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Appropriation, Dialogue, and Dispute: Towards a Theory of Philosophical Engagement with the Past

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Abstract

This article suggests a change of perspective on philosophy's engagement with its past. It argues that rather than the putative purport of giving life to the past philosopher's work, philosophical engagement with the past gives life to one's own. Drawing on the neo-pragmatist thesis of Robert Brandom, it suggests looking to what philosophers *do* when they attribute meaning to concepts and considering their engagement with the past as *appropriation* in consequence. By scrutinizing Robert Pippin's opposing thesis of philosophical engagement with the past as dialogue, and carefully examining Brandom's, the article suggests an account for appropriation that shows it to be non-dialogical, and hence unable to yield the fruits associated with this conception, but also insightful and rich with other philosophical values. Brandom and John McDowell's dispute over the interpretation of Wilfrid Sellars provides an illustration of the proposed perspective and of those values.

Keywords

Brandom – pragmatism – history of philosophy – appropriation – hermeneutics – Pippin – McDowell – Sellars

1 Introduction

Philosophy engages its past more than any other discipline. It is common to articulate and argue for a new thesis by reinterpreting the work of one or other great historical thinkers, and in consequence, latter-day philosophical work is often criticized not only for its claims and arguments but also for the

interpretations on which it builds. This article suggests a new perspective on this common practice by considering its use and how it is carried out by philosophers. It argues, as Hans-Georg Gadamer has taught us that every reading and all attempts to impart meaning and to judge a text, however well-intended, are of necessity appropriate to the reader's perspective.¹ The difference, however, between acknowledging the historian's predicament, of which Gadamer speaks, and understanding philosophy's engagement with its past as *appropriation* is that while the historian purports to give new life to the past philosopher's work, the latter-day philosopher enlists past philosophy to give new life to her own. From a pragmatist point of view that looks to what philosophers *do* when they engage the past, rather than what they *ought* to do, a new account of engagement with the past arises which renders irrelevant accusations of inappropriate exploitation of the helpless dead and offers insightful philosophical lessons.

This perspective draws on and extends the view of Robert Brandom. In an unusual act of self-awareness, Brandom reflects on his own engagement with the Mighty Dead and offers an account that uses Gadamer's insights as building blocks. By attributing meaning based on his inferentialism thesis, Brandom justifies the freedom he takes to choose from, supplement, and approximate the past for his own interests and needs, and thus turns the hermeneutic question on its head.² While Brandom's account could have been considered merely a marginal attempt to head off critiques, the inferentialism thesis on which it draws, combined with his understanding of the historical process, lent it a broader and stronger claim than perhaps Brandom intended. To explicate it, and to draw out its implications, however, requires attending to a contrary approach, best found in Robert Pippin's criticism of Brandom and his own alternative view of philosophical engagement with the past as dialogue.³

The article begins by sketching Brandom's philosophy and making explicit the argument for appropriation that lies within it. It introduces first the inferentialism thesis, which grants legitimacy to appropriation, and second, Brandom's notion of "historical rationality," which, the article argues, grants appropriation superiority over different possible interpretational methods. Next, it presents Pippin's remarks on Brandom's method, alongside the short

1 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall, 2nd ed. (London & New York: Continuum, 2004).

2 Robert Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 90–118.

3 Robert Pippin, "Brandom's Hegel," *European Journal of Philosophy* 13:3 (2005), 381–408; *Interanimations: Receiving Modern German Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1–7.

account he presents independently of those remarks, with the aim of combining them into a unified and lucid alternative perspective that focuses on the concept of dialogue (which stands at its heart). The article then looks to the two theses together to show both why Pippin's view cannot provide a solid philosophical reply to Brandom and what it nevertheless highlights about appropriation. Based on this discussion, I delineate the values of the suggested perspective and the philosophical lessons inherent in appropriations. The last section demonstrates this in the fascinating dispute between Brandom and John McDowell over Wilfrid Sellars's work, and shows appropriation to be a central and widespread practice, whether one reflects on it as does Brandom, or not, as does McDowell.

2 Brandom's Mighty Dead

Brandom's 2002 book, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, presents interpretations of six great philosophers of the past that, unlike most collections, combine to form a narrative. Starting with Spinoza and culminating in Sellars, Brandom draws a historical trajectory of his brand of inferentialism, as elements of the thesis are shown to be implicit in the past, develop over the course of history, and come to full explicitness in the present. The book, however, is more than an interestingly constructed collection of interpretations. Rewriting the past into a history as Brandom does – the reconstruction of a tradition as a progressive trajectory leading to present commitments, now to be seen as they were always already implicit in the history of thought – is in Brandom's view the *historical rationality* that accounts for the becoming and validity of conceptual norms.⁴ The introduction of the book shortly presents this new development in Brandom's philosophy of language and accordingly illuminates what follows as a three-fold project. First, it is an illustration of the notion of historical rationality, "a concrete instance of such an enterprise," as Brandom explicitly writes. Second, and drawing on the first, it is a historical account that justifies and validates Brandom's own philosophical concepts, as it is the "instance" of inferentialism. And third, it is an argument about philosophy's engagement with its past. The last is only implicit, and perhaps only the outcome of Brandom's choice to illustrate the notion in the field of philosophy, but as shown in the following, it sets the ground for a new vantage point from which to view not merely the

⁴ Brandom, *Tales*, 12–17, 33–34.

philosophical ancestors of Brandom's tradition as he writes, but also, and more interestingly, the *engagement* with them.⁵

