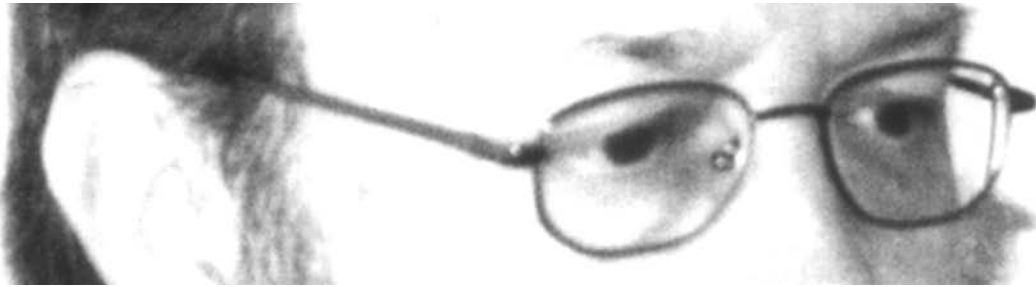


THE SPIRIT OF RORTY BOUND IN THE FEATHERS OF DAVID LEWIS

An interview with Robert Brandom

By Heine A. Holmen



A hero of yours, Wilfrid Sellars, has been famously caught saying, not without edge towards analytic philosophy, that “philosophy without the history of philosophy is, if not blind, at least dumb”. What role would you say the history of philosophy has in your project?

There is actually quite a history of thinking about the history of philosophy within analytic philosophy, not as a separate sub-discipline but as an intrinsic part of thinking when dealing with philosophical problems. It was unusual for Sellars’s generation of analytic philosophers to have systematic aspirations and to situate their work in the history of philosophy. My reading of the current situation is that neither of those aspects is nearly as rare now as they were forty years ago. Paradigmatic analytic philosophers, like Donald Davidson, David Lewis and John Searle, have proven themselves to be systematic thinkers, but not in the manner of having one great book which hold the system together. The increasing emphasis on writing books in contrast to writing articles is more evidence for that the systematic interest has won the day. Again forty years ago it was fairly unusual for people to write books, and the article was the form one looked at. So I think to the extent which history was de-emphasized in analytic philosophy it was always over-emphasized.

One of the reasons I wanted to go to Princeton to work with Rorty in the first place was that to me he

was someone who did not just take his problems from the recent literature. Rather he thought hard about how we have gotten into the pickle that we are in. He found resources for moving forward from an understanding of the larger context in which the problems had arisen. That was something that was very attractive to me. I saw the great sweep of historical understanding that he had in philosophy and intellectual history more generally.

It seemed to me that if we were to free ourselves from implicit and largely invisible presuppositions of our own time, it was only to be done by broadening the focus and thinking more about the history of philosophy. I was very impressed with that vast meta-narrative which Rorty came up with to make sense of what had been discovered. Both positively what we have learned about how things were and what were fruitful strategies, and negatively what we have learned about what were dead-ends and not. My hope was to have that sort of synoptic understanding of the history of philosophy as well.

Not many analytic philosophers read Hegel. You, however, belong among the few. What is it that you get as an analytic philosopher reading Hegel that obviously others of the same stand have lost sight of?

We must remember that even twenty-five years ago Kant was not a respectable topic for analytic philosophy.

hers. The first generation of analysts, that of Russell and Moore, reacted very strongly against the absolute idealism rooted in Hegel, which particularly dominated the Oxford-philosophy of their time. They tarred Kant with that very same brush as they did Hegel, thinking that the idealist rot had already set in with Kant. They were worried that one could not open the door of philosophical respectability far enough to let Kant in, and close it quickly enough to keep Hegel out. Once you let any sort of idealism in you are in for the whole ride. I think in the end they turned out to be right about that, though I would give the evolution a different valence. Hegel is a too fascinating and important reader of Kant for people to continue to take Kant seriously while slamming the door on Hegel. There is a certain conceptual inevitability in Hegel being rehabilitated in the same sense as Kant was, and I think that we are in the early stages of that now.

My own interest stems from seeing Hegel as having picked up on what seems to me the most fundamental Kantian insight, namely his insight into the essentially normative character of concept-use. Kant thinks of concepts as rules, whether theoretically in judgment and cognition, or practically in intentional agency. He re-centered our philosophical concern saying that by applying a concept you have committed yourself, thereby adopting a normative status undertaking a certain responsibility; *inter alia* the responsibility to justify the judgment you have made, the action that you have performed, or the maxim that you have endorsed.

In the end I don't think Kant had an account of the normative character of concept-deployment. His understanding of the relation between the norms that we apply in our empirical, theoretical or practical activity on the one hand, and that activity on the other, involves the distinction between the nominal and the phenomenal activity of the subject. These are the darkest regions of his transcendental idealism. Hegel then came along and in a sense naturalized Kant's normativity, or at least he brought it down to earth, when claiming that in the end normative statuses are social statuses. For Hegel responsibility and authority are instituted by the practical activity and attitudes of the community members.

