

НАУКОВЕ ЖИТТЯ

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THE COMMITMENT TO INFERENCE

A Conversation with Robert B. Brandom

Conducted by Ivan Ivashchenko on July 16th, 18th, and 23rd 2019 at the University of Pittsburgh¹

I. Recollecting the mighty dead

Ivan Ivashchenko (hereafter – II): In the first chapter of his most Kantian work – *Science and Metaphysics* – Sellars famously claims that “history of philosophy is the lingua franca which makes communication between philosophers ... possible” and that “philosophy without the history of philosophy, if not empty or blind, is at least dumb.”² Following this idea, which at that time was probably not as obvious in the anglophone context as it is now, I would like to start with the historical background of your philosophy. Even though one of the pivotal figures in your version of inferentialism is Sellars, I want to begin with the role your doctoral adviser Richard Rorty has played in your intellectual career. Needless to mention, the crucial importance of Sellars’s most renowned and groundbreaking essay *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* in Rorty’s opus magnum *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. However, you both seem to have developed his original insights in quite different directions.

Robert Brandom (hereafter – RB): Rorty’s figure was a paradigm for me of how to read the history of philosophy philosophically rather than in an antiquarian or a philological sort of way. His interest in the history of philosophy was not merely scholarly but a matter of how one thought philosophically. So, Rorty was a master of what I have come to think of as the Hegelian literary genre of recollection, *Erinnerung* as Hegel’s term, whereby one rationally reconstructs a past into a history or something that has a shape of the tradition, a story that is expressively progressive, so one rationally reconstructs a tradition as a gradual emergence in explicitness of lessons that turned out to have been implicit all along. One learns from each episode in the recollected story some lessons that can be applied to contemporary thinking. So, recollecting the mighty dead, I mean, philosophical dead, in this

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² [Sellars 1992: 9].

way, is a form of philosophical thinking about philosophical issues of contemporary interest and importance.

II: As I mentioned, you and Rorty have developed Sellars's original insights in different directions. How could you put the difference between yours and Rorty's versions of antirepresentationalism?

RB: Rorty in the *PMN* describes an impasse that he believes contemporary philosophy has come to. He considers that impasse as having been written in the stars, as having been essentially inevitable since the time of Descartes. He sees the deplorable situation we have got ourselves into as simply the result of the unraveling of the set of ideas that Descartes put into place. And Rorty's own view is that the only way forward is to give up the most fundamental of those ideas, which are the Cartesian concept of experience and the concept of representation. His own constructive suggestion is pragmatism, a view that he understands as doing without both of those notions. He acknowledges, of course, that his pragmatist hero Dewey made great news of a concept of experience downstream from Hegel's use of experience as *Erfahrung* rather than as Cartesian *Erlebnis*. That is experience as the sort of thing of which a job advertisement says "three years experience necessary" rather than experience in the sense of the occurrence of self-intimating episodes, mental events that were at the center of Descartes's conception of *pensée*. However, Rorty's view was that that notion of experience in Dewey did no serious intellectual work for him. He described it as an incantatory device that Dewey used to blur every conceivable distinction, and Rorty thought that it was too dangerous to use that term for a central concept in pragmatism. The baggage that the notion of experience carried from the Cartesian tradition was just too intimately bound up with it to be abandoned by the side of the road. The only thing we can do is simply cease using this word. And he thought the same thing about representation that this was a concept that Descartes invented in order to understand the relation of the new science to the world it was an understanding of. It is a more abstract replacement notion for the idea that appearance resembles the reality of which it is an appearance. He could not use the old notion developed by the ancient Greeks, by Plato in his way, the notion of ideas, and by Aristotle in his way in the notion of forms as what is shared between appearance and reality. That became outmoded with the rise of the new science. Copernicus said the reality whose appearance was the stationary Earth was a spinning Earth, and the reality that corresponded to the moving arch of the Sun was the stationary Sun. Galileo said that the best appearance of the reality that is a period of time was the length of a line, that the most insightful appearance of the acceleration of a falling object was the area of a triangle. There just was not any resemblance there at all. Descartes, inspired by his own discovery of the relation of algebra to geometry, invented this much more abstract notion of representation, and it did good work for two to three hundred years, but Rorty saw it as unraveling.

