

Hegelian Pragmatism and Social Emancipation: An Interview with Robert Brandom

Italo Testa

TESTA: How do you judge, also in light of the conference held in Venice, the role that Hegel has historically played within the American tradition? How far does your approach to Hegel connect itself to the partially interrupted stream of the pragmatist reception of Hegel and how far does it take a different direction? Which insights of the European reading of Hegel do you find fruitful to improve or revise the American pragmatic approach?

BRANDOM: Each of the members of the great triumvirate of classical American pragmatism was deeply influenced by Hegel. Charles Peirce's careful study of Hegel's *Logik* is manifest, for instance, in his own mature metaphysics of what he called "firstness," "secondness," and "thirdness," and his reading of the *Phänomenologie* in his doctrine of "evolutionary love." William James, while not himself a reader of Hegel, shaped his thought in no small part by his ongoing confrontation with the Hegelianism of his colleague and friend Josiah Royce. John Dewey began his philosophical career as an avowed Hegelian, and, while breaking with what he came to see as Hegel's intellectualism, retained and adapted many elements of his thought throughout his career.

Classical pragmatism takes over from Hegel many of its central orienting principles. Prime among them is the primacy of the practical, of doing over judging, in understanding our rational capacities. As Hegel says in the Preface to the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*: "Reason is purposive activity." The pragmatists follow Hegel in drawing the conclusion that fixed intellectual dualisms, paradigmatically the Cartesian opposition of subject and object and the Kantian opposition of description and prescription, are to be overcome by focusing on the concrete dynamic processes in which social, embodied creatures transform and are transformed by their environments. Accordingly, they follow Hegel in thinking of concepts in terms of the way they develop by being applied in practice, rather than in terms of their representational content. With Hegel, they draw holist conclusions from this way of thinking: the various capacities that make up our practical and cognitive life are intelligible only in concert with their fellows, in terms of the role they play and the contribution they make to our overall functioning.

The pragmatists also understood themselves as breaking with Hegel in distinctive ways. They were resolutely naturalistic: deeply influenced by Darwin's theory of biological evolution and by advances in statistical theory,

and determined to apply these modes of thought in understanding the development of individual practical abilities, in ways that would culminate in the early twentieth century in learning-theoretical approaches in psychology. They worked out an instrumentalist understanding of rationality: treating means-end reasoning as the model of thought itself, in ways that would culminate in the late twentieth century in rational choice models in decision theory and economics. They championed an experimental, fallibilist spirit, which emphasized the temporary, partial, context-dependent nature of the grip that any particular concepts or methods afford.

As a result, they rejected Hegel's rationalism, the central role he accords to the expressive rationality that consists in making what is implicit in practice explicit as principle; his systematic, comprehensive, metaphysical aspirations for philosophical theory; and the finality he attributed to his logic. For only partly congruent reasons, but no less vehemently than Russell and Moore were doing in England, the pragmatists in America distanced and defined themselves by their points of opposition to the Hegelian tradition they inherited.

My own view is that, though historically intelligible, this response involved significant elements both of misunderstanding and of overreaction. What is most alive and useful today in pragmatism, I think, is the way it gives explanatory priority to knowing *how* over knowing *that*, its insistence that it is only our *use* of sentences and the role that our beliefs play in organizing our practical activities that make intelligible our attribution of *content* to them – claims that Hegel shares, as I understand him. I do not think that the pragmatists' strategy of understanding the norms that articulate those functional roles on the model of means-end reasoning any longer (in our changed historical circumstances) shows us a way forward. The pragmatists, like Nietzsche and the later Wittgenstein, were concerned to emphasize continuities linking us with our mammalian and hominid ancestors, and accordingly rejected what seems to me the crucial insight in Hegel's rationalism: the way in which social practices that are discursive – in being articulated by relations of justification and evidence, in taking the form of giving and asking for *reasons* – transform merely *natural* creatures into distinctively *cultural* ones, beings whose *history* now plays the role that their *nature* plays for non-discursive beings. With their focus on prospective problem-solving, the American pragmatists tended to lose sight of Hegel's idea that it is by retrospectively rationally reconstructing the tradition we inherit, in a way that distinguishes some elements as progressive, that we put ourselves in a position to transform that tradition. Hegel's logic was intended to give us the tools to understand that process, so as to be able to engage in it self-consciously. Their rejection of this vision of the expressive role of logic took the form of a rejection of ambitious, systematic philosophical theorizing. I think that was a mistake.

TESTA: It seems that you intend to do with Hegel something similar to what Strawson did years ago with Kant, that is, making Hegel respectable in view of

the Anglo-American debate and translating his language into the contemporary philosophical lexicon. To this aim you propose a post-Fregean and post-Wittgensteinian reading of Hegel – in other words a reading of Hegel after the linguistic and pragmatic turn of contemporary philosophy. This effort should contribute to finally overcoming the distance that, in particular on the terrain of German Idealism, still divides the so-called Anglo-American analytical tradition and the European continental tradition. Remembering the title of a well-known article that Richard Bernstein wrote at the end of the seventies, the following question could be addressed to you: “Why Hegel now”? What role could Hegel play in renewing contemporary philosophy and in bridging the still great divide between the two contemporary philosophical traditions?

