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## **Reconstruction and Pragmatist Metaphysics. On Brandom's Understanding of Rationality<sup>1</sup>**

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In this paper I illustrate what is *reconstructive rationality*, a notion that remains rather undetermined in Robert Brandom's work. I argue that theoretical and historical thinking are instances of reconstruction and should not be identified with it. I then explore a further instance of rational reconstruction, which Brandom calls “reconstructive metaphysics”, arguing that the demarcation between metaphysical and non-metaphysical theories has to be understood as a pragmatic one. Finally, I argue that Brandom's reconstructive metaphysics is basically a pragmatist metaphysics. Here I try to outline a pragmatist understanding of the concept of metaphysics in order to reconcile Brandom's more or less implicit attempt at metaphysical theorizing with his devotion to a pragmatist tradition that is resistant if not hostile to the very idea of metaphysics. Hence I come back to the question of how pragmatism has contributed to the understanding of “reconstructive rationality”, and argue that the latter is a notion of rationality which is needed by Brandom's philosophy but which cannot find a clear place in the typology of the five forms of rationality that he introduces, being more akin to the core structure of rationality rather than a specific form of it.

### **Introduction: Telling a story**

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for helpful comments on this text. A previous and shorter version of some paragraphs of this paper has appeared in the proceedings of *Towards an Analytic Pragmatism. Workshop on Bob Brandom's Recent Philosophy of Language*, edited by C. Penco, C. Amoretti and F. Pitto, CEUR Workshop, Aachen, 2009: <http://ceur-ws.org/Vol-444>, pp. 1-7.

Pursuing pragmatist ideas in an analytic spirit is the main goal of Brandom's project of an "analytic pragmatism". This project is explicitly understood in *Between Saying & Doing. Towards an Analytic Pragmatism* (henceforth *TAP*) as a theoretical and systematic one. Nevertheless, working out this systematic theory implies, even if in a sketchy way, telling a story: the story of the "epic" confrontation between the project of philosophical analysis and pragmatism over the past century or so (*TAP*, p. 1). Thus the theoretical project of *TAP* endorses a historical, more or less explicit, understanding of at least two traditions in philosophy, that is the pragmatist tradition and the analytic tradition. Brandom commits himself to telling a pragmatist story – a story he develops further in his latest work *Perspectives on Pragmatism. Classical, Recent, & Contemporary* (henceforth *PP*) –, and to setting it within the narrative of the analytic tradition: so understood, analytic pragmatism is like a way of extending the classical project of analysis and of renewing the pragmatist spirit.

But how does the telling of a story – the story of one or two traditions confronting themselves – relate to theory building? This is a question Brandom scarcely addresses and that I think it would be fruitful to pose in order to further develop and supplement his perspective. We can start to appreciate this if we realize that the *TAP* project is internally linked, both in its theoretical and narrative part, with an understanding of what *reconstruction*, *rational reconstruction*, and *retrospective rational reconstruction* are. These notions remain rather underdeveloped in Brandom's account and need further investigation. As I will argue, the theoretical project and the narrative project can in fact be understood as different exercises of a form of philosophical rationality that exhibits the features of retrospective reconstruction. This may be called "reconstructive rationality".

What then is reconstructive rationality? And how did pragmatism contribute to this way of understanding what rationality is? This is a question that remains implicit both in *TAP* and in *PP* – and which is never directly addressed in *Making It Explicit* (henceforth *MIE*). Brandom's philosophical masterpiece. I will address such a question mainly with reference to *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (henceforth *TMD*). In particular I'll try to argue that theoretical thinking and historical thinking, insofar as they take a systematic form, can be understood as different deployments of our reconstructive rationality. From this point of view I'll try to shed some light on a Hegelian idea that I take to be at the core of the whole project of *TMD*: "The idea I have been aiming to put on the table is that offering a systematic contemporary philosophical theory and a rational reconstruction of some strands in the history of philosophy can be two sides of one coin, two aspects of one enterprise" (*TMD*, p. 16).

## 1. Reconstructive methodology and philosophical theory

If one wants to understand what is at stake in this passage, one should first try to pick out what exactly *reconstruction* means. First of all it refers to a certain kind of *methodology*. Brandom speaks of *reconstructive methodology*.

Reconstructive methodology is an approach to contents that can be characterized as having the following features: *selection*; *supplementation*; and *approximation*.

One needs first of all to address a particular target or set of claims, concepts and distinctions, that may be taken as central, basic or fundamental to the problem in question; secondly, one needs to supplement those claims, introducing external

vocabularies, criteria of adequacy, and premises; approximation is then the process of recursive application of selection and supplementation, aimed at reaching a kind of reflexive equilibrium between the raw materials and the target of the reconstruction (whether this be an interpretive, theoretical or historical one).

After first selecting and supplementing, one needs to further select, with the aim to “strip down the target claims to a core set, on the basis of which it is then possible to reconstruct all the rest” (*TMD*, p. 113). The next stage is then to “use the selected and supplemented raw materials to define the concepts and derive, by multipremise inferences, the claims of the selected and supplemented target” (*ibid.*, p. 113). Finally, one needs to assess the adequacy of the reconstruction<sup>2</sup>.