I agreed with Rorty that the Cartesian notion of experience was broken-backed and could do no useful work for us anymore. The notion of representation, however, I thought was too important simply to abandon, and when I reject representationalism, I do not reject the concept of representation. I object to giving it a fundamental explanatory role. I think the notion of representation is something that we should seek to explain rather than to appeal to as basically an unexplained explainer. Rorty appreciated the prospects of such an explanatory reversal with respect to representation in my case, taking the notion of inference to be prior in the order of explanation to that of representation. But he still thought the concept was simply too dangerous to be kept around and should just be put out of its misery.

II: Ok, let us move back to Sellars. You are not only one of the first philosophers who were directly influenced by Sellars's attack on what he called the Myth of the Given (hereafter – the Myth) and by his anti-foundationalist epistemological program, but you are also one of the first commentators on Sellars's *EPM* where he introduced that influential metaphor. And let us keep in mind Rorty's words in the Introduction to *PMN* where he says, "It is ... metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions."³ Do you recall your first reading of *EPM* and your first impression of the Myth? Where were you in your research at that time?

RB: Well, I was first exposed to the essay as an undergraduate philosophy student at Yale, and that is where Sellars had taught before he was stolen away by the University of Pittsburgh. So Sellars was still revered and taught at Yale. It was the accident of my being an undergraduate at his former department and made that an attractive conversation in that department in a way that it was not in most American philosophy departments. I was fascinated with it, but there was a great deal I did not understand about it. I was fortunate at that time to read an essay that Rorty had written about it. And when I decided to go to graduate school in philosophy, I was sufficiently impressed that the two places I most seriously considered were the University of Pittsburgh where Sellars himself was and Princeton because I suspected that Rorty would be possibly a better explainer of Sellars than Sellars himself. Other things were attractive to me about Princeton, given what I wanted to do, and in the end, I decided to go to Princeton. It was a narrow decision because I nearly went to Pitt. Of course, things came out in the best possible way for me since my first job, the job I have held ever since was at Pittsburgh where Sellars was my colleague that would not have been possible had I gone to Pittsburgh to get my degree, so things really worked out very well. But the first time I read *EPM*, I did not understand a great deal of it. The first time I felt that I did was reading it with Rorty in his class. He was teaching it at that time at Princeton he was already writing *PMN* and teaching that essay was part of his writing process for that book.

II: Who introduced you to this essay before you took Rorty's class?

RB: They said Sellars is important, and this is what you read. In fact, the form I read it in was an influential anthology in the philosophy of mind which one of our professors, Harold Morick, had written and had excerpted bits of *EPM* for that volume. He had published that just before I went to Yale, and that was one of the books, one read to get a background in philosophy of mind.

II: What were your philosophical interests at that time that were in connection with Sellars's essay? Or did you just read it out of general curiosity?

RB: I had two philosophical interests that became significant in the long run. One was in something like the notion of representation. I was also doing a math major, and what I found most interesting was model theory and its connection to formal semantics. On the other hand, my teacher in intellectual history, Bruce Kuklick, was writing at the time a biography of Josiah Royce. He was at the time above all a student of classical American pragmatism, and it was from him that I acquired an interest in Pierce, James, and Dewey, particularly Pierce, in my case. But I was interested in the pragmatists and formal semantics. Those were interests that I then took to graduate school, but that was the context in which Sellars seemed significant to me. Rorty's reading of Sellars as a pragmatist was particularly suggested to me. I also read the contemporary philosophy of language, particularly a more formal philosophy of language. Richmond Thomason, who is a distinguished philosopher of

³ [Rorty 2009: 12].

logic, logician, worked particularly on tense logic, was my teacher in the philosophy department, and I worked on the American pragmatists with Kuklick.

II: Since your *Study Guide* was published after the publication of *Making It Explicit*, how much of your version of inferentialism influenced your reading of Sellars's essay? For instance, your comment on section 32 in *SG*⁴ almost verbatim repeats your comment on this section in the fourth chapter of *MIE*,⁵ which commences your critique of his version of inferentialism. In other words, were you prejudiced by your theory, which would make your approach to Sellars quite Hegelian?

