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Freedom is a Matter of Responsibility and Authority

An Interview with Robert B. Brandom

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The philosophical work of Robert B. Brandom is one of the most widely discussed approaches in contemporary American philosophy. In his groundbreaking book *Making it Explicit* (1994), and recently in his John-Locke-Lectures *Between Saying and Doing*,¹ held at the University of Oxford in 2006, Brandom presents his philosophical project of Analytic Pragmatism.² Although Brandom's complex work doesn't contain an explicit political theory, assumptions and expectations regarding the political consequences of Brandom's work have grown, especially since his debate with Jürgen Habermas.³ In the following interview,⁴ Brandom points out for the first time important links between his work and central questions of political theory.

Tanja Pritzlaff: Since the publication of *Making it Explicit* in 1994, your work has attracted attention among academic disciplines other than philosophy, political theory being one of them. How would you characterize the main points of contact between your work and major concepts and questions of political theory?

Robert Brandom: The centre of my work is in philosophy of language, and the contact between that more detailed work and many topics addressed by political theory as I see it comes out of the tradition of German idealism, the idea that Kant and Hegel had that by thinking about the conditions of rationality we could ground both our ethics and our political theory. Jürgen Habermas is of course the person in our time who has most pursued this line of thought. I am concerned to see what happens if one starts with a somewhat different understanding of the nature of language than Habermas has, but to try and extract from it consequences ultimately for political theory by much the same sort of method that he uses.

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Another point of contact between my work in thinking about the nature of mind, of rationality and of language and political theory comes out of classical pragmatism, where my contemporary model for reading that tradition is my Doktorvater Richard Rorty. He, following Dewey, makes a great deal of the distinction between public language and conduct on the one hand and private language and conduct on the other, urging that in private we should use and construct transformative, poetic, ironic languages, but then in public, where our goal is not self-development but communal solidarity, he urges that we should use, that we should restrict ourselves to, a common, shared language. One of the questions I've had is whether that traditional liberal split between public and private spheres of conduct actually makes sense in a context in which one is trying to use the nature of language and rationality as one's guide in thinking about political questions, because, as I see it, the shared, common linguistic norms on the one hand and the transformative power of novel linguistic utterances on the other are two sides of one coin,⁵ they come together in the language, and that suggests to me that at least Rorty's suggestions for grounding a public-private split in two different functions of language may not be the best way to think about things.

Tanja Pritzlaff: In the framework of your approach to a critical reading of Hegel, you have developed two models that seem to be of particular interest to political theory. The first model is the 'linguistic model of positive freedom',⁶ in which you draw an analogy between the constraint imposed on language users by linguistic norms and the freedom resulting from it and the constraint imposed on us by political norms and the freedom resulting from it. The second model, the common law model,⁷ draws an analogy between the application of linguistic norms and the application of legal norms by a judge in a common law tradition. How would you describe the interrelation between the two models? And what are the main theoretical consequences for the conception of political norms that follow from the analogy with linguistic norms?

Robert Brandom: Well, this is a very big question, and I wish I could answer it. The account in terms of a model of common law is supposed to help us understand how, although there is in an important sense nothing in a language that we haven't put into it, nonetheless we manage to constrain ourselves by the norms we institute, by the ways in which we actually use the language. The challenge that that model responds to is to understand how one and the same process, namely talking, can at once consist in the application of linguistic norms and also, at the same time, be the process by which those very norms are instituted. That understanding of where linguistic norms come from and the sense in which they can be thought of as determinately contentful forms a background for applying the model of linguistic expressive positive freedom to the assessment of – to the understanding of – the possibility and nature of political freedom. There, the idea is that by constraining ourselves by the norms that constitute a public language, now thought of as an achievement that we can understand on the model of the

common law model, by constraining ourselves by those public norms we acquire the capacity to make an indefinite number of novel claims and utterances and, thereby, increase our positive freedom, our freedom *to do* things, in multifarious ways, gaining thereby a kind of positive freedom that is available in principle to us in no other way than by constraining ourselves by those linguistic norms. So, in the most general terms, the relation between the two models is that the common law model is a presupposition of the positive expressive freedom model.

Tanja Pritzlaff: While the linguistic model of positive freedom presents an alternative answer to a classical challenge of political philosophy raised in the context of traditional contractualist models, it can still be characterized as a social contract approach. Would you say that this Enlightenment tradition is an essential element of the future development of political philosophy, or should the idea of the social contract be replaced by an entirely different model?

