Brandom's Reconstructive Rationality.
Some Pragmatist Themes

Testa, Italo

email: italo.testa@unipr.it
webpage: http://venus.unive.it/cortella/crtheory/bios/bio_it.html
University of Parma, Dipartimento di Filosofia, Via D'Azeglio 85/A, 43100 Parma

Abstract. Focusing on part one of *Tales of the Mighty Dead* and on its relation to the afterword to *Between Saying and Doing,* I illustrate what reconstructive methodology is and argue that theoretical thinking is one of its instances. I then show that the historical understanding involved in telling the story of a philosophical tradition is another case of reconstruction: one that deepens our understanding of the *retrospective* character of reconstruction itself, adding something new to our conception of rationality. I then explore a further instance of reconstructive rationality, that is what Brandom calls "reconstructive metaphysics", i.e. a reconstructive theory whose aspiration is global rather than local. Finally, I argue that Brandom's reconstructive metaphysics is basically a pragmatist metaphysics.

1. Introduction

How does the telling of a story – the story of one or two philosophical traditions confronting themselves - relate to theory building? We can start to appreciate this if we realize that project of *Between Saying & Doing. Towards an Analytic Pragmatism* (henceforth *TAP*) is internally linked, both in its theoretical and narrative part, with an understanding of what *reconstruction*, *rational* reconstruction, and *retrospective* rational reconstruction are. The theoretical project and the narrative project are in fact different exercises of a form of philosophical rationality that exhibits those features. This may be called "reconstructive rationality". In Brandom's words: "For, even apart from that way of motivating it, features that are intrinsic to my project place it squarely within the analytic tradition. […] That is an analytic project, at least relative to one way of distilling an essence out of that multifarious tradition, one way of retrospectively rationally reconstructing it so as to make or find a common project that then becomes visible as having been implicit in it all along" (*TAP*, p. 232).

What then is reconstructive rationality? And how did pragmatism contribute to this way of understanding what rationality is? This is a question that remains in the background of *TAP* and that can be addressed mainly with reference to *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (henceforth *TMD*). In what follows then I'll look for an answer to this question

in *TMD* that may also be relevant for the reader of *TAP*. In doing so, I'll focus on part one of *TMD* (Talking with a Tradition) and its relation to the afterword to *TAP*.

2. Reconstructive methodology and philosophical theory

Let's try to shed some light on a passage that I take to be at the core of the whole project of *TMD*: "The idea I have been aiming to put on the table is that offering a systematic contemporary philosophical theory and a rational reconstruction of some strands in the history of philosophy can be two sides of one coin, two aspects of one enterprise" (*TMD*, p. 16).

If one wants to understand what is at stake in this passage, one should first try to pick out what exactly *reconstruction* means. First of all it refers to a certain kind of *methodology*. Brandom speaks of *reconstructive methodology*.

Reconstructive methodology is an approach to conceptual content that can be characterized as having the following features: *selection*; *supplementation*; and *approximation*.

One needs first of all to address a particular target or set of claims, concepts and distinctions, that may be taken as central, basic or fundamental to the problem in question; secondly, one needs to supplement those claims, introducing external vocabularies, criteria of adequacy, premises; approximation is then the process of recursive application of selection and supplementation, aimed at reaching a kind of reflexive equilibrium between raw materials and target of the reconstruction (whether this be an interpretive, theoretical or historical one).

Brandom first presents the method of reconstruction with reference to a case of interpretation of the conceptual contents of textual claims. Even if this may be taken as an illuminating characterization of hermeneutical understanding, one should be careful not to confine it to textual interpretation and historical thinking. In fact, as we'll come to see, reconstructive methodology may be at work also in theoretical thinking, in the building of a theory. I propose to read in this light the following passage from *TMD*: "When I was a graduate student, my teacher David Lewis advocated a picture of philosophy like this. The way to understand some region of philosophical terrain is for each investigator to state a set of principles as clearly as she could, and then rigorously to determine what follows from them, what they rule out, and how one might argue for or against it" (*TMD*, pp. 114-115).

