am concerned (among other things) to describe the special structure of social practices that consist in our granting a kind of authority over the correctness of our thinking to the things we are (thereby) thinking *about*. Their authority is of our making, but it is not thereby just our authority. Besides this difference in willingness to countenance talk of representation, perhaps the biggest difference between us is that I am a rationalist, in the sense that I think the linguistic game of giving and asking for reasons—making claims that are liable to demands for justification, and which can serve as justifications of other claims and practical commitments—is not just one language game among others. I think it is the very core of discursive practice as such, that something gets to be a *language* game, to involve the application of *concepts*, at all only by being inferentially articulated, by giving some performances the significance of *claims*, that is, undertakings of commitments that can both serve as and stand in need of reasons (and so can play the role both of premises and of conclusions in inferences). This view puts me at odds with the thought of contemporary neoromantics such as Derrida and of Foucault, as well as with the later Wittgenstein. Rorty does not endorse this sort of semantic rationalism.

Q: Wittgenstein and Sellars are two of your preferred companions; however, while Sellars is almost always welcome, it seems there is some aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy you are not completely happy with. His conception of language game is most of the time abandoned for the "game

of giving and asking for reason". This could be criticized as a too strong rationalistic move. How would you react to such a criticism?

Well, as I have indicated, it *is* a rationalistic position. I see the issue as a matter of how one should go about demarcating the discursive or intentional realm from that of merely mechanistic responses. Wittgenstein *seems* to be willing to call any social practice that involves responding to each others' vocalizations a 'language game' (Sprachspiel). I reserve that designation for practices within which some speech act can have the significance of an *assertion*, of claiming *that* things are thus-and-so. As a pragmatist, I want to understand what we *say* and *think* (the *contents* we express) in terms of what we *do* (the speech acts we perform). And I think that claiming is the doing in terms of which we must understand *propositional* contents (and conceptual contents more generally). Being assertible (claimable, believable), that is, having a propositional content, I understand as being able both to serve as and to stand in need of reasons (being able to be both a premise and a conclusion of an inference). So the rationalism that distinguishes my view from Wittgenstein's derives from three commitments: pragmatism about semantic contents, giving priority to assertion among other speech acts, and inferentialism about assertible contents. Why privilege assertion? Because the other speech acts depend on it. For instance, ordering or commanding someone to do something is not just producing a performance that obliges them to do it. It is specifying what one is being commanded to do by *describing* it, by *saying* what it is one is to do. So I take it that no-one who does not understand the claim "The door is shut," can understand the order "Shut the door," (although they could learn to respond appropriately to those noises—but that is not yet understanding the command as contentful). So I don't think that any linguistic practice that does not include the making of claims can be autonomous: a language game one could play though one played no other.

Q: At the present moment naturalism is the leading trend in philosophy. However your stance is strictly normative. Which is your main criticism to naturalism in epistemology and in philosophy of language and mind?

I think Immanuel Kant's greatest contribution to philosophy was his idea that what distinguishes judgments and actions from the responses of merely natural creatures is not that they involve some metaphysically special sort of stuff (mind stuff), but that they are things we are in a distinctive way *responsible* for. He developed this insight in the form of a normative theory of concepts: judging and acting are thought of as applying concepts, where the concepts determine what we have made ourselves responsible for by having a belief or performing an action, the content to which we have committed ourselves. One of the central tasks of philosophy is to understand the normativity of human belief and agency, the dimension of responsibility it involves, the way we bind ourselves and make ourselves subject to assessments of the correctness or appropriateness of our attitudes. I don't think there is a natural scientific story to be told about this sort of conceptual normativity. But that is not to say that it is *supernatural*. I think it is an essentially *social* phenomenon: we brought commitments and entitlements into the world when we started to take or treat each other in practice not only as doing things, but as *committed* or *entitled* to do them. One can no more understand this normative dimension of our activity by looking into our brains than one can understand what it is to join a political party or to mortgage

one's house by studying carefully the marks on paper that constitute the signature by which (in the right social setting) one did those things.

Q: Would you call yourself a neo-fregean? How do you see the importance of Frege in your work and what do you think it is the main difference between your philosophy and the original fregean project?

The closest affinities between the view of *Making It Explicit* and Frege's original project (in his *Begriffsschrift*, of 1879) concerns the role of logic in semantics. Frege there defines the "conceptual content" of an expression as its role in inference. His "concept-script" is meant to express such inferential roles, to make explicit what follows from applying a concept, what would be evidence for it, and what is incompatible with it. He understands logical vocabulary, paradigmatically the conditional and negation, as having the function of making explicit the inferential connections in virtue of which even nonlogical expressions mean what they do. Thus "if...then..." lets us *say* (put into the assertible content of a claim) what follows from a claim and what is evidence for it, and "not" lets us say what is incompatible with it. The mathematical development of the logic Frege invented has obscured for us this original expressive function he envisaged for logic, and so, I think, much of its philosophical importance. I aim to recover this aspect of his original vision. Frege followed Kant in emphasizing that logic (and semantics) is a *normative* discipline: talk about concepts is talk about how we *should* talk and think, not just about how we actually do. This insight is also very important for me. But Frege seems to have had a platonistic, ontological construal of these conceptual norms, whereas I follow a pragmatist line and see them as implicit in our practice. This is probably the greatest difference between the two approaches.