BRANDOM: We have learned from Wittgenstein that understanding ourselves requires understanding the sort of *normativity* distinctive of discursive practice. This is a rediscovery of a Kantian problematic that is central to Hegel’s thought. One of Kant’s master ideas is that what distinguishes our judgments and actions from the responses of merely natural creatures is that they are things we are in a distinctive sense *responsible* for. They express *commitments*, subject to assessment as correct or incorrect, successful or failed. When I decide that what I am looking at is a fox, or that I will teach the children a game, I bind myself by *rules*, implicit in the concepts *fox* and *game*. It is those rules that determine what I have made myself responsible for and to, what settles whether things are as I intend or claim them to be. Kant’s question, then, is what it is for us in this way to bind ourselves, to make ourselves responsible, to undertake commitments. Hegel was not satisfied with Kant’s removal of the answer from the phenomenal world of experience to a noumenal realm beyond or behind it. For Hegel, normative statuses such as commitment and responsibility are always *social* statuses, instituted by our practices, just as marriages and mortgages are. For a variety of contingent historical reasons, the problem of understanding conceptual normativity was not on the radar of philosophers again until the later Wittgenstein, following a line of thought in Frege, revived it as a central question for us. Perhaps now we have ears to hear what Hegel was saying about it.

The naturalist and historicist currents of philosophical thought that issued in classical pragmatism were disturbed and re-routed when Russell and Husserl, each in his own distinctive way, described topics that philosophers could imagine themselves studying *a priori*, and discovering necessary truths about: the structures of logic and of consciousness respectively. It took most of the century for both traditions to work themselves out of the sort of atomistic foundationalism that resulted. In analytic philosophy, the pragmatic arguments of Quine, Sellars, and Davidson led to a kind of conceptual holism, and Kuhn’s work in the philosophy of science led to an appreciation of the essentially historical character of concepts. In the continental tradition, Heidegger’s seminal invocations of social practices in *Sein und Zeit* played a role corresponding to

that of Dewey's writings of the same decade. For both traditions, again for their own reasons and in their own way, *language* came to the fore as the distinctive space within which human beings live and move and have their being. This emphasis, too, was a recovery of Hegel's view that "language is the existence of spirit (*Geist*)" – his term for the *normative* dimension of our activity, the one that raises us above the merely natural.

So we have, with great difficulty and many false steps along the way, but also much contributed by each tradition that is new and promising, worked our way back to Hegel's central philosophical concerns. Three of Hegel's most basic ideas seem to me of particular value in the current context:

- his understanding of the normative dimension of our activity (the '*geistig*') as socially synthesized by reciprocal recognition,
- his distinguishing the conceptual by its distinctive material *inferential* articulation, that is, understanding concepts in terms of their role in reasoning, and
- his view of conceptual norms as historical products of our actual practices of using them in judgment and action, in the light of the actual contexts and consequences of those uses.

The history of philosophy would look very different if we had begun working out the consequences of these ideas already in the middle of the nineteenth century – but as Leibniz said and Hegel believed of philosophy, "nothing is for nothing," and it is never too late to move forward by making something new of an old idea.

TESTA: I would like to underline two main points of the paper you gave in Venice: a) objective idealism is the best way to make a pragmatic semantics explicit and intelligible; b) idealism can make semantic holism intelligible and consistent if and only if objective idealism implies a dialectical method of comprehension. In your interpretation, idealism offers a model for a normative and pragmatic theory of meaning; on the other hand, dialectic is meant to be a consistent solution to the problems that contemporary strong holism seems unable to overcome. Could you briefly address these topics? Would it be correct to say that you propose a kind of semantic idealism?

BRANDOM: By a "pragmatic semantics" I mean an account of meaning in terms of use – a central element of Wittgenstein's pragmatism. Following Hegel, however, and in contrast both to Wittgenstein and to the classical American pragmatists, I am a rationalist about meaning. Discursive practice confers conceptual content on states and expressions suitably caught up in it. To say that beliefs and the sentences that express them are *conceptually* contentful is to say that they are *inferentially* articulated: they can play the role both of premise and of conclusion in inferences, that is, can both serve as and stand in need of *reasons*. Conceptual contents are inferential roles. The game of giving and asking for reasons is, *pace* Wittgenstein and Derrida, privileged among

language games in that it is the one that confers content on our utterances in the first place. What makes something a *language* game (verbal rather than merely vocal) is that some moves in it have the significance of *assertions*: things that can both be reasons and for which reasons can be given. This sort of semantic inferentialism has (as Quine, no less than Hegel, saw) holist consequences: concepts are defined in part by their inferential relations to each other (so, for instance, it makes no sense to talk of someone having just one of them).

