

I N T E R V I S T E

Conversation with Robert Brandom

By Pietro Salis

Robert B. Brandom is Distinguished Professor at the University of Pittsburgh and Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He obtained his BA at Yale and his PhD at Princeton under the supervision of Richard Rorty and David Lewis. He is one of the most influential living philosophers. His interests concern mainly philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, epistemology and the thought of Kant, Hegel, and Sellars. He is author of several books which comprise Making it Explicit. Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment (Harvard University Press 1994), Articulating Reasons. An Introduction to Inferentialism (Harvard University Press 2000), Between Saying and Doing. Towards an Analytic Pragmatism (Oxford University Press 2008), and From Empiricism to Ex-

pressivism. Brandom reads Sellars (*Harvard University Press 2015*). *In this broad interview, Brandom speaks about his current work, some of the central aspects of his philosophy, and about his career and education.*

1. Dear Bob, thank you very much for accepting this invitation to tell the readers of APhEx something about your current work. Before discussing in detail various aspects of your work, please let me start with a biographical question about your interest in philosophy and in becoming a professional philosopher. Can you tell us something about how you became interested in philosophy? And what about the professional expectations and ambitions you had at the beginning of your career?

RB: Well, I majored in mathematics at Yale, that's what I started off doing, but I realized relatively early on that my interests were becoming more and more foundational. I was taking statistics courses, but I was fortunate to have Leonard Savage as professor, one of the founders of Bayesianism in statistical thinking, who obviously had serious foundational interests and was very generous in this time talking to me, and Abraham Robinson, teaching set theory. Upon his death in the middle of one of these semesters Jonathan Barwise took over and finished up the model-theory portion of the course. All these people were interested not just in the technical mathematics but also in what it meant. In the same time, I was taking courses in the philosophy department with Bruce Kuklick, who was really an intellectual historian, and I found that my interests were equally divided between foundations of mathematics and questions in intellectual and historical approach in philosophy. So, by the end of my undergraduate career it seemed to me that going on in philosophy was the right thing to do. I had read Richard Rorty's account of Wilfrid Sellars' *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, and I knew that Dana Scott, the great logician, was at Princeton with Rorty, and so that seemed the perfect place to go. I considered Pittsburgh, where Wilfrid Sellars was, but I thought "well, what I can get from Sellars, I can get from Rorty." Little did I know that Dana Scott then moved to Carnegie Mellon University here in Pittsburgh, and when I later came in Pittsburgh he was here, but he left Princeton by the time I came there. But it was right because David Lewis was there, still very young, and not very well-known, but couldn't be a more perfect teacher.

2. *This early interest in the foundations of mathematics is fascinating and also something that easily makes you closer to many of the first generation's figures in analytic philosophy like Frege, Russell, and the early Wittgenstein. It is also interesting, however, the way in which you connected this 'foundationalist' interest (though devoted to mathematics) with an early admiration of Richard Rorty, an author that in a sense is an arch enemy of foundationalism. How do you understand this particular connection? Richard Rorty has also been your supervisor at Princeton during the years of your PhD. How would you describe the intellectual debt that binds you to him? How would you explain the importance of such a figure for contemporary philosophy?*

RB: Well, I think what I've found fascinating about Rorty was first of all the vast meta-narrative that he tells of the history of philosophy. He wrote his Yale dissertation on Aristotle, on *Metaphysics Z*, and in his early years, after the dissertation, he ontogenetically repeated the phylogeny of philosophy, that is, he worked extensively on medieval philosophy. The only result I think we have of that is the contribution he made to Ernan McMullin's volume on the history of matter, *The Concept of Matter*, about the conception of matter in medieval philosophy. Then he worked in modern philosophy and on Kant, worked his way through the Nineteenth Century, and by the time he got to the Twentieth Century philosophy, he had a very different understanding of how we got to the current situation in philosophy. And this led him to edit the book, with his fabulous introduction, called *The Linguistic Turn*, which was his account of where we were in analytic philosophy. I never ran across anyone who had this sort of comprehensive understanding of the history of philosophy, but who also was reading it to learn what the lessons were for what we should be doing now. He was still almost obsessed with concern with Kant, as the pivotal figure in understanding contemporary philosophy. This is not something I think any of his colleagues at Princeton at that time would have agreed with. I don't think they would have seen Kant as central for what they were doing, but given the way Rorty started to develop, it was clear to him that he was thinking of philosophy as being the kind of thing that Kant did, and that both some of the strengths of recent work and some of its limitations are explicable that way, and I found this way of thinking about philosophy and its history just very compelling.

The second influence was specifically in the philosophy of language, where I have been trained in the tradition that runs from Frege through Carnap to Tarski, and eventually to the co-supervisor of my dissertation, David Lewis, which treated logical languages as paradigms of languages and so

looked to the sort of tools needed to give a semantics for logic, to be extended to give a semantics for other things, for other ways of speaking. The triumph, during the time I was a graduate student, was intensional semantics using possible worlds, of the sort that David Lewis, but also my undergraduate teacher Rich Thomason, and people like Bob Stalnaker, David Kaplan, and Richard Montague were pursuing. I was aware, through the pragmatists and Wittgenstein, of another approach to language, and this was the one that Rorty was a prophet of, which saw languages not as formal calculi but as features of the natural history of beings like us and understood language in terms of social practices rather than in terms of model-theory. I came to realize that a principal task for philosophers of our generation was to get these two visions of language and traditions for thinking about language, one logistical and the other anthropological, together. People who worried about language in the way that Heidegger in *Being and Time*, the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, and Dewey did, typically had very little to say to the people who were doing the kind of formal semantics that David Lewis was doing, and vice versa. Mostly, what Rorty and I would talk about, aside from particular historical figures, was how to think about us as discursive creatures, how to think about language as a social practice, how to think about the way in which engaging in discursive practices transformed us from merely natural creatures into cultural creatures, about language as the instrument of *Bildung*. At the same time, when I was at Princeton I would go and talk to David Lewis about the remarkable achievements of formal semantics culminating in possible worlds semantics, which was the second wave of a modal revolution that had begun by the teenage Saul Kripke when he invoked the formal apparatus of possible worlds to give a powerful formal semantics for modal logical languages. Then he contributed to the second wave of the modal revolution which was the generalization of that apparatus to an intensional semantics for all sorts of expressions. I was particularly struck by the expressive power and flexibility exhibited by possible worlds semantics, when we say that, for instance, adverbs come in two different kinds, attributive adverbs and non-attributive ones. If we think of an adverb φ -ly, from the fact that one did something φ -ly does it follow that one did that thing: so, to look at two adverbial phrases, from “I buttered the toast *in the kitchen*” it follows that I buttered the toast, if “I buttered the toast *in my imagination*” it doesn’t follow the same. In Lewis’ possible worlds semantics we can represent a verb by a function from objects to sets of possible worlds, and so an adverb by a function from functions (from objects to sets of possible worlds), to functions (from objects to sets of possible worlds). And now, in that apparatus,

