

Turbanti, Giacomo, *Robert Brandom's Normative Inferentialism*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2017, pp. v-245.

Inferentialism is a house with many mansions, and usually the books devoted to it just try to sketch the landscape in order to focus on more specific subjects. Turbanti's book defines a different, more ambitious, project: the author attempts a wide reconstruction of Robert Brandom's inferentialism that takes advantage of a more mature phase of reception and discussion. In particular, Turbanti tried to figure out how the main Brandomian commitments hang together, something scholars in the field judged premature until now, and for a time to come. This means that Brandom's inferentialism is here understood in its wider connection with the recent project called 'analytic pragmatism' (hereafter AP), developed in the book *Between Saying and Doing* (thereafter BSD), and also with Brandom's still unpublished work on Hegel.¹ Even though Turbanti, in his introduction, describes the scope of his book as 'narrow' and low profile—because of its focus *just* on inferentialism—as a matter of fact, it is not a narrow scope at all. So, this is not the typical book about inferentialism for many reasons. In particular, it is noteworthy and important for a number of rather unique features. But let us first take a look at the structure of the book where such features emerge as properly put in context.

Chapter 1 introduces in general the main themes presented, the claims advanced, and the challenges undertaken by this book. A first important feature comes from the recent work by Jaroslav Peregrin—with its distinction of inferentialism, as a fundamentally 'normative' approach to conceptual content and discursive practice—from the views that come under the heading *inferential role semantics*, understood as rather 'causal' accounts.² Inferentialism, according to this distinction, is an account that focuses on which inferences a speaker *ought* to draw to participate in a discursive practice where the performances of speakers are liable to be assessed by other speakers; according to (causal) inferential role semantics, the inferences that determine the content of a linguistic expression (or of a thought) are those that speakers are disposed/caused to draw (p. 6). From this point of view, the distinction is fundamental in clarifying how deeply Brandom's project differs from a number of accounts proposing explanatory views based on inferential role. This is particularly useful when it comes to reconstructing the historical and argumentative genealogy of normative inferentialism. This presentation sharply distinguishes an argumentative path towards normative inferentialism that goes from Frege to Brandom, and rules out those figures which are fundamental in shaping the causal accounts, but whose contribution is not directly significant for the Brandomian project. It helps also to distinguish and isolate the problems which are genuine for normative inferentialism from those that, coming from the *causal* field, can make the dialectics spurious and lead to certain conflation. In this very context, a similar point is made to better distinguish normative inferentialism from its relatives in the field of proof-theoretic semantics (p. 7).

¹ Brandom, R.B. 2008, *Between Saying and Doing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Brandom's reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, can be found in *A Spirit of Trust*, online: http://www.pitt.edu/~brandom/spirit_of_trust_2014.html

² Peregrin, J. 2014, *Inferentialism. Why Rules Matter*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Chapter 2 introduces Brandom's normative pragmatics, the conception of discursive practice as governed by "the game of giving and asking for reasons". Turbanti here starts with an explicit account of what Brandom calls *sapience*: the idea that human cognition and intentionality depend essentially on the use of concepts and on the participation in normative practices.³ This account of sapience is also a nice introduction to Sellars' criticism to the Myth of the Given: accordingly, perceptual episodes alone are not sufficient to ground perceptual knowledge, thus acknowledging a crucial difference between 'responsiveness' (that characterizes such episodes) and 'contentfulness' (characterizing knowledge). Furthermore, the chapter explores the main pillars of Brandom's pragmatics: the normative notions of 'commitment' and 'entitlement', and the basic understanding of discursive practitioners as deontic scorekeepers. Moreover, the chapter deals with 'normative phenomenalism'—the idea that normative statuses of speakers depend on their normative attitudes—, here introduced in great depth, and this presentation, that introduces and faces the main challenges in the debate, is arguably the best in the literature. Again, another aspect of interest is the pragmatics-semantics interface, that is presented with a detailed analysis. Here, the reader can also appreciate the direct contrast between Brandom's pragmatics and mainstream literature in cognitive pragmatics. In particular, Turbanti does a good job in emphasizing how Brandom's perspective is capable of putting serious pressure to the very foundations of the cognitive approach. For example, Brandom's insights here are relevant in questioning the explanatory role that the notion of 'speaker's intention' plays in theories like Grice's and its developments: namely, these accounts just presuppose the contentfulness of intentional states (p. 48). Finally, the chapter presents and discusses the challenge of the so-called 'declarative fallacy' with which Rebecca Kukla and Mark Lance, although from a rather sympathetic perspective, addressed Brandom's pragmatics: the idea of an unjustified prominence of assertive speech acts over other types (pp. 49-59).⁴

