Pragmatism, Idealism and the Modal Menace: Rorty, Brandom and Truths about Photons

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Introduction:

In a paper from 1995, "Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry? Donald Davidson versus Crispin Wright", Richard Rorty criticizes Wright's appeal to the notion of "truth makers"—a notion that involves precisely the sort conflation of causal and justificatory relations that Rorty, following Sellars, wants to keep distinct. Here, however, he appeals to a criticism that reaches back through Davidson to Peter Strawson. "One of Davidson's reasons for having no truck with the idea of 'truth makers'", Rorty notes, "is his hunch that only completely artificial objects called 'facts' – what Strawson sneeringly called 'sentence-shaped objects' – can meet Wright's needs".[1] More recently, this issue of the status of "facts" has recurred in the context of another engagement, however *this time* with Rorty's fellow pragmatist and supporter, Robert Brandom, in the context of Brandom's otherwise strongly affirmative construal of Rorty's own form of pragmatism.[2]

In "Vocabularies of Pragmatism", Brandom describes Rorty's master strategy in his 1979 *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as his having used "a Kantian conceptual tool to undermine a (broadly) Kantian representationalist picture".[3] The tool in question is just the Sellarsian one mentioned above of insisting on "the distinction between *causal* considerations and *justificatory* considerations".[4] This strategy is *Kantian* in the sense of the strategy that Kant had used against Locke, but in Rorty it is expressed in linguistic form as the claim "that inferential or justificatory relations obtain only between items *within* a vocabulary," while in contrast, "relations between applications of a vocabulary and the environing world of things that are not applications of a vocabulary must be understood exclusively in nonnormative causal terms". In short: "Normative relations are exclusively intravocabulary. Extravocabulary relations are exclusively causal".[5] To this point Brandom's presentation has been entirely affirmative. However, he now claims that Rorty unnecessarily muddies the waters by rejecting "the idea of facts as a kind of thing that *makes* claims true".[6] Quoting Rorty that "since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths",[7] Brandom adds: "I think at this point something has gone wrong with [Rorty's] argument".[8]

Brandom claims that one can hold the causal and normative realms distinct, and yet nevertheless affirm that there *were* facts prior to the existence of claim-making, vocabulary-employing humans. We can "understand facts as true claims,

acknowledge that claiming is not intelligible apart from vocabularies and still insist that there were true claims, and hence true facts, before there were vocabularies".[9] Here we need to heed Sellars's distinction between two senses of "claim". A "claim" can refer to an act of claiming, and it can refer to the *content* of what is claimed. Of course there were no *claimings* prior to humans, but, Brandom insists, there were "claimables",[10] and with this distinction in place we can appreciate that "there is nothing wrong with saying that facts makes claims true – for they make claimings true".[11] In his reply, Rorty clearly identifies Brandom's "claimables" with the "sentence-shaped objects" at which Strawson had rightly sneered, reasserting his belief "that there were no truths before human beings began using language: for all true sentences S, it was back then that S, but there were no 'worldly items' – no facts, no truths – of the sort Brandom believes in".[12]

Brandom's appeal to facts as *claimables* which can be said to exist regardless of the existence of *claimers* raises the vexed question of how to think of the status of possibility, and here he is prepared to bite the bullet: "[F]acts are true claims in the sense of what is claim*ed*, not in the sense of claim*ings*. If we had never existed, there would not have been any true claimings, but there would have been facts (truths) going unexpressed, and in *our* situation, in which there *are* claimings, we can say a fair bit about what they would have been".[13] But Rorty is deeply suspicious of these sorts of claims which appeal to unrealized possibilities. "Possibilities" he declares, "are cheap" and "not worldly enough to do anything". To say that there were unexpressed truths about photons before human claimings is "like saying that the rules of baseball were there, but unexpressed, before baseball was played".[14]

In this paper I explore these contrary attitudes to modal talk expressed by Rorty and Brandom, and their differing attitudes to the idea of facts in a world without speakers. Ultimately, I will suggest that Rorty's intuitions here are sound, and Brandom's flawed, and that their different stances reflect deeper attitudinal differences in relation to the pragmatism they each espouse.