Brandom first presents the method of reconstruction with reference to a case of interpretation of the conceptual contents of textual claims. Even if this may be taken as an illuminating characterization of hermeneutical understanding, one should be careful not to confine it to textual interpretation and historical thinking. In fact, as I’ll argue, reconstructive methodology may be at work also in theoretical thinking, in the building of a theory. One should not then oppose the hermeneutical understanding that is needed in history of philosophy to reconstruct textual claims to the methodology that is followed in philosophical theoretical thinking. I propose to read in this light the following passage from *TMD*: “When I was a graduate student, my teacher David Lewis advocated a picture of philosophy like this. The way to understand some region of philosophical terrain is for each investigator to state a set of principles as clearly as she could, and then rigorously to determine what follows from them, what they rule out, and how one might argue for or against it” (*TMD*, pp. 114-115).

Reconstruction, according to my thesis, is then a feature of theory building in philosophical thinking. A species of this genus is philosophical analysis too, defined in *TAP* as the project that aims “to exhibit the meanings expressed by various target vocabularies as intelligible by means of the logical elaboration of the meanings expressed by base vocabularies thought to be privileged in some important respects – epistemological, ontological, or semantic – relative to those others” (*TAP*, p. 3).

This is in fact an operation that implies a selection of some features, taken to be central, of the target vocabulary, as well as a recursive supplementation of them by means of the base vocabulary – itself selected and supplemented by logical elaboration – that is expressed in explicit rules, which can be formalized in regimented technical or artificial languages.

So “philosophy cannot be *identified with* analysis”, as Brandom says in *TAP* (p. 216), insofar as analysis – understood as an atomistic algebraic form of understanding

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<sup>2</sup> As for the choice of what to select, and how to supplement it, there are no external criteria of adequacy. Such a choice – a Hegelian “beginning” – has an inescapable element of arbitrariness – as in the Hegelian “problem of the Beginning” – that can be overcome and justified only in the circular and reflexive process of approximation.

– is, according to the reading I am proposing, only a species of the genus of philosophical reconstruction<sup>3</sup>.

Let's now consider more carefully some general features of philosophical theory.

First of all, it is an instantiation of the methodology of reconstruction, that is an operation of selection, supplementation, and approximation applied to conceptual contents<sup>4</sup>.

The main focus of the reconstruction here is not textual interpretation of conceptual contents but rather their articulation within a theory (which may also be defined as a case of conceptual interpretation).

Nonetheless, I think that the difference between theory building and textual interpretation should not be understood as an essential one. I propose to understand it rather as a pragmatic difference of focus, within the same kind of act, on the same kind of object (conceptual content)<sup>5</sup>: an act that even in the case of theory building is always the exercise of hermeneutical understanding.

This is a consequence of the fact that the act of understanding – a sort of “stripping down and building back up” (*TMD*, p. 114) – exercised by philosophy in its various forms can be understood, following Brandom, as something that implies “*hermeneutical triangulation*: achieving a kind of understanding of or grip on an object (a conceptually articulated content) by having many inferential and constructional routes to and through it” (*TMD*, p. 115).

Furthermore, a reconstructive theory is a systematic one when conceptual contents are carefully, rigorously and completely articulated along their constructional and inferential dimensions (note that here “inferential” and “constructional” “routes” are introduced as not being identical).

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<sup>3</sup> Please note that reconstruction, the way I understand it, is not specific to philosophical thinking, since it occurs also in natural and human sciences and, up to a certain degree, in common thinking too. Thus, reconstruction should be understood as a methodology that is implied by every form of thinking that tries to answer to criteria of adequacy.

<sup>4</sup> Such an attitude to adopt a conceptual focus on conceptual contents – what I would call “conceptual reconstruction” – seems to be one of the main features that reconstruction tends to assume in philosophical thinking and that distinguishes it pragmatically from the approach of empirical sciences – whose content is not just conceptual – and of religious and artistic thought – whose focus is not mainly conceptual. Where the line is to be drawn exactly, is a matter of degrees, and depends pragmatically on the context in which such an attitude is adopted.

<sup>5</sup> In textual interpretation the relations between conceptual contents to be reconstructed are focused mainly as being instantiated within the context of a textual tradition of authors, whereas in theory building they can (but must not) be free-floating of any specific textual tradition.

It would be important here to better understand the status of terms such as “system”, and “systematic”, that are very often used by Brandom but scarcely defined. In some points Brandom seems to equate “system” with “theory”. One may be keen to accept that theory building always implies reconstruction: after all, reconstruction is a task of approximation and may come in different degrees. Nonetheless, it seems more difficult to accept the idea that theory may always be characterized as systematic in a strong, inferential sense. This also seems to be in contrast with Brandom’s strong commitment to methodological pluralism. Strong systematicity seems then to be an ideal of rigorous inferential control of reconstruction: of course those who do not share a logical and inferential model of rationality may not even find this an ideal for theory building, and even theories that strive towards it may satisfy it in different ways<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. Historical interpretation as reconstructive undertaking

So far we have not addressed directly the kind of enterprise involved in telling the story of a tradition, that is in historical philosophical interpretation.

Here again, I think that the real difference does not concern the object of historical philosophical interpretation – which, as in the case of theoretical thinking and textual interpretation, is always conceptual content – but rather a pragmatic focus on its historical deployment (more or less centered on authors, contexts or texts).

How then does historical reconstruction proceed? According to Brandom, rationally reconstructing a tradition means offering a “selective, cumulative, expressively progressive genealogy of it” (*TMD*, p. 14). One could say that historical philosophical interpretation is: *selective*; *cumulative*; and *expressively progressive*.