2.1 *Inferentialist Hermeneutics*

The legitimacy Brandom claims in imparting meaning to a text as he finds it is drawn, however, not from the historical rationality, but from the inferentialism thesis.⁶ According to inferentialism, meaning is a matter of use, resulting from the inferential connections concepts have with each other. To argue that meaning results from observation, as the philosophers Brandom calls "representationalist" do, is to fall into "the myth of the given." While empirical stimuli may, and indeed do, cause the uttering of words, what makes it a meaningful concept application in judgment and not mere noise is that it has *implications*, that it is tied by inference to other words. This is the distinction in Brandom's view between sapient awareness and mere sentient responsiveness. Both human agents and parrots, in Brandom's example, can respond reliably to red objects by uttering "this is red," but only for human agents does this *mean* something, since only for them does it *entail* the object is colored, not green, etc. Those consequences and incompatibilities, the use it may or may not have as *reason* for further judgments, constitute the meaning of the concept, to which the sapient speaker is *committed* and *responsible*.⁷ Her responsibility is to the concept and its unity, as well as to her *doing* when she applies the concept and *her own unity*. To make a judgment, as Brandom interprets Kant, is to *rationally* integrate new commitments (concepts) into our existing ones by following the three norms of integration: critical (excluding incompatibilities), ampliative (extracting consequences), and justificatory (placing it as consequences to others), which formulates a consistent, whole, and warranted "space of reasons."⁸

Addressing the question of interpretation, Brandom turns to Gadamer's authority, and uses his inferentialism theory to provide philosophical grounds to the latter's pivotal insights, claiming that without which they are reduced to

5 Brandom, *Tales*, 17 (quote), 15.

David L. Marshall in "The Implications of Robert Brandom's Inferentialism for Intellectual History," *History and Theory* 52 (2013), 1–31, also argues for lessons to be learned from Brandom's thesis. Committed to intellectual history, however, his account emphasizes different aspects and not appropriation as the following one does.

6 Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Also found in the shorter version: *Articulating Reasons* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

7 Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, 89–91; *Articulating Reasons*, 46–49.

8 Robert Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 33–38.

the status of mere “platitudes.”⁹ Providing these grounds, however, that is, placing the “platitudes” within Brandom’s system, instills them with new meaning and turns the hermeneutic question Gadamer has considered on its head.¹⁰ Interpretation is the attribution of meaning to concepts of written texts, and therefore, like all concepts, it depends on the concepts in its vicinity – on the set of inferences with which it is taken and by which it is integrated. The meaning is relative to, and hence derives from, the commitments that serve as background for the concepts at hand. Accordingly, interpretation is of necessity appropriative to some perspective, as Gadamer has taught us, but this is not an obstacle in the way of extracting meaning, but rather the very nature of meaning, without which there is no sense to meaning at all.

As such, there is no epistemological preference of one perspective over another; one can choose any background of commitments for the interpretation. Brandom divides the possibilities into two groups that he terms *de dicto* and *de re* specifications of content. Their names reflect an analysis of language in Brandom’s inferentialism (with history in semantics), but for the purposes of this article, suffice it to understand them as two complementary perspectives on the same subject, where the *de dicto* specifies its content in the light of the author’s commitments, while the *de re* draws on any other set of commitments (for example, one’s own). The *de dicto*, in this definition, can be seen as equivalent to the hermeneutical purport to better understand the original meaning, the one the author intended, which is indeed in accord with Brandom’s inferentialism, the concept’s connections to others in the author’s net of commitments. But this choice of background is no more legitimate than other backgrounds, Brandom tellingly reiterates. It is not truer of the meaning, and not better in any sense, as the *de re* specification has “at least an equal claim to illuminate the commitment undertaken.”¹¹ As meaning depends on

9 Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*, 92–94.

10 This is, in fact, the act of appropriation that is elaborated on in the following pages. While it is beyond the scope of this article to compare the two approaches and unveil Brandom’s appropriation of Gadamer, one can find an illuminating analysis in Cristina Lafont’s 2008 article, which despite reading Brandom differently than this article, supports this claim, as she writes at the beginning: “one may begin to suspect that what will end up being at issue ... is rather whether Gadamer is an orthodox Brandomian.” Lafont, “Meaning and Interpretation: Can Brandomian Scorekeepers be Gadamerian Hermeneuts?,” *Philosophy Compass* 3/1 (2008), 17–29 (18 quote).

This understanding of Brandom’s relation to Gadamer may serve as a reply to Kenneth Baynes, who bases his argument against Brandom’s rejection of Habermas’s criticism on Brandom’s allegiance to Gadamer. Baynes, “‘Gadamerian Platitudes’ and Rational Interpretations,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33:1 (2007) 67–82.

11 Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*, 95–96, 99–100, 102 (quote).

background commitments, the only thing to be considered is whether the interpreter was forthcoming about those commitments, and whether she properly derived the meaning from them.

With the same self-awareness that originated this entire account, Brandom introduces what he terms *de traditione* as his option of choice for most of his interpretations. In this specification of content, which naturally belongs to the *de re* group of interpretations, one takes the commitments of *a tradition as established*.¹² The reader approaches the past with what Brandom calls “target-claims”, and uses a method of “selection, supplementation, and approximation”¹³ to reconstruct the past into a history that shows how those claims were always already implicit in it. However, this sort of interpretation is not simply another option as Brandom presents it to be, since history, as already mentioned, bears a special kind of rationality, and the constitution of a history has a special force of vindication. To understand why one must return to Brandom’s thesis of meaning.