RB: Well, things went the other way around, though. I did not have the thought to publish the commentary until after *MIE*. In fact, it was a much older document. In Rorty's course note, not the first course that I took with him but the later one, he had written a paragraph by paragraph commentary of some of the early sections of *EPM* that he used to help us get in to get started in reading that essay. And when I first came to Pittsburgh, I began teaching *EPM* to undergraduates as well as in my graduate seminar. At the time, this was thought to be a crazy thing to do, such a difficult essay how could undergraduates grapple with it. And it was at that point that I took Rorty's commentary on some of the early paragraphs and expanded it both for the graduate student classes and especially for the undergraduates. Over a number of years of teaching it in the 1980s each time, I would fill in more of the commentary I felt that I found the form that made it intelligible to undergraduates. The reason the passage in *MIE* is virtually verbatim in the commentary is that it came from my commentary, which already existed for some time! I believe the first time I taught in Pittsburgh was 1978, and the commentary was certainly something like its final form by the mid-1980s. Of course, I was writing *MIE* already before time, but I formed my reading of Sellars as part of the thinking that ended up taking solid form in *MIE*.

II: But you taught this class on *EPM* to undergraduates when Sellars himself taught here at Pitt. Obviously, he knew about it. Did you discuss with him the structure of your course or his work in general?

RB: We did some. I mean, Sellars, by large, did not teach his own work. Certainly, he did not teach it to undergraduates. And I thought that was a shame that this was important and could be made accessible and he was happy enough to have me teach it. Even though he himself felt it was not appropriate for him to teach it. I do not have this view. I have often taught my own work to undergraduate as well as graduate students. Indeed, he very seldom taught his own work even to graduate students, and when he did, it was never his older work. The only bits of his own work he would teach in graduate seminars is what he is currently working on. So, he, as far as I know, never taught *EPM* in graduate or undergraduate course when he was here. But very soon after I came to Pitt, we instituted core courses in the graduate program in metaphysics and epistemology (that was a single course), in the philosophy of science, in practical philosophy, and in logic. I taught the metaphysics and epistemology course on a regular basis, essentially every other year, and one of the first things we read in it was *EPM*. Again, Sellars was happy to have that done, but he would not do it himself.

I did discuss his work with him on several occasions. It was frustrating. I think for both of us. Sellars did not work out his views in conversation with other living philosophers. His conversation was mostly with dead philosophers, and insofar as with living philosophers, it was by and large done in print, not face to face. He was a solitary thinker, and when I would

⁴ [Brandom 1997: 152-153].

⁵ [Brandom 1994: 216].

come to discuss something with him typically rather than saying what he thought, he would point me to an article at which he had laid out his views on that point. I had almost always already read that article and wanted to start there. So, I would say so making that suggestion, and he would point me to something else that he had written, which I had also read! I think he had fallen out of the habit of discussing his work. Most of the people he talked to were not sufficiently knowledgeable about his views about so many different topics that he had found that he needed to send them off to see what he thought. And he was just not accustomed to talking with someone who was on top of the things he had written. So it took a long time to get to the real points that I was unclear about or where I disagreed. Principally, this had to do with picturing. The concept that he develops and applies in *SM*⁶ as a non-conceptual mirroring of the world by language. Rorty had already been extremely suspicious of this notion, and I shared his skepticism about it. Once we had gotten to the point we could talk about it, and Sellars was convinced that I had read and understood what he had to say about it, he was quite frank that he was unhappy with what he had to say about picturing. He acknowledged that there was a cause for the sort of concerns that Rorty and I had picked up from him. Still, he remained convinced that something like his notion of picturing had to exist and had to play an important role in our explanation of how it is that our practices were as successful as they were. Even if, as he acknowledged, the exact way he tried to deploy, it had a lot of difficulties.

II: Actually, the way you put it, it seems, that this idea of picturing contradicts his very attack on the Myth if our language should somehow mirror what is already given.

RB: That is what I thought, and what I think and in one turn of phrase that turned out to be inappropriate, I put it to Sellars that he had brought about a conceptual revolution in *EPM* with his critique of the Myth. Even people who appreciated that and had taken it on board found it difficult to groom all the rest of their views adequately by inspecting them for remnants of the Myth and eliminating those remnants. I suspected that he was one of those people in whom presellarsian modes of thought survived alongside those that took on board the revolutionary *EPM*. He found that suggestion distasteful, and he said he did not see how he could be accused of being presellarsian in anything. So, it turned out not to be a helpful way for me to put the point. However, my view was and is that he had not fully rigorously thought through the consequences of the insights of *EPM* for his views about the role of science, which long antedated the insights of *EPM*. Those views were the principal point of continuity between his thought and the thought of his father, Roy Wood Sellars, the University of Michigan philosopher, longtime chair of the philosophy department at Michigan whose views about science the young Sellars had largely taken over.