Q: Your book reveals a strong connection with McDowell's *Mind and World*. What are the main similarities and the main differences?

We both resolutely oppose what Wilfrid Sellars called "the Myth of the Given": the idea that there could be a kind of thing (a sensation, or a meaning) such that just by *having* it (e.g. "before the eye of the mind") one counted as *knowing* (or believing) anything, without having to have learned how to use concepts. We both endorse one of Kant's central innovations: taking the fundamental philosophical problem to be thinking clearly about *semantics*—about what it is for our ideas so much as to purport to be about other things (to seem to us to be representings of something else that is represented)—rather than about *epistemology*—skepticism and the question of whether and if so when that kind of representational purport is *successful*, leading to genuine knowledge. Our differences are both substantive and methodological. Substantively, McDowell is concerned to rescue a notion of *perceptual experience* from entanglement with the Myth of the Given, whereas I think (with Rorty) that we are better off learning to live without such a notion. Methodologically, McDowell is a sort of Wittgensteinian quietist. He thinks the thing to do with philosophical problems is to diagnose why we think they are problems, and to dissolve the assumptions that generate them. By contrast, I am more of a systematic metaphysician, who thinks that positive theories are the proper response (inferentialism about content, pragmatism about norms, and so on).

Q: You are very famous in Europe for your supporting Hegel from within an analytic framework. Where does your interest in Hegel come from? Which aspect of Hegel do you consider the most important for your approach to philosophy?

As I indicated above, I think one of the most important lessons we can learn from Kant concerns the *normative* character of concept use. Hegel, as I read him, transposed this insight into a pragmatist key, with his idea that normative statuses are always the product of *social* practices. I see Hegel, already in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of 1807, wrestling with a core of issues that we only recovered access to recently, largely through the efforts of the later Wittgenstein. I have in mind issues concerning the possibility of understanding conceptual *objectivity* in the context of a social practice account of the norms implicit in concept use. I also read Hegel as offering an *inferentialist* view of semantic content—and consequently, as the first philosopher to struggle with the nature and consequences of semantic *holism*. My interest is not at all antiquarian: I think we have a lot to learn from Hegel on issues of the first importance—issues that we by no means see our way to the bottom of today.

Q: Normally Hegel is considered the typical example of object-oriented continental philosophy; how do you combine your interest in Hegel with the analytic tradition?

Hegel is, of course, interested in a great many things, and I don't pretend to know what to make of everything he says. But the core of his logic and metaphysics—and so the core of his systematic philosophical thought—is a theory of concepts, of their use, and the nature of their content. The story he tells about how the use of concepts, their application in judgment and action, is both subject to the norms implicit in their inferentially articulated contents, and is all there is to institute and establish those contents, seems to me to be of the greatest contemporary philosophical interest. Some of his basic commitments (his understanding of content in terms of use, his inferential holism, the crucial role he sees the actual history of their application making to the content of concepts) are insights that analytic philosophy has had laboriously to rediscover in this century, due to the efforts of such thinkers as Wittgenstein, Sellars, Quine, and Kuhn. Only against the background of these general ideas can we begin to appreciate what is most distinctive about Hegel's way of working them out, in the context of his other commitments. Indeed, without help from these developments in analytic philosophy, I think we remain blind even to the *problems* that Hegel takes over from Kant. For instance, before Kripke sensitized us to issues connected with the making intelligible the *determinateness* of conceptual norms, I don't think we could see that Hegel is very much concerned with this issue, and has a bold, original, and very interesting response to it (one that is not represented in contemporary discussions of that important issue).

Q: Which result do you think is the most single important result (idea) in your book?

Probably the most basic project is the elaboration of a notion of rationality that centers on categories of *expression*: making *explicit* in a form that can be *thought* and *said* what otherwise remains *implicit*, in what simply *is* or is *done*. This thought is worked out at two levels. First, I am concerned to say what it is we must be able to *do* in order to count as *saying* or *thinking* anything at all. And my basic idea here is that we must engage in practices of giving and asking for *reasons*. Making something explicit is putting it in a form in which it can serve as a *reason* for another claim, and for which in turn reasons can be demanded. Second, the function of vocabulary of most interest to philosophers (starting with logical expressions) is to make explicit those *inferential* connections that articulate the contents of all concepts, and the *normative* aspects of our social practice in virtue of which we can keep track of how our *commitments* and *entitlements* are changed by performing speech acts (giving and asking for reasons). I see mastering discursive practice as a matter of knowing what one is committing oneself to by performing certain speech acts, and what would entitle one to them. My project in the book is to make explicit the fine structure of such discursive practice. It puts forward an *expressive, normative, pragmatic rationalism*.

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