Robert Brandom: I myself don't think of this model as a social contract model, except in an extremely abstract sense. It does share with Enlightenment political theories generally and social contract theories in particular the abstract structure that normative statuses are taken to derive from the normative attitudes of those whose statuses they are, that is, it shares with the Enlightenment the view that normative statuses such as authority, responsibility, commitment and entitlement are products of our own activity, that these are not features of the world that we discovered as antecedently existing phenomena, but were features of our own practices that were brought into existence by our coming to take or treat each other as authoritative, responsible, committed or entitled. That is the fundamental point of analogy between linguistic commitments and social or political commitments. That feature of Enlightenment thought does indeed seem to me an unavoidable feature of our present and future thinking about political philosophy. It seems to me something that we discovered and that was part and parcel of an irrevocable transition to modern ways of thinking about normative statuses as ultimately social products.

Tanja Pritzlaff: And how would you sum up the definition of political institutions that follows from your model?

Robert Brandom: I'm not sure that anything as definite as a definition *does* follow. But there certainly is a particular way of thinking about political institutions that is motivated by the lessons I learn from Hegel. I take it one of his fundamental ideas is that normative statuses are in the end social statuses, more particularly that normative statuses – again authority, responsibility, commitment, entitlement, etc. – are instituted by social practices. More particularly, I think we can apply his model of social substance as synthesized by reciprocal recognition as a way of thinking about social and political institutions more generally. Now, the particular structure of Hegel's own understanding, not just of social and political institutions, but of the nature of self-consciousness, requires that recognition be

an equivalence relation, that is, that not only must each practitioner recognize herself, but she must be recognized by everyone she recognizes, that is the reciprocity of recognition, and must recognize everyone who is recognized by anyone she recognizes. This creates a flat community, in which everyone recognizes everyone else. Hegel thought that that ideal was something we were implicitly committed to as a condition of our being able to speak – and, so, to think – at all. I think that is an inspiring vision, but I think we get a more articulated way of thinking about social and political institutions if, in addition to his notion of what might be called *general recognition*, which is attributing normative statuses to someone at all, taking them to be able to commit themselves, to be responsible, to be able to exercise authority etc., we also acknowledge the existence of particular – of *more* particular – respects of recognition, which is a matter of attributing particular *kinds* of authority and responsibility to each other. I would want to see social and political institutions as articulated by the different respects of recognition that bind individuals together in a much more complicated sort of structure than the kind that Hegel envisaged as intrinsic to the nature of self-consciousness itself. Thus, I recognize someone as my president in one respect and recognize in another respect someone as my ambassador in part because he is recognized in yet another respect by the one I recognize as my president and the ones I recognize as my senators. The more complicated recognitive structures that are articulated by those different respects of normative recognitions seem to me a promising general framework for thinking about social institutions and political institutions.

Tanja Pritzlaff: The common law model seems to suggest that norms can only be reconstructed in retrospect. What follows from this assumption with regard to future applications and revisions of those norms?

Robert Brandom: An essential feature of the common law model is the symmetry between retrospective and prospective perspectives. Prospectively, there is nothing to constitute the content of the concepts of common law, besides the decisions that particular judges have made. There are no statutory definitions in play, that is why common law is often thought of as judge-made law. Nonetheless, a judge does not just make a decision, he justifies it, and all he can appeal to to justify it is other decisions, other applications of that concept and related concepts which other judges have made. He must retrospectively rationally reconstruct the tradition as progressive, so as to reveal within it a trajectory that he can construe as the gradual revelation, the gradual unfolding into explicitness, of principles that can be seen retrospectively to have been implicit all along. It is by formulating such an implicit principle that the judge can justify his decision in a particular case. He, in that way, makes himself responsible to the past decisions and that responsibility to those past decisions is the basis on which he asserts authority for his current decisions. But that authority is not unchallengeable, for he, in fact, petitions future judges for recognition of that authority which they will grant precisely insofar as they think he has done a good job in rationally reconstructing

the tradition he inherited and actually *has* found a principle that can be seen to have been implicit in the decisions that were made before. Novelty comes into the system because the facts of each case that comes up for adjudication are novel. It can't simply have been settled, at least in the interesting cases which do introduce novelty, by previous decisions, what one ought to do in the next case. If there is no need for the judge to add a little bit of content to the law, one doesn't really have a novel case. So I find in this diachronic recognitive structure – where a judge makes himself responsible both to previous judges and to future judges, but also exercises a kind of authority over both the past judges whom he interprets and the future judges who are bound by the precedent that his decision establishes – I find in this complex diachronic recognitive structure a model that is of very great help in thinking about the constitution of conceptual norms and of normative statuses.

Tanja Pritzlaff: A central assumption of the 'linguistic model of positive freedom' is that language use has a creative aspect and that competent language users gain a new kind of positive freedom – you call it expressive freedom – that enables them not only to produce and comprehend novel utterances, but also to refine and change their way of applying certain concepts. Throughout your work, you not only develop this way of thinking about concept application on a theoretical level, you *practically* demonstrate it by presenting your own way of applying major philosophical concepts – a way that differs from previous definitions of those concepts. Seen from the perspective of political theory, this becomes apparent in your way of applying concepts like authority, autonomy, commitment, duty, responsibility and bindingness. How would you describe the differences and similarities between your way of applying these concepts and their use in political philosophy? And how would you characterize the theoretical possibilities in the area of political theory that are opened up by changing the use of traditional concepts in this way?