II: Let us now move to the broader context of Sellars's philosophy. I mean the context of analytic Kantianism. Of course, it was not Sellars who coined the concept of the Given (with definite article) in the anglophone context. It was his predecessor and his intellectual adversary who became a target of Sellars's criticism in many of his essays, namely, Clarence Irving Lewis. In his book *Mind and the World Order* (1929), which can be regarded as one of the first attempts of systematic reading and reception of Kant's theoretical philosophy in the US, he particularly discusses the problem of a synthetic a priori, "traditional" account of which he sums up as follows: "there must be universal truths which are known otherwise than through experience. Such universal

⁶ [Sellars 1992: 112-141].

propositions cannot be logically derived unless from other such universals as premises.”⁷ Sellars’s account of a synthetic a priori proposition in his early essay, *Is There a Synthetic A Priori*, is quite similar: “a synthetic a priori proposition, on our account, is one that is both synthetic and true ex vi terminorum.”⁸ Ex vi terminorum in his vocabulary means true by meaning of terms involved. However, all of these definitions somehow contradict the very definition of synthetic judgments or propositions a priori, which Kant gives in the Introduction to *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he calls them *Ertweiterungsurteile*, ampliative judgments.⁹ In other words, according to Kant, there is no way we can describe a synthetic judgment as true by terms involved. Yet at that time, it seemed to become a standard interpretation of a synthetic a priori within analytic Kantianism. What are the roots of such a reading, which was crucial in Sellars’s early essays?

RB: Well, it is a very important and very large issue. Lewis was the American neo-Kantian of his generation. He was a Kant-scholar, at least an extremely careful reader of Kant. Indeed, he was one who taught Kant to graduate students in the Harvard philosophy department, and his style of course was then taught by his students for many generations. That was how Kant was taught in American graduate programs. Lewis was a teacher of Sellars when Sellars did his master’s degree at Harvard, and he was one of the teachers he was most impressed with. *EPM* is, in many ways, directed at the assumptions of *MWO*. When I taught *EPM* to the graduate students, we read *MWO* and a chapter of Lewis’s later book *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (1946) as the targets of Sellars’s criticism. Sellars was notorious for never mentioning the names of the figures he was talking about. Rorty once described reading Sellars is like watching a basketball player dribbling an invisible basketball and avoiding the invisible opponents. Now, as to synthetic a priori, this is point that joined C. I. Lewis as a neo-Kantian and Sellars who was the principal neo-Kantian of his generation synthesizing C. I. Lewis, on the one hand, and that other great neo-Kantian Rudolf Carnap who was taught by Bruno Bauch, an official neo-Kantian of his time, and Carnap thought he had shaken off Kant in favor of empiricism. In fact, I believe it is not right, and it is Sellars’s reading of Carnap that taught me the extent to which Carnap is neo-Kantian. Sellars saw one of Kant’s fundamental ideas that, in addition to concepts whose principal function is to describe and explain empirical goings-on, there are also concepts that have quite a different expressive role. Their expressive role is to make explicit features that are implicit, implicitly articulate the framework that makes it possible to describe and explain empirical goings-on, and those are the Kantian categories, the pure concepts of the Understanding.

The reason Sellars revered Carnap as he did was that Carnap persuaded him of what Sellars in his early essays called “the new way of words,”¹⁰ the metalinguistic turn. What Sellars saw was that Carnap’s notion of metalinguistic concepts was a version of Kant’s notion of categories that Carnap thought that in addition to ordinary empirical descriptive concepts, there was one other class of concepts that were respectable. Those were metalinguistic concepts whose job was not to describe and explain empirical goings-on but rather to let us talk about the language as in theories that we use to do, describe, and explain things. Unlike Carnap, who did not think of those metalinguistic concepts as categorial, as pure

⁷ [Lewis 1990: 199].