In this sense of ‘conceptual,’ there need be nothing particularly psychological or subjective about conceptual articulation. For objective facts are inferentially articulated: from the fact that this coin is copper, it follows that it will melt at 1084°C. If Fido is a dog, then he is not an amoeba. Inferentialism about the conceptual underwrites conceptual realism: the view that objective reality itself is conceptually articulated. In empirical inquiry, we are not just trying to get the facts right, but also and at the same time to get the concepts right, to reason in accord with what really follows from what. As Hegel famously insisted, we must also accept a kind of holism about the objective world itself. But how are we to understand such a view and such a reality?

Talk of ‘idealism’ is talk about a conception of how the subjective is related to the objective. As I understand Hegel, the view I call his “objective idealism” is the view that the concepts and categories we use to understand the objective world and the concepts and categories we use to understand the discursive practices in virtue of which we are subjects are *reciprocally sense-dependent*. That is, one cannot grasp or understand objective categories such as *object*, *fact*, and *law of nature* except insofar as one also understands what it is to use an expression as a singular term (that is, as purporting to refer to or pick out an object), to assert a sentence (that is, to purport to state a fact), and to reason counterfactually (about what *must* be the case). The great misunderstanding of idealism (responsible for its contemporary philosophical status as “the love that dare not say its name”) is to mistake this *sense-dependence* for a *reference-dependence* – to mistake dependence in the order of *understanding* for dependence in the order of *existence*. For it is *not* a consequence of this view that there were no objects, facts, or laws before there were people to use singular terms, sentences, and modal vocabulary such as ‘necessary.’ Objective idealism is a thesis about *meanings*. It is a kind of holism relating concepts of objective relations to concepts of subjective processes or practices – the ability to use various sorts of words. In this sense, the semantic pragmatism I am recommending is a kind of semantic idealism.

TESTA: Hegel’s inferentialist semantics seems to offer some conceptual tools that enable us to finally overcome the representationalist standpoint of modern epistemology and ontology. In this direction you share Rorty’s anti-ontological perspective, in that you take it that all matters of authority and normativity are matters of social practice and not ontological matters, that is matters of how things are in fact made in a non-human world. Does this imply a total refusal of

ontology, or do you think that it is also possible to reformulate ontological problems in another way, qualifying for example your inferentialism as a kind of social ontology? A similar question could be posed about the *vexata questio*, at least in continental philosophy, about the end of metaphysics: does accepting the consequences of the linguistic turn imply necessarily, as Habermas for example assumes, the acceptance of a post-metaphysical point of view? Or do you think that there is rather a sense in which a metaphysical approach can today still be subscribed to? Is your Hegel the first post-metaphysical thinker or else a good metaphysician?

BRANDOM: The question about ontology is to a certain extent terminological. Normative pragmatism about ontology transposes questions about the fundamental categories of *things* into questions about *authority*, and then understands those questions in terms of *social practices*. Thus, the ontological category of the *mental*, of things that are subjective in a Cartesian sense, can be identified with those states and episodes about which a particular individual is indefeasibly authoritative. There is no difference between my being in pain or seeming to see a red triangle, on the one hand, and my merely *thinking* or otherwise *taking it* that that I am in pain or seem to see a red triangle, on the other. My sincere pronouncements on these matters are definitive. The ontological category of the *social* can similarly be identified with things that a *community* is indefeasibly authoritative about. If the members of the Kwakiutl tribe treat a certain kind of gesture as a greeting, then it is a greeting. They cannot be wrong about their own greeting gestures, for being a greeting just is being taken or treated as one in the practices of the tribe. The ontological category of the *objective* can then be understood as comprising matters about which no individual and no community is indefeasibly authoritative – things about which *anyone* and *everyone* can be wrong. The social pragmatist about normativity then takes it that these distinctions are themselves socially instituted. So Rorty, in his early work on eliminative materialism, argued that the world does not compel us to acknowledge a category of mental events, for it does not compel us to treat any utterances as incorrigible first-person reports. A community that does so treat some utterances has Cartesian mental states and episodes. A community with different practices would not. (It is a special question for a view along these lines what structure a set of social practices must have in order to count as withholding authority on some topics from its own members and granting that authority to *things*, which in virtue of that constellation of authority count as what we are talking *about*, or representing. That is the question to which the second half of my book *Making It Explicit* is addressed.) Is this sort of view a rejection of ontology or itself a social ontology? I don't think it matters much which label is used, as long as we are clear about the view being labelled.

I would distinguish the issue of metaphysics from that of ontology. A discourse can be considered 'metaphysical' in three increasingly committive senses. In the weakest sense, it just means "philosophical *theory*," of the sort

that Wittgenstein means to reject as a principled philosophical quietist. He often talks as though any *explanation* of our linguistic practice that goes beyond *description* of it – indeed, beyond reporting our *observations* of it – must be an objectionable scientism or reductive naturalism. (We are only supposed to “assemble reminders.”) In this sense, when Descartes recommends understanding the relation between appearance and reality (mind and world) in terms of the master concept of *representation*, rather than, as the ancients and medievals had, in terms of *resemblance*, he is offering a metaphysics of intentionality – and so is the rationalist who uses the concept *inference* to the same end, and the Kantian who organizes his philosophical idiom around the concept of *rule*. I think there is no good reason to reject metaphysics in this sense. Philosophical theory is methodologically distinguished from scientific theory by its characteristic *expressive* aim: to make explicit what is implicit in the use of concepts. Employing theoretical terms – that is, terms whose only use is inferential and have themselves no observational uses – is as legitimate in philosophy as in science, and doing so does not by itself entail any further naturalist or reductionist commitments. Certainly Hegel is a metaphysician in this sense, unpacking and making explicit the conceptual in terms of the concepts of *determinate negation* and *mediation* (material incompatibility and material inference), and the normative in terms of the concept of *reciprocal recognition*.