Robert Brandom: I think the principal possibility for applying my ways of thinking about these normative concepts to issues in political theory comes from the fact that the concepts I am using have been crafted in the first instance with an eye to their application in the case of discursive practice, in the case of language use. Conceptual norms, linguistic norms, discursive norms are different in many ways from legal norms, from moral norms, from the norms of prudence and from political norms. The Kant–Hegel tradition, represented in our own time by Habermas, has the idea that those discursive norms can provide a useful model for, in particular, political and institutional norms. One of the happy features of appealing to a discursive model is that there one finds available a characteristic answer to a classical question of political philosophy, namely how one can justify or legitimate the restriction of negative freedom, the freedom *from* constraint that is involved in participating in *any* social institution from the point of view of the individual. In the linguistic case, this becomes a question of how one could justify constraining oneself by the norms whose applicability constitutes the use

of some particular natural language. And there it is clear that a rational justification for subjecting oneself to such constraint is supplied by the possibility of making all the sorts of novel utterances that constraining oneself by discursive norms makes possible, the creative realm that is opened up by coming to speak a natural language. Kant's and in particular Hegel's idea, as I understand it, is that that sort of payoff in positive expressive freedom that one gets and can only get by constraining oneself by discursive norms should set the standard by which we assess and evaluate *any* social or political institution that proposes to constrain us. The question always is what new sorts of expressive freedom, what new sorts of life possibilities, what new shapes of life does this normative constraint make possible.

Tanja Pritzlaff: Another model that has attracted attention in political theory is the deontic scorekeeping model first presented by you in *Making it Explicit*. If one draws an analogy between this approach to discursive practice and political practices, how would you define the central characteristics of a practice that can be referred to as a democratic political practice? In what ways would your model of discursive practice have to be modified in order to characterize a democratic political practice?

Robert Brandom: All I have to offer here is one very general idea. If one starts with a discursive scorekeeping model, there is a kind of *content democracy* inherent in speaking at all. What shapes linguistic norms is the commitments that we attribute to each other based on the words that we use, the responsibilities that we take ourselves to be undertaking by using those words. All these things are shaped by the give and take of keeping score on each other in conversation. It is an essential part of that process that it doesn't matter whose mouth the words come out of in order to determine what one has committed oneself to by doing that. One looks not to extraneous features of the identity of the speaker, but simply to their collateral commitments and entitlements. Those are going to shape the significance of the speech act that is performed. If one uses discursive practice and the sorts of authority and responsibility that we keep track of in order to understand each other as a model for the sorts of authority and responsibility that political theorists are interested in, that reciprocal scorekeeping, that democracy of conceptual content, may perhaps provide a guide for thinking about democratic norms.

Tanja Pritzlaff: And how important is the actual participation of *all* members to a definition of a democratic political practice?

Robert Brandom: On this model, exactly as important as it is in the human conversation more generally. Not every participant in a conversation need at every point have something to say, but to be a participant in the conversation requires being able to have your say when you do have something to say.

Tanja Pritzlaff: If political practices were modelled in analogy to the deontic scorekeeping model, would it be possible to integrate a conception of a *right to disobey* into this model, and what would it look like?

Robert Brandom: Again, we look to conversation as the model. And conversation is every bit as much about disagreement as it is about agreement. Indeed, as I understand discursive practice, the very possibility of common conceptual norms, the norms by which we bind ourselves, in using a word like ‘copper’ every bit as much as a word like ‘freedom’, the very possibility of instituting common conceptual norms depends on the differences in doxastic perspective, the inevitable differences in commitments that distinguish interlocutors simply in virtue of the different trajectories through the physical and social worlds that they inevitably take. The capacity to converse is the capacity to navigate across those differences in perspective, corresponding to differences in commitment. That disagreement, even about trivial matters of taste, is the medium in which common conceptual norms are forged, and the context in which we express ourselves by binding ourselves by those common norms, so as to undertake commitments that distinguish us one from another. So disagreement is an absolutely essential element of discursive practice. Without the right to disagree, there is no language. That is a feature of the model that will presumably carry over to the political context.

Tanja Pritzlaff: You use the copper example very often to explain the importance of facts and you use more of those kinds of examples than examples like the concept freedom. Would you say that you can treat concepts like freedom in an analogous way to concepts like copper?