Reconstruction, according to this reading (that Brandom takes up again in the afterword to *TAP*), is then a feature of theory building in philosophical thinking.

Let's now consider more carefully some general features of philosophical theory.

First of all, it is an instantiation of the methodology of reconstruction, that is an operation of selection, supplementation, and approximation applied to conceptual contents.

The main focus of the reconstruction here is not textual interpretation of conceptual contents but rather their articulation within a theory (which may also be defined as a case of conceptual interpretation).

Nonetheless, the difference between theory building and textual interpretation is not an essential one, but rather a pragmatic difference of focus, within the same kind

of act, on the same kind of object (conceptual content): an act that even in the case of theory building is always the exercise of hermeneutical understanding.

This is because the act of understanding – a sort of "stripping down and building back up" (*TMD*, p. 114) – exercised by philosophy in its various forms implies *"hermeneutical triangulation*: achieving a kind of understanding of or grip on an object (a conceptually articulated content) by having many inferential and constructional routes to and through it" (*TMD*, p. 115).

Furthermore, a reconstructive theory is a systematic one when conceptual contents are careful, rigorously and completely articulated along their inferential dimensions.

3. Historical interpretation as reconstructive undertaking

So far we have not addressed directly the kind of enterprise involved in telling the story of a tradition, that is in historical philosophical interpretation.

Here again the real difference does not concern the object – which, as in the case of theoretical thinking and textual interpretation, is always conceptual content – but rather a focus on its historical deployment (more or less centered on authors, contexts whatsoever or texts).

How then does historical reconstruction proceed? According to Brandom, rationally reconstructing a tradition means offering a "selective, cumulative, expressively progressive genealogy of it" (*TMD*, p. 14). One could say that historical philosophical interpretation is: *selective*; *cumulative*; and *expressively progressive*.

Here we can clearly see that the historical understanding involved in telling the story of a tradition is first of all an instantiation of reconstructive methodology. This reconstructive task implies selection of particular conceptual contents to be deployed in the narrative (picking out some particular claims within the authors and texts being considered), their supplementation with some further external vocabularies, premises, criteria of adequacy (*de re* readings) that should permit us to translate the conceptual contents that occur in different authors and texts in a single controlled idiom, on the basis of which it is then possible to reconstruct all the rest; reflexive approximation, through recursive selection and supplementation, to the target of the reconstruction (the idea of a tradition as historical deployment of some conceptual contents through authors and texts).

This tells us that selection is always connected with supplementation and approximation even in historical thinking. But what about the "cumulative" and "expressively progressive" characters of historical reconstruction? Can we understand them only on the basis of the methodology of reconstruction?

Here let's take another quotation from *TMD*: "This is a *historical* conception, which understands rationality as consisting in a certain kind of reconstruction of a tradition – one that exhibits it as having the expressively progressive form of the gradual, cumulative unfolding into explicitness of what shows up retrospectively as having been all along already implicit in that tradition" (*TMD*, p. 12).

On the one hand, the idea of the gradual, cumulative, and expressively progressive unfolding into explicitness is the result of the application of reconstructive *approximation* to the idea that conceptual contents develop themselves historically: such a historical development is reconstructively understood as a process of approximation –

i.e. as a gradual and cumulative unfolding – to the accomplished conceptual content whose genealogy is to be exhibited as the history of a tradition. The tradition is reconstructed, through selection and supplementation, as such a process of conceptual approximation.

If we now focus on the "expressively progressive" character of historical reconstruction, we can see that here something more is in play. But what, exactly?

Brandom's idea is that historical reconstruction is an instantiation of reconstructive methodology that deepens our understanding of what reconstruction is, insofar as on the one hand (1) it makes explicit some dimension of the reconstruction already present in other forms of philosophical thinking, and on the other hand (2) it adds something new to our understanding of what rationality is.

