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Beyond Brandom's Pragmatism

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I begin with a risky complaint that I myself interpret as an unlikely clue to a decisive counterargument that must remain inchoate. The target of this unfair maneuver is Robert Brandom's inferentialism read as an expression of what he calls “analytic pragmatism,” largely inspired (as he himself says, in Saying and Doing) by the “later Wittgenstein,” whose essential thesis he explicitly repudiates in the same pages.¹ My complaint, however, begins at a greater remove. Deflationism, I say, by which I mean a reductive semantic or conceptual policy of extreme economy, whose purpose is to persuade us that we can diminish or eliminate altogether certain seemingly robust doctrines by demonstrating that the most salient functions of their would-be verbal markers, canonically thought to designate substantive or predicative or syntactic or similar distinctions we cannot do without – deflationism, say -- we can indeed do without without serious, possibly without any philosophical loss.

The master of this method is undoubtedly Paul Horwich, whose deflationary account of truth stands as a model of clarity and courage. Now, though I much admire Horwich and regret complaining about his best argument, what he himself calls “minimalism” (effectively: his eliminativist strategies that depend on linguistico-conceptual thought-experiments, as we might say) is, finally, philosophically evasive. The trouble is that, although (as I see matters) Horwich's argument is evasive, it cannot be

shown to be evasive with the same sort of precision with which Horwich is able to demonstrate (by his own lights) that the minimalist deflation of “true” succeeds.

The reason I must fail, I suggest, rests with the fairly obvious complaint (which Horwich does not share of course) that his entire method falls short of testing whether (say) what we standardly have in mind in speaking of the “realist” or “realist-affirming” or “realist-disclosing” role of “true” has been effectively captured by his deflationary paraphrases, or could ever be shown to have succeeded by the strategic maneuvers he employs, or can be shown to be superfluous or needless. I confess I'm tempted to say that that can never be done: that the verdict is always presupposed or added as a matter of larger conviction that can never be managed in the way the deflationary argument itself is drawn up. But I'm willing to bite my tongue on the excessive zeal of my own use of the term “never,” if Horwich will bite his tongue for the opposite reason.

I simply don't know of any mode of argument sufficiently like the distinctive rigor deflationism claims for itself that could possibly confirm the seemingly higher-order conviction that holds that deflationism is, or is not, the right way to settle the question. I warn you in advance that I mean to use the same argument against Brandom. Before I proceed further, however, I trust you will concede to yourself that I have indeed redeemed the extravagance of my opening sentence. Because if you agree, there we stand together in acknowledging that deflationism cannot be autonomous, is best viewed as a subaltern strategy of argument subject to the executive commitments of an ampler philosophy – pragmatism, reductive materialism, phenomenology, or something of the kind – whose own advantage may never quite yield to disciplinary testing of the fine-grained sort deflationism displays.

I am myself prepared to admit that these higher-order disputes are unlikely to free themselves completely from the deepest, largely inchoate (but naggingly compelling) “guesses” at the riddle of the intelligible world; hence, that what I've called the evasion of Horwich's otherwise splendid deflation

of “true” remains infected by just such quasi-instinctual guesses, which we simply have not yet found a way of disarming by extensions of our best analytic strategies. To help you understand my meaning here, let me add that I take these last remarks to be a gloss on the deepest reading of what Charles Peirce calls “abduction,” which has no formal method of its own, or “Critique” in the Kantian sense. It's entirely possible that these guesses would, if formulated explicitly as claims, include incompatible options.

It's my conviction that the line of argument we know as “naturalism,” on a reading much like that regarding “deflationism,” is, also, usually, a subsidiary or subaltern mode of analysis, subject to the executive vagaries of so-called “higher” disputes of what to understand by pragmatism, materialism, phenomenology, and similar global visions. You may confirm this easily by reviewing, for instance, the naturalism of the Australian philosopher, Huw Price (who is both an ally and a critic of Brandom's position) or, notoriously, Daniel Dennett's reading of mind and self.² Under circumstances not difficult to imagine, nearly every strong vision of how to proceed in mounting the best arguments against one's rivals may be read as dependent in a similar way – some more, some less resiliently – which, I believe, signifies that any provisionally higher-order vision (there being no fixed disjunction among candidate theories of either sort) tends to be holist; so that a similar complaint against Brandom's inferentialism, or (say) against Michael Dummett's elevation of “semantic analysis” over metaphysics may reasonably charge that the presumptive method in question demonstrably scants important lines of inquiry that cannot be shown to be merely subsidiary to its own characteristic work.³ Along these same lines, it helps to remind ourselves that it's quite common to encounter versions of naturalism that are also distinctly wedded to deflationary policies.