Here I can clearly state my thesis: the historical understanding involved in telling the story of a tradition is first of all an instantiation of reconstructive methodology. This reconstructive task implies selection of particular conceptual contents to be deployed in the narrative (picking out some particular claims within the authors and texts being considered), their supplementation with some further external vocabularies, premises, criteria of adequacy (*de re* readings) that should permit us to translate the conceptual contents that occur in different authors and texts in a single controlled idiom, on the basis of which it is then possible to reconstruct all the rest; reflexive approximation, through recursive selection and supplementation, to the

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<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, a tension may arise between the idea of systematicity as rigorous reflexive approximation, and the idea of systematicity as completeness. I think this is due to the fact that reflexive approximation seems to be an infinite task, and as such prevents us from achieving completeness as the final stage of the reconstruction. If this is the case, then the idea of systematicity as completeness would have a different status from the idea of systematicity as reflexive approximation, since the latter is an activity, whereas the first would be, in the best case, a regulative ideal. In the worst case, strong systematicity as completeness could reveal itself to be in contrast with the commitment to methodological pluralism.

target of the reconstruction (the idea of a tradition as historical deployment of some conceptual contents through authors and texts).

This tells us that selection is always connected with supplementation and approximation even in historical thinking. But what about the “cumulative” and “expressively progressive” characters of historical reconstruction? Can we understand them only on the basis of the methodology of reconstruction?

Here let’s make use of another quotation from *TMD*: “This is a *historical* conception, which understands rationality as consisting in a certain kind of reconstruction of a tradition – one that exhibits it as having the expressively progressive form of the gradual, cumulative unfolding into explicitness of what shows up retrospectively as having been all along already implicit in that tradition” (*TMD*, p. 12).

On the one hand, the idea of the gradual, cumulative, and expressively progressive unfolding into explicitness is the result of the application of reconstructive *approximation* to the idea that conceptual contents develop themselves historically: such a historical development is reconstructively understood as a process of approximation – i.e. as a gradual and cumulative unfolding – to the accomplished conceptual content whose genealogy is to be exhibited as the history of a tradition. The tradition is reconstructed, through selection and supplementation, as such a process of conceptual approximation.

If we now focus on the “expressively progressive” character of historical reconstruction, we can see that here something more is in play. What exactly? Brandom leaves this largely unanswered.

Here I propose to supplement Brandom’s position by arguing that historical reconstruction is an instantiation of reconstructive methodology that deepens our understanding of what *reconstruction* is, insofar as on the one hand (1) it makes explicit some dimensions of the reconstruction already present in other forms of philosophical thinking, and on the other hand (2) it adds something new to our understanding of what rationality is.

Concerning (1) historical reconstruction, in particular with its idea of expressively progressive unfolding into explicitness, it focuses on the *retrospective* character of reconstruction<sup>7</sup>. Even if, to different degrees, a retrospective character is always at stake in every form of reconstruction – from theoretical, metaphysical, up to hermeneutical and historical ones – where a stripping down and building back procedure is involved. In historical thinking, the assumption that something shows up retrospectively as being already implicit in the target of the reconstruction takes the shape of “what shows up retrospectively as having been all along already implicit in a tradition”, whose unfolding is then understood as “an expressively progressive trajectory through past application of the concept” (*TMD*, p. 13).

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<sup>7</sup> In chapter three of *Reason in Philosophy. Animating Ideas of Idealism* (henceforth *RP*), Brandom further develops a “retrospective notion of rationally reconstructing” and names it – in relation to a reading of Hegel – “retrospective reconstructive recollection”.

Concerning (2) – what does historical thinking add to our understanding of rationality?

First of all, it points out that historical thinking, being an instance of reconstruction, is a genuine form of the exercise of rationality. This vindicates the idea that telling a story can be a legitimate rational move in the space of reasons, that is, a legitimate form of justification.

In particular “systematic history” (*TMD*, p. 15) is the form of historical thinking that mostly approximates to the ideal of systematicity as rigorous control of reconstruction.

From this point of view, if rationality can be understood also as a certain kind of reconstruction of a tradition, then I think that the peculiar features of such an accomplished reconstruction – that is its selective, gradual, cumulative and expressively progressive character – can be understood as specifications of some criteria of systematicity. That is to say that historical thinking, so conceived, is a way to make explicit systematicity as *an* ideal of rationality and to specify some criteria of such an ideal of rationality when it occurs in historical reconstruction. This is not the only way systematicity can be satisfied by reconstruction, since, as we have seen, one could develop a theory in a systematic way. Hence *systematic history* and *systematic theory* can be (but don’t necessarily have to be) understood as two different instances of systematic reconstruction, where different criteria of the ideal of systematicity may be specified relative to their different focus<sup>8</sup>.

But there is a more radical answer to question (2) – what does historical thinking add to our understanding of rationality? The idea that conceptual content develops historically applies not only to the object of historical reconstruction (the historical development of some conceptual contents), but also to the form of rationality such a reconstruction exhibits. Given that rationality is some kind of concept use, historical thinking adds up to that “whatever content those concepts have, they get from the history of their actual application” (*TMD*, p. 13).

This comes close to what Brandom names a “historical conception of rationality” (*TMD*, p. 12). Historical thinking makes it clear to us that historical reconstructions are rational moves because concepts not only develop through history but are also historically instituted as to their normative content. Historical reconstruction makes it explicit that history is a dimension of rationality.

We can now come back to the question we asked at the very beginning – how does the telling of a story relate to theory building? – and start to appreciate the strategy that has led to the answer I have sketched out: theoretical thinking and historical

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<sup>8</sup> For example the idea of systematicity as careful and rigorous reconstruction may apply to both, whereas the historical thinking, with its focus on phenomena of cumulative gradual unfolding, would put an emphasis on reflexive approximation as the way such a rigorous reconstruction deploys itself. On the other hand, the idea of systematicity as complete articulation may not wholly apply to historical reconstruction – given the strong retrospective, perspective, and not just inferential character of historical phenomena – and could be more on the side of systematic theory, due to its focus on logical inferential routes as such.

thinking, insofar as they take systematic form, can be understood as different deployments of our reconstructive rationality.