In a more committive sense, the *systematic* metaphysical ambition is to produce a *comprehensive* philosophical theory: a crafted and controlled technical-theoretical idiom in which *everything* can be said. Here the sense in which the artificial theoretical idiom is ‘controlled’ is an inferential one. It is to be clearly determined what one is committing oneself to and precluding oneself from claiming by each claim expressed in that idiom, and what would be evidence for it and against it. The point of such an enterprise is a certain sort of expression and so of understanding: a kind of discursive self-consciousness. The fact that it is no doubt an unattainable ideal does not seem to me to speak against it. Each such systematic crafting, assembling, and deploying of expressive resources is an advance in understanding, as much where it fails as where it succeeds. Again, Hegel is a paradigm of a systematic metaphysician in this sense, as is Sellars. This literary-philosophical genre has indeed been officially out of fashion for the last 150 years, both in the Anglophone and the continental traditions – which is not to say it has not been surreptitiously practiced – but this seems to me to be due more to preference and prejudice than to principled philosophical insight.

Finally, in the most committive sense, what might be called *imperial* systematic metaphysics claims that its expressive resources are the final arbiter of the *reality* of things, in a distinctively metaphysical sense. What cannot be said in its favored idiom is mere appearance and does not really exist. (Think of the students’ characterization of the attitude of the Oxford Plato scholar Jowett at the end of the nineteenth century: “I am the master of this college, and what

I know not is not knowledge.”) These pretensions define ‘metaphysics’ in a sense that is deservedly pejorative. Figures such as Bradley, to whom Russell reacted, and McTaggart, to whom Dewey did, are paradigmatic practitioners of this genre. When we talk of the “end of metaphysics,” whether that be in Nietzsche’s sense or in that of Dewey and Rorty, the point ought to be that we give up the idea of a vocabulary that is final in the sense of unrevisable and irreplaceable, a set of concepts and categories that can be counted on as fully adequate as we develop and our circumstances change. The spirit of these pragmatists is *experimental*, it is one in which *nothing* is immune from criticism and if need be revision. Endorsing this need *not* entail an end to philosophical theorizing, even systematic philosophical theorizing, of the sort the classical metaphysicians engaged in. It is only giving up certain pretensions concerning the authoritativeness of the results of such theorizing – a kind of authoritativeness that the pragmatist rightly does not admit *any* system of concepts as even potentially possessing. It is hard to deny that Hegel sometimes talks about his logic in this bad metaphysical way. But I do not think this attitude expresses his better wisdom, and we need not follow him in this regard in order to learn from him in others.

TESTA: A main point of your perspective consists in theorizing the existence of a kind of rationality you call expressive rationality, a rationality which constitutes at the same time the object and the methodological procedure of your philosophical enterprise. Expressive rationality seems in your view to be the most important form of human rationality and to be in some way presupposed by other forms of rationality (such as formal rationality, instrumental rationality...): expressive rationality consists in an articulating activity, an activity of making explicit what is implicit. How does Hegel contribute to our understanding of expressive rationality? How would you relate your concept of expressive rationality on the one hand to what Habermas understands as communicative rationality and, on the other hand, to what hermeneutics understands as interpretation (Gadamer) or articulation (Taylor)?

BRANDOM: I take from Hegel the idea of a rationalist expressivism. By ‘expressivism’ I mean the idea that discursive practice makes us special in enabling us to make *explicit*, in the form of something we can *say* or *think*, what otherwise remains *implicit* in what we do. Calling it ‘rationalist’ points to the crucial role of *inference*, of reasoning in the form of the relation between premise and conclusion, in determining what counts as explicit. At the base level, this means the theorist must explain what we have to be able to *do* (what sort of practical know-how we have to have) in order to be claiming or intending *that* something be so (a kind of knowing *that*). The inferentialist answer is: engaging in a social practice that has the structure of giving and asking for *reasons*. (This is how Hegel draws the line, difficult for representationalists, between the conceptual and the nonconceptual.) At the next level, I take from Hegel also the idea that logic is the organ of semantic self-consciousness – that is, that the

expressive role distinctive of logical vocabulary as such is to make explicit the inferential practices in virtue of which we can say or think anything at all. Using this sort of vocabulary – the sort he develops and motivates in his *Wissenschaftslogik* – lets us do consciously what we have all along already been doing unconsciously by applying concepts in judgment and action, namely *make* those concepts, simultaneously developing them and ourselves.