What seems to me particularly interesting about Hegel is that he combined that social pragmatism about normativity with a rationalism about the conceptual; that is, with an understanding of conceptual content as consisting of something like role in reasoning.

Perhaps you could emphasize on what you find so profitable in the works of Kant? It seems to me that you and Rorty diverge at this point.

I disagree with you about Rorty's views on Kant. He has equivocal relations and attitudes. There is no question that for Rorty Kant is the greatest of modern philosophers and the one who made all things new. Indeed, when Rorty talks about what philosophy as a discipline is, and why it should not continue what it has been doing, he means just the kind of thing Kant did. So he is critical of this enterprise that we both take Kant to be the greatest practitioner of.

On the other hand, if you look at the tools that Rorty deploys to criticize the philosophical tradition, they are in no small part Kantian tools. In particular Kant was the one who taught us to distinguish between the causal antecedents of some bit of behavior on the one hand, and the order of justification on the other. So I think of Rorty as having used Kantian tools to demolish some of the Kantian edifice. But Kant is still, as I refer to him in this afternoon's lecture, for Rorty as for all of us, "the great, gray mother of us all".

To many of us 'Frege and Hegel', or 'Frege and Pragmatism' for that matter, seems awkward when conjoined conjunctively. Perhaps we are trapped in a habit of expecting the nametags to be disjunctively related. Would you consider yourself a neo-Fregean?

Frege, like Kant, made all things new philosophically. There has been a disjunction in anglophile philosophy of language. A tradition that begins with Frege and runs through Russell, Carnap and Tarski to Quine, and which thinks roughly model-theoretically and mathematically about meaning, has triumphantly given us a mathematical and indeed an algebraic grip on the notion of meaning. They have focused mostly on the way in which the meaning of complex expressions can be seen to depend on the meaning of simpler expressions.

This tradition coexists with a more anthropological, pragmatist tradition in the philosophy of language, which sees language as a part of the natural history of human beings. Broadly this tradition includes the classical American pragmatists, the triumvirate of Peirce, James and Dewey, but also the early Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein. They see language as a social practice to be understood in the same terms as we understand other social practices. This tradition worries more about what it is that we have to do to mean anything by our performances.

As a matter of fact these two traditions have not had a lot to say to one another. I think that is a shame, and it is not a situation that is justified by the intellectual situation, but rather various contingent and merely sociological matters have reinforced it. It seemed to me that what was needed was a synthesis of the two traditions. The anthro-

ological pragmatist tradition could teach us about what it was for us in virtue of which various semantically relevant what's its could be associated with the simple expressions of our language. For instance: what did we have to do to mean red by 'red'? And then the model-theoretic tradition could tell us how in virtue of those practical associations of semantically relevant what's its with some of our expressions, we could understand the huge open-ended variety of things that we are able to mean with the language.

Rorty famously described Wilfrid Sellars as having the spirit of Hegel bound in the feathers of Carnap. At one generation later I was pleased to think of myself as having the spirit of Rorty bound in the feathers of David Lewis. In either case what I was trying to do was to bring these two traditions into a dialogue and to see them as complementary rather than competing.

It is here I think Frege is so important. He thought of conceptual content, its *begrifflicher Inhalt*, in terms of role in reasoning. In the very opening of his *Begriffsschrift* he says that two expressions have the same *begrifflicher Inhalt* just in case they have the same inferential consequences when combined with certain other propositions. The task for logic was to be able to make this explicit, so that we could say what the inferential roles of various expressions were. It seems to me that this mechanism of making explicit inferential roles is just what we need to combine with the anthropological pragmatist picture of language. Because *giving and asking for reasons* and making inferential moves is something that we actually do.

In your monograph Articulating Reasons you give privilege to inference over reference. What exactly is inferentialism?

Inferentialism is the view that the place to start when thinking about the meaning of expressions is their role in inference. That which is meaningful in the first instance are sentences, because they are what can play the primary inferential roles of premise and conclusion in an inference. To understand any other expression, sub-sentential expressions, singular terms, predicates, names and so on, is to understand the contribution their occurrences make to the role of the sentences into which they occur, as these

sentences are premises and conclusions of inferences.

One of the principal advantages of *Inferentialist* approaches to semantics is that they say that understanding some expression is knowing when it is appropriate to apply it, and knowing what follows from, what is incompatible with, and what would be good evidence for applying it. This amounts to a practical know-how that you need to have, if you are to be reckoned as grasping the concept. Wilfrid Sellars famously said that the grasp of a concept is always mastering the use of a word. *Inferentialism* tells us what kind of use we should look for. That is its use in inferences.

