

Published on 5/25/2020, in English at <https://mana.net/robert-brandom>  
and in Arabic at <https://mana.net/brandom>

Interview by Mohammad Hussain for Badr Mostafa (ed.) at Mana.net

1. Let us start with an introductory overview, could you tell us, in brief, about your philosophical career and your former teachers and heroes? How do you see philosophy in general and philosophy of language in particular?

As an undergraduate at Yale University I came to philosophy by triangulating from the two consuming interests I had initially found there: mathematics and intellectual history. I had been introduced to set theory by Abraham Robinson, model theory by Jon Barwise, and statistics by Leonard Savage, and had studied the American Pragmatists (especially Peirce and Royce) with Bruce Kuklick (who was then writing his history of the Harvard philosophy department). Richmond Thomason taught me about Richard Montague's version of possible world semantics, and I saw in that the possibility of using formal methods to get a mathematical grip on the issues of meaning and language that the pragmatists and Wittgenstein had made live for me. The supervisors of my doctoral thesis at Princeton were Richard Rorty and David Lewis, who again represented the historical and formal aspects of the study of language.

2. When we look at your work we see a synthetic character, you synthesize and construct different streams and figures (analytic philosophy – pragmatism; semantics – pragmatics; Sellars – Rorty; etc.), could you elaborate on this this character? As well, could it be considered some sort of Hegel's dialectic or Paul Ricoeur's grafting?

The motivating impulse of my doctoral dissertation was to synthesize what I saw as two traditions of philosophical thought about language in the previous century: a monological, logistical paradigm modeling language on artificial formal calculi that codify mathematical proofs, and an anthropological view of language as a social practice that is a prominent feature of the natural history of human beings. These contrary approaches were worked out by Frege, Russell, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, Tarski, and Carnap, on the one hand, and the American Pragmatists, Heidegger in *Being and Time*, and the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, on the other. I had come to think of figures such as Quine, Davidson, and Dummett as attempting to bring these two ways of thinking together, and I aspired to contribute to that enterprise. My first big book, *Making It Explicit*, was my attempt to deliver on this promise. My Oxford John Locke lectures, published as *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism*, was, as the subtitle indicates, my effort at synthesizing the insights (as I saw them) of analytic philosophy with those of pragmatism—thought of broadly enough to include not only Peirce, James, Dewey, and C.I. Lewis, but also the early Heidegger, the later Wittgenstein, and Rorty. In subsequent works, culminating in *A Spirit of Trust*, I have aimed at

bringing German Idealism and analytic philosophy into conversation with one another in a pragmatist spirit. The synthetic impulse is, I think, the philosophical impulse. It is, in the words of my hero (and former colleague) Wilfrid Sellars, the desire to see, and say, “how things, in the broadest sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest sense of the term.” My particular interest has been to do that when the “things” that must hang together are themselves philosophical traditions.

3. Rorty once said “Brandom has shown how analytic philosophy might transcend itself”, is this right also for pragmatism? Some say that pragmatism was kept alive and renewed with the analytic or linguistic turn; others say it was distorted and transformed to something else, how do you see the implications of linguistic turn on pragmatism? Furthermore, your work is discussed widely in analytic as well as continental philosophical circles, what would you say about the analytic/continental divide?

I do mean to be breathing new life into analytic philosophy, into pragmatism, and into German Idealism. My main idea about how to do that is to bring ideas from each tradition into the others. From my point of view, what made pragmatism seem old-fashioned was that it did not put enough emphasis on language. Peirce, I think, did. But it is not a central concern of James’s, and even Dewey to my mind does not sufficiently place it at center stage in understanding us—partly, no doubt, because he was so committed to emphasizing the similarities and continuities that link discursive creatures to nondiscursive ones, rather than the differences. Here, it seems to me, is where Heidegger and Wittgenstein are most usefully thought of as correcting the classical American pragmatists. From my point of view, one of the principal dangers facing the contemporary heirs of analytic philosophy in pursuing metaphysics, epistemology, and the philosophy of mind today is that they typically no longer think of philosophy of language as “first philosophy.” My worry is that they do not sufficiently appreciate the lessons of the twentieth century, which truly was the “century of language” in philosophy, in Germany and France no less than in Britain and the U.S..

As to the “analytic/continental divide,” which I hope is vanishing rapidly in the rear-view mirror of history, I always endorsed Rorty’s view that we should take our standards of clarity and many of our tools and methods from the Anglophone tradition and apply them to philosophical topics and concerns drawn from the Continent. Though there are still no doubt sociological remnants of that once-fierce ideological split, what I think will ultimately turn out to have repaired that divide is the reappropriation of Kant by analytic philosophers, begun by Rawls on the practical side and figures such as Strawson, on the theoretical side. The fighting faith of analytic philosophy, as formulated by Russell and Moore, identified itself by its rejection of Hegel. But as we find ourselves happily in a golden age of Anglophone philosophical appreciation of Kant, the fact that Hegel is such an interesting reader of Kant guarantees that he, too, will be embraced by the tradition that once spurned him. As Hegel says at the end of the *Phenomenology*, “The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind.”

4. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein states the rule-following argument, did he save individual freedom? If he didn't, could your positive account concerning presenting solutions for philosophical problems, unlike McDowell and Wittgenstein, be an alternative to do this?

One of Kant's most important ideas is an idea of freedom as consisting, not in the absence of constraint, but in a particular kind of constraint: constraint by *norms*. As he put it, merely natural creatures are constrained by rules in the form of laws that operate independently of the attitudes of those they constrain. As discursive beings, we are distinguished by being constrained by our *conceptions* of rules: rules that bind us only in virtue of our own attitudes towards those rules. Kant was inspired by Rousseau's definition of freedom in the *Social Contract*: "obedience to a law one lays down for oneself is freedom." Kant turns that *dictum* into a definition of the normative: genuinely normative constraint is always *self*-constraint, obedience to a law one lays down for oneself. This is his autonomy version of the Enlightenment insight that normative statuses, such as those of superior and subordinate, or (better) authority and responsibility, are not features of the prehuman natural (or supernatural) world, but are products of our practices and practical attitudes toward one another. Hegel moves beyond Kant's individualism. He sees normative statuses as ultimately *social* statuses, instituted by attitudes of reciprocal recognition. In the twentieth century, Wittgenstein rediscovers the normativity of intentionality (the essential normative dimension of significance of intentional states such as belief, desire, and intention), and also seeks to understand that normativity in terms of the role things (for instance, the sign-post "considered just as a piece of wood") play in our social practices. In both *Making It Explicit* and *A Spirit of Trust* I offer accounts of discursive normativity, the practical conditions of the determinateness of the conceptual contents of discursive norms, and the kind of positive freedom that results from binding ourselves, both collectively and individually, by such norms.

5. Concerning your considerations on how analytic philosophy has failed cognitive science, which provinces the analytic philosopher might focus on? Then, how do you see the relation between results of the philosophical analysis of the concept and results of cognitive science?

Many philosophers of mind and of language are rightly concerned to integrate results from cognitive science into their philosophical theories (for instance, of perception). The contribution I would like to make goes in the other direction. I am concerned that cognitive scientists who think about concept use do not sufficiently appreciate the lessons philosophers learned about concepts from Frege, which developed into quantificational logic. One such lesson is that any approach that thinks of concepts in terms of Boolean combinations of microfeatures is doomed to be unable to consider a whole range of important concepts, beginning with the simplest arithmetical ones. For those concepts depend on discerning new complex predicates by substitutionally analyzing compound sentences, applying quantifiers to those new predicates, and then repeating the process in an open-ended way. This is a lesson any contemporary philosopher of logic or language should be concerned to teach cognitive scientists, including psychologists and artificial intelligence

researchers. From the point of view of my own idiosyncratic way of understanding language, the most important lesson is the conceptual primacy of specifically *propositional* representations. Representations whose content would be expressed by subsentential expressions such as singular terms and predicates must be understood in terms of the contributions they make to this fundamental kind of representation. That is a pragmatist lesson: one that pragmatics (the theory of what we are doing in using expressions) has to teach semantics (the theory of the contents of meanings those expressions acquire in virtue of being so used). My view is that what distinguishes propositional contents is that they can play the role both of premise and of conclusion in *inferences*—that they can both serve as and stand in need of *reasons*.

6. Your philosophical enterprise is sprawling and covers areas as diverse as philosophy of language, philosophical logic, philosophy of mind, German idealism, history of philosophy, neo-pragmatism, and more, do you think your work is related and has a line of continuity or do you present different and orthogonal projects? Besides, if there is an attempt to introduce your thought or your key ideas to new audience, do you suggest an introduction like Jeremy Wanderer's *Robert Brandom* or Ronald Loeffler's *Brandom*? Or one of your less technical books like *Perspectives on Pragmatism*?

I see all my work as consisting of contributions to a single enterprise, the parts of which stand in intimate relations to one another. That said, the edifice can be entered through different portals, depending on whether one is more concerned for instance with the philosophy of language in general, the history of philosophy, pragmatism, or logic. The core works, those on which I expect my reputation to rest, are *Making It Explicit*, *Between Saying and Doing*, and *A Spirit of Trust*. Each of these is dense, complex, and difficult. For an overview, both the Wanderer and the Loeffler books are good, as is Giacomo Turbanti's *Robert Brandom's Normative Inferentialism*. Of my own works *Reason in Philosophy* and *Articulating Reasons* (particularly the early chapters of the latter) are intended to be introductory and to presuppose less philosophical background than the others. Many of my recent sets of lectures (my Vienna Brentano lectures, my Shanghai Dewey lectures, my Helsinki Nordic Pragmatism lectures) are available freely for anyone on academia.edu (and, once it is revamped, will be available on my website), and provide useful introductions to different parts of my corpus. There one can also find other interviews like this one.