we can represent the difference between the inferential behavior of attributive adverbs and the inferential behavior of non-attributive adverbs by the relation between these functions from functions to functions. I found this mathematical grip on meaning a transformative technical achievement of particular significance for philosophers, who after all spend a lot of their time thinking about the meanings of various expressions.

With these two powerful thinkers as teachers – Rorty, thinking about linguistic practices, and Lewis, thinking about meaning in these mathematical terms –, I formed the intention of understanding how the kinds of meanings that Lewis had taught us to think about could be connected with what people were doing when engaged in that kind of practices that Rorty was thinking about. That's what I began thinking hard about in my dissertation and that's what issued, 18 years later, in *Making It Explicit*.

3. Your philosophical output is outstanding and covers many different areas of philosophy, but it's easy to recognize the centrality of the problem of providing an alternative to representationalism – the idea that the notion of representation plays an explanatory role – both in semantics and in epistemology. Some of your more central ideas, like inferentialism and expressivism, are of special importance in providing such an alternative perspective. Representationalism, however, is still a mainstream approach to many philosophical problems (even though things are changing, for example in cognitive science): what is your explanation for this, and what is your current take on representationalism and the need for alternatives to it?

RB: I think representation was and is the central idea of early modern philosophy and philosophy after that. Descartes had basically invented it, I think, modelling it on the relation between algebra and geometry (he was famous as a mathematician), but as a more abstract way of thinking about the relation between our knowledge and the world that we know about. The history of modern philosophy absolutely revolves around this concept, but I think we never really got very clear about it and from early on one of the lessons I learned from Rorty was that this was not a concept that was sufficiently clear to bear the sort of weight which had accumulated around it in the tradition. Rorty himself thought that there was so much baggage associated with the concept of representation that what we should do was simply reject it and start somewhere else. The pragmatism of Dewey was his solution: let's think in more ecological terms about us as natural organisms coping with the world instead of thinking of us as representing it.

My own view, partly influenced by the mathematical training I had, was that representation was far too valuable and important an idea simply to discard, but, on the other hand, that it needed a new conceptual setting. The key to a new approach to it I've found in Wilfrid Sellars. In an autobiographical sketch he describes how his own thinking from the 1930s – particularly the thinking about alethic modality, about notions of necessity and possibility – had led him to think that we should look downstream to the role that concepts like the modal concepts play in our reasoning in order to understand their content, rather than looking upstream to their supposed origin in experience. So, Sellars was already contrasting a broadly empiricist view that looks to the origin of our ideas, with – what I think of his – a functionalist view that looks instead to the role in our discursive life generally, but more specifically in inference. And though Sellars has done much with this idea, it seemed to me (under the influence of model-theory and in particular the possible worlds semantics that David Lewis was making particular good use of) that much more could be done with the inferentialist idea, with the notion of role in reasoning, than had so far been done.

4. In your latest book, From Empiricism to Expressivism: Brandom reads Sellars, you provided a substantial reading of the thought of Wilfrid Sellars, who's been your colleague in Pittsburgh. In the book it is easy to grasp the main debts that your philosophy owes to him. How would you describe the main lines of continuity between Sellars' philosophy and your own?

RB: Well, it seems very hard for me to separate myself from Sellars because I learned so much from him. We're having this interview next to Sellars' desk and sitting in Sellars' office here in Pittsburgh, as you say he was my colleague from the time I joined the department in 1976 until his death in 1989.

There are a number of fronts along which I learned from Sellars. One is to think of what distinguishes us from non-human animals principally in terms of our living and moving and having our being in a normative space: that what was special about us was a matter of the commitments we could undertake and the normative demand we justify all those commitments. I didn't actually realize it at that time, but eventually learned from Sellars, to think of this as a Kantian lesson.

Second, there was Sellars' broad semantic functionalism, that particularly focused on role in reasoning and on inferential roles in thinking about semantics.

I only came to realize it later, and this was the occasion of writing the book that you refer to, that there was another strand that tied together Sellars' thought, and this is something that I think he himself was not explicitly aware of – at least, I haven't been able to find it either in the published works or in the unpublished materials in the Sellars' archive that's here in the library of the University of Pittsburgh. I haven't been able to find him mentioning this as a unifying theme in his work, but I think it is and it has become one in mine as well, and that is: thinking of concepts that are potentially philosophically puzzling (semantic concepts, modal concepts, intentional concepts) as, in some sense, metalinguistic. This is a lesson he avowedly learned from Carnap, but it's one that Sellars transposed into a pragmatic key like what in his early work he called "pure pragmatics." Rather than thinking about semantic meta-languages, he thought about pragmatic meta-languages. This is a theme he did not develop: this theme of pragmatic meta-languages is one he did not thematise and explicitly develop in his later work, though I think he would have profited from doing that, but he did apply the notion. I think that a pragmatic meta-language is one that lets us talk about what we are doing in using some other kind of language, some other sort of vocabulary. In a series of papers that Sellars wrote at the absolute height of his powers, right around between 1956 (*Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*) and what I think of as his *annus mirabilis*, 1961, he wrote on the one hand about alethic modal vocabulary, and on the other hand, about the perennial philosophical problem of universals, in terms of what we can see are pragmatic meta-vocabularies – that is, in terms of a discussion of what we are doing in using an expression for universals or in making a modal claim. This theme focused on understanding problematic philosophical concepts in terms of their expressive role, in terms of what they let us explicitly say about what we are doing in talking and thinking. This, I think, ended up being an immensely productive methodology and approach for Sellars, and it's one I've tried to get more theoretically clear about in my own recent work, in particular in the vicinity of expressivism.