1. Modality, Metaphysics and Analytic Philosophy

We might see this difference in attitude to the consideration of counterfactuals as a mark of the generational difference between Rorty and Brandom. As Brandom notes elsewhere, "suspicion of alethic modal vocabulary" had been common among earlier generations of analytic philosophers.[15] Emerging as a specialist task of providing a set-theoretical semantics for propositional modal logic in the 1950s and 1960s, so called "possible-worlds semantics" eventually came to transform the ways in which many analytic philosophers conceived of the propositional contents of claims and beliefs in general.[16] Although there had been discussion of these topics in the 1970s, these were not reflected within the pages of Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* which appeared in 1979. In any case, one might suspect that much of this discussion would have simply strengthened Rorty's belief that Strawson had been on

the right track all along, as possible-worlds semantics had become identified with David Lewis's metaphysical thesis of possible worlds as real and concrete, spatio-temporally disconnected analogues of the *actual* world.[17] If holding onto an ontology of propositions and facts requires belief in real parallel universes, might this not be taken as a *reductio* of the attitude of regarding propositions and facts as anything *other than* human products? Many others less radical than Rorty in their questioning of analytic metaphysics have responded to Lewis's claims, if not with Strawson's sneer, then at least with an "incredulous stare".[18]

Brandom, however, has sought to develop a Sellars-inspired *pragmatist* approach to modality free from the metaphysical snares of possible-worlds semantics.[19] Moreover, as Brandom has pointed out, these modal issues were bound up with Sellars's "critique of the Myth of the Given" that had inspired Rorty's pragmatist case against representationalism. Brandom links his attitude to modality to the *Kantian* dimension of Sellars's own philosophizing—what he calls the "Kant–Sellars thesis" about modality.[20] The basic idea here is that "the ability to use ordinary empirical descriptive terms such as 'green', 'rigid', and 'mass' already presupposes grasp of the kinds of properties and relations made explicit by modal vocabulary".[21] We might think of this as Kantian in as much as that Kant had insisted that in order to achieve objectivity the contents of all judgments needed to be brought under the "pure categories of the understanding", which include the *modal* categories. Kant had linked modal claims to the *hypothetical* inferences used in explanation,[22] and in a similar way, Sellars argued that although the activities of describing and explaining may be distinguishable, "they are also, in an important sense, *inseparable*. … The descriptive and explanatory resources of language advance hand in hand".[23]

Brandom believes that such forms of connection between the facts that are expressed in true judg*ings* and those inferential activities *presupposed* by the act of judging speak against the sorts of claims Rorty makes about the *dependency* of claimables on actual vocabulary using agents. "When I say 'pure copper necessarily conducts electricity,' and thereby unrestrictedly endorse inferences from anything's being pure copper to its conducting electricity, I have nevertheless *said* nothing about any inferences, explanations, justifications, or implications—indeed, have said something that *could be true even if there had never been any inferences or inferrers to endorse them*, hence no describers or discursive practitioners at all".[24] Brandom refers to this as an "obvious fact", and links the tendency to think otherwise to "idealism", quoting an observation from Sellars that "[i]dealism is notorious for the fallacy of concluding that because there must be minds in the world in order for *us* to have reason to make statements about the world, therefore there is no sense to the idea of a world which does not include minds".[25] Rorty, of course, in no way denies the sense of the idea of a world without minds, nor, of course, denies that such a world can contain things like mountains or photons. What he denies is that a world without minds could contain *truths* or *facts* about, say, mountains or photons, but Brandom's

diagnosis of what is wrong with Rorty's claim and that of the worrisome idealist is effectively the same. In contrast to both he asserts the intelligibility of a counterfactual world of facts without language users.

On reflection, we might find Brandom's appeal to *Kant* as an ally in his approach to modality as somewhat odd. Kant *was* a realist about the empirical world, and in as much as knowledge of the empirical world relied on the application of modal categories, we might think him as endorsing a *kind* of realism about modality. Nevertheless, Kant, after all, described himself as an idealist about the *form* of objects, including their *logical* form. Thus in contrast to Aristotle's *realist* attitude to the "categories" as features of "being", Kant was an *idealist* about the categories that made up his own equivalent list. Such categories were meant to be grounded in the logical form of the *judgments* we make about what is, rather than in the *ways* in which the world is "in itself". This idea was at the heart of Kant's "transcendental" or "formal" idealism that accompanied his "empirical realism". Moreover, we might recall that Rorty *himself* had found support for his attitude to "facts" in *another* earlier "analytic Kantian", Peter Strawson.