2.2 *Historical Rationality Added*

For Brandom, concepts do not acquire their content, and do not *hold* us committed and *bound*, by our commitment only – by our *normative attitudes* only, in Brandom’s terms. In his holistic picture, he needs to explain the possibility of being wrong, of avoiding “what seems right to me would be right,” as Wittgenstein put the problem.¹⁴ To add constraints, and to make intelligible concepts like fact, truth, mistake, and others from the representational vocabulary, Brandom draws on Hegel and introduces the reciprocal recognition model. Unlike philosophers who rely on some given of apriority, for Brandom the use (and meaning) of a concept is governed by the social structure in which it takes place; it is subject to recognition of others, and depends on *their* normative attitudes, which are taken together with one’s own. By a game of giving and asking for reason – a dialogue in Brandom’s sense of the term – a correct application, or a wrong move in language, is constituted: *normative statuses* that have binding force while remaining fallible, still dependent on human *attitudes* and in no way external or prior to practice.¹⁵

12 Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*, 107–109.

13 Brandom, *Tales*, 111.

14 Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, xvi–xvii, 6–7, 30–31, 607; *Articulating Reasons*, 30–31; *Reason in Philosophy*, 64, 79. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 92.

15 Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*, 66, 70–72. Hegel’s model substitutes Brandom’s “score-keeping model” that he develops in *Making It Explicit* to explicate the same linguistic social practices (e.g. 141–143, 181–183. In *Articulating Reasons*, 80, 165–166).

History, in Brandom's later view, plays a similar, if *diachronic* pragmatist role. Seeking to explain the availability and force of *determinate* conceptual norms, and again having only uses as raw materials, Brandom suggests that past uses determine their future uses just as in Common Law.¹⁶ The common law judge, he argues, privileges certain past rulings as precedents but not others, and thus constructs an expressively progressive trajectory that justifies both the decision she takes and the trajectory she constructs. Doing so constitutes once again an act of integration that grants judgments and agents their rationality, as the judge integrates her commitments with past commitments by drawing consequences when she decides which cases serve as precedents, and by rejecting incompatibilities when she decides which should be ignored. This grants the judge great freedom, yet within the limits of the existing past and the choices that will be taken in the future, that is, limits placed by the social relations of the diachronic sphere. By choosing precedents, the judge recognizes the authority of former judges, and by petitioning acknowledgment of her own judgment, she recognizes the authority of future judges, which, in Brandom's view, constitutes a *normative status* that is independent of her *normative attitude*.¹⁷

The interpretation of a text *de traditione* is, therefore, part of that process itself. The reader who selects, supplements and approximates the past to show how her "target-claims" were always already implicit in the tradition's background commitments is engaging in the same process of historical rationality – of a reciprocally justified rational normative integration – that recognizes the normative authority of the past while petitioning on its basis for its own recognition by future thinkers who, in doing so, will deem claims suggested correct and properly applied. Brandom's understanding of history as a process of determinateness *of use and by use* hence redefines the latter-day philosopher's engagement with the past as a means to validate and argue for her commitments by enlisting past philosophers thought in legitimate acts of appropriation.

16 Jeremy Wanderer, in his book *Robert Brandom* (New York: Routledge, 2008), claims that adding this argument to inferentialism is unnecessary (201–208). His claim, however, relies on the *Tales*, which by itself can leave the impression the argument is merely rhetorical and so secondary and redundant (e.g. 33, 90), and not on Brandom's later writings, which tell a different story in which the argument's essentiality is disclosed (e.g. *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 78–108). Ronald Loeffler, whose book *Brandom* is more recent (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), interestingly finds the temporal perspective to already be present in Brandom's inferentialism, in his discussion of anaphora (216–218).

17 Brandom, *Tales*, 13–14; *Reason in Philosophy*, 84–90.

3 Pippin's Ghosts of the Past

Whether taken as a general and radical argument as proposed above, or as a local defense of his own work, Brandom's approach has convinced few, and his specific interpretations have been criticized by many.¹⁸ The only philosopher who has seriously confronted it is Robert Pippin. Preceding his critique of Brandom's interpretation of Hegel, Pippin writes: "But I should admit at the outset that the relevance of those questions will depend on just what Brandom means by the *de re* method of interpretation he defends at the beginning of *TMD*."¹⁹ In the discussion that follows, Pippin seems to give Brandom his argument, and to object merely to the viability of applying it specifically to Hegel, claiming the principle of "selection" in the method of "selection, supplementation, and approximation" ignores the unique character of Hegel's work as "a theory of everything."²⁰ But Pippin's objection runs deeper than this. Footnotes to the discussion cash out his first remark, quoted above, and reveal his different understanding of *de re* interpretation, and a short thesis on philosophy's relations with its history, which serves as an introduction to his latest book, presents his different view of philosophical engagement with the past in general. Together they form a highly relevant, albeit short and implicit, opposition to the position this article advances.

3.1 De Re as *Interanimation*

Attempting to explain the definitions of *de re* and *de dicto* to the reader, Pippin presents them, as Brandom does, as two different perspectives, equally philosophical and equally respectable. For Pippin, however, one seems to include the other. Without explicitly disputing Brandom, by merely reinterpreting (appropriating) Brandom's definition, Pippin gives away his decidedly non-Brandomian philosophical commitments. The *de re* interpretation differs from the *de dicto*, in his view, in that the original author would not sign off on it, as in Strawson's reading of Kant, in his example. But within Strawson's interpretation, he goes on to argue, there still remains something of Kant that

18 E.g. John Haugeland, "Reading Brandom Reading Heidegger," *European Journal of Philosophy* 13:3 (2005), 421–428; Willem A. DeVries and Paul Coates, "Brandom's Two-Ply Error," in *Empiricism, Perceptual Knowledge, Normativity, and Realism: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. Willem A. DeVries (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 131–146; John McDowell "Why is Sellars's Essay Called 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind?'," in *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel and Sellars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 221–238.