5. Recently, Jaroslav Peregrin, in his book Inferentialism: Why Rules Matter, distinguished between two distinct approaches towards understanding meaning and conceptual content as based on inferential role. The first is classical conceptual role semantics, the idea that the meanings of utterances depend on a number of inferences speakers are caused/disposed to draw. The other, which is the approach that you pursue and develop, is normative

inferentialism, the idea that speakers' meanings depend on the inferences they ought to draw. How would you describe such contrast?

RB: Well, through reflection on inferentialist functionalism I think of two species of functionalism generally, that is, outside of semantics – outside of the philosophy of language –, just within the philosophy of mind. The functionalism of the 1960s, that begins with people like Putnam thinking about Turing Machine functionalism, was typically developed in terms of the causal roles that something played, what the dispositions of the system were, what the abilities or capacities of various parts of the system were, and how they related to one another. But I think it became clear that *biological* functionalism, for instance, involved a kind of teleological normativity – it was the sort of notion that in our own time Ruth Millikan has articulated under the heading of a “proper function” of something, the way something ought to behave. It is clear that this is the sort of functionalism that Wittgenstein was concerned about both in the *Investigations* and in the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*: when he says, you know, when we think about a blueprint for a machine, we are not thinking about the possibility of the cogs breaking off of the gear or some of the pieces melting down. Though normativity is not one of Wittgenstein’s words, I think he was pointing out that the sort of functions that matter, above all in the philosophy of mind, are normatively characterized functions, appealing to norms of proper functioning of the pieces. I think that in inferentialist functionalism in semantics and in the philosophy of language, the beginning of wisdom is to think in these normative terms rather than in dispositional terms, and also it’s important that one realizes that normativity itself involves an essential bifurcation of perspective. Sellars remarks on this, when he distinguishes between “ought-to-do’s” and “ought-to-be’s,” between rules of action and rules of criticism. My preferred terminology is to think in terms of the context of *deliberation*, and the role that norms have in that, and the role that norms have in the context of *assessment*. An explicit distinction between the norm one is following and the norm one is assessed according to, has turned out to be of the first significance in debates about the normativity of meaning, where people have thought that meaning couldn’t really be a normative notion: if it were, then anyone who was violating a certain norm would just count as meaning something else, and even the notion of violating the norm makes no sense. But if you think about it from a third person point of view, it makes perfect sense to think that I can assess some person’s activities according to a particular norm, which they may be violating, but to my taking them to mean something is taking that they’ve

committed themselves to behave in certain ways, that they ought to behave in certain ways, even if, as a matter of fact, their dispositions are not in line with the norms that, from the point of view of the context of assessment, I take it they're properly assessable according to. So, in general, I think there are two kinds of functionalism, causal functionalism and normative functionalism, and the distinction within inferentialism is just a reflection in the application of that.

6. Let me consider again this conception of normativity. In Between Saying and Doing. Towards an Analytic Pragmatism you defended the conception according to which the “normative” vocabulary, like many other vocabularies of special philosophical significance, is something akin to a meta-linguistic device. A vocabulary that practically empowers us to better specify and improve the things that we do in our practices. Is it possible to understand the inferentialist normative meta-language that you developed in Making It Explicit as an expressive device of this kind?

RB: Yes, I think that's exactly the way one should think about it: it begins with a notion of regimenting the kind of normativity that's involved in what, inspired by Sellars, I call the game of giving and asking for reasons (he talks about the “space of reasons”). In this regimented normative meta-vocabulary, the principal flavors of normative status, our commitments and entitlements, the claim is that anything that is intelligible as a practice or game of giving and asking for reasons has to have something corresponding to a commitment which one undertakes paradigmatically by asserting something, claiming something, saying it in the mode of making a claim or an assertion. But the very idea of a reason indicates and marks a distinction between commitments to which one is entitled, by having a reason, and commitments to which one is not entitled. So, besides the fundamental normative status of a commitment, anything recognizable as a practice of giving and asking for reasons must also involve, in practice, distinguishing between commitments one is entitled to and those one is not. And that's true whether the commitments in question are cognitive or theoretical (that is, the question whether one is entitled to a claim one is making), or whether they are practical commitments (the one I commit myself to when I say I'll drive you to the train station, for instance). The picture in *Making It Explicit* understands those normative statuses in terms of normative attitudes towards them. I've already mentioned the attitude of acknowledging or undertaking a commitment – and that's what we do in the context of deliberation

– or attributing a commitment – which is what we do in the context of assessment. Those two fundamental perspectives that one can have on a commitment, to claim it oneself or to attribute it to another, that's the fundamental social articulation of normative attitudes, the normative attitudes that in the end institute those normative statuses. So, in *Making It Explicit* I'm trying to describe, in this pragmatic meta-language of commitment and entitlement, of acknowledging and undertaking commitments on the one hand, and attributing them to others on the other hand, what discursive practice is, what the practices are within which it's possible to claim, or even to think, that things are thus and so.

7. You are a famous interpreter of Hegel, even though your reading of the Phenomenology of Spirit is still to be published (at the moment, it is only available online on your website under the title "A Spirit of Trust" http://www.pitt.edu/~brandom/spirit_of_trust_2014.html). Along with important philosophers such as Robert Pippin, Terry Pinkard, and others, your work contributes to an American rediscovery of Hegel. How do you evaluate this cultural turn in a philosophical environment dominated by American pragmatism and analytic philosophy? Why is your reading of Hegel still unpublished? Do you still consider it work in progress? How do you evaluate, more in general, the importance of modern figures like Kant and Hegel for contemporary philosophy?