In his classic paper from 1950, "Truth", Strawson had chided J. L. Austin for his carelessness in failing to distinguish between worldly "things" and "events" on the one hand, and "facts" on the other. Austin, Strawson had claimed, had been looking for "something in the world *which makes the statement true … or to which the statement corresponds when it is true*", and for him, "facts" answered to these demands.[26] In his critique, Strawson uses the technique, familiar in mid-twentieth-century analytic philosophy, of appealing to our *use* of terms such as "fact": "facts", he remarks "are known, stated, learnt, forgotten, overlooked, commented on, communicated or noticed. … They are not, like things or happenings on the face of the globe, witnessed or heard or seen, broken or overturned, interrupted or prolonged, kicked, destroyed, mended or noisy".[27] Nicholas Rescher has indeed said much the same in support of the "mind-dependence" of modal notions: "It is my central thesis that by the very nature of hypothetical possibilities they cannot exist as such, but must be thought of: They must be hypothesized or imagined, or assumed, or something of this sort".[28]

Although Strawson's article predates his famous rehabilitation of Kant, the Kantian feel to his criticism of Austin here is readily apparent. To think of "facts" as components of the world *itself* is to project onto the world the structures we bring to it in our endeavors to know it. Brandom, of course, need not affirm all aspects of Kant's transcendental idealism. Indeed, both Rorty and Brandom have advocated a move from Kant's to *Hegel's* way of seeing things, but when we focus on the issue of modality we can see clear differences as to how this is to be conceived. On Rorty's picture, Hegel had further *concretized* Kant's approach to the "mind", grounding mindedness in the contingent doings of embodied and historical social agents, a view

that seems compatible with, perhaps even as extending, Kant's non-realist attitude to modality: Possibilities, Rorty says, are "cheap", and not "worldly" enough to do any explaining. In contrast, Brandom claims to find a *modal realist* dimension to Hegel, for whom, he says, "there really are modally qualified states of affairs: possibilities and necessities".[29] In the following section I want to explore Brandom's contrary position further, by locating his approach to modality within some of the current literature on the "metaphysics of modality", where similar debates have taken place concerning the "reality" of possible worlds. Elements of Brandom's approach, I will argue, suggest a more "Leibnizian" than Kantian form of realism about possibility, taking him in the direction of a type of metaphysics to which he, following Rorty, is overtly opposed.

2. Brandom, Modality and the Issue of Modal Realism

Debates over the ontological status of possible worlds had emerged in the wake of the development of a formal semantics for modal logic in the late 1950s, especially that of Saul Kripke, who had effectively developed a mathematical device for offering completeness proofs for the various systems of propositional modal logic created by earlier figures such as C. I. Lewis as well as extending to them the quantificational devices of classical logic. The basic intuitive idea behind Kripke's formalization was to treat modalities in terms of quantification over possibilia understood as "possible worlds", necessary truths then being treated in a Leibnizian manner as truths holding in *all* possible worlds. *Qua* mathematical formalization, Kripke's model structure consisted of an ordered triple <G, K, *R*>, in which "K" designated a set having G as a member and "*R*" a relation of "relative possibility" (also known as "accessibility") defined over the members of K.[30] *Intuitively*, K was to be thought of as the set of all possible worlds, with G the actual world, and *R* was thought to hold between members of K, H1 and H2, such every proposition *true* in H2 was *possible* in H1. Various requirements on *R* (is the relation *transitive*? *symmetrical*? an *equivalence* relation?) now allowed the differentiation of the various existing systems of propositional model logic.

Kripke's innovations raised metaphysical questions over the ontological status of possibilia, and it was David Lewis who was to take this Leibnizian talk of possible worlds at face value, leaving those critics who wanted to gain the advantage of possible-worlds *semantics* with the problem of how to make sense of the semantics *without* the metaphysics Lewis seemed happy to embrace. Among opponents to Lewis's realist approach, Jaakko Hintikka, a co-originator of the modal revolution, had an explicitly "Kantian" outlook, insisting that modal logic be understood primarily in relation to *epistemic* logic, and criticising ideas of "alethic" or "metaphysical" modality.[31] More recently, something of the same approach can be recognized in Robert Stalnaker's advocacy of a metaphysically minimal "actualist" understanding of possible worlds—a position he has opposed to the *metaphysically realist* and *rationalist* dimensions of Lewis's approach.[32] Possible worlds, Stalnaker

writes, are "abstract objects whose existence is inferred or abstracted from the activities of rational agents". It is "thus not implausible to suppose that their existence is in some sense dependent on, and that their natures must be explained in terms of, those activities".[33]

As we have noted, Brandom has attempted to circumvent this tangle of metaphysical issues by pursuing modality from his own Sellars-inspired *pragmatist* and *inferentialist* approach to semantics. The inferentialist approach treats the content of an assertion *not* as built up from independently meaningful atomic parts, as in set-theoretically based semantics, but rather in terms of the inferential relations within which assertions stand to *other* assertions within our reason-giving linguistic practices. Thus, Brandom treats all sub-propositional components in terms of the functional role they play in contributing to the identity of the judgments in which they appear—judgments which, in turn, gain *their* meanings from the inferential relations within which they stand in language games of the giving and asking for of reasons.[34]