19 Pippin, "Brandom's Hegel," 381.

20 Pippin, "Brandom's Hegel," 381–382.

is transplanted in the new context, it is still “guided by *some* insight of a historical author.”²¹ Hence the *de re* for Pippin could be said to consist with a core of original meaning that does not change when placed among different sets of commitments – a prior *de dicto* element, as it were. To tie this claim with Pippin’s first criticism, this *de dicto* element restricts the interpretive freedom Brandom wrongfully takes and forbids the sort of selection that he inappropriately makes.

But Pippin does not see himself as committed first and foremost to *de dicto* interpretation. On the contrary, to introduce the approach to the past that he himself advances, he emphasized its differences from hermeneutics and intellectual history. Whereas these fields see the attending to past philosophy as preparatory to philosophizing, his approach, named “interanimation,” sees it as an act of philosophizing in itself. Since to philosophize in Pippin’s view is to engage in dialogue, the philosophical engagement with past thinkers requires one to resurrect their ghosts and make them speak. To do that, Pippin writes, we need to give the ghosts “the blood of our hearts” and be “willing to admit that some of our most deeply held philosophical convictions can be challenged by these ghosts.”²² Here, however, lurks a danger according to Pippin. By giving their own blood, readers might unwittingly (let alone deliberately!) attribute an alien thought to the ghost, and thus fail to properly revive him and achieve the desired dialogue. Pirates, as Pippin calls those readers, and as Brandom can now be called accordingly, in fact leave no “*de dicto* element” to guide the interpretation, and thus fail to properly read the past text.²³

Appropriation is, therefore, a major Gadamerian stumbling block for interanimation from Pippin’s perspective. Yet Pippin does not say how to avoid it. Rather than address it philosophically, he settles for a laconic demand for “historical and scholarly preparation,”²⁴ which leaves the question in place, and the thesis in deficit. But even more important, nowhere does Pippin explain what the problem really is to begin with. Confusing reading in with reading out collides with his view of engagement with the past, but what is it about the latter that so excludes the former? Two answers emerge from Pippin’s work. The first is his presupposed conception of what an appropriate interpretation should be like, found in his unreflective commitments to hermeneutics in his new definition to *de re*. The second, and more interesting one, is the conception of

21 Pippin, “Brandom’s Hegel,” 402, n. 5.

22 Pippin, *Interanimations*, 1–7, 3. Pippin quotes Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1908).

23 Deeming Brandom a “pirate” does not sit well with Brandom’s reading of Hegel serving as an example of “interanimation” in Pippin’s book.

24 Pippin, *Interanimations*, 4, 5, 7.

dialogue on which his approach is built, found in his argument for interanimations. In what follows, I show how Pippin's conception of dialogue explains, and better establishes, the collision he claims for, and hence the non-dialogical nature of appropriation, and in the next section, why this very conception runs counter to the *diachronic* dialogue he argues for.

3.2 *Dialogue and Criticism*

Dialogue, in Pippin's view, is a critical engagement with others by which one's philosophical commitments are liable to be challenged to the point of changing one's mind. This is the very essence of dialogue, as the second condition for interanimation quoted above implies, and the very essence of philosophical work, as Pippin explicitly claims. With no empirical data to keep one's ideas in check, he argues, one needs others to help rethink and revisit one's concepts.²⁵ If interanimation is such critical dialogue, and appropriation is the act of pirates that raise the ghosts in their own image, it follows that the collision between the two that Pippin points to is in fact that between the possibility of being challenged by an interlocutor, and an interlocutor one draws out of her own commitments, as Brandom's *de re* allows. Dialogue necessities an interlocutor that is *other* than oneself.

While Pippin himself does not demand this, and even notably argues the opposite when he writes that dialogue "can be created within a single mind,"²⁶ there is a good reason to hold to that demand, and to find appropriation non-dialogical and unable to facilitate the changing of one's mind in accordance. Pippin thinks that we turn outside because of the limits of our imagination, which can only envision a finite number of dialogue partners.²⁷ However, the importance of dialogue to the progress of thought he argues for is envisaged by many to stem precisely from dialogue's external nature, in which one turns outside.²⁸ It is needed, not for the lack of empirical data, but for the lack of a second perspective. To keep one's ideas in check, as Pippin puts it, is not merely a matter of facts, but a normative one that necessities criticism from without, as argued by Menachem Fisch and Yitzhak Benbaji. Criticism judges states of affairs to be right or wrong – i.e. to deviate or not from what we deem appropriate – by reasoning from norms. In self-reflection we can, therefore, prioritize our norms, and troubleshoot for coherence, but we cannot call *those*

25 Pippin, *Interanimations*, 6–7.

26 Pippin, *Interanimations*, 6.

27 Pippin, *Interanimations*, 6–7.

28 E.g. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1: *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), followed by Michael Friedman, *Dynamics of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

norms into question or deem *them* wrong. For a deep normative change, they argue, one must turn to others, as simply talking to oneself will not suffice.²⁹ The need for dialogue owes, in this view, to the qualitative limits of self-criticism, and not to the quantitative limits of imagination.