Finally, I take from Hegel his social-perspectival story about the nature of expression, of making something implicit explicit. For him the paradigm is the way in which something inner becomes manifest in the outer, the subject realized in the objective world, in intentional action. Where the tradition sees two different *things*, inner intentions and outer consequences of action, and has trouble explaining the relation between them, Hegel sees just one thing, a doing (*Tat*), and two sorts of specifications of it. The agent has authority over the specification under which the action was intentional (what she was trying to do), and the community has authority over the specifications of the consequences of the doing (what she in fact accomplished). Thus, Maria intentionally turned on the light, and unintentionally alerted the burglar. Both are things she actually did, seen from two different social perspectives.

I see this story as an alternative way of working out Habermas's core insights about the significance of the centrality of discursive practice to our being the sort of creatures we are. Hegel, too, as I understand him, sees us as social beings who undertake commitments (Habermas's "*Geltungsansprüche*") which essentially involve the propriety of demands for justification by reasons in principle addressed to each and every community member. Further, I think this story in principle underwrites the possibility Habermas sees for explicating moral and political practices, and the critical assessments of such practices by appealing theoretically to discursive practices at once as the model and as the context for those practices and assessments. Taylor is avowedly picking up Hegel's idea of expression, and I mean to be developing also what he sees there. The relation of these thoughts to Gadamer is a much more complicated case. I discuss how one might interpret his hermeneutic practice and theory in terms of my Hegelian theory of meaning in the third chapter of my book *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*.

TESTA: In your confrontation with Habermas, the question of normativity and how it should be understood plays a central role. Would it be correct to say that what differentiates your understanding of normativity from that of Habermas stems from a different approach to Hegel's criticism of Kant? If you don't share Habermas's point that there are some formal criteria of rationality that are presupposed even by the pragmatic institution of normativity (this is in fact one of the objections Habermas addresses to you), how do you think you could preserve a meaning of normativity that is also useful to make explicit the critical dimension of thought?

BRANDOM: Hegel was not only critical of Kant. He also claims to be following out Kant's most basic ideas more consistently and rigorously. Kant's insight into the essentially *normative* character of action and cognition is prime among them. Kant often makes this point by emphasizing the distinction between normative and factual issues – as when he accuses “the celebrated Mr. Locke” of offering “a mere physiology of the understanding”: an account of the *causal* antecedents of knowledge, when what is wanted is an account of its *justificatory* antecedents. Habermas sees as one of Kant's fundamental lessons the division of normative from factual issues. For him, one sort of inquiry is appropriate for settling factual issues, and quite another sort for settling normative ones. But when Habermas talks about norms, he has in mind first and foremost political and moral norms. He is rightly concerned to guard against the dangers of the idea that how we ought to act can be read off of how things just *are*, independently of our activities and discussions. For Hegel, as for Kant, all norms are *conceptual* norms – a form more basic than moral or political normativity. (With the American pragmatists, and by contrast to the German Idealists, I see a level of not-yet-conceptual normativity underneath that. The rational is, at the most basic level, the conceptual, and it makes sense for me to talk of normativity that is not yet conceptual, and so not yet rational.) The genus of conceptual normativity can be understood in terms of the liability of commitments and claims of authority to demands for justification by reasons – a thought Habermas, of course, wholeheartedly embraces. Hegel's holism (like Quine's, and for ultimately similar reasons) rules out factoring conceptual authority into a component due to our decisions and another component due to the way things are.

But not only is talk of facts itself already normative talk; in contrast to Habermas, I think it makes good sense to talk of normative facts. Facts are just true claims (not in the sense of *claimings*, which require us for their existence, but of what is *claimed*, which does not). For there are facts about what follows from what, and what is evidence for and against what other claims. Hence, on my Hegelian inferentialist conception, there can be facts about the contents of concepts. Further, with my colleague John McDowell (and others such as Gilbert Harman), I think that such facts can, at least under favorable circumstances, be directly observed. On my Sellarsian conception, the capacity to observe a certain range of facts is just the product of two in principle separable capacities: the ability reliably to respond differentially to the presence of such facts (as iron reliably rusts in the presence of water), and the ability to use in response a word that expresses a concept (that is, that plays a suitable role in undertaking commitments in a game of giving and asking for reasons). In this sense, we don't just hear the *sounds* others make; for the most part, we hear rather what they *mean*. For we can reliably respond not only to the sounds but to the meanings, and we respond to them *as* meanings by applying suitable semantic concepts – for instance, by straightway drawing an inference. In the

same sense, it is possible, at least sometimes, to *see* cruelty or kindness (and not just the bodily movements on which they supervene).

But to talk like this (which, like the other claims I have been making, requires supplementation and argument I cannot provide here) is not – as Habermas fears – to cut ourselves off from the possibility of criticism of conceptual norms (including those implicit in the use of ‘thick’ moral terms such as ‘cruel’). Creatures with the expressive resources of logical and normative vocabularies can criticize their normative commitments, including their factual claims, in the light of their connection to other commitments, including those we find ourselves with noninferentially by exercising observational capacities. There is no rational criticism from outside what is conceptually articulated, since only what can be claimed can justify what can be claimed. But among the conceptually articulated commitments in play are those that express our common intentions and decisions: those in which, to use un-Hegelian, un-Quinean language, what we make predominates over what we find.