It is the inferentialist dimension of this general approach that provides Brandom with the resources for treating the semantics of *modal* terms. Rather than interpret inferences in terms of some independently meaningful account of the *truth* of the judgments involved, he treats them in terms of the fundamental concept of "incompatibility", as "p implies q" can be read as saying that everything incompatible with q is necessarily incompatible with p.[35] This notion of incompatibility at the same time provides the resources for treating *modal* claims, as the content of "necessarily p" is to be understood as determined by the set of sentences that are *incompatible* with p.[36] Thus, treating incompatibility as a modal semantic primitive allows the introduction of "*modal* logical vocabulary in the very same setting, and the very same terms, in which we introduce the classical *non*-modal logical vocabulary".[37]

As Brandom himself indicates, his "incompatibility semantics" turns out to have many of the same features as Kripke's canonical notation,[38] but, as others have pointed out, there is one important difference. While Kripke had fixed the truth conditions of 'necessarily p' by starting from one possible world that is taken to be the *actual world* (G in the triple <G, K, R>), then treating other possible worlds in terms of their accessibility from the former,[39] "Brandom defines necessity in a *global* way by talking about the entirety of all sentences *at once*. Thus, Brandom's account lacks anything like a particular perspective from which a formula like 'necessarily p' is evaluated".[40] While Brandom envisages his incompatibility approach as allowing him to avoid the metaphysical traps of Lewisian possible-worlds semantics, I will argue that it is this latter feature that puts him on the Lewis–Leibniz side of the debate about the nature of possible worlds, opposing him to Lewis's more "Kantian" critics. In relation to this issue I will focus on Stalnaker's "actualist" alternative to Lewisian realism about possibility ("possibilism") as Stalnaker shares many of the pragmatist and anti-metaphysical assumptions motivating Brandom and Rorty.[41]

In his 1976 paper "Possible Worlds", Stalnaker had summarized Lewis's main theses as follows: 1. Possible worlds exist and are "just as real as the actual world"; 2. They are "*things of the same sort as the actual world*", and don't differ in kind from the actual world; 3. We should understand the adjective "actual" indexically—by "the actual world" is meant the one that we "inhabit"; and 4. Possible worlds cannot be reduced to something more basic.[42]

While like many readers of Lewis, Stalnaker is critical of thesis 1, the thesis to which he devotes much of his criticism is 2, Lewis's way of talking of possible worlds as "things of the same sort as the actual world", something like "parallel universes" to our own that are spatially and temporally inaccessible from it. The common starting point for modal semantics is to account for our everyday talk about "ways things might have been", and possible worlds talk, Stalnaker insists, should be no more than a convenient way of talking about possible situations or scenarios within *this*, the actual world.[43] But Lewis's "plurality of worlds" rhetoric involves more than an "innocent terminological substitution".[44] It is this talk of possible worlds as *complete worlds* or parallel universes to the actual world that, Stalnaker thinks, is the basic problem: even those disavowing the explicit metaphysics of thesis 1 can *implicitly* buy into it, he thinks, by conceiving of the semantics in this way. But while critical of thesis 2, Stalnaker *accepts* thesis 3, linking the actual world "indexically" to us—but without theses 1 and 2 this must be understood in a different way. Stalnaker, I suggest, can be read as taking the indexicality thesis it in a broadly *Kantian* way.

4. Empiricism, Givenness and Indexicality

In Lewis's words "'actual' is indexical, like 'I' or 'here' or 'now': it depends for its reference on the circumstances of utterance, to wit, the world where the utterance is located."[45] Lewis's thinking here seems to capture, and in its peculiar way promise to resolve, an odd ambivalence surrounding the role of indexicals in knowledge. On the one hand, indexicality gets linked to the empiricist idea that it is direct experience that differentiates the actual world from any possible alternatives. Thus demonstratives, indexicals and other such ego-reflexive terms have, from a Cartesian or "internalist" perspective, been taken as promising *certain knowledge* as in Russell's treatment of demonstratives as "logical proper names", or to the infamous "here now red, there blue" protocol sentences of logical positivism.[46] But from its rival, "externalist" perspective, indexicality signals not objectivity *via certainty*, but rather subjectivity *via context-dependence*. We might think of the sentence, "today is Tuesday", when uttered on a Tuesday, as true, but not true in the way other *objective* truths are true because it becomes false on *Wednesday*. Lewis's modal realism seems to negotiate this tension by *generalizing* the idea of context dependence so as to treat the *actual*

world *itself* as a *particular context* within the broader framework of the plurality of *possible* worlds.