RB: Well, as far as the book is concerned, it is unpublished because I'm very slow. I've started writing it in the 1980, it will come out very soon. I'm almost done with it, but it's a long slow process. I have, to be sure, published some articles on Hegel along the way, and a year or two ago a short book in German, *Wiedererinnerter Idealismus*, that conveys some of my reading of Hegel. It's not that I'm shy about sharing this, it's just that I'm only going to get to say it once and I want to say it just right.

Now, why are we, as I would claim we are, at the dawning of a golden age in the study of Hegel in anglophone and in analytic philosophy, after all the founders of analytic philosophy, Russell and Moore, themselves were recoiling from the excesses of the British Idealism of their teachers? They understood that Hegel was too good a reader of Kant for one to reject Hegel but accept Kant, that one couldn't open the door wide enough to let Kant slide through but slam it quickly enough to keep Hegel out. So, from their point of view, the idealist rot had already set in with Kant, and the mainstream of the history of philosophy had to be understood to run from Leib-

niz through John Stuart Mill, and then to Frege, without ever passing through the oxbow and backwater of German Idealism. As a result, through the first half of the Twentieth Century, Kant was not much of a figure for analytic philosophers.

In previous generations, recent generations in analytic philosophy, however, we've seen a recovery of Kant: on the theoretical side, a lot of credit goes to Peter Strawson, and also to figures like Jonathan Bennett; on the practical side, above all to John Rawls and to his students, and I think it's fair to say that the last 30 years have seen a real renaissance in analytic and anglophone studies of Kant. And I think we've seen that Moore and Russell were right, that if you are that interested in Kant you can't ignore as interesting a reader of Kant as Hegel was. So, I think it was inevitable that a golden age of Kant reading, that we find ourselves in, should give rise to a new wave of Hegel reading. I didn't myself, when I set out, ever expect to be part of that, but when I started reading Hegel I found myself learning too much from him to just stop reading him. Again and again, I would find him addressing questions that I was interested in and puzzled about, and saying things that transform my own way of thinking about them, and so I set myself the task of translating Hegel into a conceptual framework and a terminology in which others would be able to see him as I have come to see him, as addressing philosophical problems of contemporary interest, and doing so in a way that presented many challenging and suggestive ideas of how we might get out of some of the corners we are backed ourselves into in thinking about those issues of contemporary philosophical interest.

I see Kant as a great transformative figure in philosophy. I see him as being, for contemporary philosophy, what the poet Algernon Swinburne described the sea as being the great gray mother of us all. But I think that Kant's real philosophical insights have not been sufficiently appreciated, particularly in the anglophone circles.

Two of Kant's great innovations, that I think have been insufficiently appreciated, are first of all his normative turn, his idea that what distinguishes knowers and agents like us from merely natural creatures, the non-human animals, is not the presence of some Cartesian mind-stuff, but rather the fact that judgments and intentional doings are things that we are in a distinctive sense responsible for, that they are exercises of our authority, and of undertaking a distinctive kind of commitment. Responsibility, authority, commitment, these are all normative notions. Kant replaced the Cartesian ontological distinction of mind and body with the deontological distinction between those of us that live, move, and have our being in a normative space and those who only obey rules without exception in the form of laws of na-

ture. This normative turn, I believe, has been revived in the Twentieth Century above all by the later Wittgenstein, who I believe also thought about intentionality generally in normative terms.

The other big Kantian idea, that I think has been insufficiently appreciated, is his idea that besides the concepts that we use to articulate our knowledge of the empirical world around us, there are also concepts whose principal expressive use is to make explicit the framework within which describing and explaining the empirical world is possible: what he called “categories,” the “pure concepts of the understanding.” The figure that I think has done the most with that Kantian idea, in the middle years of the Twentieth Century, is my hero Wilfrid Sellars. But this idea has not particularly penetrated the contemporary discussion, and I think it’s worth our returning our attention to it.

8. Your philosophy is particularly focused on explaining intentionality and cognition, with a great emphasis on the participation in normative practices. This is the idea that proper intentionality and cognition (that is contentfulness) are characteristic of participants to such practices: they are “sapient,” as opposed to mere sentient beings, able just to differentially respond to environmental stimuli. Sapient beings are those capable of conceptually articulated responses, whose states can be properly understood as contentful. This approach is sometimes accused of being ungenerous towards non-linguistic animals, and animal cognition and ‘mentality.’ What do you think of the separation between these types of cognition? Which commitments do you think your views bear on such a problem?

RB: Though I consider myself a pragmatist, at least in the sense of being concerned with developing the legacy of the classical American Pragmatists, Peirce, James, and Dewey, unlike them and like the rationalist tradition of which we were just speaking, I see a bright line between language-using creatures and creatures which have not come into language as we have. I do think it’s important that we understand what broadly cognitive abilities non-linguistic animals have, and how those abilities along with abilities recognizably like them, or continuous with them, are recruited in our coming to be participants in generally discursive – that is, linguistic – practices. But I don’t think, in principle, that one can understand what it is to understand things in the sapient way, I don’t think one can understand the transformation that we undergo when we come into language *from below*, by looking at the abilities that we share with only non-linguistic creatures. I think in

principle we can only understand that *from above* – that is, from the point of view of creatures who have made that transition both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. The center of my own theoretical efforts has been to try to develop expressive tools to let us make explicit what it is that we have to be able to do in order, by doing those things, to count as saying something, to count as able to make assertions, to describe things, to explain things, and do all the other things that we do with language.

