

On the Very Idea of Brandom's Pragmatism

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Abstract. Although Brandom is critical of some features of narrowly conceived classical pragmatism, at the same time he explicitly embraces a version of pragmatism, both in his overall philosophical outlook, and in the philosophy of language. His distinctive theoretical approach is based on what he calls rationalist and semantic pragmatism, and most recently analytic pragmatism. The paper briefly discusses the very idea of his pragmatism and its bearing on the philosophy of language, and formulates a basic dilemma it faces there.

Neo-pragmatism is certainly a very distinctive movement of recent American philosophy. There are several outstanding philosophers associated with it, including Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty. Among them there is also Robert B. Brandom, perhaps the leading American philosopher of his generation, known especially for his work in the philosophy of language and mind. Although he is critical of some features of narrowly conceived classical pragmatism, at the same time he explicitly embraces a version of pragmatism, both in his overall philosophical outlook, and in the philosophy of language. His distinctive theoretical approach is based on what he calls rationalist and semantic pragmatism, and most recently analytic pragmatism (Brandom 2008). In my paper I shall briefly discuss the very idea of his pragmatism and formulate a basic dilemma it faces there.

1 Global Pragmatism

Brandom's pragmatism has explicit affinities both with global pragmatism conceived as a distinctive approach to philosophical questions, and with local pragmatism within the philosophy of language.

To put it very roughly, the distinctive trait of the former is to take human practice as a crucial factor in our theorizing, that is as providing evidence for our theories and constraining them in various ways. Brandom described the former

as a movement centered on the primacy of the practical, initiated already by Kant, whose twentieth-century avatars include not only Peirce, James and Dewey, but also the early Heidegger, the later Wittgenstein, and such figures as Quine, Sellars, Davidson and Rorty (Brandom 2002, p. 40).

This is certainly a broad construal of pragmatism, since it is not confined to what is known as classical American pragmatism and its more or less faithful contemporary followers.¹ Of course, there will be as many varieties of pragmatism in this broad and inclusive sense, as there are ways of conceiving "the primacy of the practical", and especially the domain of practice and the practical. For Brandom, even if not, apparently, for many mainstream or classical pragmatists², at the center of human practice are characteristically rational activities of seeking and

¹ A similarly broad construal of pragmatism has been also proposed by Charles Taylor. He includes in it "Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, as well as the great American figures of the last turn of the century who embraced the designation (Taylor 2004, p. 75). For Taylor pragmatism is an approach to philosophical questions that insists on the primacy of practical reasons, on "pragmata" over merely neutral states of affairs. Although extensionally equivalent to Brandom's broad account of pragmatism, it is presumably different in various details of emphasis.

² Brandom (2002, 2004) has various misgivings about several ideas often taken as constitutive of classical pragmatism. It is contentious to what extent he is right in his criticisms, and to what extent his criticisms are heavily dependent, as Putnam (2002) insists, upon misconstruing classical pragmatism.

providing reasons. To put it in currently popular jargon, the practical domain is the space of reasons. This enables Brandom to claim that his pragmatism is uniquely rationalist one. As he himself explains:

It is a *rationalist* pragmatism, in giving pride of place to practices of giving and asking for reasons, understanding them as conferring conceptual content on performances, expressions, and states suitably caught up in those practices (Brandom 2000, p. 11).

The elements of such a rationalist pragmatism can even be discerned in the work of Hegel (Brandom 1999), although this is *prima facie* surprising.

No matter how sensible and attractive a philosophical option this rationalist pragmatism seems to be, one may wonder whether a general view of this kind is able to yield any substantial constraints on an account of meaning. It is hard to represent such constraints as following from rationalist pragmatism, even if one combines it, as Brandom does (2000, p. 2–3), with insistence that human practices of giving and asking for reasons are significantly dissimilar from and discontinuous with, the uptake and transmission of information by nonhuman animals.

Brandom himself suggests that his rationalist pragmatism is the source of such constraints after all, because the primacy of the practical means, among other things, that knowing how has a certain kind of priority over knowing that. This priority, he claims, “enforces a restriction on the vocabulary a semantic pragmatist can use to describe the linguistic practices that establish the association of semantic interpretants with linguistic expressions” (2002, p. 47). It is the restriction that the vocabulary cannot be exclusively intentional. However in order to determine what this supposed restriction amounts to in this context, one should first describe briefly the main idea of semantic pragmatism, that is, of local pragmatism within the philosophy of language.