There are many kinds of expressions that it is very difficult to understand in terms of what they represent. For instance: we know what it is for the cat to be on the mat,

but we are puzzled when it comes to possibilities or necessities. What state of affairs are you representing when you say the cat is necessarily a mammal or possibly in the next room? *Representationalist* semantics has similarly always had difficulty with probabilistic statements. For instance: to say that the chance of rain tomorrow is twenty percent. How are we saying the world actually is? What states of affairs are we representing? Similar problems arise for normative statements.

On the other hand if we just look at the role in reasoning for probabilistic or modal statements, we do not have metaphysical puzzlements. We can just constructively and specifically think about what the inferential role of these expressions is. And also for normative statements, if we think about it in terms of role in practical reasoning we can begin to give a definite semantics for it.

The semantic field that is captured by an *Inferentialist* approach is much broader than that captured by a *Representationalist* one. On the other hand I think it is possible to say in broadly *Inferentialist* terms what it is to represent something. So I do not say that we should stop talking about representation, just that we should understand our representational talk in terms of its inferential role.

This is actually a point on which I diverge from Richard Rorty. He sees how important the notion of re-



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presentation has been in modern philosophy. It is basically coeval with it! But in this he sees the tradition as being wrongheaded. It has fallen into exactly the sort of meta-physical puzzlement that I was speaking about a moment ago. His recommended therapy is that we should simply do away with representational ways of talking and with the notion of representation. We should talk in pragmatic terms about how it is useful for us to act rather than in terms of representing how things are.

Though I agree with his diagnosis my own response is that his therapy is more radical than necessary. There is an intermediate possibility, which is to have a different semantic master-concept, namely that of inference, in place of that of reference. Then in terms of this master-concept we can reconstruct representational talk in the cases where this is appropriate.

Let us move to what may be termed a demarcation problem lurking backstage. You differentiate between concept-using organisms and non-concept-using organisms, whereas we have commitments towards the former, while we may in principle omit the latter from this privilege. What would you say demarcates clearly between these two kinds of organisms?

The issue for me does not arise at the level of the individual. Is this chimp a talker? Is this baby a talker? I think of language, not primarily in terms of the capacities of individuals' exercise in speaking it, but rather in terms of the social practices that confer significance on the performances produced by the individual. I do not think speaking a language is something one can do one-by-one. Rather than talk about learning a language I prefer to talk about the process of coming into it.

One feature of our linguistic practices is that room is made for various sorts of auxiliary, secondary and second-class statuses. Not fully enfranchised children are counted by courtesy as making claims, which they are not capable of articulating the inferential significance of. We are nonetheless willing by this courtesy to hold them responsible and to take them as having said *that* things were thus-and-so, even though in the serious sense they do not understand *what* it is they are saying.

This phenomenon of counting people as having

said or thought things that they are not fully a master of is not restricted to proto-linguistic children. When an ordinary person says that "a coin is made of copper", or that "electricity consists of a flow of electrons", typically, they do not know in any detail what they are committing themselves to. What would be evidence for their claim? What is incompatible with it? They are simply able to make the claim in the sense that they can play that counter and use that word.

Instead of thinking about the capacities of the individual language-users, I am interested in *what you have to do* to count as being able to play one of these counters, which significance runs beyond anything that could be derived from your individual capabilities. It is *what we all have to do* to confer that sort of content on a noise like 'copper' or 'electron'. It is at the level of the practices of the whole

community that I think we will find the bright line between communities that do confer conceptual content on their performances and expressions, and communities that do not.

I actually see three levels in play. There are creatures that merely interact causally with each other and with their environment. And there are creatures that interact with each other socially in such a way as to institute normative significances for their performances. They need not yet be concept-using creatures in order to be

social-implicitly normative creatures.

Then we can say something relatively specific about what structure the normative statuses must have for them to be a structured game of *giving and asking for reasons*. The opening chapters of *Making it Explicit* aim to describe that structure. I think it is important to tell a story about how concept-using creatures could have arisen by the structural articulation of their practices from non-concept-using creatures. Then no magic is required to see how hominids could have gone from belonging in the one class to belonging in the other.

It is important not to underestimate how much difference it makes once one become concept-using creatures. To be able to talk at all is to be able to produce and understand an indefinite number of sentences that are novel. Not just in the sense that the individual has never heard



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them before, but also in the much stronger sense that no one in the community has ever used that sentence before. This makes it possible envisaging an indefinite number of novel ends and acquiring an indefinite number of novel desires. It transforms us into a kind of creature radically different from any non-discursive or non-concept-using creature. It is important not to underestimate the scope and magnitude of this distinction, the vastness of the chasm that opens up between the kinds of life that are led by creatures that do deploy concepts, that do *give and ask for reasons*, and those that do not.

You take a clear stand pro rationalism. What does this amount to, and what sets the language game of giving and asking for reason apart from all the other possible language games?