9. Like Richard Rorty, you endorsed Wilfrid Sellars' lesson about the Myth of the Given. Sellars' criticism emphasized how the sensory given is insufficient to ground perceptual knowledge and in general contentful states. Such high-level states require further resources like participation in social normative practices, such as a discursive practice. From this perspective, you usually characterize sensory perception in terms of differential dispositions to respond reliably to environmental stimuli. This is mainly a "responsive" characterization of perception. The focus of such conception seems to depend on the cognitive role that such sensory dispositions play in your understanding of cognition. However, as Carl Sachs forcefully emphasized in the book Intentionality and the Myth of the Given, this view seems to neglect the importance of the phenomenological aspects of perceptual experience. What do you think about the importance of such phenomenological features? Do you consider them as structurally distinct from a cognitive understanding of sensory perception? What is, in your opinion, the connection between the cognitive role of perceptual dispositions and sensory states on the one hand, and their phenomenological features on the other?

RB: Well, no doubt what people describe as the phenomenological features of our experience are important to the lived lives of natural beings of the sort we are, sentient living beings who can speak. I've been unable to see, however, that anything essential to our being discursive creatures turns on the nature, the character, or even the existence, of such phenomenological properties. *Making It Explicit* has been described as an enterprise in "vandalizing Neurath's boat." Neurath said that our knowledge does not have a foundation. In effect, we are afloat in our knowledge as in a boat, we can replace one bit of it with another bit, but there is no such thing as holding it into a dry-dock to found it on anything. The project of vandalizing Neurath's boat is to see how much of our discursive practice we could do without crossing the bright line I was talking about a minute ago, from language-using to non-language-using creatures, from creatures who can say

that things are thus and so to creatures that do not. There is a great deal of language that is very important to us that I think can be thrown over without sinking Neurath's boat: logical vocabulary (which I've described as the organon of semantic self-consciousness), that gives us expressive resources to make explicit the inferences in virtue of which our concepts have the contents that they do, plays a very important role in our distinctive form of self-consciousness. And yet it seems to me intelligible that there should be creatures who engage in discursive practices, implicitly normative practices of giving and asking for reasons, applying inferentially articulated concepts, and saying how things are and explaining why things are the way they are, even though they couldn't use logical vocabulary. It's something like the spirit of Popperian methodology – Popper has recommended to us that we adopt the strongest most easily falsifiable hypothesis that is consistent with the evidence we have. Just as I don't see why the notion of rational but not logical creatures is unintelligible, so I don't see why the concept of empirical knowers, language users, who can reliably respond differentially to visible features of their environment, for instance, but for whom that capacity is not accompanied by anything recognizable as phenomenal properties, or even secondary quality properties should be either: I don't see why the conception of that sort of empirical speakers and knowers is unintelligible.

10. Which projects are you recently working on?

RB: Well, as I just mentioned, I'm writing the conclusion and the introduction of the long Hegel book, *A Spirit of Trust*, that I've been working on for many years. But a project that is occupying me at least this much is a project in logic and the philosophy of logic, that is the next phase in a train of thought that one can see already in my 1994 *Making It Explicit*. We've talked some about how the picture of language in that book is articulating a normative pragmatics – that is, a way of thinking about what we are doing in speaking that understands it in terms of our commitments and our entitlements, our attitudes of undertaking commitments and attributing them. We've talked about how the semantics in that book is an inferential role semantics. Perhaps, the third large idea of that book, besides the normative pragmatics and the inferential semantics, is an expressivist approach to logic, so to the understanding of logic, and in particular an expressivist answer to the question "Why should philosophers care about logic?"

Logic has been at the center of analytic philosophy, but I think it's fair to say that the original hopes for the transformative effect that logic could have

on our thinking about philosophical problems have turned out to be unsustainable. The stories that people like Russell told about why we should be doing our philosophy and philosophical thinking in logistical languages, for instance, are stories that almost no one today would subscribe to.

My view is that logical vocabulary is one of the principal kinds of vocabulary whose expressive role is to make explicit, as something we can say, what we are doing in reasoning. I've elaborated this expressivist philosophy of logic not only in *Making It Explicit*, but also in my 2006 *Locke Lectures*, published as *Between Saying and Doing*, which we already referred to. I came to think that if the expressivist philosophy of logic is right – that is, if the topic and task of logic really is to craft expressive tools to make explicit relations of implication and incompatibility in non-logical vocabularies, relating non-logical concepts – then the reason logic is important in philosophy is because it is providing the expressive tools we need to think about giving and asking for reasons. That shouldn't just transform the way we think about logic, it should transform the way we do logic: it should actually have an effect on the practice of logic.

Over the last decade, along with a number of students and former students and collaborators, we've developed *expressive logics*, built largely on Gentzen's style proof-theory, and developed new logical vocabularies and tools for the expression of what Sellars called "materially good inferences," and material incompatibilities of concepts, which are what I take Hegel as addressing under his notion of "determinate negation." So, we're well launched on writing a book called *Logics of Consequence*, with subtitle *Tools for the Expression of Structure*, which presents our results in logic, but embedded in a fuller telling of the philosophical story about what logic is and why it is important. My co-authors of that book are Ulf Hlobil, who teaches at Concordia University in Montreal, and my current PhD student Daniel Kaplan.

11. You recently published a book devoted to your understanding of the legacy of American Pragmatism entitled Perspectives on Pragmatism. Classical, Recent, and Contemporary. This book is useful in mapping a number of divergencies between your endorsement and understanding of pragmatism and many classical pragmatist doctrines. In light of such differences, how do you understand the basic distinction between new and classical pragmatism?

RB: I see the pragmatists as having a number of fundamental insights. One is to think about meaning in terms of use, and putting it that way indicates that I think of the later Wittgenstein as a pragmatist, in a broad sense, though this is not the way he ever used to think about himself. I take thinking about meaning in broadly functional terms – that is, of the use of expressions as the roles that they play in our forms of life – as a fundamental pragmatist insight.

I take that the Classical American Pragmatists also appreciated the normative character of meaning and content, indeed thinking about norms of the deployment of concepts in terms of usefulness and solving problems of everyday life, to use a Deweyan phrase; thinking about the normativity of our discursive lives in terms of some sort of broadly instrumental or adaptive terms – to use the sort of evolutionary language that was very important to them. This was one of their fundamental ideas, and it was the means by which they hoped to naturalize our understanding of rationality. Slightly more specifically, they were all impressed by the sort of normativity that's on display both in the evolution of species and in individual learning, where a certain kind of adaptation by selection occurs either in the species as a whole or in the individual, and they sought to generalize that.