Chapter 3 deals with the inferentialist account of conceptual content, a "semantic theory that represents linguistic contents in terms of inferences" (p. 61). Here the reconstruction is wide, and the contributions of the 'founding fathers' of inferentialism (Frege, Sellars, Dummett) are presented with great detail. A noteworthy feature is the *negative narrative* that Turbanti employs in order to present and discuss the typical lessons of inferentialism. The author skillfully introduces inferentialist insights and solutions in the philosophy of language by presenting in detail the problems of alternative accounts as the basic motivations for introducing typical Brandomian (and Sellarsian) points. These narratives often make Turbanti's presentations and discussions of these insights wider and more complex than those proposed by Brandom himself; they not only deal with theoretical details and dialectics, but are often enriched with historical perspective. For example, the book presents inferentialism by starting with a taxonomy of the problems of the nominalist conceptions of meaning—the idea that all linguistic expressions work like names. In this context, Turbanti's negative narrative is at its best, especially Gilbert Ryle's *Fido'-Fido* objection against

³ This idea of beginning with sapience is shared with Jeremy Wanderer's book. Cf. Wanderer, J. 2008, *Robert Brandom*, Stokesfield: Acumen.

⁴ Kukla, R. and Lance, M. 2009, *'Yo!' And 'Lo!': The Pragmatic Topography of the Space of Reasons*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Millian nominalism (p. 62), and Dummett's criticism of Frege's assimilation of sentences to complex names (p. 63). This extension of the dialectics, as readers may easily appreciate, is particularly interesting not only for the contribution of Frege and Sellars, but also of Carnap, as for example the first source, even without a personal endorsement, of the very idea of 'material inferences': "if ever Carnap was close to inferentialism, the idea that good inferences go before logical forms is where he certainly gets off the train" (p. 71). The chapter smoothly goes on to present the well-known characteristics of Brandom's semantics: its holistic shape; the putative difficulties in explaining the compositionality of meaning; the substitutional account of sub-sentential expressions; and the anaphoric conception of semantic vocabulary. Here, Turbanti adds to this reconstruction a final section (3.2) devoted to introducing Brandom's expressivism, and the 'meaning-use analysis' taken from BSD, in order to complement inferentialism with a preliminary grip on the conceptual toolbox of AP. In particular, Turbanti's presentation of logical expressivism—the idea that logical vocabulary plays the fundamental expressive role of 'elucidating', or 'making explicit', conceptual contents and relations—is the most complete and exhaustive in the literature (with an interesting reconstruction of its Fregean roots).

Chapter 4 presents 'incompatibility semantics' (thereafter IS), the formal semantics developed in BSD as a pragmatic meta-vocabulary⁵ for logical and modal vocabularies. This enterprise depends on the general possibility of using such meta-vocabulary to make explicit "the relations between practices and vocabularies" (p. 97). In this sense, it is both a pragmatist and expressivist attempt. The chapter begins with a fruitful exploration of the reasons that may lead to develop a formal semantics in a general context influenced by Sellars' distinction between formal and philosophical semantics: a framework that recommends the latter view as the default option. Turbanti clarifies how such misunderstandings rest on dubious representationalist conceptions of formal semantics; it is a tool for representing meanings, not a representational account of meanings (pp. 110-11). The presentation goes on to explore both the formal aspects and the underlying theoretical motivations of this apparatus, contributing to a more robust understanding of Brandom's overall expressivism. Of particular interest is the semantic interpretation of IS (pp. 118-25), then the way in which logical vocabulary is defined (pp. 126-40), and the highlighting of some of its problems. Furthermore, the chapter introduces some noteworthy formal properties of the system, especially *conservativity*, as warranting the semantic recursiveness of IS (pp. 140-43) instead of the usual accounts based on compositionality. Conservativity permits the meanings expressed within the system to be fully recursive, even though these are *holistic*, and therefore *non-compositional*. And this property is of special importance for a holistic semantics like inferentialism, that *prima facie* would entail serious difficulties in explaining compositionality. As the last point shows, one master feature of this chapter (and of this book) is the use of the technical apparatus of AP, developed by Brandom in BSD, as a main tool in order to better clarify the wide project of inferentialism

⁵ According to BSD, pragmatic meta-vocabularies are those sufficient in *specifying* the practices required to count as using certain *target* vocabularies: e.g., one may use "non-indexical vocabulary" as "sufficient to specify the practice required to count as using indexical vocabulary" (p. 99).

put forward with the monumental *Making it Explicit* (thereafter MIE).⁶ More generally, Turbanti manages to use effectively AP to provide a global account of the rational expressivism of which MIE is species of a genus.