Finally, there is room in this picture for a Hegelian version of a story of the general sort Habermas and Apel have recommended as a pragmatic successor to Kant’s way of grounding universalistic norms. For one may be able to find some kinds of commitments that are implicit in attributing and acknowledging conceptual commitments at all. For Hegel, these are commitments implicit in one’s *recognition* of others, that is, one’s treating them as agents and knowers able themselves to attribute and acknowledge commitments – a recognition of others that is a requirement and presupposition, if Hegel is right, of the possibility *self*-recognition.

TESTA: Richard Rorty has paid great attention, in the paper given in Venice, to your reading of Hegel in the context of the pragmatist tradition. On the other hand, Rorty seemed to argue at the end of his paper that your philosophy, if it has to be consistent with an anti-representationalist and anti-foundationalist standpoint, cannot aim at a philosophical foundation of his point of view. Only a pragmatic and political justification should be available for such a perspective, whereas what pragmatically justifies this point of view is that it contributes to the political progress of society. How do you react to such a move?

BRANDOM: It is true that my way of thinking does not achieve – nor does it aim at – offering some sort of foundational justification for Rorty’s pragmatist philosophical practice. As he makes clear, that is the last thing his approach needs. The normative inferentialist-expressivist approach to semantics that I recommend does, however, offer an alternative to the representationalist paradigm different from the one Rorty has developed (following the American pragmatists more closely, and Hegel less closely than I do). I do not, as he does, think that the proper critique of traditional representationalism requires us to give up its locutions, as opposed to its order of explanation. And I do think there is something other than its contribution to political progress that can justify a philosophical view – even a pragmatist one. For I think the

contribution such a view makes to our *self-consciousness* can speak for it. This, I think, is Hegel's view: what is *conceptually* progressive is what contributes to our self-conscious understanding of our cognitive and practical conceptual activity. Hegel's reading of the revolution of modernity was that such conceptual self-consciousness *was* (and always had been, throughout earlier transformations as well) politically and socially progressive. One need not think, as he perhaps did, that this is the *only* sort of progress there can be in politics to think that it is one important sort.

TESTA: Now I would like to come more specifically to some political aspects of your philosophy and also of your Hegel reading. Many contemporary thinkers, whose philosophy stems from an intersubjective paradigm and makes use of the Hegelian concept of recognition, have taken positions within the political debate concerning multiculturalism – I think, for example, of Taylor, Habermas, Fraser, Honneth. Until now you have given great importance to the Hegelian concept of recognition within the context of your semantics. How far could your concept of recognition be extended to treat the problems concerned with “politics of recognition”?

BRANDOM: I can offer only a rather general response. As I read Hegel, the recognitive structure of the conceptual as such underwrites a political model. Kant had the idea that freedom consists in constraint by norms. It is the meta-normative status of being able to commit oneself, to undertake responsibility. He took from Rousseau the idea that the difference between normative constraint and constraint by force is that genuinely normative force binds only those who acknowledge it *as* binding. Autonomy for him accordingly does not consist in lack of constraint by rules, but in being constrained only by rules one takes or treats *as* constraining. The content of the rule is *found*, but commitment to it is *made*. Its grip on one is secured by one's own attitudes. Hegel thought the notion of content presupposed by this dualistic conception was a fiction. His idea was that the content of norms, no less than their force, is a product of our activity. And he offered a *social* account of how it is that, if we determine the content of the norms, we can still intelligibly be said to be bound by them. His model was reciprocal recognition: it is up to me whom to recognize (say, as a good chess player). But it is then up to those I recognize whether or not I myself am recognized in turn (say, as a good chess player). I can undertake commitments and responsibilities, I have that authority, only insofar as it is attributed to me by those I recognize, in the sense of taking their attributions to me to be authoritative. The ‘moments’ of making and finding are bound up holistically with each other in a structure of reciprocal authority.

The paradigm of this sort of Hegelian recognitive structure of norms, and hence of freedom, is language. In speaking a language, I relinquish a certain sort of negative freedom: freedom *from* certain constraints. Only certain noises count. But in return I achieve, within the community of language users, a multifarious new positive freedom: freedom *to* do a whole range of new things.

For now I can, following the norms for word use, formulate an indefinite number of novel sentences, expressing novel possible claims, intentions, and aims, and so have a range of *thoughts* that were unavailable before. A dog cannot think that freedom is better than slavery, or persuasion better than compulsion. As Sellars says: “Clearly human beings could dispense with discourse, but only at the cost of having nothing to say.” Constraining oneself by *conceptual* norms transforms one into a vastly more capable sort of creature – a *spiritual* (*geistig*) creature, in Hegel’s terminology, a *free* one, in the idiom he shares with Kant. For what one becomes capable of is undertaking responsibilities and acknowledging authorities from which one was previously cut off by an otherwise unbridgeable gap.