I've now sketched a general strategy for the purposes of my argument against Brandom. Let me turn, therefore, to the actual argument, by comparing Horwich's explicit deflation of truth with

Brandom's quasi-deflationary treatment of pragmatic inference. If I can make a plausible case through such a seemingly unlikely detour, your surprise may make you more receptive to the conclusions I should like to draw from the entire maneuver. If it succeeds, it will be seen to yield a very clean sort of counterargument.

Nothing could be simpler than to provide Horwich's memorable summary of his own position; it's gratifyingly brief and candid. He says:

Deflationism begins by emphasizing the fact that no matter what theory of truth we might espouse professionally, we are all prepared to infer

The belief that snow is white is true
from

Snow is white

and vice versa. And, more generally, we all accept instances of the “truth schemata”

The belief (conjecture, assertion, supposition...) that p is true iff p.

But instead of taking the traditional view that an analysis of truth still needs to be given – a reductive account deeper than the truth schemata, which will explain why we accept their instances – the deflationist maintains that, since our commitment to these schemata accounts for everything we do with the truth predicate, we can suppose that they implicitly define it.⁴

When I say that Horwich is evasive here, I mean, very simply, that he cannot derive his own deflationary verdict merely from an inspection of the inferences and the instances of the “truth schemata” that he mentions; that he cannot answer objections to his own account by way of further autonomous or purely logical or semantic or linguistico-conceptual resources; that the usual objections (pragmatist objections, for instance) involve substantive concerns (often characterized, without

prejudice, as metaphysical or epistemological or practical) that are not normally taken to be merely logical, semantic, or linguistic, in the way Horwich himself proceeds; and that he cannot show that his own procedure is suitably autonomous, adequate to resolving pertinent objections, or independent of the higher-order convictions I've mentioned before (and Horwich himself seems to believe can only produce redundancy). All one need suppose is that different semantic analyses (and the like) are bound to be produced from the vantage of different metaphysical or epistemological (or practical) convictions. That's not to defeat "deflation" wherever it may be deemed defensible, but it is to admit its problematic and divisive possibilities – and the prospect that we may not be able to come to any uniquely convincing resolution by canvassing philosophical arguments restricted in the way deflationary, naturalistic, semantic, and similar analytic policies are.

Now, it turns out to be remarkably easy (and instructive) to cite a brief summary by Brandom, of his own program of inferentialism, that, on its face, is very nearly the mate of Horwich's summary of his account of truth. I think it invites much the same verdict and for very similar reasons. It's not quite a perfect fit because, as I read Brandom, his summary makes incipient concessions to the opponents of deflationism that may reasonably be turned against his own deflationary tendency. It's for this reason that I characterize Brandom as holding a quasi-deflationary view, a milder (perhaps more equivocal) sort of deflationism that already means to accommodate its own opponents's usual objections. In fact, Huw Price seems to take pointed notice of Brandom's slippage,⁵ which he views as a defect. Let's see.

Brandom's enabling argument (regarding what he rather daringly calls his "semantic logicism"⁶: the key to the corrective challenge of his inferentialism and its extension into pragmatic contexts of discourse) is noticeably denser and more quarrelsome than Horwich's paradigm. But then, Brandom at once adds a telling, distinctly prudent, concession at the very start of his account that consigns his entire effort to a limbo. As far as I know, Brandom nowhere overrides the limitation he places on his

very modest deflationism: it's a concession that may easily be taken to support an entire passage of ungenerous readings of what he's up to. Read strictly, for instance, it seems to signify that the success of inferentialism is little more (or may be little more, or cannot be shown to be more) than, say, what, charitably, is meant in speaking loosely of some machine program's "pass[ing] the Turing test."