So far we have left unanswered the further question we raised: how did pragmatism contribute to this way of understanding what rationality is? And how does all this relate to the theoretical project of *TAP*, in particular to the afterword, and to the historical narrative of *PP*?

In order to tackle these questions, we now need to explore a further instance of rational reconstruction, which Brandom calls “reconstructive metaphysics”.

### 3. Reconstructive metaphysics

What about *reconstructive metaphysics*? *TMD* is presented in its subtitle as “a collection of historical essays in the metaphysics of intentionality”. And what metaphysics means here is conceptually articulated under the label of “reconstructive metaphysics” (*TMD*, p. 115).

Understanding what is going on here may later shed some light on how we are to understand the positive notion of metaphysics that Brandom introduces in the afterword to *TAP*, since this latter notion seems to presuppose an understanding of metaphysics as a reconstructive project.

What then is reconstructive metaphysics?

Up until this point, the Lewisian characterization of philosophy<sup>9</sup> is not sufficient to pick out what exactly is metaphysical in reconstructive metaphysics. We may guess that reconstructive metaphysics is an exercise of methodological reconstruction that falls under the Lewisian characterization of philosophical theorizing. Something more is needed however to settle the question. Here Brandom adds something relevant to it: “The aim and aspiration of the systematic metaphysicians of old – for present purposes, paradigmatically Spinoza, Leibniz and Hegel – was to craft a restricted and controlled idiom in which everything could be said” (*TMD*, p. 116)<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> See the already quoted passage, inspired by Lewis, where Brandom writes: “the way to understand some region of philosophical terrain is for each investigator to state a set of principles as clearly as she could, and then rigorously to determine what follows from them, what they rule out, and how one might argue for or against it” (*TMD*, pp. 114-115).

<sup>10</sup> For a critical assessment of Brandom’s interpretation of metaphysics see the symposium on *Tales of the Mighty Dead* published in “European Journal of Philosophy”, 13 (3), 2005, pp. 381–441. On Brandom’s interpretation of Hegel see in particular R. Pippin, “Brandom’s Hegel”, *ivi*, pp. 381-408. For a critical reading of Brandom’s whole philosophical project see the essays contained in B. Weiss, J. Wanderer (eds.), *Reading Brandom. On Making It Explicit*. London: Routledge, 2010.



Here I propose to supplement Brandom's theory and to characterize metaphysics as a *reconstructive theory* whose aspiration is global (a theory in which everything could be said) rather than local (a theory in which something could be said, such as algebraic local analysis). This is what at first sight seems to distinguish metaphysical theories from non-metaphysical ones.

Note that this may refer both to a theory that applies globally only to some local region of the philosophical terrain – a theory in which everything about that region could be said – and to a theory that applies globally to all regions of the philosophical terrain.

And I think that also the distinction between metaphysical and non-metaphysical theories, being related to the distinction between global and local, needs to be defined as a pragmatic one, having its criterion in the degree of systematicity of the reconstruction and its ideal in the pragmatic commitment to try to say everything in that vocabulary<sup>11</sup>. Here again the notion of “everything” is not ontologically conceived, as we'll see, but rather pragmatically as a discursive commitment to saying everything in that vocabulary.

Even if Brandom affirms that he thinks that “this sort of conceptual engineering remains a viable enterprise today”, he does not further develop the notion of reconstructive metaphysics in *TMD*. This is a task that Brandom picks up again directly in the afterword to *TAP*, where he tries to make sense of a positive and viable notion of metaphysics that may resist the pragmatist criticism of metaphysics as a magical, mythical enterprise, and indirectly in the last paragraph of chapter five of *PP*, where he immanently criticizes Rorty for having *de facto* embarked in just the “metaphysical project” – in the end a pragmatist kind of “systematic metaphysics” – he himself “explicitly and strenuously rejects” (*PP*, p. 155).

Concerning the positive notion, metaphysics is here understood as the “enterprise of crafting a vocabulary in which everything could be said” (*TAP*, p. 227; see *PP*, p. 155).

The point here is not that some vocabulary is taken as privileged. This happens in every form of philosophical reconstruction, where a determined vocabulary is assumed as base vocabulary, that is as a privileged vocabulary with respect to some other vocabulary, i.e. the target vocabulary to be reconstructed by selection and supplementation.

A metaphysical theory is rather a theory that takes some base vocabulary as *globally, universally* privileged – that is, privileged with respect to *all* other vocabularies. A theory assumes a distinctively metaphysical commitment when it commits itself to globally privileging some vocabulary, i.e. when it takes some vocabulary as having universal expressive power: to the effect that “everything that can be known, said, or thought, every fact, must in principle be expressible in the base vocabulary in question” (*TAP*, p. 219).

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<sup>11</sup> Even degrees of systematicity are pragmatic, since they are a matter of the practical process of reflexive approximation, and there is no given scale (as for an example an ontological hierarchy) of such an approximation, whose adequacy can be stated only in terms of reflexive equilibrium from within the act of reconstruction.

This is a characterization of the metaphysical enterprise in semantic rather than in ontological terms, since metaphysics is understood as an enterprise that “seeks to establish distinctive sorts of relations among vocabularies” (*TAP*, p. 230).