⁸ [Sellars 1953: 124].

⁹ [Kant 1998: 57] (KrV, B 11).

¹⁰ See Sellars’s essays *Epistemology and the New Way Of Words* (1947) and *Realism and the New Way Of Words* (1948). Both essays are to be found in [Sellars 2005: 106-165].

concepts of the Understanding, Sellars did. The axis around which all of Sellars's work revolves as I interpret him in my book *From Empiricism to Expressivism. Brandom Reads Sellars*,¹¹ is his understanding Kant through the lens of Carnap, taking the Carnapian idea, as he thought, of categories as metalinguistic and transposing that into a pragmatic rather than a semantic key. For Sellars, the concepts that were successors to Kant's categories are the concepts of the pragmatic metavocabulary. A vocabulary that we use to talk about what we are doing in saying or meaning anything. The revelation to me, the point that made the veil fall from my eyes, was when I realized that this is what tied together Sellars's treatment of modality with his nominalistic approach to universals. Sellars's nominalism had always been a puzzle to me. Rorty never talked about it. I could not myself see what connected the critique of the Myth with this work on nominalism which is what Sellars did in 1959 and 1960 in three long essays that were his principal occupation at the same time that he was writing his brilliant treatment of modality, *Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and the Causal Modalities*.¹² What I saw what tied them together was his nominalism is an application of Carnap's metalinguistic treatment of universals where Carnap treats triangularity as covertly metalinguistic, as a quasi syntactic expression as he calls it. It is a way to talk about triangularity as a way of talking about the term 'triangular' being a predicate. To say there is triangularity for Carnap was a way of saying that '...is triangular' is a predicate. Sellars extended that metalinguistic treatment to modal notions of law and necessity. That was his version of Kant's notion of categories, which he saw much more fundamental than the idea of synthetic a priori truths. Sellars did think that the synthetic a priori truths were underwritten by the application of pure concepts of the Understanding that is framework explicating concepts. He says they are true *ex vi terminorum* contradicting Kant's insisting that these truths are not analytic precisely because Sellars thinks of meaning so differently from the way that Kant did, thinking of material inferences as what articulate the meanings of empirical concepts. So, for Sellars, the meaning-articulating inferences are all and only the lawful ones, the counterfactuals supporting inferences, and those are one and all synthetic. You have to know what the melting point of copper is to know that it is a law that any sample of pure copper will melt at 1085 degrees Celsius. But that is part of the meaning of the word copper, according to Sellars's inferentialist picture of the meanings of empirical terms. So, Sellars thinks that you need to go into the laboratory in order to find out the meaning of your word copper. You need to find out what the laws of nature are that govern copper in order to know what your concept of copper is. You cannot tell just by introspecting. To think you could is a version of the Myth. So, Sellars is much closer to Kant's notion of a synthetic a priori than you would think. One of the difficulties that Sellars had in debates with, for instance, Quine about analyticity and synthetic a priority was precisely that he needed to start by conveying what his view of meaning was, which is not transparent to the people who apply them. He had a Kantian view according to which when you apply a term like copper, you have bound yourself by a rule, and that rule is not between your ears, and you are not omniscient about what rule you have bound yourself by playing that counter in a public game.

II: It is quite interesting that you mentioned that influence of Carnap's neo-Kantian approach on Sellars since in *Inference and Meaning*, one of his early essays, which precede *EPM*, he calls Carnap's syntactical account of rules "a snare and a delusion,"¹³

¹¹ [Brandom 2015].

¹² [Sellars 1958].

¹³ [Sellars 2005: 346].

which seems to be quite a strong accusation. Moreover, the whole argument in *IM* is, at least in my opinion, anti-Carnapian.

RB: Well, it is, but it takes place in a purely Carnapian framework. So, it is a way of his expressing where he gets off the Carnapian bus and underlining the disputes that he has very much within the terminology and the conceptual framework that Carnap had set up. To the point that he uses the vocabulary of L-rules and P-rules from *The Logical Syntax of Language*¹⁴ insisting, however, that and this was Sellars's foundational idea of the material inferences that articulate the contents of non-logical concepts. He said we have to make the P-rules do the work that Carnap's L-rules did. The L-rules were supposed to articulate the meanings and be analytic, the P-rules were synthetic, and they were used to express the laws of nature. You had to discover your P-rules empirically by going into the laboratory. Sellars uses that conceptual framework to emphasize and delineate his points of disagreement with Carnap precisely that he thinks that what Carnap treated as P-rules has to be thought of as articulating the very meanings of terms. So, it was in that regard an intramural debate. One might, in this way, compare it to Quine's essay *Carnap and Logical Truth*,¹⁵ which also takes place within the Carnapian framework but uses that framework to express short diversions from a particular Carnapian doctrine.