No one seriously doubts that it's negligibly easy to claim that all sorts of computer programs pass as "language-users" without their ever "understanding" what it is to speak "intelligently." In fact, it's never really clear whether Brandom supposes that his own models are in striking distance of meeting conditions that could actually count as a pragmatist notion of human competence. I must alert you, therefore, to Brandom's rather casual usage: he speaks quite sanguinely of the pragmatist standing of his entire undertaking and then again of the pragmatic dimension of the specific "meaning-use analysis" he provides in Chapter 3 of Between Saying and Doing. The two expressions, however, are not easily interchangeable, without risking a trivializing equivocation. For instance, I'm quite ready to agree that Brandom has already clarified important features of what, in the common idiom of semantic analysis, is labeled language's "pragmatic" dimension – as in respects touched on in Charles Morris's early studies of language, which Brandom seems to have come to know partly at least through the work of Ruth Millikan.⁷ But that sense of "pragmatic" has long ago been detached from any now-distinctive focus on pragmatism as a full scale philosophy.

Of course, it's part of Brandom's effort to reconnect the two – through inferentialism. But the linkage remains unclear. Because the very scope of the "pragmatic" extension of Brandom's "meaning-use analysis," the nerve of his inferentialism (which he claims to have drawn chiefly from Wittgenstein's Investigations), itself depends on whether he has actually captured important elements of a full-service pragmatist account of human discourse within the terms of his would-be pragmatic extension. In perfect candor, I must say that what we have in the long-awaited

answer, in Between Saying and Doing, is still, largely, a promissory note. Of course, the matter is open to substantive dispute. Nevertheless, I believe the concession I mentioned a moment ago signals Brandom's willingness to concede something of this important worry. Certainly his abrupt rejection of Wittgenstein's account of language games is an utterly unexplained mystery; and certainly Wittgenstein's reflections on "following a rule" and the puzzles involving continuing an arithmetic series support well enough a quite severe appraisal of Brandom's counterproposal. The fact remains, as far as I can make out, that Brandom nowhere takes up Wittgenstein's implicit challenge to his own claims, or any specimens of Wittgenstein's very careful gauge that would require an answer.

Here, then, is what I take to be the gist of Brandom's brief regarding what he believes he's provided in the somewhat technical semantic/pragmatic proposals of Between Saying and Doing. He says, there, that his model of "meaning-use analysis" requires his providing accounts of two sorts: one regarding "what we must do in order to count as saying something" (in effect, composing one vocabulary); the other characterizing a "vocabulary that one can use to say what it is one must do to be doing something" (for instance, "to be saying something else"). We bring these vocabularies together to form what Brandom calls the "pragmatic metavocabulary' relation."⁸ That is the minimal key to what Brandom means by "pragmatic" in the broadly semantic sense; but it is also, of course, the focus of the would-be innovation (inferentialism), by which Brandom means to redirect pragmatism itself (a fortiori, analytic philosophy) along the lines he recommends. If he fails in this inventive practice, when applied to the most important problematic sorts of pragmatist cases, then (I think we may say) his own plan for redirecting pragmatism along significantly improved and strengthened lines will be rightly perceived to have been a retrograde effort at reviving a semantic/pragmatic project generally thought to be impossible: that is, literally mapping (algorithmically or in rule-bound ways), rather than merely modeling (however loosely or narrowly, for whatever practical advantage may be wanted) the

inferential regularities that the so-called “pragmatic metavocabulary' relation” is meant to capture. A true mapping is what we need (and seems to be promised): something to compare for instance with the exemplary claims of Kant and Frege, whom Brandom admires and more than suggests he's following.

Brandom adds at once, however, the following telltale qualification to his proposal (cited above) regarding the construction of a pragmatic metavocabulary: “I have suggested [he says] that this relation is most illuminating when the pragmatic metavocabulary is demonstrably expressively weaker than the vocabulary for which it is a pragmatic metavocabulary. This is what I have called 'pragmatic expressive bootstrapping', in the strict sense.” (He mentions illustrations drawn from Noam Chomsky's and Huw Price's studies involving, respectively, syntactic and normative contexts, in which “weaker... vocabularies are...sufficient to deploy (produce and recognize) expressively stronger...vocabularies.”⁹

In fact, in representing a specifically syntactic instance of “pragmatic expressive bootstrapping,” Brandom actually formulates his rule in a way (I daresay) that deliberately conforms with, but then falls short of, Horwich's unqualified (minimalist) deflationism. (Brandom does not mention deflationism in his book, Between Saying and Doing, but he had encountered Horwich, in Prague, in 2007, as a formal commentator on one of the lectures he gave there, which precede the book. He mentions Horwich, in this connection, in the Preface.) I also find the following explicative line regarding pragmatic metavocabularies to have “made [perfectly] explicit” the extremely strong sense in which Brandom would have us believe he's adhering to Kant's or Frege's sort of rigor; he says, unguardedly:

we can prove that one vocabulary that is expressively weaker than another can nevertheless serve as an adequate pragmatic metavocabulary for that stronger vocabulary. That is, even though one cannot say in the weaker vocabulary everything that can be said in the stronger one, one can still say in the weaker one everything

that one needs to be able to do in order to deploy the stronger one.¹⁰

This clarifies exceptionally well (perhaps trivially, when read in the strictest way) what Brandom means by vocabularies that are expressively weaker and stronger. But you cannot fail to see that Brandom's carefully crafted expression, “everything that one needs to be able to do in order to deploy the stronger one” is a deliberately and cannily weakened version of Horwich's own unrestricted deflationist formulation. It explains precisely why I treat Brandom as a “quasi-deflationist.” He needs the stronger vocabulary in order to make sense of the presumed adequacy of the weaker metavocabulary, especially since he admits a discrepancy, which he takes to be benign. But then, we see at once that Brandom's revision exposes a lacuna in his own argument, which, serendipitously, betrays the matching lacuna in Horwich's argument.

Brandom's phrasing, “everything that one needs” and so on, comes into play, we realize, only after he has demonstrated the adequacy of the paraphrastic method of his “pragmatic vocabulary.” That's to say, once we agree to the adequacy of the metavocabulary, we will have agreed that Brandom has provided “everything that one needs” (for the occasion); but such a defense surely risks triviality. Brandom demonstrates that if we agree to analyze pragmatic contexts of discourse in the way he proposes – for instance, by employing the strategy he calls “deontic scorekeeping,” in Making It Explicit,¹¹ which I take to be the human analog of the Turing test's rationale: one use applied to “weak” computer programs conceded to capture “all that's needed” of some “stronger” human vocabulary; another (the outcome of deontic scorekeeping) applied to “weak” readings of what (for some unexplained reason) humans are said to be saying and doing in their own world – then Brandom will have succeeded in mapping part of the pragmatist reading of our specimen cases (or, will have succeeded in modeling part of what he already believes can be mapped in fully pragmatist contexts).

In effect, Brandom rather neatly outflanks Hume's argument about the conceptual divide

between descriptive and normative discourse, which marks him as committed to an essential doctrine (so we may say) that Kant, Frege, Sellars, and McDowell share. Even so, it needs also to be noted that the adjustment is open to a great many different readings of what a norm or normativity is and how we may reasonably be said to comply in with the correct use of language – or with regard to understanding the inferential aspects of saying anything. But that, of course, is the point of Wittgenstein’s challenge. There is no ineluctable inference from the admission of language’s having a normative cast to the need to subsume the correct use of language under explicit and determinate rules, rules said to be necessary or sufficient for such use and known sufficiently well (to include “all that we need to know”) in order to use language correctly. Brandom seems to be persuaded – he certainly provides no argument – that the admission of inferentialist constraints on our use of language entails or justifies the imposition of specifically algorithmic rules. I take that to be an obvious petitio and, in any event, completely indemonstrable. One may not agree with Wittgenstein’s treatment of rules governing the use of language; but it’s not preposterous or implausible – or incoherent – and it definitely contests Brandom’s confidence that he’s got it right. I’d say he’s got the cart before the horse.

We don’t really know what, beyond or apart from, the pragmatic aspects of Brandom’s intended formal analysis of speech and behavior, actually collects specifically pragmatist concerns (say, in continuing an arithmetic series, or in using the word “gold”). For instance, Brandom speaks quite straightforwardly of deontic scorekeeping; but the rigors of the deontic remain hostage to the diverse contingencies of whatever he means by the “giving and asking for reasons.” You have only to recall that Wittgenstein compellingly shows how seemingly sincere compliance with ordinary instructions may actually baffle inferential habits along, say, lines of analysis Brandom might well favor. The trouble is, Brandom never (as far as I know) takes up Wittgenstein’s immensely instructive specimens, though they must be both “pragmatist” and “pragmatic” on his own reading. They seem to be

unconditionally inhospitable to “deontic scorekeeping”: indeed, they show a need for very different procedures involving intractable idiosyncrasy.