This argument can serve as grounds for Pippin's emphasis on dialogue, as well as for his hermeneutical demands. Arguing that *de re* interpretations must contain some core meaning objectively attributable to the author is consistent with his rejection of appropriation, and can be similarly justified by the need for something external to oneself to dialogue with and be challenged by. But can this be achieved? While interanimation seems ever more conditioned on the possibility of reaching such objectivity, the thesis, as already mentioned, does not dawdle on the question how. In the absence of any account or direct remarks on the issue, one can only infer Pippin's hermeneutical position from his short definition of *de re*. Pippin uses the example of Strawson's reading of Kant, but he does not simply claim that it is guided by Kant. Rather, he claims that, despite not being *de dicto*, it is nevertheless a reading *of* Kant, and hence guided by Kant.³⁰ This line of thought, however, bears resemblance to that of the representationalists to whom Brandom objects. Pippin infers here, as they do, the existence of some external objectivity from the very notion of intentionality having an object, and hence presents, as their position does, a variation of the "myth of the given." But Pippin's position perhaps does not have to rely on such myth. Putting aside this claim, and casting the authorial intent that Pippin depicts as "guidance" in Brandom's terms as an essentially *de dicto* specification, as suggested above, seems to open a possibility that avoids the fallacy of the myth. Brandom's definition of *de dicto*, recall, has the pretention of approximating the author's intent on the one hand, while on the other, he is highly committed to not taking any mythical routes, in a way that could suit the case.

4 Engagement with the Past as Appropriation

To take Pippin's thesis as opposed to the one this article seeks to advance requires *supplementations* to his arguments, an *approximation* of his ideas, and even *selection* within his texts, like for example the above-suggestion to ignore the claim that entails a mythical position. The use of the method of

29 Menachem Fisch and Yitzhak Benabaji, *The View from Within: Normativity and the Limits of Self-Criticism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 202–207.

30 Pippin, "Brandom's Hegel," 402, n. 5.

appropriation to discuss appropriation might seem circular to the objectors to the thesis, but it is not only inevitable in a sense (as this section argues), but also fruitful (as the last section demonstrates at length). Such a method has been shown to be used by Pippin himself when he reinterprets Brandom's view to articulate his opposition to it, and it is used here to better explicate this opposition so that it fits the inquiry of appropriation that is at the heart of this article. The *de dicto* interpretation, taken as a linkage between Brandom's and Pippin's views, will be shown to shed light on both, as it fails the task of grounding Pippin's dialogical thesis on the one hand, and uncovers deficiencies in Brandom's thesis on the other. Those very shortcomings will enclose the nature of engagement with the past as appropriation, and consequently the values it has.

4.1 *An Oscillation*

For Brandom, the division into two sorts of content specifications does not seem crucial, especially as they do not differ in value. Nonetheless, dividing them into two equal complementary sorts overlooks how their starting points overlap. This overlapping renders them connected and conditioned, as Pippin interprets them, but in opposition to his view, as the *de re* is the prior and necessary starting point among them, and not the *de dicto*. All interpretations start with the interpreter's commitments. Even if followed by setting some of the author's commitments as background, the *setting* itself draws on one's own. While Brandom does not explicitly endorse such a hierarchy, he opens the door for it, with most of his section dedicated to *de dicto* ascriptions attending to the decisions the interpreter must take at the outset. He writes: "the beginning of responsible interpretation must be to make clear just how the boundaries of the context one is appealing to are determined – and so what the rules are for the sort of *de dicto* interpretation one is engaged in."³¹ Brandom arrives from within his theory of meaning at the hermeneutical circle, and the age-old question of "breaking into the texts," and indeed claims that every reading, not only *de re*, is appropriative to the reader's perspective.³² The division between the two sorts of interpretations made in his *hermeneutical thesis* as based on

31 Brandom, *Tales*, 98.

32 In her article mentioned above (note 10), Lafont argues for the same idea, but on behalf of Gadamer, and in contradiction to Brandom. Even though she recognizes the quoted passage, she holds Brandom committed to a view of "pure" *de dicto*, and in consequence, to a strong division from *de re*, and to an essential claim for equality and not hierarchy, which she terms "ecumenical historicism," and on which she builds her comparison (17–25). Interestingly, Lafont finds similarities to Gadamer in Brandom's *de traditione* (25–27), which has been shown in this article to support appropriation above all.

the different commitments each draws on is enclosed by his *inferentialism thesis* to rest on the different task each takes upon itself, as both start from the same commitments of the interpreter.

For Brandom, accordingly, the questions of *de dicto* – whether a “pure” *de dicto* can be achieved and how – are not questions at all. Unlike many thinkers who have engaged the issue, Brandom opens, rather than closes, the diversity of *de dicto* interpretations. And it is this diversity that renders the use of his notion futile and irrelevant to Pippin’s thesis. What Brandom defines as *de dicto* runs afoul of *the* guiding meaning Pippin demands, and more importantly, abolishes the idea that a revived ghost could be a genuinely second perspective. As the inferential result of the very commitments it is supposed to criticize, the outcome of *de dicto* cannot constitute a challenge to one’s commitments to the extent of changing one’s mind, as was suggested on behalf of Pippin. The myth that his thesis stands on might indeed be avoided, but only at the price of losing to appropriation all critical, dialogical bite.