II: Now, I would like to look into the development of Sellars's Kant readings that seems to take place during his career. I mean starting from his early essays through *EPM* to *SM*. When I was reading his essays, I got the impression that he severely changed his reading of Kant, starting with his accusation that Kant was a psychologist in *Realism and the New Way of Words*¹⁶ (1948). Then, in the very first section of *EPM*, he claims that Kant was not free of the Myth,¹⁷ and he finally ends up defending and unfolding some central ideas of Kant's epistemology in *SM*. How would you explain this, so to say, "changing" Kant in Sellars's work?

RB: Well, this is a very interesting observation you have made, and it is not anything I have thought about or that, I think, other Sellars scholars have. I mean, it is very plausible that he changed his view. When he wrote *EPM*, he explicitly identifies the view he was endorsing there as Hegelian and meant that by contrast to and in distinction with Kant. Particularly on the issue of immediacy. At that point, he was still thinking of Kantian intuitions as something like Cartesian self-intimating episodes. As immediacy that could be understood apart from the role that it played in our conceptually articulated judgments, insisting that we distinguish immediacy of origin (the fact that our perceptual judgments are wrenched from us non-inferentially by the environment) from the immediacy of content, the non-relational atomistic status of content. That distinction is saying, well, yes, perceptual judgments are immediate in the one sense but not in the other sense. Their origin is not mediated (mediation is Hegelian way of talking about inference, it is modeled on role of the middle premise in a syllogism, in getting you inferentially from the premises to the conclusion), so these perceptual judgments are non-inferential in the sense that their occurrence is not the result of a process of inference. Yes, but they are not non-inferential in the sense that they could have the meaning they get independently of their inferential relations to other such contents. That distinction is the essence of his criticism of givenness which runs together the idea of sensory experiences as non-inferential in the process sense (they are not the result of an inferential

¹⁴ [Carnap 2001].

¹⁵ [Quine 1960].

¹⁶ [Sellars 2005: 134].

¹⁷ [Sellars 1997: 14].

process) with the idea that their content is non-inferential in the relational sense of not depending on its relation to other concepts. That is the essential idea of the criticism of the Myth, and he sees that in Hegel, specifically in the treatment of sense-certainty, and takes that point to be one that is not a Kantian point but a way in which Hegel has advanced beyond Kant. By the time of his Locke lectures that he published as *SM*, he came to have a much more nuanced view of Kant and in particular more nuanced view of the relation between intuitions and concepts in Kant. He came to appreciate what became his favorite passage in Kant that the principle of unity of a manifold of intuition is the same as the principle of unity of a judgment and to think of intuitions as the “this” in the “this-such”, as he puts it in *SM*, and so as already in conceptual shape but not inferentially elicited, demonstratively used. So, I think, he came to a view of Kant as having a much more sophisticated view and one that is not necessarily entangled in the Myth. It is that reading of Kant that McDowell, for instance, has elaborated¹⁸ and sees the Sellars of *SM* and after as appreciating. Exactly when in the nine years between 1956 (*EPM*) and 1965 (Locke lectures, *SM*) did Sellars get that more nuanced view of Kant, I do not know. But it is an interesting question, and I think it would be worth looking more closely at.

II: My impression of his early essays is that when he talks about Kant, he means receptions of Kant (Carnap’s, C. I. Lewis’s). For instance, at the end of *IM*, he concludes that the view that logical rules determine only the form of a concept while their content is derived from experience embodies a radical misinterpretation of “the manner in which the ‘manifold of sense’ contributes to the shaping of the conceptual apparatus ‘applied’ to the manifold in the process of cognition.”¹⁹ At that time, he believed in the “Kantian origin” of this radical misinterpretation.