7. Recently, your long-awaited book on Hegel, *A Spirit of Trust*, has been published, you introduce a new reading of *Hegel's Phenomenology*. How do you locate this work within your vast philosophical enterprise and within the new discovery of Hegel and Kant?

I worked out and worked over my thoughts about Hegel's *Phenomenology* for most of four decades—basically, throughout my career. When I wrote *Making It Explicit*, one of the decisions that made it possible to finish that massive work was the reluctant compromise to ignore all questions about the development and determination of conceptual contents. This is a theme that Sellars, too, had always appreciated and explicitly acknowledged as of centrally importance, but

also never managed a worked-out way to approach. I always thought that the key ideas needed were to be found in Hegel. The problem was to extract and clarify those ideas, and then to deploy them to address issues in the philosophy of language that have become much clearer to us along some dimensions than they were to him. Doing that required coming to terms with the pragmatists' reception of Hegel, by synthesizing their insights and formulations with his, as well as getting clearer about how to understand the development from Kant to Hegel. During this extended period I occasionally published telegraphic dispatches from the front lines, but it was always clear that only an extended, systematic treatment would suffice. I am very glad that it turned out to be possible to see that project through to its conclusion. I am satisfied that *A Spirit of Trust* is as good a working out of my ideas in the vicinity as I am capable of. I hope that others may find it inspiring and useful.

8. What is your current work in progress? Looking ahead, which themes or ideas you hope to work on if you have ample time? Is there any question you wish I had asked but I didn't?

I have two current projects. The first is a project in logic, motivated, informed, and guided by my views about the philosophy of logic. Already in *Making It Explicit* I had added to an *inferentialist* approach to *semantics* an *expressivist* view about *logic*. Semantic inferentialism says that conceptual contents generally are to be understood in terms of the broadly inferential relations they stand in to one another. These are relations of implication and incompatibility that are *material* (to use Sellars's phrase) in that they articulate the contents of ordinary, empirical, descriptive, *nonlogical* vocabulary, and so owe nothing to the concepts expressed by any specifically *logical* vocabulary. Logical expressivism is the view that such specifically logical vocabulary is distinguished by the special expressive role it plays. My slogan is: "Logic is the organ of semantic self-consciousness." By that I mean that logical vocabulary is introduced to make explicit those relations of material implication and incompatibility in virtue of which (according to semantic inferentialism) *nonlogical* vocabulary expresses the concepts it does. The paradigms are the conditional, which makes explicit (puts in claimable form) relations of *implication*, and negation, which makes explicit relations of *incompatibility*. I find a view of logic of this kind already in the early Frege. The current project addresses the question: if we had developed our formal logic explicitly with this expressivist view in mind, how would we have done it differently? Here a key point is that material implication and incompatibility are in general nonmonotonic: a good implication can turn into a bad one if one adds further premises. The difference between monotonic and nonmonotonic implications is itself one we would like to be able to express explicitly using logical vocabulary. My article "From Logical Expressivism to Expressivist Logics" describes this project, and sketches some of our initial results. My co-authors Ulf Hlobil, Dan Kaplan, and Shuhei Shimamura, and I are writing a book presenting logics that codify nonmonotonic material consequence relations, to be titled *Logics of Consequence: Tools for the Expression of Structure*.

The other project is a book built around my upcoming Spinoza lectures at the University of Amsterdam (scheduled for the Spring of 2021). It is an extension and elaboration of my work on the thought of my Doktorvater, Richard Rorty. Throughout my philosophical career I have wrestled with and tried to come to terms with his work (for instance, in my contributions to the volume of essays devoted to him that I edited, *Rorty and His Critics*). The task of situating myself in philosophical space relative to Rorty has been fluid and ongoing, and has shaped my thought in many ways—some of which I am only beginning to understand. In recent years I feel I have made progress in understanding the various stages through which Rorty’s thought developed, and the difficulties and insights that prompted various of his signal developments. My Spinoza lectures and the volume I hope to write around them are to be my attempt to understand in particular what I take to be his final motivation and formulation of his pragmatism, announced in his 1996 Ferrater Mora lectures in Girona. The idea is to compare and contrast his evolving, but always critical attitude towards the Enlightenment’s philosophical master-idea of representation with what I take Hegel to have thought about it.