The loss of a second perspective also affects Brandom’s thesis. A second perspective, recall, is crucial for his theory of meaning and his conception of objectivity, as it places constraints on the problematic autonomy model, and constitutes a normative status that one’s attitude can be wrong in respect to. Consistent with this view, Brandom underwrites Gadamer’s last insight, and describes the encounter with the text as dialogue, between “text-and-context on the one hand, and an interpreter on the other.”³³ Once the context is understood as dependent on the interpreter, it collapses the two perspectives to one, and with it the needed constraints. Oscillating between Pippin’s dialogical hermeneutics and Brandomian appropriation thus resembles the oscillation between “the myth of the given” and “a coherentism that does not acknowledge an external rational constraint on thinking” that animates McDowell’s *Mind and World*.³⁴

4.2 *Non-dialogical Valuable Appropriation*

To put the problem with the Brandomian side more accurately, one may say it does not even seek for constraints, for it does not aim for criticism. The dialogue that Pippin defined as a challenge for one’s commitments, is in Brandom’s thesis a practice that seeks coherence and hence achieves only self-confirmation. As critics have noticed, the dialogue Brandom describes, by which agents keep track of each other’s language moves (scorekeeping), recognize and are recognized, discloses to them the *possibility* of being wrong, but no tools with

33 Brandom, *Tales*, 109.

34 John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 46.

which so to deem their own attitudes.³⁵ The only norm to follow in Brandom's philosophical picture, indeed a critical responsibility in his view, is to "weed out materially incompatible commitments."³⁶ Aiming for unity, however, is barely enough. While such a critical act can weed out inconsistencies, it cannot achieve a deep normative change, for such a change must be governed by norms that lie beyond its reach, as argued above.³⁷

This criticism, however, is irrelevant to Brandom's conception of *diachronic* dialogue. Not because it somehow aligns with such a significant critical dialogue, but because it cannot in principle. This critical dialogue is the very conception that Pippin applied to engagement with the past and that has been shown to hold no water. While the Brandomian picture can be supplemented with (and benefit from) a richer conception of dialogue, it can only apply to the synchronic sphere, and not to the diachronic one. And while Brandom might be troubled by the consequences of its absence from his inferentialism thesis, it seems it would have no bearing on the historical one for him. On the contrary, the thin conception of dialogue that justifies rather than challenges, that confirms rather than questions, is how Brandom defines the *purpose* of engagement with the past, and how he sees its *value*. We should tell, in his view, as many historical stories as we can in order *to confirm* as many target-claims as possible. Each such confirming would "highlight a genuine aspect of the overall inferential role played by the text, the contribution it makes to the goodness of inference."³⁸ Nevertheless, while this depiction of contribution is coherent with Brandom's concept of dialogue (as understood by his critics), it does not suffice to assert that engagement with the past *is* a dialogue *in Brandom's sense of the term*, since this, recall, has already been refuted based on the lack of two perspectives.

Despite the different uses of the concept, both the critical-dialogue and the confirming-dialogue require two perspectives, and neither makes the necessary distinction between synchronic dialogue and diachronic dialogue. Even when the axes are placed clearly to distinguish between the two sides of the analogy, engagement with the present and the past, only one general notion of

35 Loeffler, *Brandom*, 209–212.

36 Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*, 36. This, it should be recalled, is one of the three norms of integration.

37 This is Fisch and Benbaji's criticism on the lack of account for norm modification in Brandom's philosophy, *The View from Within*, 197–202, 206–207. In his latest book, Fisch attributes it directly to the notion of historical rationality. Fisch, *Creatively Undecided: Towards a History and Philosophy of Scientific Agency* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 80.

38 Brandom, *Tales*, 95.

dialogue is applied to both. This is, of course, routed by the very analogy itself. While there is indeed room for an analogy between present community and past tradition, the relationship among members of the first is not symmetrical to that of the second, as Brandom maintains it is and as Pippin's position presupposes. A past figure cannot criticize or confirm one's commitments as a contemporary interlocutor does, and therefore encountering him cannot yield the changing of one's mind or the constitution of a status – at least, not on its own. While those tasks cannot be fulfilled by the diachronic axis, the appropriated concepts are still always up for deliberation in the (potentially) critical synchronic sphere. It is necessary to understand the axes together. This is a point Brandom insists on,³⁹ and one that should be taken seriously if we wish to avoid the pitfall in the oscillation.

Brandomian appropriation is, therefore, not only open to criticism but also welcomes it. From criticism more appropriations arise, and from the multiplicity of appropriations – a richer inferential picture in Brandom's view, and grounds for disputes in this article's view, that shares Pippin's appreciation of the importance of critical dialogue. But appropriation has further, no less important values, which become apparent when we recall the pragmatistic method that originated the inquiry and the theses it draws on, namely, by understanding what philosophers *do* when they appropriate. Since appropriation is an act of self-integration, in which the philosopher conjoins the appropriated concepts to his former endorsements, connecting them inferentially to others by extracting and excluding consequences and incompatibilities, it is “an exercise of reason” in the full sense of the term Brandom employs in summarizing his combination of Kantian and Hegelian elements.⁴⁰ The commitments of the latter-day philosopher come to life in the engagement as she puts them to play, and not those of the ghosts of the past as Pippin hopes.

The appropriating readings that are the outcomes of this reason exercised, the conclusions of the complex inferences that the latter-day philosopher drew from the text, are therefore valuable not only for her but also for us. By *making explicit* the inferential apparatus that is folded within them, appropriations shed new light on the philosophical views that derive them, as they allow insight to how they inferentially “work,” as it were, unlike any direct argument that does not rest on engagement with historical thought. From this perspective, we ask not what the philosopher *took from* the past *into* her own philosophy and *whether* it was properly taken, but rather what she *did with* the past *by* her philosophy and *how* this led to drawing that specific interpretation.

39 Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*, 91–92, 103–106.

40 Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*, 107.