Robert Brandom: Well, of course there are differences as well as analogies. When I am principally concerned with thinking about discursive practice, the challenge is to understand how objective empirical concepts, ones that owe part of their content to how the world is, independently of our practices, can possibly be instituted by a social practice. How it is that we can agree to institute a normative dimension of assessment of our claims that grants authority over their correctness, how it is with the things that we then in that normative sense count as talking or thinking *about*. Just as a matter of social engineering I am interested in the large question of how if, as we social pragmatists believe, all normative statuses are ultimately social statuses, instituted by us, we can understand that sort of objective empirical normativity, answerability to the world. In a political context, that is not the principal question. I have already suggested that I don’t see politics as primarily a matter of coming to agreement. It’s at least as much a matter of coming to understand our disagreements, about practical matters as well as about theoretical matters. But my thought is to use the theoretical model to illuminate the practical case.

Tanja Pritzlaff: The deontic scorekeeping model presented in *Making it Explicit* is based on a structure that you refer to as an I–thou account that stands in contrast

to an I–we account of social practice. Furthermore, the model focuses on the micro-level of social practice with a construction that includes two participants. How would you describe the next step towards an application of this dialogical, two-agent structure to a theory of political practice that deals with larger groups? Do you think that it would be necessary to modify the model in order to apply it to a different level, i.e. to larger groups?

Robert Brandom: Already, the deontic scorekeeping model points towards its extension to larger groups and groups with significant amounts of structure that don't yet appear in the two-person case. The scorekeeping model is essentially an audience-centred model. It doesn't look at the intentions with which a speaker utters, but rather at the possible uptake by an audience. The significance of a speech act is understood in terms of how it is understood by those who hear it, how they keep score on how it alters what the speaker is, in their eyes, committed to, responsible for and entitled to, what they take the speaker to have authorized in the way of further claims, for instance those that are inferential consequences of the claim the original speaker made. That audience needn't be thought of as limited to a single scorekeeper. Certainly written utterances in particular have very large and disparate potential audiences, all of whom can be thought of as keeping score on the same speech act. Second, I spoke earlier about particular respects of recognition, not just taking someone to be a speaker or a subject of normative statuses such as commitment and responsibility in general, but specific recognition of someone as having undertaken a particular commitment or responsibility, as having issued a particular kind of authority. Deontic scorekeeping is a matter of that sort of particular recognition, attributing new commitments, based on what the interlocutor is saying. And I suggested as well that a more articulated way of thinking about social institutions and social roles is to think about *particular* respects of recognition, which need not be reciprocal, or transitive, or reflexive, that is, need not have the structure that Hegel took, the recognition constitutive of at once self-conscious individual selves and the recognitive communities that they institute by their reciprocal recognition. That is, the more particular respects of recognition permit a more articulated sort of recognitive structure. And it would be through developing that idea, I think, that we'd look to institutions larger and more complex than a simple face-to-face conversation between two people.

Tanja Pritzlaff: And how would you describe the element in a model of political practice that corresponds to the concept of *objectivity* in your model of discursive practice?

Robert Brandom: The philosopher Sellars tells us that, in science, models always come with commentaries. The commentary provides information about which features of the model are to be taken to guide our thinking about what we are modelling, and which are just features of the model that we will leave behind and

do not carry over in our inferences about what is modelled. And I take it that, in general, the objectivity of empirical claims in discursive practice is not going to have an analogue in the practical sphere that political theorists are interested in. That is, we are only very seldom in the position of granting authority over the correctness of our political recognitive performances to how things are objectively in the non-human world around us. Typically, where that is an issue, it is simply a matter of knowledge of matters of fact, and there is no particularly political normative dimension to the discourse and to the discursive practices that we appeal to to settle matters of objective fact. I think of the norms that political theorists are principally concerned with primarily as practical norms, not a matter of undertaking commitments as to how things already are anyway, but undertaking commitments to do things, undertaking commitments as to how things shall be, rather than to how they already are. This point is one of the principal areas in which Habermas has been concerned about the political implications of the model of *Making it Explicit*. My talk of normative facts led him to think that I was assimilating norms of the sort that we would hope would guide political discourse and would be instituted by that discourse precisely on the model of objective empirical conceptual norms such as copper, with the intended suggestion that, in order to decide what we want to do, all we need to do is find out how the world really is. And he, quite properly, finds that not only an objectionable but in many ways a dangerous idea in the political sphere. I mean only something much thinner and weaker by my talk of normative facts, which is that normative discourse lets us formulate statements, normative statements, in the form of declarative sentences, and some of those sentences are true. All I mean by a fact is a true claimable. So, if any normative sentences are true, there are normative facts. But that thin notion of normative factuality says nothing about what *makes* them facts. And I take it, as a pragmatist about normativity, that normative facts, outside the objective empirical realm, are instituted by our social practices. Habermas and I are not, in fact, disagreeing here, except in a verbal way.