Chapter 5 explores the possibility of extending the expressive power of IS in other directions and with slightly different philosophical motivations. These explorations provide interesting philosophical insights, especially dealing with open problems for both IS and its connection with inferentialism. Turbanti extends the formal framework in order to further develop the expressive power of this language. This chapter presents the most original sections of the book, and since Turbanti is a logician—like others who devoted special attention to this framework⁷—the main results are formal in character. He first uses IS to frame a Kripkean ‘possible worlds semantics’ with the effect of vindicating “incompatibility as a serious ground for modal vocabulary” (p. 145). Then, he tries to use IS to develop a non-monotonic type of logical entailment (purported to match the defeasible character of material inference). Both exercises are revealing: first Turbanti shows that certain fundamental results proved by Brandom about IS, e.g., the fact that it is a holistic semantics which is fully recursive without being compositional, can be proved as well in the modified Kripkean framework (p. 152); second, after a nice summary of the connection between modality and defeasibility of material inferences, Turbanti explores the chances of developing a tenable notion of non-monotonic entailment suitable for Brandom’s purposes, by developing IS in the direction of *Preferential Calculus*, even though this attempt still presents some open problems (p. 172).

Chapter 6 relocates inferentialism in the wider context of two great philosophical traditions: its connections with the legacy of American Pragmatism and with German Idealism (especially the dialectics that goes from Kant to Hegel). Such relocation deals with the main open problems for normative inferentialism, that is, realism and the objectivity of conceptual norms in a context of subjective/perspectival discursive commitments. After summarizing Brandom’s main views on inferentialism and realism, section 6.2 tries to identify Brandom’s debts and connections—together with a number of divergencies—with the pragmatist tradition. Then Turbanti tackles Kant and Hegel: first, with the problems of Kant’s normative theory of judgment; and then with *conceptual realism*, the ‘Hegelian’ solution to the problem dealing with the objectivity of conceptual norms. In particular, Turbanti explores Brandom’s ‘semantic’ reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, dealing with conceptual realism. This is the idea that reality is conceptually structured. Turbanti devotes some efforts to clarify how this Hegelian route is in line with Brandom’s overall pragmatism, and also tries to present the main challenges for conceptual realism, such as the sharp remarks advanced by Jürgen Habermas.⁸ In 6.4, another important aspect deals with the Brandomian reading of Hegel’s notion of ‘determinate negation’ in terms of material incompatibilities between commitments undertaken by means of

⁶ Brandom, R.B. 1994, *Making it Explicit. Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

⁷ Especially the already mentioned Jaroslav Peregrin and Christian Fermüller; Cfr. Fermüller, C. 2010, “Some Critical Remarks on Incompatibility Semantics”, in *The Logica Yearbook 2009*, 81-95, London: College Publications.

⁸ Habermas, J. 2003, *Truth and Justification*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press.

assertoric judgments.⁹ Since conceptual contents become ‘progressively determined’ by ruling out other contents that show up as *incompatible* with them, this very practice amounts to a progressive *updating* of commitments and beliefs undertaken by speakers. This suggests a parallel with theories of belief-revision. The chapter ends with an attempt to emphasize the open problems of this Hegelian enterprise, well summarized also in the conclusion.

Despite original and innovative ways to introduce and discuss normative inferentialism, this book is more in line with other works in identifying the main axes of Brandom’s theory: a normative pragmatics that understands the game of giving and asking for reasons as the core of discursive practice; an inferential account of the conceptual contents mongered by discursive practitioners; and an expressivist conception of logic, language, and rationality. But this presentation offers some interesting and original features. In particular, this reconstruction presents a sophisticated understanding of Brandom’s expressivism, and rightly stresses the centrality of it for the overall inferentialist enterprise:

[...] Brandom’s *rational* expressivism is the thesis that the application of concepts is essentially a process of expression, consisting in making explicit what is implicit, in the sense of turning something that can only be *done* into something that can also be *said* (p. 8).

Furthermore, this understanding greatly profits from the vantage point provided by Brandom in BSD, where meta-vocabularies and vocabularies are analyzed with a special focus on their expressive power and in connection with social practices. The way in which expressivism is worked out here provides more refined tools, also in order to look back at MIE. Turbanti claims that the two books are connected in a tighter way than Brandom himself believes. He claims that AP is “necessarily required in order to appreciate Brandom’s later work in the philosophy of language” (p. 10). From this point of view, Turbanti’s combined presentation is a substantial improvement. In fact, according to this reading expressivism can be seen as a “unitary perspective” from which BSD and MIE “can be seen as part of the very same philosophical enterprise” (p. 10). This focus on expressivism is also very important since it is in general, and despite its relevance, the less understood and appreciated part of Brandom’s proposal, and this nice presentation may surely be of help to the reader.

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⁹ Being committed to a certain content *C* *precludes entitlement* to the contents that are *incompatible* with *C*.