The following section demonstrates this kind of inquiry by looking closely at Brandom and McDowell's dispute over the interpretation of Wilfrid Sellars.⁴¹

5 The Case of Brandom, McDowell, and Sellars

Brandom and McDowell have inherited and view themselves as adhering to Sellars's legacy, only to part ways in producing two important yet contradictory philosophies. This interesting situation has led many to seek the origins of their philosophies in their teacher's work, or in their different readings of him, often followed by deeming one truer than the other.⁴² The perspective of appropriation suggests looking in the opposite derivative direction: from the philosophies to the readings, from Brandom's and McDowell's views to the interpretations they present, and does not judge their proximity to the origin.⁴³ From this perspective we can unpack Brandom's appropriation rather than reject it, we can reveal McDowell's doing as appropriation (despite his likely objection), and we can reconstruct their interpretational dispute as revolving their philosophies and learn more about them. As the two philosophers differ in their attitude toward appropriation, and in what is done by appropriation, their case also shows the centrality, significance, and different manifestations this practice has.

5.1 *Interpretations Disputed*

Sellars is the sixth and final figure in the tradition drawn in *Tales*, and hence, not surprisingly, he is reflected in Brandom's interpretation as the quintessential Brandomian. Brandom focuses on his 1956 paper "Empiricism and the philosophy of mind,"⁴⁴ where he finds Sellars's inferentialism, pragmatism,

41 Note that for this inquiry to be available one must have a second reading, be that of a different reader or of one's own. A dispute plays a crucial role once again.

42 E.g. Chauncey Maher, *The Pittsburgh School of Philosophy: Sellars, McDowell, Brandom* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Mark Lance, "Placing in the Space of Norms: Neo-Sellarsian Philosophy in the Twenty-first Century," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, ed. Cheryl Misak (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Paul Redding, *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

43 Niels Skovgaard Olsen in "Reinterpreting Sellars in the Light of Brandom, McDowell, and A.D. Smith," *European Journal of Philosophy* 18:4 (2010), 510–538, starts with a similar analysis, but only to go on to suggest an interpretation of his own.

44 Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 1, eds. Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), 253–329. This is the most important of Sellars's works,

and Kantianism, which owe to what Brandom takes as an attempt to abandon and refute empiricism (late of Kant).⁴⁵ This position is evident, in his view, in the text's opening sections that introduce the famous "myth of the given," and also in the pivotal section 36, where Sellars presents his "space of reasons." The key to understanding Sellars's entire work, however, is section 16, where the pragmatic-normative element of *endorsement* is introduced by considering withholdings of endorsement as in sentences like "it looks to me that ..." Sellars's notion of endorsement marks for Brandom the commitment and responsibility that he presents in his own view as characteristic of the sapience, and the "withholding of endorsement" marks the disclosure of one's disposition to respond to stimuli, that is consistent with his idea of sentient abilities. On that basis, Brandom claims that Sellars explains empirical knowledge as he does, as deriving from inferential relations in the space of reasons, incorporating only minimal, non-contentful empirical responsiveness.⁴⁶ Sellars's main concern in this "two-ply account of observation," according to Brandom, is the holistic inferential structure of the second ply that enables empirical judgments – the very same *semantic* concern of Brandom himself.⁴⁷

According to McDowell, however, this interpretation of Sellars's work is far from correct, especially if we consider Sellars's later work, *Science and Metaphysics*.⁴⁸ What Sellars aims to do, he claims, is to rescue empiricism from its failures by offering a reformed version of it. This suits his own brand of Kantianism, which due to a different appropriation of Kant, McDowell finds in the central role receptivity plays in Sellars's work. Sellars's sympathy for empiricism is evident, in McDowell's view, right at the beginning, in section 6, but more importantly, it is the very point of the distinction Sellars makes in section

in Brandom's view, which constitutes a troika together with Sellars's "Phenomenalism" (1963) and "Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and the Causal Modalities" (1957). Robert Brandom, *From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom reads Sellars* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 9–10, 127–139. Accordingly, Brandom takes it upon himself to write a "study guide" for it, in *Empiricism and the philosophy of Mind, with an Introduction by Richard Rorty and a Study Guide by Robert Brandom*, ed. Robert Brandom (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

45 Brandom, *From Empiricism to Expressivism*, 4–5; "Pragmatism, Inferentialism, and Modality in Sellars," in *Empiricism, Perceptual Knowledge, Normativity, and Realism: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. Willem A. DeVries (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 33.

46 Brandom, *Tales*, 348–349, 356; "Study Guide", 140–142; "Pragmatism, Inferentialism, and Modality," 40.

47 See especially Brandom, "Pragmatism, Inferentialism, and Modality," 34.

48 Wilfrid Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1992).

38 between traditional and non-traditional empiricism. Whereas traditional empiricism indeed falls to “the myth,” Sellars’s non-traditional version takes into account a logical dimension in which observation reports rest on empirical propositions and hence changes the very nature of experience, which can now be the source of empirical knowledge without falling into “the myth.” On this reading, Sellars’s earlier discussion of “looks” sentences is not at all what Brandom makes of it, but serves as an epistemological argument that credits experience with “intentional content.” To see it as such, however, it must be read together with the late sections 59–60, in which Sellars completes the argument. These sections, which Brandom overlooks entirely, are for McDowell the key to understanding the text and grasping Sellars’s *epistemological* concern.⁴⁹

5.2 *Appropriations Disputed*

Brandom fails to interpret Sellars correctly, according to McDowell, because he reads his own project into Sellars. He ignores some parts and reinterprets others to fit his own views, of which McDowell writes: “it is questionable exegetical practice to insist that a text contains something one wants to find in it, even though that requires one to criticize its perspicuity.”⁵⁰ Hence, McDowell disputes Brandom’s interpretation for being an appropriation. What for Brandom is a successful retrospective reconstruction that suits his inferentialist target-claims, is for McDowell an inappropriate act to condemn. Interestingly, however, a glance to McDowell’s own philosophical commitments shows his interpretation to be just as appropriative.⁵¹