The rationalism consists in a disagreement with Wittgenstein over his claim that language is a city that has no downtown. His image is that there is no set of practices that is central to language such that the others are arrayed around it as dependent suburbs around a core. What I mean by rationalism is a specific way of denying Wittgenstein's claim. I claim that practices of *giving and asking for reasons* are downtown in the city of language. What distinguishes discursive practices from non-discursive practices is that some performances have the significance of providing reasons for other performances. What makes a practice discursive is that it is inferentially articulated, so that inferential roles are instituted by that set of practices.

That is a recognizably Leibnizian form of rationalism though transposed into a pragmatist key. The issue that the classical early-modern rationalist found most difficult was appreciating that in order to be aware of something, to apperceive it, one had to apply a concept to it. They were asked: "Where do these concepts come from?" And they did not provide a very good answer to that. Innateness is not a satisfying answer then nor outré Fodor now. A social pragmatist says that the concepts are there in the community into which you are born. It is an already up-and-running enterprise. 'Copper' was there before you came into the language and before you knew enough about its inferential role to be able to apply it.

Where I part company with the anthropological and pragmatist tradition, and, not coincidentally, the way I erect a bridge to the model-theoretic semantic tradition, is precisely via this rationalist commitment.

Maybe I shall expand this slightly and say that the two great strands of philosophical criticism in the 20th century, one associated with Foucault, the other with Derrida, are directly addressed by this sort of rationalism. Foucault sees *giving and asking for reasons* as merely the distinctively

modern form that power-relations of coercion and exploitation take. Derrida on the other hand sees it as just one game among others that one can play with language. Both of them are criticizing the sort of privilege that philosophers have typically associated with reasoning.

The pragmatic rationalism that I am endorsing says contra Derrida that *giving and asking for reasons* is not just one more game you can play with language. It is *the* game you have to play to be talking at all, as it is the downtown of the city of language. It is what provides the raw materials for the sort of playful and creative things that one can do with language. The other games that Derrida points to are all in principle parasitic on our reason-giving games. There really is the kind of privilege that he is denying, even though he is right to see that the traditional philosophical stories will not do.

Foucault also sees that the traditional stories told about that privilege will not do, but he is again wrong to think that no contrast can survive between persuasion and coercion. Persuasion is a matter of acknowledging the normative force of a better reason. The existence of that kind of normative force is the essential element in our being able to mean anything. It is simply not intelligible from a semantic point of view that *giving and asking for reasons* should merely be another form that the exercise of power should take.

Given this week's seminar on pragmatism we could perhaps ground this off with a question about your former teacher Richard Rorty. What would you say are the main affinities and differences between your philosophical projects?

The affinities are legion and the disagreements are small, local and parochial. We are both pragmatists. We both share a diagnosis of the ills of modern philosophy. This diagnosis sees that the notion of experience and representation has led us into a set of philosophical assumptions, which inevitably lead to a characteristic kind of philosophical puzzlement, difficulty and dead-end.

Rorty's view is that radical surgery is what is wanted. That these notions should simply be cut out, whatever the pain involved. He has spent his career forging alternative ways of talking, and trying to teach us how to talk about important features of our practices and lives without using what has grown up over the last three hundred years of philosophical discussion.

That is a very radical undertaking both on the surgical side and on the side of rehabilitation. People have found it difficult to do with just the vocabulary that he recommends, because people are nostalgic for the old vocabulary that he tells them to do without. In *Making it Explicit* I agree with him that there is no useful way to rehabilitate

the concept of experience. We just need to do without that, and I have various suggestions about how this can be achieved. I suggest, however, that the concept of representation can be sanitized and retained. There is a hygienic version of the notion of representation that does not have the bad consequences that he is concerned about, so I think significantly less radical surgery is required.

My colleague John McDowell, who shares the general orientation of Rorty and myself, completes the trio by suggesting that the attitude I take towards representation ought also be our attitude towards the concept of experience. Rorty and I both think that Sellars' critique of the myth of the given shows the notion of experience as simply outmoded, whereas McDowell shows us how to rehabilitate and deploy it in a way that respects the lessons of Sellars' critique.

An image the three of us have found comfortable is that we all think there is an abyss which modern philosophy leads us to fall into, and that the only way forward is to avoid this abyss. Rorty thinks we must erect a fence hundreds of meters away from the edge, and let no one through. I think that a lower fence can be erected much closer to the edge, and even though some people will climb over and fall in, on the whole we do not need to keep people that far back from the abyss. McDowell is capable of leaping like a mountain goat from point to point on the precipices, and I think Rorty and I agree that McDowell himself never falls into the abyss. However, we want to say: "Kids, don't try this at home! This man is a professional." The fact that he can respect the lesson of not falling into the abyss does not mean that it is a good idea for us to go right up to the edge and peer over it.