2 Semantic Pragmatism

One may begin here by noticing that the term “semantic pragmatism” is to a certain extent misleading. The reason is that the view in question does not especially prize semantics, does not assign it the central role in an account of language, but rather emphasizes that it should be answerable and subordinate to pragmatics. That is to say, semantic pragmatism insists on the priority of pragmatics (a study of the ways linguistic expressions are used) over semantics (a study of the sense and reference of linguistic expressions). As Brandom puts it:

While the meanings studied by semantics may not *consist* in the roles played by expressions in linguistic practice (meaning need not be *identified* with use), according to this view those roles must at least establish the connection between contents, meanings or semantic interpretants, on the one hand, and linguistic expressions on the other. The semantic pragmatist’s basic insight is that there is nothing apart from the use of expressions that *could* establish such connections (2002, p. 45).

There are at least two claims involved here. Although Brandom does not assume that meaning is just use, he insists that use has explanatory priority over meaning or content. That is to say, it is use of expressions which determines what meanings, if any, they have. Furthermore, use of expressions may be conceived in broadly functionalist terms: as the roles played by expressions in a wider linguistic practice or game.

Putting aside the question of what exactly the explanatory priority is in this context, let us consider various ways in which use of expressions may be specified and described. There seems to be three major options here. First, use may be specified in explicitly semantic terms. For instance, one may describe the use of a given expression by saying that it enables one to refer to a certain item or to express a certain content. This way of proceeding will surely identify and fully describe the meaning of the expression, as well as correctly specify its connection with use. However, it will achieve this aim at the price of triviality and lack of any explanatory power whatsoever. It will also make semantic pragmatism an empty doctrine. Brandom himself notices this disastrous consequence as he writes: “If one is allowed to use the full resources of *semantic* vocabulary in specifying the use – describing an operator as “used so as to express negation”, or a term as “used to refer to Leibniz”, then the requirements of semantic pragmatism will automatically be met” (2002, p. 45). Thus if one wants to have semantic pragmatism as an interesting and substantial view, one should avoid describing the use of expressions in explicitly semantic terms.

The failure of the first way of specifying use, suggests a radically different approach. One may attempt to grasp and express all intricacies of language use in non-semantic terms, that is without invoking the notion of meaning or content in identifying, differentiating, and describing varieties of linguistic use. To achieve this one would have to describe use mainly in physical and biological terms. The psychological expressions would be allowed only if they are taken to refer to “psychological states construed in non-representational or non-conceptual terms – behavioural (or more broadly, functional) dispositions of various kinds” (Price 2004, p. 197). If such an austere functionalist description of linguistic use succeeds, one would have all required resources to provide a non-circular and non-trivial account of meaning or content, along the lines recommended by Brandom. Yet it is doubtful whether such a functionalism is an available option for him. Of course, one may be inclined to read in this spirit Brandom’s statement that pragmatism as adopted by him

seeks to explain what is asserted by appeal to features of *assertings*, what is claimed in terms of *claimings*, what is judged by *judgings*, and what is believed by the role of *believings* (indeed, what is expressed by expressions of it) – in general, the content by the act, rather than the other way around (Brandom 2000, p. 4)

Nevertheless this strategy does not guarantee by itself that the act that explains a given content, for instance the act of asserting that is supposed to explain what is asserted, can be specified in austere behavioural or functional terms, independently of and without appealing to what is asserted. But even if it does guarantee that, one may argue, then at least it does not start with “states already thought of as possessing content”; instead it begins with “something more basic” (Price 2004, p. 197). It seems to me, however, that this not the best way of putting the matter. For instance, asserting something is rather in no interesting sense more basic than what is asserted; it is presumably a more encompassing and situated phenomenon than the content of assertion, and thus bringing it into play may be useful in specifying and explicating of the content in question. But it is one thing to notice that and insist, as Brandom does, that in explaining meaning or content we cannot confine ourselves to employing “exclusively *intentional* vocabulary” (2002, p. 47), and quite another one to endeavour to reduce content to something more basic.