McDowell’s 1994 classic *Mind and World* is an epistemological work that aims to dismantle the putative dichotomous dualism of the conceptual and the non-conceptual by placing experience within the conceptual realm to begin with. It suggests a reformed empiricism in which experience is understood to actualize conceptual abilities in action, albeit being in itself passive and non-conceptual.⁵² With this philosophical enterprise in mind, McDowell’s interpretation of Sellars presented above shows itself in a different light, as mirroring and echoing McDowell’s thinking, just as Brandom’s interpretation does. Nevertheless, it is more elusive than Brandom’s appropriation, not only

49 McDowell, *Having the World in View*, 221–224, 235–236; “Having the World in View: Sellars, Kant, and Intentionality,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 95:9 (1998), 435–436, 463–464.

50 McDowell, *Having the World in View*, 226, 230 (quote).

51 The appropriation thesis is the article’s target-claim. Discovering that appropriation is realized in a specific case is finding in it these target-claims, as the thesis suggests.

52 McDowell, *Mind and World*, 9–13; “Having the World in View,” 437–441; “Avoiding the Myth of the Given,” in *John McDowell: Experience, Norm, and Nature*, ed. Jacok Lindgaard (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 5–8.

because McDowell's interpretation purports to deliver a more objective and less biased reading, but because McDowell also criticizes his subject of interpretation.⁵³ While Sellars is right, in his view, to place experience above the line that engulfs the dichotomy, he fails to follow this topography all the way through by insisting on a form of "sheer receptivity" below it. Sellars's "bad side", as McDowell calls it, hence maintains the dualistic fallacy, and does not reflect McDowell's own view.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, McDowell's break with Sellars does not place him outside the space of McDowell's commitments.⁵⁵ Criticized or embraced, Sellars is interpreted and engaged from McDowell's perspective, which is precisely what allows him *to be* criticized or embraced. A nice demonstration of this is McDowell's treatment of section 36, where, in order to fit his view, he emphasizes one part over the other, softens definitions, and even then claims that Sellars's articulation of the "space of reasons" is a "less helpful" formulation and "not completely felicitous" description.⁵⁶ Whether it is Brandom's self-conscious bear-hug or the critical disposition McDowell adopts without accounting for his interpretational acts, both philosophers *choose* different parts to highlight, and different texts to rely on, both *supplement*, and *approximate* the arguments when needed, and both end up with a different past philosopher, graven in their own image. Brandom and McDowell's dispute over Sellars is therefore that between their own views, namely their different understandings of the empirical, which, more interestingly, engage two different projects they attempt to bridge by appealing to the same past philosopher.

53 Within Brandom's interpretive work there is rarely any criticism of Sellars's views, but even when there is, as in "Categories and Noumena," Brandom's effort goes to show that Sellars's other views undermine his problematic ones, and not that he is simply wrong. in *From Empiricism to Expressivism*, 56–98; see also "Author Meets Critics" in *Sellars and Contemporary Philosophy*, eds. David Pereplyotchik and Deborah R. Barnbaum (New York: Routledge, 2017), 219–249.

54 McDowell, "Having the World in View," 441–442, 451–452, 471–472. McDowell in fact disputes Sellars's reading of Kant and rejects it as appropriation. Interestingly, despite his clear opposition to appropriation, he finds it insightful and fruitful as this article suggests, when he tries to trace Sellars's reading of Kant back to Sellars's commitments, and when he elsewhere looks to Sellars's reading of Thomas Aquinas with an explicit aim "to expound his own thinking" (*Having the World in View*, 239).

55 Willem A. DeVries claims McDowell's interpretation serves his methodological need for an opponent. DeVries, "McDowell, Sellars, and Sense Impressions," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14:2 (2006), 182–201.

56 McDowell, "Having the World in View," 432 n. 3; *Having the World in View*, 234 n. 6.

6 Conclusion

Framed in Brandom's pragmatist terms, to understand philosophy's engagement with its past is to understand what it is that philosophers *do* when they engage it. The answer provided by this article is: *appropriation*. Philosophers read and interpret concepts by placing them within their concepts – integrating them into their own commitments – and, in accordance with the inferential relations these commitments bear to the concepts at hand – they attribute them meaning and content. This process gives life to latter-day philosophers' work, and not to the philosophers of the past, which can, therefore, result in, at best, a conversation between one and one's own voice, and not a dialogue as Pippin (and Brandom) claim. Applying the measurements of adequacy articulated by hermeneutics and condemning it on these grounds misses its genuine value. And applying the synchronic conception of dialogue to the diachronic engagement with the past misses what those values are. Engaging the past does not constitute statuses and is not an opportunity for changing one's mind. Engagement with the past is appropriation, valuable to exercise reason, and to better understand the reason exercised in it.

The full-blooded inferentialist Sellars who refutes empiricism, and the controversial Sellars who rescues empiricism by redefining experience, demonstrate respectively Brandom's and McDowell's appropriations, as they interpret the same past work through their own commitments, and portray him in their likeness. The two appropriations nicely demonstrate the central role played by appropriation in philosophical practice, both in one's own argument and in a dispute with another, which allows the better understanding of both the views each of the philosophers brings to the table and of *their* dispute. The case of Brandom and McDowell's dispute over Sellars's work, however, is but one example of a widespread philosophical practice, past and present, that harbors a wealth of significant philosophical lessons that are rendered noticeable and accessible once philosophy's engagement with its past is considered as appropriation.