I don't doubt that deontic scorekeeping may serve, some ad hoc, even ordinarily extraneous interests, regarding which, exact mapping may not count at all. Recall that Chomsky's conception of universal grammar, which is, in its way, an exemplary model of linguistic inferentialism, remains largely if not completely indifferent to the historical complexities of actual speech and (it seems) to the inseparability of syntax and semantics. More than that, Chomsky himself has come rather late to admitting that so-called universal grammar could not possibly be an autonomous system entirely independent of the informalities of culturally diverse languages, whose classificatory idiosyncrasies it must share.¹² What were the normative necessities on which universal grammar was thought to have been validated?

Brandom's “scorekeeping model” seems to fit, if it fits at all, only the most elementary, ritualized, formulaic, repetitive “social practices” (or “parts” or “aspects” of such practices) we can name. For instance, I don't find it at all unlikely that discursive practices exhibit normative features without ever yielding any reliably specific or strict fine-grained norms of any kind. Even grammar, the completing of sentences, the very logic of discursive order (as in ordinary conversation) seems unbelievably idiosyncratic. It's possible that inferentialism's best contribution is reconstructive (rather than descriptive or descriptive of implicit norms), keyed to one's shifting interests, opportunistic, an interpretive and orienting heuristic of practical or personal value, a way of modeling ad hoc regularities that might never be confirmed by “practices of giving and asking for reasons.”¹³ What are the antecedent reasons for supposing that the “pragmatic” dimension of discursive life is rule-governed or algorithmic in any sense that would fit Brandom's attempt to extend the familiar logical canons congruently? Wittgenstein shows, unmistakably, that norms and rules may be quite separate matters

and that rules may not be at all what we suppose them to be, if (let us say, with Brandom) we supposed we could get clear about norms and rules by consulting Kant or Frege or Sellars. They themselves hold very different views; and Wittgenstein, of course, is the implacable opponent of all three (whether he's read them or not). He makes it perfectly clear that although it's correct enough to say we follow the “rules” of our language and form of life, it's just as true to say that we cannot – ever – explicitly state what those rules must be. They are not what Brandom requires if his “pragmatic” metavocabularies are fitted to actual use.¹⁴

Now, if this last argument holds, then it remains unclear what we (or Brandom) may rightly take to be the logical or conceptual standing of the would-be inferential necessities (normative necessities) said to govern Brandom's model of “pragmatic expressive metavocabularies.” The question here is not one of merely legitimating the use of modal or normative or intentional concepts, as by refuting the “empirical” objections of a Hume or a Quine. Brandom is understandably exercised by such objections: they take up nearly the whole of his explicative energies in Chapter 4 of Between Saying and Doing, in reclaiming the legitimacy of speaking of necessity and normativity vis-à-vis pragmatic inference. Here, as I say, he explicitly follows Kant, Frege, and Sellars in restoring the relevance of speaking of what is conceptually necessary and has normative import in any adequate explication of empirical (specifically, pragmatically-qualified) inference. He speaks warmly of “the modal revolution” he takes himself to be a part of. I have no objection to any such adjustment, though I'm not persuaded his three mentors are reliable enough in their own accounts to be trusted here. But that's not the issue. The issue is whether Brandom can demonstrate (or has already demonstrated) that his paraphrastic model of inferential linkages said to be “pragmatic” (in the technical sense admitted) or in some more demanding “pragmatist” sense (seemingly promised) can be expected to fulfill his actual claims. I say he fails.

Let me, then, end this brief with a statement of Brandom's that comes as close as possible to his bottom line:

My overall claim [he says] is that both the modal and the normative Kant-Sellars theses are true. In order to be able to talk at all, to make claims and inferences, one must already know how to do everything necessary in principle (in the precise sense of “in principle” given by the notion of algorithmic elaboration) to deploy alethic modal and deontic normative vocabulary.¹⁵

If, once again, we accept Wittgenstein's objections to anything like a Kantian or Fregean or Sellarsian reading of necessity and normativity in the context of “following a rule” and, therefore, of explicating inferential linkages in ordinary speech, among apt speakers, we cannot fail to see that Brandom's idea of “algorithmic elaboration” has nowhere been established as necessary. It seems to be a petitio. It cannot possibly be relied on in the vast expanse of “pragmatic” and “pragmatist” contexts of use; although if we distinguish carefully between these two notions, then, trivially, if such “elaboration” already obtains in canonical logic, then it will surely obtain in “pragmatic” contexts that are hardly different from what is already systematized in standard logics (as well as with carefully selected semantic applications). Otherwise, without prejudice to “the modal revolution,” if Brandom's paraphrastic program hews essentially to the intention (say) of AI-simulation, than I admit he's home free. But what would be the point?