Tanja Pritzlaff: How should an analysis of normativity be designed that includes positive law and political decisions? How important is the development of a philosophy of rights in this context?

Robert Brandom: There are really two different ways that one can think about the notion of rights. On the one hand, talk about right can simply be a way of talking about authority in general. So we are accustomed to thinking of various forms of property, real property, intellectual property, and so on, as a bundle of rights and responsibilities. It was a fundamental Enlightenment discovery that the shapes of those bundles of rights and responsibilities are not given by the natural world or the natural order, that they are our products, and that we can, accordingly, re-bundle those rights and responsibilities and create new forms of property. Thought of that way, the notion of right is an essential element of any normative structure, either a discursive one, or a political one, or any other – it is just a

dimension of normativity. It is also possible to think of rights not just as a way of talking about authority in general, but as naming a much more specific and determinate species of authority, a kind of authority that is unoverridable, a kind of authority that takes precedence over other normative claims. Our notion of human rights is of that second sort. The linguistic model of normativity, that is the idea of taking specifically conceptual normativity of the sort that articulates our being as rational beings, as players of the game of giving and asking for reasons, allows, underwrites, this stronger notion of rights only insofar as there are commitments that can be shown to be implicit in being a discursive practitioner at all, in playing the game of giving and asking for reasons and availing oneself of the public, shared conceptual norms by constraining oneself by which one gets to say things and make novel claims. All of Kant, Hegel and Habermas think that when we unpack explicitly what we have implicitly committed ourselves to by being discursive creatures we will find that we have committed ourselves to discursive practitioners, not just ourselves, but any discursive practitioners, having certain, unoverridable rights. I think the question of whether that case can be made out and, if it can be made out, exactly what the content is of those rights that we have committed ourselves to acknowledging as part of synthesizing discursive social substance or reciprocal recognition is the largest and deepest question in political theory.

Tanja Pritzlaff: In recent years, you have focused more and more on presenting what you call a critical reading of Hegel.⁸ One of the major changes that I have noticed in your work is a stronger focus on the historical–evolutionary dimension of normative practice. It seems that the concept of *tradition* has become more important to you, and even the concept of *experience*, that used to be ‘not one of your words’. How would you describe the influence Hegel had on the development of your way of thinking about normative practice, and how would you characterize the significance of the concepts of *tradition* and *experience*?

Robert Brandom: *Making it Explicit* concerned itself principally with an understanding of discursive practice as a normative practice, with how creatures who already lived and moved and had their being in a normative space, could – by engaging in practices with the right sort of recognitive structure, that is, that involved the right sort of keeping score on each other’s commitments and entitlements, and in particular showing sensitivity to inferential relations among those commitments and entitlements – lift themselves into a discursive space, become discursive creatures, able to make claims and perform intentional actions in a richer and stronger sense than any non-discursive creature can do. I did not take as part of that problem in *Making it Explicit* giving an account of how conceptual norms could develop. The question rather was ‘What are they?’ and ‘What structure must a practice have to be properly understood as a practice in which the practitioners bind themselves by conceptual norms?’ Hegel not only believes that all transcendental constitution in Kant’s sense is a matter of social institution, but

also is centrally concerned to understand the historical process whereby conceptual norms are at once instituted and applied, thereby being given determinate contents through their application to determinate states of affairs. In the years since the appearance of *Making it Explicit*, I have been concerned to mine this vein of Hegel, to try to understand better the structure of the process whereby conceptual norms become more determinate by being applied in novel circumstances. And it is in connection with that enterprise that I found the common law model particularly helpful.

Tanja Pritzlaff: And how would you characterize the role of the experience of inconsistencies, errors and failures in discursive practice? Is it correct to describe them as a basis for an *update function* in the evolving structure of discursive practices?

Robert Brandom: Yes it would be. The role of disagreement and error, in particular the role of finding ourselves with commitments that are incompatible by our own lights, is an absolutely essential feature of the intelligibility of what we are doing, constraining ourselves by norms, that is, making ourselves subject to normative appraisal as to the goodness of our reasons for believing what we believe and for doing what we do. The principal motor of conceptual development is finding ourselves with incompatible commitments and acknowledging in practice the obligation to change something, so as to remove that incompatibility. And this happens not just on the theoretical-doxastic side, but also on the practical side, where we can find ourselves with commitments that are incompatible, even though those are commitments to *do* things rather than commitments as to how things already are.

Tanja Pritzlaff: How do you define the concepts community and membership in your approach, and do you distance yourself from other current approaches with regard to these concepts, for example, from the communitarian perspective on community and membership?