In fact metaphysics is understood as a distinctive application of the semantic base vocabulary/target vocabulary distinction that Brandom analyzes in *TAP*.

From here we can make a more general point that concerns our investigation of reconstructive rationality. We are now in a position to appreciate the fact that the base vocabulary/target vocabulary distinction Brandom elaborates in *TAP* is the semantic structure of the genus of methodological reconstruction, and of which textual interpretation, historical interpretation, local analysis, and metaphysics are, according to my thesis, different species.

Here it is important not to forget that different species of the same genus of reconstruction are distinguished neither by essentialist features nor semantically, but rather pragmatically.

Let’s take again the demarcation between non-metaphysical and metaphysical theories. This distinction, as I have argued, should be referred to different pragmatic commitments to take the semantic base vocabulary/target vocabulary distinction to be local and relative (to particular expressive-explanatory claims) or to take this distinction to be global and absolute.

And note that such a pragmatic demarcation could apply also to textual and historical interpretation, which are both forms of reconstruction that can be pursued with or without a metaphysical commitment.

Furthermore, the same global/local distinction that underlies the pragmatic demarcation between metaphysical and non-metaphysical theories is to be interpreted pragmatically.

Brandom’s proposal in *TAP* is to make sense of the notion of ‘all possible vocabularies/facts...’ “understanding ‘everything’ regulatively rather than constitutively” (*TAP*, p. 228). On the one hand, pragmatism has argued very well that the notion of “all possible vocabularies” is one to which we can attach no definite meaning, since every new vocabulary produces new purposes which are not formulable in the antecedently available vocabularies (*PP*, p. 156). But one does not preliminarily need to grasp semantically a definite or determinate notion of totality (be it a semantic – all possible vocabularies – or an ontological one: all possible facts) in order to undertake the metaphysical commitment to privileging globally rather than locally some vocabularies as base vocabularies.

Thus, the ‘everything’ can be taken to express a regulative pragmatic commitment that has the following form: “for every vocabulary anyone comes up with, the metaphysician is committed to the favored base vocabulary being adequate, when suitably elaborated, to express what it expresses” (*TAP*, p. 228).

Hence I propose to say that the metaphysical commitment is a pragmatic commitment to a pragmatic regulative principle. This is what makes the metaphysical enterprise still *viable*. Such viability is understood in *TAP* in terms of reasonableness. If metaphysics is understood in the sense previously sketched out, it would then be, according to Brandom, a “perfectly reasonable undertaking, and that we potentially have a lot to learn from pursuing it” (*TAP*, p. 228). According to my thesis, this should mean that metaphysical enterprises that are not viable – at least that we can make no sense of – are those that do not understand pragmatically the metaphysical

commitment and its content, and thus we undertake it pretending that the concept of a definite totality makes sense and is always at our disposal before its application.

The reasonableness of metaphysics is thus measured against a pragmatic criterion of adequacy.

#### 4. Some pragmatist themes in rational reconstruction

So far I have developed and supplemented some ill-defined pragmatic themes in Brandom's notion of reconstructive metaphysics, seeing how the pragmatic mediation by use of the semantic structure of reconstruction (by our practical normative attitudes) should intervene in characterizing metaphysical theories.

I think that one can appreciate some pragmatist themes – more closely related to the philosophical tradition of pragmatism – if one understands Brandom's reconstructive metaphysics as a basically “pragmatist metaphysics”<sup>2</sup> in at least two senses: first of all, because it strives to make metaphysics compatible with pragmatist criticism of metaphysics. Secondly, because it shows us that one of the fundamental ideas of pragmatism – the social nature of normativity – is a metaphysical one.

Pragmatists, in the broad sense that Brandom uses the term – a sense that encompasses Hegel as well as Dewey, Wittgenstein and Rorty – have objected to traditional, representational metaphysics in that it is based on a mythical, “ultimately magical” (*TAP*, p. 222) understanding of the nature of some sort of privileged authority. In Brandom's jargon, what is wrong is not the assumption of some vocabulary as privileged – this is something that occurs in every philosophical reconstruction, even a pragmatist one – but rather the assumption “of the idea of some vocabulary being necessarily privileged by *how things are*, [...] quite apart from our contingent projects and attitudes” (*TAP*, p. 222).

And this is wrong for the pragmatists because one of their basic ideas is the view of the social nature of normativity, i.e. that there are no normative statuses apart from our practical normative attitudes.

But if we redefine the metaphysical commitment as I have proposed, then even the assumption of some base vocabulary as universally privileged depends on our normative attitude and may become compatible with the view of the social nature of normative authority.

Note again that here Brandom should introduce a distinction between good and bad, reasonable and not reasonable metaphysics.

Let me supplement Brandom's position in the following way. *Good metaphysics*, that is one which is compatible with pragmatist criticism of traditional bad metaphysics, would be one pursued in an open-minded, that is a *pluralistic* and *fallibilist spirit*: given the regulative character of the understanding of the “everything”, it is inevitable that every metaphysical reconstruction is subject to partial failures and, as Brandom admits, “fails to reconstruct in the favored terms *all* the antecedent uses of *all* the vocabularies it aspires to codify” (*TAP*, p. 228); hence many different possible metaphysical vocabularies will always be possible as different expressive resources to take many different paths through the philosophical terrain.

Given that, if one wants to make sense of the required distinction between good and bad, reasonable and not reasonable metaphysics, then Brandom's appeal to two basic pragmatic commitments is no longer enough.