Concerning (1) historical reconstruction, in particular with its idea of expressively progressive unfolding into explicitness, it focuses on the *retrospective* character of reconstruction. Even if in different degrees, a retrospective character is always at stake in every form of reconstruction –from theoretical, metaphysical, up to hermeneutical and historical ones – where a "stripping down and building back" procedure is involved. The assumption that something shows up retrospectively as being already implicit in the target of the reconstruction takes in historical thinking the shape of "what shows up retrospectively as having been all along already implicit in a tradition", whose unfolding is then understood as "an expressively progressive trajectory through past application of the concept" (*TMD*, p. 13).

Concerning (2) – what adds historical thinking to our understanding of rationality?

First of all, it points out that historical thinking, being an instance of reconstruction – a "sort of genealogical, historical, expressive progressively reconstructive rationality" (*TMD*, p. 15) - is a genuine form of exercise of rationality. This vindicates the idea that telling a story can be a legitimate rational move in the space of reasons, that is, a legitimate form of justification. In particular "systematic history" (*TMD*, p. 15) is the form of historical thinking that mostly approximates to the rational ideal of systematicity as rigorous inferential control of reconstruction.

But there is a more radical answer to question (2) – what adds historical thinking to our understanding of rationality? The idea that conceptual content develops historically applies not only to the object of historical reconstruction (the historical development of some conceptual contents), but also to the form of rationality such a reconstruction exhibits. Given that rationality is some kind of concept use, historical thinking adds up to that "whatever content those concepts have, they get from the history of their actual application" (*TMD*, p. 13).

This comes up to what Brandom names a "historical conception of rationality" (*TMD*, p. 12). Historical thinking makes it clear to us that historical reconstructions are rational moves because concepts not only develop through history but are also historically instituted as to their normative content. Historical reconstruction makes it explicit that history is a dimension of rationality.

We can now come back to the question we asked at the very beginning of this talk – how does the telling of a story relate to theory building? – and start to appreciate the strategy that has led to the answer we have sketched out: theoretical thinking and historical thinking , insofar as they take systematic form, can be understood as different deployments of our reconstructive rationality.

4. Reconstructive metaphysics

TMD is presented in its subtitle as "a collection of historical essays in the metaphysics of intentionality". And what metaphysics means here is conceptually articulated under the label of "reconstructive metaphysics" (*TMD*, p. 115). Understanding what is going on here, may later shed some light on how we are to understand the positive notion of metaphysics that Brandom introduces in the afterword to *TAP*, since this latter seems to presuppose an understanding of metaphysics as a reconstructive project.

What then is reconstructive metaphysics?

All this way down, the Lewisian characterization of philosophy is not sufficient to pick out what exactly is metaphysical in reconstructive metaphysics. We may guess that reconstructive metaphysics is an exercise of methodological reconstruction that falls under the Lewisian characterization of philosophical theorizing. Something more is needed to settle the question. Here Brandom adds something relevant to it: "The aim and aspiration of the systematic metaphysicians of old – for present purposes, paradigmatically Spinoza, Leibniz and Hegel – was to craft a restricted and controlled idiom in which everything could be said" (*TMD*, p. 116).

Metaphysics then is a reconstructive theory whose aspiration is global (a theory in which everything could be said) rather than local (a theory in which something could be said, such as algebraic local analysis). This is what at first sight seems to distinguish metaphysical theories from non-metaphysical ones.

Even if Brandom affirms that he thinks that "this sort of conceptual engineering remains a viable enterprise today", he does not further develop the notion of reconstructive metaphysics in *TMD*. This is a task that he picks up again in the afterword to *TAP*, where he tries to make sense of a positive and viable notion of metaphysics that may resist the pragmatist criticism of metaphysics as a magical, mythical enterprise.

Concerning the positive notion, metaphysics is here understood as the "enterprise of crafting a vocabulary in which everything could be said" (*TAP*, p. 227).

The point here is not that some vocabulary is taken as privileged. This happens in every form of philosophical reconstruction, where a determined vocabulary is assumed as base vocabulary, that is as a privileged vocabulary with respect to some other vocabulary, i.e. the target vocabulary to be reconstructed by selection and supplementation.