RB: I do not know when he became a serious reader of Kant. I believe he did read Kant at Oxford, and, again, I do not know whether, at Harvard, he did take Lewis’s Kant course or only philosophy of mind course.

II: Now, I would like to move to your reading of Kant, particularly in *MIE*. To be honest, when I started to read your book, which was last September in your seminar, I was convinced that it is Hegel who has to be the central figure, the mightiest of mighty dead, in your inferentialist account. However, I was stunned to find out that, at least in the first part of your book, one of the central figures is Kant, whereas Hegel is only a background-figure. So, already in the first chapter, you distinguish your pragmatist understanding of normativity from traditional accounts, among which Kant’s account seems to be the most important one. You call it a regulist, intellectualist, or Platonist conception of normativity. According to this conception, “to assess correctness is always to make at least implicit reference to a rule or principle that determines what is correct by explicitly saying so.”²⁰ In other words, the normative appears only explicitly as rules, laws, etc. Could you elaborate on that?

RB: My idiom there talking about intellectualism and Platonism is picking up on Dewey’s usage where Dewey thinks of traditional philosophy, basically since Plato, as having been intellectualist, Platonist (he considered it with a small “p”), in the sense that behind every propriety of practice it finds a principle, the idea starting off already in Plato whereas the converse form of explanation, doing pragmatism as opposed to the intellectualism or

¹⁸ [McDowell 1996].

¹⁹ [Sellars 2005: 353].

²⁰ [Brandom 1994: 20].

Platonism, sees norms that are implicit in practice as conceptually prior to norms that are explicit in the form of principles or rules. Though he sees storing of this idea in the 19th century in people like Nietzsche, I think, he does not see storing of it before Hegel, his hero. Still, he thinks that it is only American pragmatism, and the pragmatist order of explanation sees the priority of practice over principle. Specifically, I want to say that this is not something that is explicit in Dewey. I rather think that it was implicit that we are talking about norms. It is implicitly normative practices, proprieties, correctnesses, fitnesses that manifest themselves practically that underwrite and underlay proprieties explicit in principles or rules. Viewed through those spectacles, the fact that the very form of the norm for Kant is the rules is an intellectualist and Platonist way of thinking. He sees that what distinguishes judgments and intentional actions from the responses of merely natural creatures is that judgments and intentional actions are things we are in a distinctive sense responsible for that they are commitments of ours. He sees that the distinction between these discursive acts and others is their liability to normative assessment in a particular assessment of the goodness of the reasons that we have for doing it. But the only language that Kant has available for talking about the norms is the jurisprudential language of rules and laws, and that is a language of explicit norms. Indeed, in the same first chapter, in an appendix,²¹ I take Wittgenstein to task for using the language of rules to make his pragmatist point about the priority of norms implicit in practices over norms explicit in principles. Talking about rules in this context is distracting and unhelpful, a misleading term to use for making the point that he is making precisely because of its Kantian explicit, Platonist, and intellectualist overtone.

II: Let us now talk about your reading of Hegel, which is present at least implicitly in *MIE*. In the third chapter, *Linguistic Practice and Discursive Commitment*, you introduce a crucial notion of deontic scorekeeping and deontic scorekeepers (even though it does not reappear in *AR*). Someone who before reading *MIE* had already read Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* would wonder if your notion of deontic scorekeeping, i.e., keeping track "of their own and each other's commitments and entitlements"²² by linguistic practitioners, has something to do with Hegel's notion of *Anerkennung*, recognition, introduced by Hegel in the self-consciousness chapter.

RB: Indeed, it was very much in my mind that scorekeeping was a more articulated version of recognition. I came to think of Hegel as speaking at the level of generality where recognizing someone was practically taking or treating them as a normative subject that is as a subject of normative statuses and normative attitudes *überhaupt*. A subject of normative statuses, of authority and responsibility (in Hegel's terminology of independence and dependence when he uses these words to apply to subjects), and normative attitudes of acknowledging a commitment oneself, that is attitude as a matter what a subject is for itself, or attributing authority or responsibility to someone else. It is attitude expressed in the Hegelian language of what a subject is for another subject. A general recognition, I think, in Hegel is just keeping score on someone, taking someone to be a subject of normative statuses and attitudes in the language of *MIE*. What he does not thematize but, in my view, has clearly in the background is what becomes explicit in deontic scorekeeping (what I came to call specific recognition). It is attributing a particular commitment or entitlement to someone. That is really the keeping score, not just that they are fit to have score kept on them but actually

²¹ [Brandom 1994-8: 64-66].