Although Dewey was, from my point of view, moving in the right direction, I think it was only with the later Wittgenstein that we saw that a more general, more social, notion of normativity was needed, beyond this adaptational one. I've already mentioned Sellars' student, Ruth Millikan, and her notion and generalization of that adaptational notion of normativity, which in her hands also is a very important social dimension: that's one of the differences between communicating systems like us and most of the ordinary biological systems. But I think that a more Wittgensteinian notion, a notion of normativity that understands that kind of norms as implicit – I think Wittgenstein put on the table a notion of norms that are implicit in social practice – is more suited to a use theory of meaning and to an understanding of discursive practice than the more reductively naturalistic notion of normativity that the Classical American Pragmatists employed. So, it seemed to me that a task is to transpose their good insights into a more social key and into a more linguistic key. Again, one of the great insights of analytic philosophy was the focus on language, and this was something that, with some exceptions, came in late in the pragmatist story, especially for James, and even for Dewey. Language was to the fore for Peirce, but the sociality of language was not so important and cared about by the community of interpreters, and not as much to the fore as it is in Wittgenstein. This is a difference in emphasis, but what I tried to do in the book is discern a common

tradition that has Peirce, James, and Dewey as the founding generation, moves through figures like Sellars and Rorty as recent philosophers, and up to the people today: I would mention Huw Price as someone else who's been developing these pragmatist ideas for a long time, and Ruth Millikan, that I've already mentioned before.

12. Still about pragmatism: in recent years you were involved in an interesting dialogue with Huw Price, who shares, even if with important differences, ideas which are central for your philosophy, such as expressivism and anti-representationalism. This surely marks a common Rortyan influence on both of you, but this dialogue also shows divergencies and disagreements, having to do with the scope of anti-representationalism and of the expressivist understanding of language. While Price endorses a radical anti-representationalism and a global form of expressivism, you offered reasons for narrowing and circumscribing the scope of such ideas, offering what you called their 'local' version. How do you understand the fundamental lines of your disagreement?

RB: Indeed, my conversations with Huw Price over the years have been immensely valuable, and important to the development of my own thinking. We started interacting at the series of conferences that he sponsored when he was still at the University of Sidney, and it is continued as he moved over to Trinity College at the University of Cambridge. Like me, Huw came to his interest in philosophy of language from thinking about issues particularly in philosophy of science. For me it was more logic and then the exact sciences, but in Huw's case it was from the philosophy of physics, and in particular from thinking about the difficulty in reconciling the role of the "time" variable in quantum mechanics and again in general relativity theory. He came to think that that difficulty was due to the way we were thinking of the function performed by those bits of language, of the "temporal magnitudes" as they figure in these mathematized theories. Specifically, he thought that we were wrong in squeezing them, so to speak, into a box of the wrong shape, by asking ourselves what qualities in the world these represent, and he concluded that we need to take a more general functionalist approach to them. He found some of the things I've written in the philosophy of language, the inferentialist approach to semantics, very helpful in focusing his work on these languages of fundamental physics. He himself came to a generalized pragmatic, even pragmatist, approach to language and was very much impressed and influenced by Rorty and, as you point out, in

many ways he is more Rortyan than I am: he, like Rorty, is a global anti-representationalist.

He made two distinctions, that I think are of first importance in thinking about these issues, and at least one of them I know Rorty himself was aware of and impressed with, and wanted to take on board. So, the first of those is the distinction between what he calls “object naturalism” and “subject naturalism.” Object naturalism is what almost everyone else means by naturalism. It coincides with what his compatriot Frank Jackson calls the “location problem.” finding what feature of the world as described in the language of physics it is that we are talking about when we use some bit of language that comes from outside of physics, say normative vocabulary, semantic vocabulary, or intentional vocabulary. The object naturalist takes for granted the representationalist semantics for the language that she is addressing, asks about what is represented by these features of the language, and wants the specifications of those represented things to be cashed out in a naturalistic vocabulary.

The subject naturalist, by contrast, wants a naturalistic account, as the term suggests, not of the object we are talking about, but of the subject we are talking about. The subject naturalist wants an account in naturalistic vocabulary of the practices of using these expressions. A paradigm of the subject naturalist is the later Wittgenstein whose language games – *Sprachspiele* – are precisely descriptions in a broadly naturalistic vocabulary of what practitioners have to do to count as saying various sorts of things (to be using pain-talk, for instance, or using number-talk).

Huw’s view is, in general, that subject naturalism is all the naturalism one should want. That, for instance, rather than being puzzled about how to find numbers in the world as described by physicists – the sort of enterprise that for instance Hartry Field brilliantly pursues in his book *Science Without Numbers* – and so, rather than looking for what features of the world as described by natural sciences it is that numerals refer to, that number-talk represents, we should begin, as the later Wittgenstein would, looking at how we use numbers to count and the way we teach children to use numbers to do arithmetic. If we can, as we can, give a naturalistic account of how we learn to count, and to add, and to do arithmetic, and to use numerals in general, then there is anything left over to be puzzled about, unless we are antecedently committed to a representationalist semantics being the meta-language that we should use to describe every sort of talk. And that’s exactly the supposition that Price wants to contest.

Another distinction he makes that seems to me of principal importance is that between what he calls *i*-representation and *e*-representation – that is, be-

tween a notion of representation that is internal to a conceptual scheme and one that involves stepping outside that conceptual scheme and looking at a reference to outside objects. Here he thinks there is nothing wrong with the notion of internal representations; it's the notion of external representations that gets us committed to a notion of what Rorty described as Reality with capital "R." Price, with his distinction between *i*-representations and *e*-representations, is developing a successor concept, I think, to Putnam's notion of internal realism and external realism, and he is endorsing the sort of attitude that Putnam had towards that: internal realism is ok, external realism is metaphysical extravagance.