Robert Brandom: My notion of community and community membership is, first of all, a normative one, and, second, a matter of who one attributes commitments and entitlements to. That is, the specific sorts of norms involved are deontic scorekeeping norms, which is another way of saying that they are matters of specific recognition, since to recognize someone in a particular respect is to attribute a responsibility or some sort of authority to her. So, the notion of community has a lot more structure than, for instance, some communitarian views take it to have. This is part of the I–thou structure of recognition and deontic scorekeeping which you adverted to earlier by contrast to an I–we picture. On the more traditional I–we picture of communities and membership the question is a binary one: ‘Are you in or are you out?’ What are the criteria for being in the community, where are the boundaries of a community and who is ‘out’? On the

deontic scorekeeping, recognitive picture, there is a lot more structure and things are more complicated, for one can recognize someone in some respects, but not in others. Attribute to someone some kinds of authority, acknowledge their capacity to undertake certain kinds of responsibility, and not others. Every time one attributes some sort of authority or responsibility to someone, one is treating them as one of us, in our community, in a particular respect. But no one is accorded every sort of authority or responsibility – this is how we distinguish various people. In specifically recognizing people, in keeping deontic score on them, we are all the time constituting various sorts of virtual communities, recognitive communities to be sure, constituted by the specific respects of recognition, corresponding to the normative statuses that we recognize them as having, that we attribute to them.

Tanja Pritzlaff: Your definition of agency is dominated by the concept of responsibility. Recent debates between philosophers and researchers in the field of cognitive science centre around the question of freedom of will and freedom of action on the background of results from experiments in the field of brain research that doubt our responsibility for our own actions. What is your opinion on this debate?

Robert Brandom: The pre-Kantian philosophical tradition thought that the notion of choice was prior to the notion of responsibility in the order of explanation. That is, it was part of the rising tide of modernity to think of people as responsible only for what they had chosen to do. And the question of free will, of what one had or even could choose to do, what one could do otherwise, accordingly came to the fore. But I take it that it is an essential part of the Kantian conceptual revolution to reverse that order of explanation. Freedom is a matter of responsibility and authority. It is a normative status for Kant, not a matter of factual status, turning on the question of whether one could have done otherwise. Freedom is, for Kant and for Hegel, the capacity to commit oneself, to be a subject of normative statuses, to exert a certain kind of authority. And on the Hegelian picture – I think a social pragmatist picture – those normative statuses are social statuses. The question of what sort of authority one has, what sort of responsibility one has for one's doings, hence which bits of one's behaviour are actions, are doings in the very strongest sense, is a matter of which of them one is in a distinctive sense responsible for. And that is, in the end, not a matter of what happens between one's ears, but what happens out in public, in the social space created by a community. For Hegel, self-consciousness, rationality, responsibility and freedom are all normative, social statuses that depend on public, social practices, not, in the first instance, on what is going on in the brain. In this sense of freedom, thought of as the positive capacity to commit oneself, to bind oneself by conceptual norms, it is not a potential discovery of a neurophysiologist that one is not free. The particular mechanisms by which the brain produces behaviour are largely irrelevant to the social question of which bits of our behaviour we are

responsible for, which count as exercises of our authority, and hence are exercises of our freedom in the normative sense.

Tanja Pritzlaff: Especially in Europe your approach is often contrasted with the work of Jürgen Habermas. How would you characterize the main differences and similarities between his work and yours?

Robert Brandom: As I have indicated before, Habermas and I share a methodological aspiration which we both see as the working out of a line of thought that is present already in Kant and Hegel. And this is the idea that the paradigmatic form of human social interaction and human normativity is to be found in discursive practice, in linguistic practice. An aspiration is to use that form of practice, use that social institution, as a model on the basis of which both to understand other forms of social normativity, in particular the normative statuses instituted by political activity within political institutions, not only to understand political normative statuses and activity, but also to assess the justifiability of various political norms. We share a commitment to the idea that a foundation for assessment of political institutions can be found in commitments implicit in being a discursive practitioner, being a language user, being a participant in the human conversation.

What has, in retrospect, become clear, is an absolutely fundamental element of his way of working out that order of explanation, namely the idea that there is an intimate connection, a constitutive connection, between meaning something and making a validity claim, that is, making a claim that stands in need of normative vindication, as to the nature of its rational authority. This is a fundamental idea of Habermas: that there *is* this constitutive connection between meaning and justification. It has been his hope that the philosophy of language, worked out in great detail in *Making it Explicit*, can vindicate that connection. The theory of *Making it Explicit* is an inferentialist theory, and that is to say that it understands meaning as in the first instance a matter of what is a reason for what, that meaning is to be understood precisely in terms of justification. As I say, at least in retrospect it has become clear that the foundations of Habermas's political theory in his *Theory of Communicative Action* principally depend on this connection between meaning and justification by reasons, and so it has – at least at some point – seemed to him tempting to appeal to some of the considerations that I advance in my philosophy of language in justifying this central contention of his system. He is, then, of course very interested in the particular sorts of political conclusions that he is concerned to draw from thinking about the nature of communicative action. He has got to be concerned about the extent to which those conclusions actually would be underwritten by the theory of language put forward in *Making it Explicit*. He suspects – and I think he may be right about this – that what one can actually get out of the account of language in *Making it Explicit* in the way of political conclusions may be significantly thinner than what he aspires to. The theory of *Making it Explicit* was not constructed with an eye to the political conclusions that might