Moreover, Brandom constantly emphasizes that our practice is permeated with normativity. That is to say, almost everything we do is governed by rules or norms. Things we do can be done either correctly or incorrectly, either in consonance with appropriate rules or in conflict with them. And this indispensable and ubiquitous normativity cannot be reduced, Brandom claims, to mere regularity of behaviour, or anything else, for that matter. This is especially true about our discursive and linguistic practice of giving and asking for reasons, which is, in accordance with rationalist pragmatism, the center of our activities. Thus pragmatics to which semantics is answerable has to be essentially normative. It cannot restrict its vocabulary to purely descriptive terms and provide us with an account of our linguistic practice as an activity of making various noises in certain circumstances. Any restriction of this kind, Brandom insists, “renders invisible the very phenomena we discuss under such rubrics as “meaning”, “understanding”, “assertion”, “belief” and “intention”” (2002, p. 49). However, if pragmatics which is supposed to explain semantic properties of our linguistic expressions cannot be confined, even at the most basic level, to an account of our linguistic practice in terms of various noises we make, but rather from the very beginning has to construe those noises as claims or assertions that are in given circumstances appropriately or inappropriately, correctly or incorrectly, made, then one seems to specify and describe them from the very beginning in terms of their semantic properties. If this is indeed so, then presumably there is no interesting and non-trivial sense in which normative pragmatics is able to explain semantics.

Brandom is well aware that normativity poses a challenge for his project of semantic pragmatism. However, he formulates this challenge in terms of the alleged incompatibility of normative pragmatics with naturalism. And he assures his readers that this challenge can be met. That is to say, in describing our linguistic practice one may “distinguish performances that are correct in various senses from those that are not” and “talk of what one commits oneself to or becomes responsible for by producing a speech act”, without depriving oneself of the prospect of “an ultimately naturalistic account of the applicability of such normative assessments” (Brandom 2002, p. 50). Maybe Brandom is right in his assurance, and normativity can indeed be fully explained in a naturalistic framework. But it is one thing to provide such an explanation, and quite another one to give an account of our linguistic performances and their correctness in non-semantic terms. In other words, one may hold that there is nothing in our speech acts which eludes description and explanation in broadly naturalistic terms, that is in terms of physical, biological, and social sciences, but insists that in describing them as assertions, questions, promises, etc., or, in Brandom’s preferred

normative vocabulary, as commitments we make, to which we are entitled, and for which we are responsible, one has to use explicitly semantic terms, and right from the start talk about their content or significance.

3 The Dilemma

In his more programmatic and dramatic moments Brandom suggests that sooner or later one has to face a choice between semantic pragmatism and semantic platonism. The former “seeks to explain how the use of linguistic expressions, or the functional role of intentional states, confers conceptual content on them” (Brandom 2000, p. 4). The latter reverses this explanatory strategy: it first assigns meaning or content to linguistic expressions, and subsequently tries to explain “how associating such content with sentences and beliefs contributes to our understanding of how it is proper to use sentences in making claims, and to deploy beliefs in reasoning and guiding action” (Brandom 2000, p. 4).

But does one really have to make this choice? Presumably not. It seems there is at least one further option, advocated by Michael Dummett in his many writings.³ It is the option which takes as undeniable that “the meaning of a word or type sentence is constituted by its use, that is, the manner in which it is (correctly) employed in linguistic interchange (spoken or written)” (Dummett 2004, p. 23). However, it does not require that use must be specified in austere terms as noises and marks, and it gives the idea of constitution an epistemological or methodological reading, rather than an ontological one. That is to say, by observing use and attending to its various details one is able to recognize what semantic properties expressions possess, as well as to check whether one’s envisaged semantic theory is on the right track. It is the option that does not explain semantics in terms of pragmatics, neither reduces the former to the latter, but insists that there is an interplay or mutual dependence between them.

This option has also been noticed by Brandom himself (2002, p.42–44), and further elaborated in an ingenious way in his John Locke Lecture (2008). He claims there right at the beginning that his primary aim is to situate “concern with the *meanings* of expressions in the broader context of concern with proprieties governing their *use*” (Brandom 2008, p. xii). However, it is not fully clear what this situating amounts to. Perhaps it is just the claim of mutual interdependence between semantics and pragmatics. But it seems that in order to realize his ambitious project he very often needs something more, namely the explanatory priority of pragmatics over semantics. And this requirement forces him into uncomfortable position of use specification in terms of purely functionalist terms.

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³ See Dummett (2004) for the most recent statement.

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