In Stalnaker's hands, however, the indexicality of the actual is not thought of in this way. While Lewis argues that the actual world only *seems to be* the real world from *our* point of view—the idea being that the inhabitants of other possible worlds would similarly treat *their* worlds in the same way—Stalnaker criticizes the notion of any consideration of things *from the standpoint of other worlds*: "We can grant that fictional characters are as right, from their points of view, to affirm their full-blooded reality as we are to affirm ours. But their point of view", he goes on, "is fictional, and so what is right from it makes no difference as far as reality is concerned." Thus, he says, while Lewis identifies "the objective or absolute standpoint with a neutral standpoint outside of all possible worlds … there is no such standpoint. The objective, absolute point of view is the view from within the actual world, and it is part of the concept of actuality that this should be so".[47] As an application of this idea, Stalnaker criticizes Lewis's "modal rationalism": the thesis "that all the distinctions between possibilities that could possibly be made are distinctions that exist from the perspective of any possible world—distinctions that exist necessarily".[48] For Stalnaker there can be no sense to the idea of a perspective that is not that of our own world.[49] But in contrast, Brandom's "directly modal" incompatibility semantics, by bypassing the idea of the actual world as the initial locus from which the accessibility of non-actual worlds is to be understood, would appear, in *this* respect, to structurally resemble Lewis's Leibnizian "rationalist" approach to modality.[50]

Again, I suggest we can hear a distinctly Kantian echo in Stalnaker's approach to the indexicality of the actual. Kant thought that individuals can achieve an objective *take* on the things of our world by bringing their empirical judgments under the categories. We each need to distinguish between judgments that "hold good only for us" from those that "should be valid for all times for us and for everyone else",[51] and it is only by bringing a judgment under the categories that one can grasp that its content is *not* limited "to the subject [or] to its state at a particular time".[52] This is how we overcome the context dependence of our knowledge, which is a consequence of the fact that, as embodied creatures, each of us is *always* located somewhere, somewhen and somehow, and so can think of our empirical claims as realistic. But Lewis has reapplied this distinction between perspectivally constrained knowledge and knowledge freed from such constraint. That is, he moves from the idea of different viewpoints *within* the actual world to the idea of different viewpoints *from* different possible worlds, one of which is the actual world. This is the move that Stalnaker challenges and the challenge, I suggest, is akin to Kant's challenge to "transcendental realism" in which categories such as the *modal* ones are taken as applicable *beyond* the realm of the appearing *actual* world. Kant insisted that the only way to be a realist about the empirical world was to be a "transcendental idealist" about the categories.

For Kant, then, there then is a sense in which there is an *irreducible* indexical dimension to the world as it is experienced and known, an indexicality that reflects the fact that the actual world is always revealed within the experience of contextually located individual perceivers. We might think of this as having two levels. We can transcend the context-specific nature of the conditions of our *individual* experience by bringing our judgments under the categories, but to do this is to introduce a *type* of indexicality (perhaps a type of *collective* indexicality) at a higher level. This is because all our objective representations, as shaped by the categories, must be conceived as accompanied by a higher-level representation—the "I think"—whose thoughts are structured by the categories themselves. This higher-level indexicality of Kant's "transcendental I" is thus introduced in order to overcome the contextual limitations of the lower-level "empirical I". But any attempt to now transcend the standpoint of the transcendental I and its categorially structured thought is, for Kant, the temptation *par excellence* that leads to "dogmatic" metaphysics, and it is a temptation we should resist, lest we mistake the cognitive capacities of this transcendental I for features of reality *itself*. And this is a temptation that surely the Kantian will see *Lewis* as succumbing to, and Stalnaker as resisting. I have suggested that in some important formal respects Brandom's approach to modality is closer to Lewis's than it is to Stalnaker's, because Brandom's "directly modal" approach to assertion by-passes the particular perspective of the *actual* world which is crucial for the "actualist". We might now see such Lewisian features of Brandom's position, I believe, as implicit in his criticism of Rorty.

5. The purported world of thinkable facts without thinkers

In the light of the Lewis-Stalnaker difference discussed above regarding how to understand the "indexicality" of the actual, we might appreciate that this thought of a possible world *without* minds is itself open to very different interpretations. On the one interpretation—the "actualist" one—we will think of the idea of a "world which does not include minds" as just a possible state of *our* world—this, the actual world, to which we *actually* belong. *Or* we might think of it along the lines that Lewis conceives of possible worlds, as another complete concrete universe, different from ours in that in it there are no language-using beings like us, but there *are* certain other things such as photons. In the former, we are thinking of a possible state of *our* world, but in the latter, we are trying to conceive of a whole world which has been stripped of "us" and our representational devices in a much more radical way. Let's consider this in the case of thinking of a world with photons but no language users.