be drawn from it and it is governed by a methodology that may well be not only unhelpful, but actually perverse in the context of Habermas's particular concerns. For what I wanted to do is give the absolutely minimal conditions on being a discursive practice, to say what one needed to do in order to be able to claim that things are thus and so. This project has been described as 'vandalizing Neurath's boat'. Otto Neurath famously said that our conceptual scheme, our language and beliefs, are not something that we can pull out in dry-dock and redo the foundations of – we are obliged to repair it at sea. And my question in *Making it Explicit* was how much of that structure we could throw overboard without sinking it – that is, without changing it from a discursive practice to a non-discursive practice. As a result, I abstracted away from everything about us as human beings that did not seem to be absolutely essential to the one enterprise of making claims about how things are. And it may well be that the sort of normativity that seems to me to be discursive rock bottom will not allow us to draw the rich sorts of political conclusions that Habermas aspires to.

Tanja Pritzlaff: How would you describe your relation to pragmatist political philosophy and to the political views expressed by pragmatist philosophers, classical as well as contemporary?

Robert Brandom: Well, I have spoken about the Enlightenment discovery that normative statuses are ultimately to be made sense of in terms of the normative attitudes of the members of the community within which authority is exercised and responsibility is undertaken. I think the classical American pragmatists instituted a second Enlightenment by putting forward new ways in which we could understand the relation between norms and the practical attitudes of human beings. Where I part company with the classical American pragmatists is in their instrumentalism. I think – though on some occasions the figures I am talking about, particularly James and Dewey, deny this – that their ultimate understanding of normativity is in instrumental terms, that is, what is appropriate is what conduces to securing antecedently specifiable goals or ends. This is a picture that has been articulated and deepened in our own time in terms of maximizing utility, thought of as a measure of preference. It is an essential feature of the linguistic model that what one gets by constraining oneself by conceptual norms is the capacity to entertain and endorse an indefinite number of novel ends, ends one could not so much as envisage, never mind pursue, before one had the conceptual capacity to formulate and describe those ends. On this view, what is special about discursive practice is not that it is *for* something, not that it helps us pursue some antecedently specifiable end, but rather that it helps us generate this bonanza of novel potential ends. That is a thought that I see as active in contemporary neo-pragmatists, in particular in the thought of Richard Rorty, who has as one central strand of his thought the transformative capacity of vocabularies. I find that strand of thought existing uneasily in the company of another strand of Rorty's thought, which is a more traditional kind of reductive, naturalistic instrumentalist pragma-

tism. And in various places I have suggested that his better wisdom resides in his endorsement of the transformative capacity of vocabularies and that he should actually jettison the instrumentalism that he shares with traditional pragmatists such as Dewey.

Tanja Pritzlaff: Throughout your work, you define the making of a claim as the fundamental speech act. Attempts to apply speech act theory to political practices tend to identify other speech acts as important, for example declarative speech acts. Would you say that an application of speech act theory – for example, in the version introduced by John Searle – to political practices is a fruitful undertaking? And how would you characterize the role of types of speech acts other than claims or assertions in the context of political practice?

Robert Brandom: We are in danger of a bit of a terminological confusion here, because *claiming*, the central speech act, indeed *the* speech act, the performance kind in virtue of which a practice gets to be a discursive practice at all, according to me, is the utterance of declarative sentences, and so, in linguistic terms, is a declarative speech act. But I take it when you talk about declarative speech acts you are talking about more practical forms of speech act, for instance, speech acts that undertake *practical* responsibilities or exercise *practical* authority. The christening of a ship or the announcement of one's allegiance to a particular party, I take it, are the sort of speech act you care about, that you are asking about here. As I just indicated, I disagree with Wittgenstein's famous claim that language has no downtown, that there is no central speech act. I think what makes discursive practice *discursive* practice, what makes a practical game we play, a practice, into a *Sprachspiel*, is that it has the structure of a game of giving and asking for reasons, that it is inferentially articulated, and I take it that making assertions and making inferences are two sides of one coin. An assertion, a claim, is a speech act that can both serve as and stand in need of a reason. Discursive practices, I understand it, *must* include practices of making claims and so practices of giving and asking for reasons. But not all commitments are the doxastic, theoretical commitments undertaken by making claims. Besides doxastic commitments, there are also practical commitments, which are commitments to *do* something. What makes them discursive commitments is that we can formulate those commitments by *saying* what it is we are committing ourselves to do, *describing* what it is we are going to do, *saying* what would count as fulfilling the practical commitment that we have just understood. There can't be a discursive practice that doesn't have both doxastic and practical commitments and they interact in many ways. Part of what is going to be distinctive about political institutions will be the way in which they are directed at *practical* speech acts. I have already indicated that I don't think we should restrict our thinking about politics to a context in which we are aiming at agreement, at a shared practical commitment. The discursive scorekeeping picture incorporates a great deal more division of labour than that. The specific cognitive structure of institutions allows that the outcome of a political process,