From Hegel’s expressive point of view, language is the paradigm of an emancipatory social institution: one that constrains only to empower. And, as Kant envisioned, self-constraint, undertaking commitments, and acknowledging responsibilities – that is, *freedom* in his distinctive normative sense – is the form of what it enables. Our political practices and institutions must, first, not distort or cripple this discursive freedom. Second, they should extend it to our collective doings, including institution-making. Third, they should aspire to build on our discursive capacities further practices that share their expressive virtues: that each constraint they impose as a limitation on negative freedom repay itself many times over in the extension of our positive freedom. Our political practices should not just make use of our discursive abilities, they should themselves be language-like.

Just how this constellation of abstract ideas about discursive practice, freedom, and normative political theory might help to guide our thinking about more concrete issues is, of course, a complicated matter. Hegel’s own track record in applying them is sufficiently checkered to counsel modesty.

TESTA: According to you, Hegel’s pragmatism lets us understand how norms are socially instituted and, as you have recently argued in an interview, that there is no natural unity of normative conditions: normative relations could be individuated, depending on the unity of reference we choose, at the level of moral relation between individuals, at the level of relations between social classes, genders, races, cultural communities. Normative relations that satisfy criteria of justice along a certain unity of reference (for example, classes) could reveal themselves to be unjust if judged in terms of gender relations. Now, how are we to establish which unity is the relevant one to judge if some relations satisfy criteria of justice? In other words, do you think that the individuation of the relevant normative relations is merely an historical fact, depending on historical-moral progress, or do you think that some formal criteria could be at our disposal to make such a choice? In this perspective, don’t you think that, as Axel Honneth has argued, struggles for recognition could constitute the logical infrastructure of moral progress of society, that struggles for recognition are what historically individuates the unity of reference that is relevant, at a given

moment, to individuate which normative relations have to be judged along criteria of justice?

BRANDOM: The question as put presupposes that in any given situation there is such a thing as *the* way of individuating the units of responsibility and authority that matters for assessments of justice. But they *all* matter. By exercising our discursive expressive capacities, we keep discovering new descriptions, new ways of describing and individuating potentially morally and politically significant units, and hence new forms of possible and actual injustice. This is progress. Marx's idea (in the 1844 manuscripts) that exchanges that were symmetrically unforced and consensual when considered between individuals could nonetheless show themselves to be asymmetric and coercive when the classes involved were considered, is the form of a general experience of modernity. Rorty has argued, provocatively, that our social experiments should be driven by fear rather than hope. Part of what he means is that we must always look for new redescriptions of our interactions that may reveal that we are still making versions of old mistakes. So, for instance, thinking about the lessons we have learned (theoretically, at least) about injustice among races helped us begin to think about injustices that show up only when we think in terms of genders. We may by analogy wonder whether the relation between time slices of the same people – say, as pensioners (who in the US now collectively own more than half of all corporate stocks) and as younger working people – stand in a proper recognitive equilibrium of reciprocal authority and responsibility. Thinking about restrictions on the voting franchise that appear in retrospect as reflections of asymmetric power relations rather than symmetric recognitive ones should lead us to query the rational credentials of our current withholding of the franchise from, say, teenagers and resident non-citizens.

The question about the status of the choice of relevant criteria of normative individuation is, I think, asking about how we should think about *collisions* between the demands of justice from the different points of view of two or more ways of picking out subjects of authority and responsibility – say, individuals and ethnic groups. This is one of the places where the ontological temptation Habermas is so sensitive to is most tempting. Thus, one side may want to say, for instance, that the issue is settled by an individualist ontology that is nominalist about other modes of individuation: all that *really* exists (and so is available to be a morally or politically relevant unit with respect to which to assess injustice) is individual human beings, and all other groupings are reducible to and definable in terms of them. Or, equally, as with some strains of Marxism, that the only units that matter for normative assessments of domination are economic classes, so gender cannot be important for justice. But these are exactly the sorts of issues that should not be presumed to be settled by some antecedent ontology. These are political matters *par excellence*. That is, they are to be negotiated through actual recognitive processes and practices. What is wrong – for Rorty and Habermas, and in fact – with appeals to ontology or metaphysics

in the normative realm is when they pretend to settle genuinely political issues in advance, by reading off an answer about what we should do and who we should be from views about how things just *are*, apart from our activities, practices, and decisions. But Hegel's recognitive metaphysics, is, as he claims, a metaphysics of *freedom*. That is, as I read him, thinking of authority and responsibility, of normativity in general, in recognitive terms returns the responsibility for the content of our norms to *us*. This is genuine Kantian autonomy, but now read in a social key. Further, in the expressive form I recommend, which extends the recognitive model by appealing to the analogy with language – another metaphysical move – the whole point of political institutions (insofar as this pragmatist appeal makes sense for the framework within which alone ends can be pursued) is the positive expressive power of participants. And this crucially includes the expressive power to redescribe those participants. They are the ones whose right to recognitive negotiation of the norms genuinely binding on them (the residuum of which is then recognizable as a matter of power, rather than authority) *is* metaphysically guaranteed – in the sense that this is what normative authority *means* as construed in the recognitive idiom. So there is a metaphysics behind this view: a distinctive kind of social understanding of the normative as such, of authority as instituted by reciprocal recognition. But it is this very metaphysics that turns substantive issues of justice back over to us to settle, by actual processes of recognitive negotiation.