Metaphysical is rather a theory that takes some base vocabulary as *globally, universally* privileged, that is privileged with respect to *all* other vocabularies. A theory assumes a distinctively metaphysical commitment when it commits itself to globally privileging some vocabulary, i.e. when it takes some vocabulary as having universal expressive power: to the effect that "everything that can be known, said, or thought, every fact, must in principle be expressible in the base vocabulary in question" (*TAP*, p. 219).

Brandom's proposal in *TAP* is to make sense of the notion of 'all possible vocabularies/facts…' "understanding the 'everything' regulatively rather than constitutively" (*TAP*, p. 228). The 'everything' expresses a regulative pragmatic commitment that has the following form: "for every vocabulary anyone comes up with, the meta-

physician is committed to the favored base vocabulary being adequate, when suitably elaborated, to express what it expresses" (*TAP*, p. 228). Hence one could say that the metaphysical commitment is a pragmatic commitment to a pragmatic regulative principle.

5. Some pragmatist themes

So far we have traced some pragmatic themes in Brandom's notion of reconstructive metaphysics, seeing how the pragmatic mediation by use of the semantic structure of reconstruction (by our practical normative attitudes) intervenes in characterizing metaphysical theories.

One can appreciate some pragmatist themes – more closely related to the philosophical tradition of pragmatism – if one sees that Brandom's reconstructive metaphysics is basically a pragmatist metaphysics in at least two senses: first of all, because it strives at making metaphysics compatible with pragmatist criticism of metaphysics. Secondly, because it shows us that one of the fundamental ideas of pragmatism – the social nature of normativity – is a metaphysical one.

Pragmatists, in the broad sense that Brandom uses the term – a sense that encompasses Hegel as well as Dewey, Wittgenstein and Rorty – have objected to traditional, representational metaphysics that the latter be based on a mythical, "ultimately magical" (*TAP*, p. 222) understanding of the nature of some sort of privileged authority. In Brandom's jargon, what is wrong is not the assumption of some vocabulary as privileged – this is something that occurs in every philosophical reconstruction, even a pragmatist one – but rather the assumption "of the idea of some vocabulary being necessarily privileged by *how things are*, […] quite apart from our contingent projects and attitudes" (*TAP*, p. 222).

And this is wrong for the pragmatists because one of their basic ideas is the view of the social nature of normativity, i.e. that there are no normative statuses apart from our practical normative attitudes.

But if we redefine the metaphysical commitment in Brandom's term, then even the assumption of some base vocabulary as universally privileged depends on our normative attitude and may become compatible with the view of the social nature of normative authority.

There is a second reason why pragmatism is relevant to Brandom's understanding of reconstructive metaphysics. This is because the fundamental idea of pragmatism – the view of social nature of normativity – is a metaphysical one.

In fact the view of the social nature of normative authority can be restated as the idea that all possible normative statuses are instituted by social practices. If this is so, then we are faced with the same problem that the notions of "all possible vocabularies/all possible facts" pose.

This means at least that the view itself of the social nature of normativity undertakes a metaphysical commitment to privileging globally some vocabulary as universal base vocabulary.

Not to admit this – that is not recognizing that the pragmatist dismissal of bad metaphysics is itself a metaphysical position – would amount to taking the metaphysical commitment as an absolute one – understanding the social nature of normativity as a

feature of how things are – hence falling back to the bad, representational metaphysics pragmatism wanted to rescue us from.

The only reasonable way out here is to recognize positively the metaphysical character of the basic idea of pragmatism and to pursue it in a pragmatist way, that is a pluralistic and fallibilist one.

Hence, to assume "that all possible normative statuses are instituted by social practices" would mean to metaphysically commit to reconstruct every instance of authority anyone comes up with, in the favored base vocabulary of social institution.

One could say that this is exactly the project that underlies *TMD*. This collection of "historical essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality" is in fact a historical and theoretical reconstruction of the basic idea of pragmatism – the idea of the social nature of normativity - as the core idea of a metaphysics of intentionality. This is what a pragmatist metaphysics amounts to.

References

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