whether a deliberative one or not, may be very many different kinds of commitments, different sorts of assertions of authority, different undertakings of different kinds of responsibility on the part of different participants in the political institution, interlocutors occupying very different roles and statuses within that institution. And I take it that part of the job of our theoretical analytic apparatus is to give us the tools to describe and understand those different sorts of outcomes, the different ways in which a political process can alter the deontic score, that is, alter in the eyes of the various scorekeepers, some of whom are participants in the process, alter the deontic score that they are keeping in the sense of altering what differently contentful commitments, responsibilities and claims of authority they attribute to different participants in that political process.

Tanja Pritzlaff: Your approach to normative practice is centred around the concept of rationality. To justify a claim, agents have to give reasons for it, they have to show that it is rational to commit oneself to this claim. How important are competing concepts to your approach? How would you, for example, characterize the importance of emotions in discursive practices?

Robert Brandom: I think they can come in in two ways. First of all, there is the Kantian principle that 'ought implies can' which has led people thinking about ethics and ethical normative evaluations of individual actions to be properly concerned with moral psychology, for instance, with the way in which psychological issues affect what people *can* do, what situations they *can* become sensitive to. And I think that there may well be an analogous set of considerations in the political case where we are not talking so much about the actions of individuals as we are about the way in which normative statuses and normative attitudes of people occupying different roles within an institution change. The second way in which emotional or, more broadly, psychological issues can matter in the political context of course has to do with our *aim*. It may well be that the aims of many of the participants in a political process concern the emotional well-being or status, the psychological status, of various people who are affected by the outcome of that political process, in which case psychology is going to matter in politics.

Tanja Pritzlaff: The publication of your 2006 Locke Lectures and your book about Hegel⁹ are the two major projects you are working on right now. Do questions of political philosophy play a role in your latest writings, and are you planning to focus more on questions of political philosophy in the near future?

Robert Brandom: I have expressed my admiration for the Kant–Hegel–Habermas line of thought that seeks to find grounds for assessing political institutions and political processes and practices in an understanding of discursive practices as such. My principal focus has been on thinking about what talking and thinking consists in and understanding those as social, normative phenomena, that is, understanding them largely in terms of what happens in the public space of linguistic practice rather than in thinking about psychological or even neuro-

physiological mechanisms which enable practitioners to engage in those public practices. My ambition is to see what political consequences one might draw from the sort of understanding of discursive practice that I have been pursuing over the last 20 years. But that is a project that is still in its infancy.

Tanja Pritzlaff: Thank you very much.

Notes

1. Brandom, Robert B. (2008) *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2. Influenced by his academic teachers Richard Rorty and David Lewis as well as by the work of Wilfrid Sellars, Brandom provides a synthesis of Pragmatism and Analytic Philosophy.
3. For Habermas's criticism see Jürgen Habermas (2000) 'From Kant to Hegel: On Robert Brandom's Pragmatic Philosophy of Language', *European Journal of Philosophy* 8(3): 322–55. Brandom replied to Habermas's criticism (Habermas 2000) in Brandom (2000a) 'Facts, Norms, and Normative Facts: A Reply to Habermas', *European Journal of Philosophy* 8(3): 356–74.
4. The interview was conducted on 30 Jan. 2007 at the University of Pittsburgh.
5. Brandom elaborates this argument in (2000b) 'Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism', in Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and his Critics*, pp. 156–83. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
6. The model is first presented in Brandom (1979) 'Freedom and Constraint by Norms', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16(3): 187–96.
7. The model is described in Brandom (1999) 'Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism: Negotiation and Administration in Hegel's Account of the Structure and Content of Conceptual Norms', *European Journal of Philosophy* 7(2): 164–89 and in Brandom (2002) *Tales of the Mighty Dead. Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press.
8. Brandom gives an outline of his Hegel interpretation in Brandom (2005) 'Sketch of a Program for a Critical Reading of Hegel. Comparing Empirical and Logical Concepts', in Karl Ameriks and Jürgen Stolzenberg (eds) *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus*, vol. 3, *Deutscher Idealismus und die analytische Philosophie*, pp. 131–61. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter.
9. The book will be published under the title 'A Spirit of Trust'.