Price and I are together in looking into the subject rather than to the object represented, and in wanting to describe the use of expressions in terms that are not philosophically puzzling. Take the way he thinks of my rehabilitation of representational locutions, which leads me to distinguish between the broadly non-representational expressions that one should give in the first instance an expressivist account of (which for me begins with logical vocabulary) and the expressions that I say play a principal representational role (which I'm going to explain and understand in terms of the inferential role they play and the social articulation of the scorekeeping practices involving them). He understands all of that as an account of internal representations and sees that story as not genuinely in tension with his global anti-representationalism.

I'm not sure that things line up so nicely. I think that one should give an expressivist account of vocabularies that provide semantic but, more broadly, pragmatic meta-vocabularies for other vocabularies. That is where the principal use of these vocabularies is to talk about what you're doing in using some other vocabulary, and there is no vocabulary that stands to ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary as the logical, normative, and modal vocabularies stand to our ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary. That's what it means to be an expressivist about the meta-vocabularies but *not* about the ground level ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary. I mention in passing that even vocabularies whose principal use is to be understood in terms of their expressive role, as pragmatic meta-vocabularies, even those vocabularies can have a representational dimension to their use. I don't think that logical vocabulary does, but I think both normative and alethic modal vocabulary acquire also a representational use in virtue of their meta-linguistic expressive use. But that's a complicated story.

13. During the years, in many of your writings, you developed a number of theoretical moves providing a general viable alternative to the truth-conditional and representationalist understanding of language. However, you never dedicated specific attention to a global taxonomy of the problems of such approaches. Interestingly, in the first chapter of his recent book, Brandom, Ronald Loeffler tried, in my opinion with good results, to reconstruct such taxonomy of theoretical problems for what he called “the Received View” representing the mainstream alternative to your views in semantics. What do you think of such a reconstruction? Do you plan to write an ‘extensive’ and systematic criticism of representationalist and truth-conditional semantics in the future?

RB: I want to answer the last part of your question first: no, I don't. Very little of what I write has taken the principal form of a criticism of the views of others. I began by appreciating the considerable achievements of representationalism in semantics, as I think of it as a strain of thought that begins at least with Descartes. It seems to me that it had many explanatory successes and illuminated what we are doing in talking in many ways, and my aim has been to embrace those achievements and extend them, but mostly to set them in a larger framework: the framework of a theory of the use of language, a theory of discursive practices of the sort I was talking about a minute ago. It seems to me that a principal source of people's reflexive attachment to representationalist ways of thinking has been the lack of obviously viable alternatives, and so I've taken as my principal aim the provision of such alternatives. Sometimes this takes the form of alternative theories of fundamental concepts, such as anaphoric accounts of the use of expressions like “true” and “refers;” sometimes has taken the form of describing alternative ways of thinking about what we are doing in talking. You don't have to be a philosopher to distinguish between what we are saying or thinking on the one hand, and what we are talking or thinking *about* on the other hand. But it's the philosophers who thought that we need to understand what it was to say or think that things are thus and so in terms of what we were speaking *of*, or thinking *about* – that is, in representational terms. That order of explanation is a substitute theoretical philosophical commitment, and it's representationalism in the sense of endorsing that order of explanation that I've set out to provide an alternative to. I think we should understand what it is to talk or think about something in terms of what we are doing when we say something or think something. I've suggested thinking about the pragmatics and semantics of sentences, the things we can say and think, in terms of inferences, on the semantic side, and in terms of commitments, on the

pragmatic side. So, what I take one to be doing in saying something, or in thinking it oneself, is committing oneself either publicly, or privately, that things be thus and so; and I think of the content of that commitment in terms of inferential roles – that is, in terms of what follows from the commitment one has undertaken and what would count as evidence for or against it.

14. Inferentialism attributes fundamental importance to the notion of “materially good” inferences. These are the inferences that are good on the basis of the non-logical concepts involved rather than in virtue of their logical form. In a sense, since material inferences spell out the contents of our conceptually articulated claims, they are akin to forms of “ampliative” reasoning, and this feature points to a kind of “synthetic” conception of judgment that is an important Kantian legacy. According to expressivism, the very same feature of such inferences is responsible for their elucidating role – making conceptual contents explicit – in discursive practice. How would you describe such connection between expressivism and the “synthetic” character of material inference?

RB: As recent discussions of my work have shown, discussions by Jeremy Wanderer, by Pietro Salis, and more recently by Ronald Loeffler, the three pillars of my picture of language are normative pragmatism, semantic inferentialism, and a logical expressivism. It’s a peculiarity of *Making It Explicit* that at its core is the idea of using the sense of explicitness in which logical vocabulary lets us make explicit what otherwise is implicit in our practice, paradigmatically conditionals, “if-then” locutions, that let us say that an inference is good, so say what we can otherwise only implicitly do by taking or treating in practice an inference as good. It’s a meta-logical strategy of *Making It Explicit* to take that notion of explicitness as the model for making something explicit in the sense of saying anything at all, saying that the cat is on the mat or that freedom is better than slavery. The attempt in each case is to say what you have to do to be saying something.

15. In Between Saying and Doing you claimed that while presenting some main lines of continuity, the ‘analytic pragmatist’ enterprise is widely independent, from a theoretical point of view, of the general understanding of language that you developed in Making It Explicit. Recently, Giacomo Turbanti’s book Robert Brandom’s Normative Inferentialism claimed to find a stronger connection between normative inferentialism and analytic pragma-

tism. He claims that the general understanding of expressivism developed within analytic pragmatism provides theoretical tools that greatly help in reaching a higher-level grasp of normative inferentialism. I agree with him, at least with respect to certain topics, for example the defense of semantic holism and the wide reconsideration of compositionality permitted by incompatibility semantics. What do you think about such ‘continuist’ reading of your work?