Clearly we humans can consider our non-existence as a possibility within the actual world and, for instance, talk of the existence of photons in a world which does not contain us or other language users. Indeed, we typically think of the world as having been like this for most of its history—a point that Rorty, of course, in no sense

denies. From the actualist perspective, however, the absence of humans from this scenario will not be conceived as it is from the Lewisian one. From the Lewisian perspective the counterfactual world is a complete concrete world that is otherwise without humans or language users—and it is so simply by stipulation. And *this* human-free possible world can contain[s] photons, or at least, the "counterparts" of actual photons.[53] But, from a Stalnakerian interpretation, it would seem, the photons that are present in this alternative scenario are to be understood as *just those photons* that exist in *this*, the actual world. In the latter case we are conceiving of the actual world as it would be without one of its properties *instantiated*—the property of its containing us. But there is no reason to think things like *photons* in this world will be anything other than they *actually* are. These two ways of conceiving of such a possible world thus result in two ways of understanding the idea of the dependence of "facts" on the activities of speakers.

When Rorty writes that "since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths", this seems to be a claim that sits easily enough with the what I have been describing as Stalnaker's broadly Kantian or "actualist" understanding of possibility. The resources for saying and thinking things about photons, for dividing up possible ways that things *might have been* against which we understand how they *are*, are *our resources*. The thoughts we have about the photons in such a counter-factual world are the same kind of thoughts that we have when we think about photons but *don't* eliminate ourselves from the picture. However, the fact that *Brandom* finds this problematic in the way that Sellars finds the worrisome "idealist" problematic, suggests that he is construing Rorty's words in ways that are more consistent with a Lewisian understanding of counterfactuals. And lacking the resources for thinking modality in actualist terms, this is what we might expect. Moreover, this same impression is produced by *his* way of putting his own alternative case.

In contrast to Rorty, Brandom says that "If we had never existed, there would not have been any true claimings, but there would have been facts (truths) going unexpressed, and in *our* situation, in which there *are* claimings, we can say a fair bit about what they would have been".[54] Brandom describes these facts as ones that "would have been", but, I suggest, in such cases we are only saying something about what the facts actually *are*. As Rorty puts it in the context of Brandom's temporal formulation: "for all true sentences S, it was back then that S",[55] because these sorts of truths are not the sort to change with time, nor with the fact of our being around or not. Photons are not the sorts of things that, like cities, say, depend in important ways upon *us*.[56] But for Brandom to imply the existence of a difference between what actually *is the case* with photons and what *would have been* the case with photons in a counterfactual situation in which *we* never had existed is to suggest a picture of this possibility as a type of parallel complete possible world. Put otherwise, Brandom

seems to be misusing the subjunctive here by applying it to the photons, and misusing it in a way that is akin to Lewis's less-than "innocent" terminological substitution of possible worlds for possible states of *this* world. The photons *about which* we are talking are not constituents of some postulated parallel universe, they are just the photons of the actual universe, and given what we know about *them* it is not puzzling that we can *say* something about them. Brandom's way of articulating the distinction between "assertibles" and "assertings" that he uses against Rorty, I suggest, rests on a semantics that has metaphysical connotations opposed to the type of pragmatism he otherwise endorses.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to suggest that the difference between Rorty on Brandom on this particular issue might be taken to express a deep difference between pragmatism as they each conceive it. This difference might be best captured in terms of the question: what is the nature of that to which their deepest anxieties are directed? Rorty is commonly regarded as having a somewhat cavalier attitude to the types of *irrationalist* threats that that are commonly thought to haunt modern philosophy: relativism, anti-realism, idealism, and so on. While he typically resists such labels, it is true that his attitude towards such targets is not the one that is more prevalent among analytic philosophers. He does not appear to see it as his professional or moral duty to protect our minds from the dangers of such ideas. Rather, he sees such positions as typically containing important truths, but expressed in such a way that they are compromised by the type of absolutist attitudes that he sees *more typically* expressed in the critics of such "irrationalisms".[57] But despite his apparently relaxed attitude here, Rorty, I suggest, equally crusaded against perceived dangers: it was just that he located these elsewhere—paradigmatically in the attitude of Platonism.