TESTA: I would like to end this interview coming more directly to the problem concerning the relation between normative thinking, historical normativity, and justice. How is it possible to judge some normative relations as just or unjust? Your Hegelian concept of normativity, understood as socially and historically instituted, seems to rule out a Kantian approach to justice such as Rawls's normative theory of justice. Do you share contextualist views of justice, according to which criteria of justice – as many have argued against Rawls, from Walzer to the communitarian thinkers – cannot be specified outside social contexts? Are the social relations that institute normativity the same relations that institute the criteria of justice that are to be used to judge and criticize such normative relations? Or do you think that a universalistic concept of justice, even though not Kantian-Rawlsian, could be articulated within your paradigm?

BRANDOM: The dilemma arises because of the collision of two criteria of adequacy for an account of the critical enterprise. On the one hand, the standards by which we criticize our conduct must somehow be *justifiable*. It is hard to see how that can be achieved if they are cut off from what we currently take to be good reasons. To be criticisms for us, they must somehow get a grip on us we can acknowledge. On the other hand, if the grip is to be efficacious, if criticism is to be able to oblige us to *change* what we are doing – in particular, to change what we take to be good reasons – then the standpoint from which it is issued must in an important sense be independent of the practices it stands in

judgment over. Historicism offers concrete justifications of standards that are motivated by and intelligible in terms of the actual course of historical experience in which the standards were developed and have been applied. But just for that reason, the issue arises of how there can be sufficient distance between the criticizing conduct and the criticized conduct for there to be genuine purchase of the one on the other. Universalism of the broadly Kantian sort secures that independence by its appeal to abstract principles, which serve as an Archimedean point outside the whole sequence of particular practices for which it serves as a tribunal. But just for that reason, the issue arises of how those principles are to be justified.

For as rational creatures, Hegel thinks, we have a standing obligation – a commitment implicit in our very practice of giving and asking for reasons, hence of meaning or thinking anything – to *make* our practices reasonable. Doing that is finding a way concretely to *take* them to be reasonable. And doing *that* is rationally reconstructing the tradition of applying our concepts in judgment and action and noting and resolving the inevitable resulting incompatibilities by finding an *expressively progressive* trajectory through it. (This is what Hegel himself aims to do for the whole history of thought.) It is to select and arrange episodes of conceptual revision so that they take the form of the cumulative making explicit to ourselves of normative connections among the concepts that appear, from this reconstructed point of view, as having been all along already implicit in our discursive and critical practice. The model I find most helpful is that of judges applying Anglo-American common law. In contrast to positive or statutory law, in the common law there is no originally authoritative statement of a principle to guide judges. *All* there is to go on is the tradition constituted by previously decided cases, in which legal concepts have been taken by other judges to apply or not to apply in determinate circumstances. The current judge's decision about the case before her is authoritative only insofar as it can be justified by appeal to a principle she finds implicit in the practice of her predecessors in the cases she treats as precedential. She must *make* the tradition she inherits rational by finding a way concretely to *take* it as rational: as the gradual unfolding into the explicit light of day of principles that were all along implicit (on her telling) in the practice of resolving disputes about the applicability of the concepts in question. Warrant for criticism is secured by that concrete historical experience. Sufficient independence of criticizing principle from criticized practice is secured by the obligation to be able to tell a certain kind of Whiggish retrospective story about the tradition: to render it as the cumulative revelation of a universal principle ("the march of reason through history").

Of course, whether this grand scheme can be made to do the sort of work Hegel wants it to do – to rescue us from the sort of theoretical oscillation you sketch – is a big question. But Hegel is giving us a rich, intricate, and promising set of conceptual tools to use in making the attempt. In the end, what is

supposed to give us sufficient distance from our own current practices to criticize them beyond the tools they immediately provide for that purpose (internal criticism) is philosophical theory, which rationally reconstructs the tradition that temporarily culminates in those practices, producing a metaphysical idiom (comprehensive, controlled, discriminating progressive from regressive elements in the development of that idiom) that lets us talk about dimensions of expressive freedom that we can aim to nurture and promote, and can see as thwarted or perverted by various of our contemporary practices. This is the sense in which we can be at once both inside and outside of our own global practices. It is the mission of systematic philosophical theory that is metaphysical in a non-pejorative sense. This emancipatory aim of its high metaphysical theory is in my view what warrants Heidegger's talk of "the dignity and spiritual greatness of German Idealism."

NOTE

This interview, conducted at the conference "Contemporary Hegel: La ricezione americana di Hegel a confronto con la tradizione europea" in Venice, May 2001, was published in Italian translation in *Iride* 34 (December 2001): 575–98.