Theories that take the semantic base vocabulary/target vocabulary distinction to be local and relative (to particular expressive-explanatory claims) cannot be contrasted only with theories that take this distinction to be global and absolute. Otherwise every metaphysics would be a bad one in the given sense, since "absolute" means here exactly "because of how things anyway are": independently from our attitudes, i.e. not relative to our pragmatic cognitive convenience or taste.

Hence I propose to understand good metaphysics – compatible with the pragmatist idea of the social nature of normativity and pursued in a pluralistic and fallibilist spirit – as a theory that takes the base/target distinction as a *global* and *relative* one. And some may be surprised by the fact that what comes closest to satisfying the criteria of good metaphysics is simply the Hegelian picture – sketched by Brandom in his portrait of Rorty in *PP* – of the "modest metaphysician" as someone who "aims only to codify the admittedly contingent constellation of vocabularies with which her time (and those that led up to it) happens to present her – capture her time in thought" (*PP*, pp. 156).

There is a second reason why I think that pragmatism is relevant to this understanding of reconstructive metaphysics. This is because the fundamental idea of pragmatism – the view of social nature of normativity – is a metaphysical one.

The view of the social nature of normativity – labelled by Brandom as "normative pragmatism" – does not only imply, as he argues against Rorty's self-understanding, to accord "a certain substantial categorial privilege to the ontological category of the social" (*PP*, p. 111). In fact, I think that the view of the social nature of normative authority can be restated in a stronger form as the idea that all possible normative statuses are instituted by social practices. If this is so, then we are faced with the same problem that the notions of "all possible vocabularies/all possible facts" pose.

This means at least that the normative pragmatism itself undertakes a metaphysical commitment to privileging globally some vocabulary as universal base vocabulary.

Not to admit this – that is not recognizing that the pragmatist dismissal of bad metaphysics is itself a metaphysical position – would amount to taking the metaphysical commitment as an absolute one – understanding the social nature of normativity as a feature of how things are – hence falling back to the bad, representational metaphysics which pragmatism wanted to rescue us from.

I think that the only reasonable way out here is to recognize positively the metaphysical character of the basic idea of pragmatism and to pursue it in a pragmatist way, that is a pluralistic and fallibilist one.

Hence, to assume "that all possible normative statuses are instituted by social practices" – as Brandom puts it – would mean to metaphysically commit to reconstruct every instance of authority anyone comes up with, in the favored base vocabulary of social institution.

We can now finally come back to the question of how pragmatism contributed to the understanding of reconstructive rationality. One way of vindicating this idea could consist in historically reconstructing a tradition for the idea of reconstructive rationality: a tradition that could encompass not only the idea of systematic thinking in German classical philosophy, but also the idea of rational reconstruction in

Hermann Cohen's version of Neokantianism, the reconstructive understanding of philosophical method by Jürgen Habermas, and John Dewey's idea of "Reconstruction in philosophy" (Dewey 1920). I think this would be a viable enterprise – which Brandom does not follow – and one that we could learn a lot from, but that would require much more external supplementation than we can afford here.

It's better then to limit ourselves to looking a bit closer at Brandom's tales of pragmatism. In *TMD*, *TAP*, and finally in *PP* Brandom analyzes many senses of the word "pragmatism". I propose to introduce here a further distinction between *thin pragmatism* and *thick pragmatism* which can be understood as being a fundamental distinction by which to categorize the notions of pragmatism which Brandom introduces.

On the one hand we have a *thin sense* of the notion of pragmatism, which seems to me to encompass all the different meanings of pragmatism Brandom explicitly defines in *PP*. *Pragmatism in the broad sense* is by Brandom understood as "a movement centered on the primacy of the practical, initiated already by Kant" (*PP*, p. 56): i.e., a philosophical approach giving explanatory primacy to practice, activity, use, doing. All other forms of thin pragmatism are ways to specify the idea of the primacy of practice and to apply it to different fields. *Methodological pragmatism* consists in the idea that semantics must answer to pragmatics" (*PP*, p. 3): this amounts to the idea that pragmatic theory supplies the explanatory target of semantic theory. *Semantic pragmatism* consists in a "kind of use-functionalism about meaning" (*PP*, pp. 24): the idea that "it is the way practitioners *use* expressions that makes them *mean* what they do" (*PP*, p. 61). *Fundamental pragmatism* consists in the idea to understand "knowing *that* as a kind of knowing *how*" – that is in terms of practical abilities to do something –, and thus to give explanatory priority to norms implicit as proprieties of practice over norms explicit as rules or principles (*PP*, pp. 13-14, 65-66). *Linguistic pragmatism* is the association of methodological pragmatism and semantic pragmatism through fundamental pragmatism (*PP*, p. 24): the idea that the locus of concepts lies in language, understood as an ensemble of discursive practices both instituting conceptual norms and applying them. *Normative pragmatism* is finally understood as "pragmatism about norms". Normative pragmatism is a distinctive form of fundamental pragmatism and consists in employing a normative vocabulary to specify the practice of using linguistic expressions, and to understand norms that are explicit in the form of rules as intelligible only against a background of norms implicit in practice (*PP*, p. 69). All these sorts of what I have labeled as 'thin' pragmatism are according to Brandom instantiated in classical American pragmatism (James, Dewey and Peirce are the authors he mainly considers). Still, such notions of pragmatism have historical roots that go back much further – having in Kant and Hegel their most eminent historical exponents – and that are to be found also in later authors of different traditions such as Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Quine, and Sellars.