In contrast, Brandom's concerns about a view he seems to think as shared by Rorty and "the idealist" seems to express a different attitude—one that is closer to the Platonist attitude about which Rorty *did* see it as his duty to warn us. If it is the case that Rorty sometimes sailed too close to the winds of worrisome philosophical outlooks, then we might see how, from his point of view, Brandom, in his claims about the presence of facts in a world without thinkers, seems himself to sail too close to the winds of a type of *anti-pragmatist Platonism* that for Rorty represents the main danger.

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[1]   In Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 35. Rorty gives no reference to Strawson there, but presumably has in mind his critique of Austin's attempt to

"purify" the correspondence theory of truth in the 1950 paper "Truth" of 1950, which he invokes in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. "My own attitude is Strawson's (and Heidegger's): 'The correspondence theory requires, not purification, but elimination'". Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 179.

[2]   Robert B. Brandom, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism" in Robert B. Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and His Critics* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000).

[3]   Ibid., p. 160.

[4]   Ibid.

[5]   Ibid. But if Rorty's strategy here is Kantian, the motivation for this strategy as Brandom portrays it seems quite unkantian. Rorty's rejection of "the idea of facts as worldly items that make our claims true or false" is described as "a consequence of his anti-idealist commitments to a world of causally interacting things that causally constrains our application of vocabulary not having a conceptual structure". Ibid., 161.

[6]   Ibid., p. 161.

[7]   Quoted ibid. The quote is from Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 21.

[8]   Brandom, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism", p. 161.

[9]   Ibid., p. 162.

[10]   Ibid., p. 162.

[11]   I am leaving out other aspects of Brandom's critique here.

[12]   Richard Rorty, "Response to Robert Brandom", in Brandom, *Reading Rorty*, p. 184.

[13]   Brandom, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism", p. 163. Brandom makes a similar point elsewhere about the role of observation in science. "The theory is that electrical currents cause magnetic fields regardless of the presence of suitable measuring devices. And that can only be made out in terms of what is observ*able*, that is, *could* be observed, not just what *is* observed". Robert B. Brandom, "A Kantian Rationalist Pragmatism: Pragmatism, Inferentialism, and Modality in Sellars's Arguments against Empiricism", in *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, and Contemporary* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 93.

[14]   Brandom, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism", p. 184.

[15]   Robert B. Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 93.

[16]   Crucial breakthroughs here included Saul Kripke's "A Completeness Theorem in Modal Logic", *Journal of Symbolic Logic* 24, 1 (1959), pp. 1–14 and "Semantical Considerations on Modal Logic" *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 16 (1963), pp. 83–94. For a helpful account of this complex history see B. Jack Copeland, "The Genesis of Possible World Semantics", *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 31 (2002), pp. 99–137.

[17]   The basic features of this "modal realism" were present in David K. Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), but it was his Locke Lectures of 1984, published two years later as *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), that introduced this idea to a wider audience.

[18]   Lewis, *On The Plurality of Worlds*, p. 133.

[19]   Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing*, p. 97.

[20]   Ibid., p. 95.

21   Ibid., p. 96–7. (I have omitted the boldface of Brandom's text.)

22   Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A74–6/B99–101.

23   Wilfrid Sellars, "Counterfactuals, Dispositions and Causal Modalities", in H Feigl, M. Scriven and G. Maxwell (eds), *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957), §108, quoted in Brandom, "A Kantian Rationalist Pragmatism", p. 98. We might here remember Sellars's argument in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* about the reporting of the colour of ties under different lighting conditions. In learning to use the concept "blue", say, one has to learn that a particular blue thing may not always *look* the same way. Under odd sorts of lighting a blue tie might look *green*. Thus the very capacity to correctly apply the concept "blue" then must include the capacity to make inferences of the type, "were I observing this under such and such conditions this blue thing would indeed look green", or, "if I am actually observing this under such and such conditions this thing that *looks* green might actually *be* blue".

24   Brandom, "A Kantian Rationalist Pragmatism", p. 99, final emphases added.

25   Sellars, "Counterfactuals, Dispositions and Causal Modalities", §101, quoted in Brandom, "A Kantian Rationalist Pragmatism", p. 99 fn. 17.

26   Peter Strawson, "Truth", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supl. vol. 24 (1950), reprinted in Michael P. Lynch (ed.), *The Nature of Truth: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge MA.: MIT Press, 2001), p. 452.

27   Ibid., p. 452–3. Austin in his assimilation of facts to worldly things had offered a "purified version of the correspondence theory", but "the correspondence theory requires, not purification, but elimination". Ibid., p. 447.

28   Nicholas Rescher, "The Ontology of the Possible" in Michael J. Loux, *The Possible and the Actual: Readings in the Metaphysics of Modality* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 167.