RB: I agree with Turbanti when he presents my thinking in the philosophy of language as having three principal pillars: a normative pragmatism about the use of language, a semantic inferentialism about the meanings that expressions acquire by being used in the ways we do, and an expressivism about many concepts that have been of particular interest of philosophers, such as the concepts we use when we are doing logic and semantics, when we are doing the philosophy of mind, and the normative concepts that we use when we are doing practical philosophy. So, a normative pragmatism, a semantic inferentialism, and a broad expressivism about a range of philosophically significant concepts, paradigmatically logical concepts. The first two of those, the normative pragmatism and the semantic inferentialism, are developed in considerable detail in *Making It Explicit*, while what I call logical expressivism is announced, but not really developed there. And I think he’s right to see analytic pragmatism, and the conceptual apparatus that I developed in *Between Saying and Doing*, as trying to do justice to that third pillar in something like the same sense in which I aspired to do justice to the first two in *Making It Explicit*. In that sense the later book could well be thought of as “volume 2” of *Making It Explicit*.

On the other hand, I was concerned to write *Between Saying and Doing*, my 2006 *John Locke Lectures* in Oxford, in a way that would display the relations between vocabularies we use to talk about the use of language and the vocabularies we use to talk about the meanings that we express by using language that way, in a way that was not held hostage to the particular views about discursive practice and meaning – that is, to the normative pragmatism and to the semantic inferentialism of *Making It Explicit*. So, in *Between Saying and Doing* I went into some trouble to talk about the use of expressions on the one hand, and the meaning of expressions on the other, in a way that doesn’t presuppose either normative social pragmatism or semantic inferentialism. For instance, on the side of the pragmatics I was happy enough there to talk about practices or abilities as the principal focus of pragmatics. Speaking from the point of view of *Making It Explicit*, it’s the practices the matter not the abilities, but not everyone thinks that way (and not everyone

needs of thinking that way) of the apparatus of *Between Saying and Doing*: it should go through if you think about use in terms of the individual abilities rather than in terms of social practices. On the side of meaning, even though the account of meaning-use analysis that I'm giving a regimented idiom for in *Between Saying and Doing* works well for an inferentialist semantics, it works as well for a representationalist semantics. So, my hope was, in the later book, to describe an apparatus for thinking about the relations between pragmatics and semantics that would be of use even to people that didn't have my particular commitments in pragmatics and semantics.

16. Making It Explicit is heading towards the 25th anniversary of its publication. It is a book difficult to underestimate and that received a wide praise all over the philosophical world. It presented a global challenge to truth-conditional and representationalist understandings of language, conceptual content and linguistic meaning, and a general valuable theoretical alternative to mainstream semantics. Which are, in your opinion, the main open problems and challenges of such an enterprise after all these years?

RB: Of course, I've been gratified by the reception and the attention that *Making It Explicit* has received, and in particular in recent years to the extent to which people working outside of philosophy, in neighboring disciplines, have found the picture of discursive practice that I pursued there helpful in their own work. It remains the case that it's very much a minority tradition in the contemporary scene, compared for instance to the sort of representationalist broadly model-theoretic picture that my teacher David Lewis developed. I think that there has been, in the anglophone philosophy generally, a turning away from philosophy of language in favor of a more metaphysical object-oriented approach, which is less concerned with how we talk about things and more concerned with how the things themselves are. Though I've written some myself about how I think of the metaphysical enterprise is pursued, by David Lewis in particular, and about the terms in which I think we can and should endorse the project of developing a metaphysical idiom – that is, an idiom that aspires to be able to say everything, but which is nonetheless a regimented idiom and under our control in a way in which natural language is not –, I've also written about why I think any such attempt must ultimately run up against the things that can't be said in the favored terms, and why I think we shouldn't draw the invidious conclusion that the things that are not sayable in our favored idiom are less real than the things that can be said, but rather, in the spirit of the young David

Lewis, start with a *different* metaphysical idea and see what can be said and what can't be said in that idiom and learn our way around.

As far as the development of the general program and point of view that's announced and given some development in *Making It Explicit*, I appreciated right from the beginning that the inferences that articulate the meanings of non-logical expressions, ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary – what, following Wilfrid Sellars, I called material implications and incompatibilities, the implication of “color” by “red,” the incompatibility of “square” and “circular” –, as long as we broaden our attention to include different varieties of ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary, we find first of all that those implications and incompatibilities are subjunctively robust. They support subjunctive and counterfactual reasoning, and this is a dimension that is made explicit by the use of modal vocabulary of various kinds. Sellars pointed out a deep connection between deontic modal vocabulary and this alethic modal vocabulary: between expressions that let us talk about what we are doing in using expressions of commitments and entitlements (that is, deontic normative modals), and the expressions that also articulate this subjunctive robustness of the inferential roles and relations that articulate the meanings of our expressions and of our speech acts. When Sellars said that the language of modality is a “transposed language of norms,” I think there is a deep connection and that we don't well understand that. That's one of the insights that I see as animating Hegel's work, and which drives me to Hegel to try to understand that phenomenon better by seeing what he had to say about it.

A second dimension of the inferential articulation of ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary is that those relations of material implication and incompatibility are non-monotonic. The fact that q follows from p , in this material sense, doesn't entail that q also follows if we add r to p . If I say “If I strike this dry well-made match” it can follow that it will light, but not if it's in a strong magnetic field. But if we add the claim that I'm striking it in a Faraday cage, in a strong magnetic field, now it does follow again that it will light. But if we add that there is no oxygen in the room, no, then it won't light. In general, the fact that something is a good inference doesn't mean that it is still a good inference if you throw in a few more premises: those premises may defeat the inference, and adding still more premises may reinstate it. We still have not nearly but good enough formal and mathematical grip on the way in which non-monotonic reasoning works. Our representation, our means of expression for non-monotonic inference and incompatibilities, is nothing like as good as it is for the sort of monotonic reasoning that we find in mathematics, and so in fundamental physics.

One of the frontiers of development of thinking about inferential semantics, accordingly, is to develop logical tools with more expressive power for codifying non-monotonic relations of implication and incompatibility. The book I'm working on (with former student Ulf Hlobil and present student Dan Kaplan), *Logics of Consequence*, takes some steps towards remedying that incapacity.

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