On the other hand, we have a *thick sense* of pragmatism, understood in a more substantive way, and that consists in the global application of the vocabulary of the social nature of normativity. This amounts to what I have called *metaphysical pragmatism*<sup>12</sup>, even though those who make this assumption very often do not

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<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that Brandom just uses the label "metaphysical pragmatism" as the title for the paragraph of *PP* developing the criticism of Rorty's

acknowledge it (this is the case of what Brandom calls “radical pragmatism” in its different shapes: Rortyan anti-metaphysical radical pragmatism, Wittgensteinian, McDowellian quietism). And since rational beings, according to Brandom’s rationalist version of pragmatism, are concept users, metaphysical pragmatism is, in the end, an image of our rationality.

Here it is important to note that pragmatism, in the large sense that Brandom uses the notion in *TMD*, reaches its most accomplished form when it realizes that the relation between the social and the normative is mediated through history (*TMD*, p. 47 s.).

Along these lines pragmatism seems to be in *TMD* a position that points at an image of our reconstructive rationality as the intersection of three fundamental dimensions, that is its *social dimension*, its *inferential dimension*, and its *historical dimension*. If this is the case, then the notion of pragmatism Brandom uses in *TMD* does not correspond to the (thin) senses of pragmatism he later distinguishes in *PP*. And I think this is due to the fact that in *TMD* Brandom is much more concerned with what I have labeled as the thick notion of pragmatism, that is pragmatism understood as pragmatism metaphysics.

It would be a reasonable enterprise to show, independently from Brandom’s narrative, how historical American pragmatism has contributed to the discovery of each of the dimensions of pragmatism he introduces in *TMD*. Unfortunately this is a task that *PP*, Brandom’s latest book on “Classical, Recent, & Contemporary pragmatism” does not really undertake.

In particular, one could show in detail how Charles S. Peirce contributed to the inferential understanding of thought, how Georg H. Mead (an author Brandom never mentions) contributed to social functionalism, and how John Dewey contributed to a historical understanding of concept use.

However, there is no single pragmatist in the historical sense whose thought instantiates all three dimensions altogether. This is a thesis that Brandom implicitly endorses in *TMD* – at least in not committing himself to giving any comprehensive account of a single historical pragmatist – and that should be put under further historical scrutiny. Let’s now read this in light of *PP*, where Brandom says that American classical pragmatism instantiates all the senses of pragmatism he defines (broad, methodological, semantic, linguistic, normative) and that I have grouped under the label of thin pragmatism. This gives us a reason to find ourselves confirmed in the idea that the notion of pragmatism Brandom is using in *TMD* is of a different sort, namely of what I have called a thick, metaphysical one, and that the explicit introduction of such a notion is needed.

And here it is important to note that, according to Brandom’s *TMD* narrative, the first (and only?) thinker whose thought captures all three dimensions of the large sense of pragmatism is again Hegel, who is the pragmatism *ante litteram*. I don’t want to go into the justification of this reading but I want only to hint at what exactly

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supposed anti-metaphysical philosophical perspective, but never gives a definition of the notion itself. So this seems to be the only notion of pragmatism introduced in *PP* that remains unanalyzed.

constitutes the core of what I would call Hegel's pragmatist metaphysics of normativity.

This is constituted by Hegel's theory of recognition, understood as the theory according to which reciprocal recognition is the structure that institutes and thus makes the normative conceptual content intelligible along his three dimensions, i.e. the social (a process of reciprocal acknowledgment of authority and responsibility), the inferential (the process of application of concepts in reasoning) and the historical (the process of the development of a tradition as the process of determination of conceptual contents).

A systematic theory of recognition would then be the positive, reconstructive development of the pragmatist metaphysical insight into the social nature of normativity.

## 5. Conclusion: six forms of rationality?

So far I have tried, first of all, to make sense of the notion of *rational reconstruction* and, furthermore, to characterize metaphysics as a pragmatist enterprise which expresses such a form of rationality. I want to conclude by highlighting a problem that may arise when we focus on the notion of reconstructive rationality the way I have been doing throughout this paper.

In fact, in the first part of *TMD* Brandom distinguishes five forms of rationality, that are: *logical* (being able to distinguish logically good arguments from those that are not logically good); *instrumental* (the ability of getting what you want); *translational* (the ability to map some behavior by others in ways that allow us to converse with them); *inferential* (being able to play the game of giving and asking for reasons, understood here as mastering inferential roles); and *historical* (rationality as a certain kind of historical reconstruction of a tradition).

In Brandom's picture, each model has specific features of its own (focuses on a particular aspect of rationality), and each subsequent model in the scale subsumes and incorporates the previous one. If this is so, then one should expect that historical rationality, while revealing something left so far unsaid about what being rational is, subsumes and incorporates all previous forms of rationality. (Here one could additionally ask why what Brandom elsewhere calls the *social* dimension of rationality is not mapped out here among the forms of rationality).