29   Robert B. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 181.

30   Kripke, "Semantical Considerations on Modal Logic", p. 84.

31   See, for example, Jaakko Hintikka's discussion of these issues in his "Intellectual Autobiography" in Randall E. Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn (eds) *The Philosophy of Jaakko Hintikka: The Library of Living Philosophers Volume XXX* (Chicago: Open Court, 2006), pp. 21–4.

32   While Stalnaker does not use the phrase "metaphysical realism" to characterize the position he criticizes, he has associated his position with Hilary Putnam's "internal realism", which Putnam opposes to "metaphysical realism". For a recent self-characterization of his position in relation to the modal realism–nonrealism dichotomy, see Robert Stalnaker, *Mere Possibilities: Metaphysical foundations of Modal Semantics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 39–42.

33   Robert C. Stalnaker, "Possible Worlds", originally published in *Nous*, vol 10, no. 1 (1976), pp. 65–75, reprinted in Robert C. Stalnaker, *Ways a World Might Be* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 32. (Pagination here is to the latter publication.)

34   Brandom's major work here is, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

35   Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing*, pp. 119–21.

[36]   Ibid., p. 123.

[37]   Ibid., p. 128.

[38]   Ibid., p. 129.

[39]   Majkie and Prasad make this point neatly: "Fundamental to Kripke semantics is the relativization of semantic evaluation to possible worlds in *W*. That is, in order to evaluate a modal formula, we need to specify some world $m \in W$ (the *current* world) and begin the evaluation *there*. The function of the modalities is to scan the worlds accessible from *m*, the worlds accessible from those worlds, and so on. In brief, m is the starting point in the step-wise local exploration of the model." Zoran Majkie and Bhanu Prasad, "Soft Query-Answering Computing in P2P Systems", in Bhanu Prasad, *Soft Computing Applications in Industry*, (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2008), p. 347.

[40]   Benedikt Göcke, Martin Pleitz, and Hanno von Wulfen", "How to Kripke Brandom's Notion of Necessity", in Bernd Prien and David P. Schweikard (eds), *Robert Brandom: Analytic Pragmatist* (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2008), p. 137.

[41]   For a short characterization of what he calls his "pragmatic picture", see Robert C. Stalnaker, *Inquiry* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1984), Chapter 1. See also his description of his proximity to Quine's pragmatism in the "Introduction" to Stalnaker, *Ways a World Might Be*.

[42]   Stalnaker, "Possible Worlds", p. 27.

[43]   Stalnaker essentially understands possible worlds as uninstantiated *properties* of the actual world.

[44]   Ibid., p. 26. This criticism has, of course, been made by others central to the history of "possible-worlds semantics".

[45]   Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, pp. 85–6.

[46]   This was one of the examples from the first of Rudolf Carnap's possible "answers" to the nature of protocol sentences in his "Die physikalische Sprache als Universalsprache der Wissenschaft", *Erkenntnis*, Band 2, Heft 5/6 (1932), p. 438. It is not clear he was endorsing this conception.

[47]   Stalnaker, *Possible Worlds*, pp. 28–9.

[48]   Stalnaker, *Mere Possibilities*, p. 129.

[49]   Without the idea of a standpoint transcending the actual world, "any contingent proposition might be a propositions that exists only contingently". Ibid., p. 130. It is significant here that in C. I. Lewis's system S5, possibilities are themselves *necessary*, a condition that Brandom acknowledges as part of his incompatibility approach. Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing*, p. 129.

[50]   Clearly there are other respects in which Brandom's "directly modal" approach differs from Lewis's.

[51]   Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics. With Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*, revised edition, ed. and trans. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2004), § 18.

[52]   Ibid., § 19.

[53]   Because Lewis treats non-actual possible worlds as parallel universes, the commonplace idea that one thing cannot be in two places at once means that one cannot find *identical* entities in different worlds—no-actual worlds must contain only "counterparts" of the inhabitances of the actual.

[54]   Brandom, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism", p. 163.

[55]   Rorty, "Response to Robert Brandom", p. 184.

[56] Perhaps something like what Brandom wants to say could be said about something more *specific*, like the distribution of photons in the universe were we not around. Artificial illumination, after all, is going to make *some* difference. But there is no reason to think of there being a difference between what "would have been" and what "is the case" with respect to the nature of photons themselves.

[57] In relation to idealism in particular, his position in "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism" (in Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972–1980)* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 139–160) is typical. While Brandom refers to this "canonical text", the stress he puts on Rorty's "anti-idealist commitments" fails, I believe, to reflect the spirit of that work. Brandom, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism", pp. 160–61.