What about "reconstructive rationality"? Why doesn't such a notion find a place among the forms of rationality Brandom introduces in *TMD* and why isn't it further analyzed in his later works? On the one hand, I think that reconstructive rationality should not be equated with inferential rationality. Brandom himself seems to admit this insofar as he writes in *PP* that "there is more to reason than inference. Making distinctions, formulating definitions, and producing constructions are all rational processes, alongside drawing conclusions" (*PP*, p. 30n). And note that even in *TMD* rational reconstruction had been understood as a recursive process of construction consisting in selection, supplementation, and approximation. As such, (re-)construction may have inferential routes but is not itself inference. Furthermore, I think that the idea that "there is more to reason than inference" should not mean that one should equate reconstruction with systematic historical thinking, as Brandom tends to do, even if the latter lets us appreciate some fundamental dimensions of

reconstruction. Here I want to give a further argument related to the position Brandom supports in *RP*. Brandom attributes to Hegel the discovery of a novel, historical understanding of rationality as “recollection”, that is as retrospective, expressively progressive, rational reconstruction. But one has to note that what distinguishes *recollection* from its precursors – and in particular from Kant’s understanding of rationality – is its *diachronic* (both retrospective and progressive) character rather than its reconstructive side. In fact, if one looks back at Kant’s notion of reason as a synthesizing activity, one sees that it already consists of a form of *integration*. In order to be rational one has the responsibility to integrate the judgment into the unity of apperception, i.e., according to Brandom’s jargon, to *integrate* new commitments into the whole that comprises one’s previous endorsements. Brandom characterizes integration as a diachronic activity that involves three sorts of activities: an *ampliative* one – i.e. an activity of extracting the inferential consequences of each commitment, including the new ones, in the context of the auxiliary hypothesis and collateral premises provided by the whole body of one’s commitments, and which implicitly implies an ideal of completeness; a *critical* one – i.e. an activity of repairing incompatibilities between old and new commitments, which implicitly implies an ideal of consistency; and a *justificatory* one – i.e. an activity of being prepared to offer reasons for one’s own commitments, which implicitly implies an ideal of warranted rationality (*RP*, pp. 36 and 108 ff.,101). I do not want to go into further details here, but it should be clear that *integrative rationality* is already a reconstructive rationality, insofar as the activity of integration implies the reconstructive activities of selection of the commitments to integrate, supplementation of these commitments with auxiliary hypothesis, and recursive approximation of the whole process. Furthermore, *recollective rationality* is understood as an implementation and extension of the activity of integration: its distinctive feature is the *diachronic* – i.e. historical – character of the integration it accomplishes. Hence one should not identify reconstruction with the fifth form of rationality, that is historical rationality. But Brandom never analyzes reconstructive rationality per se and normally treats it only in relation to historical rationality.

So there is something missing in Brandom’s project, and that is exactly the role that “reconstructive rationality” should play in it. Once we have made explicit reconstructive rationality, how should we then understand it? Is this a sixth, distinct form of rationality, that subsumes and incorporates the previous ones? On the one hand, the analysis of the reconstructive proceeding of thought seems to make explicit something about rationality that was left unsaid in the development of the other models: something that seems to be related with the systematicity as an ideal of reason (whose apex seems to be systematic, reconstructive metaphysics)<sup>13</sup>. But this is

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<sup>13</sup> One may be tempted to use the *MIE*’s notion of “expressive completeness” to understand the idea of “system” Brandom uses in his later works. Expressive completeness is mentioned in *MIE* as “one of the criteria of adequacy that has guided the project”, and is characterized in the following terms: “this means that the model reconstructs the expressive resources needed to describe the model itself. By means of the logical resources, the theory of discursive practices becomes expressively available to those to whom it applies” (*MIE*, p. 641). As such, the notion of



not because reconstructive rationality supervenes on the other forms of rationality, but much more because Brandom introduces reconstruction only in relation to historical rationality (which according to him supervenes on the other four forms) and then makes clear something that was already present in the previous forms.

In the previous sections I have argued that history telling, theory building, and metaphysics can be understood – can be translated or reconstructed – as instances of rational reconstruction, that is as different species of the genus of rational reconstruction (provided that here such species are distinguished neither by essentialist features or semantically, but pragmatically). Now I would like to propose understanding rational reconstruction as transversal with respect to the *TMD*'s five models of rationality, that may be in their turn understood as different ways of developing and perfecting reconstructive understanding. So, even if there is something distinctive in rational reconstruction, I suggest that one should not understand it as a sixth form of rationality but rather as the shape of an act of understanding that unfolds in different dimensions of reason.

The transversal relation of reconstruction to the five forms of rationality could be understood in a strong sense as being itself a genus-species relation, whereas all the five forms of rationality should be understood as instantiations of reconstruction. In a weaker sense this could be understood as a periphery-core relation, where some forms (for instance inferential and historical rationality) are closer to the core, and others have weaker family resemblances with it. So far we have seen that rational reconstruction can be identified with none of the five forms of rationality listed by Brandom. Furthermore I have given some reasons why one could understand inferential and historical rationality in terms of rational reconstruction. If one could succeed in translating all the five forms of rationality in terms of reconstruction, then a criterion of adequacy for the strong thesis could be satisfied. Reconstruction could then be the transversal, unitary core structure of rationality that develops pragmatically through all its different forms. *There is more to reason than inference.*

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expressive completeness is understood as a form of explicit and complete “expressive equilibrium” (which is in its turn understood as “the ideal that the theory should specify practices sufficient to confer on the various locutions considered all the kinds of content required to state the theory itself”: *MIE*, p. 116). Note that this notion of complete expressive equilibrium presupposes the very idea of reconstruction – it is introduced as an instantiation of reconstruction –, and as such cannot exhaust it. Furthermore, the ideal of “completeness” is here specified in logical and inferential terms. Brandom's idea is that the logical vocabulary supplies “full expressive resources”, in the sense that “the expressive power of logical locutions is necessary and sufficient to make possible the adoption of the *explicit* discursive scorekeeping stance” (*MIE*, pp. 640-641). In this sense such a characterization does not exhaust even the idea of “system” and “systematic”, since here the notion is specified in relation to a determinate form of rationality – that is inferential rationality – while other forms of specification of its content are still needed in order to have a full account of it.

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