²² [ibid.: 142].

doing it, attributing different commitments to you that I acknowledge myself or that I attribute to someone else. The notion of Hegelian recognition does occur in *MIE*, it is mentioned in passing.²³ However, it does no expository work because I believe that people did not understand what Hegel meant by recognition. It would be trying to explain the obscure by the more obscure, to appeal to it would be confusing. I believe, in passing, I say in *MIE* that those who have the eyes to read Hegel will see how Hegelian the story that I am telling is. But to see how Hegelian it is, you have to read Hegel the way I read Hegel. Probably, no one who has not read the new book,²⁴ twenty-five years later, would be in a position to do that! However, the language into which I translate Hegel's language in *A Spirit of Trust* is recognizably a close relative of the language of *MIE*.

II: Could you describe the context in which Hegel caught your attention? It is quite striking, especially if we call to mind that in the 1980s, in the anglophone world, it was precisely Kant who became the central figure of classical German philosophy because of the influential readings of Kant's works, which Peter Strawson put forward in his *The Bounds of Sense*²⁵ and Jonathan Bennett in his *Kant's Analytic and Kant's Dialectic*.²⁶ Even you contributed to the thematic issue of *Philosophical Topics* dedicated to so-called analytic Kantianism.²⁷

RB: I think philosophers who are much younger than I am, find it hard to keep in mind that until Strawson, Rawls, and Bennett, analytic philosophy was as hostile to Kant as it was to Hegel. Russell and Moore, who established the slogans and fighting faith of analytic philosophy, each was in his way recoiling from the Hegel of their day, the British idealism of Bradley and Green. Their view was that the idealist rot had set in already with Kant. That Kant and Hegel were too intimately tied up with one another. In particular, there was too much truth in Hegel's self-understanding as a merely insightful reader of Kant for it to be possible to open the door of the canon wide enough to let Kant in and slam the door quickly enough to keep Hegel out. So, their view was that the progressive strand in analytic philosophy has to be seen to move directly from Leibniz to John Stuart Mill to Frege without taking a turn into the oxbow of German idealism at all. I think once analytic philosophers came to take Kant seriously and to appreciate him as a philosopher of science and as an exact clear thinker in the way that Strawson, Rawls, and Bennett presented him, the remnant of the truth of Moore's and Russell's assessment became clear. It is not possible to let Kant into the canon and slam the door quickly enough to keep Hegel out. If one is going to take Kant seriously, one is obliged to take Hegel's reading of him seriously. I believe I was probably predisposed to take that step in a way others were not. The reading of American pragmatism that I had gotten from my mentor Bruce Kuklick emphasized the influence not only of Kant but of Hegel on Pierce but especially on Dewey. He read, as my Doktorvater Rorty did, Dewey as naturalizing Hegel. Dewey, in his own development, started off as a Hegelian and was converted to a naturalized post evolutionary pragmatist version of what still was a Hegelian social practice theory and semantic holism. And I had also been taught already by Kuklick to read Quine as repeating some of the dialectics of late German idealism but now

²³ [ibid.: 67, and note № 1 on page 663].

²⁴ [Brandom 2019].

²⁵ [Strawson 1966].

²⁶ [Bennett 1966; Bennett 1974].

²⁷ [Brandom 2006].

in a semantic mode. So, when Quine in *Two Dogmas* says, “Meaning is what essence becomes when it is divorced from the object of reference and wedded to the word,”²⁸ he is talking about the distinction between internal and external relations in British idealism that said that all relations were internal relations. There were no accidental relations. They were all essential to the objects. The paradigm of this distinction between internal and external relations (to explain the terminology) is in the makeup of a ladder. The relation between the rails and the rungs of the ladder is internal. If you change that, you destroy the ladder. Whereas the relation between the ladder and the wall it is leaning against is external, for you can put the ladder elsewhere. The British idealists said that all relations were internal. It was what Russell caricatured as the bowl full of jelly picture of the Universe to which he opposed his bucket of shot. Quine was putting forward a semantic holism by saying that we have to think of all of these inferential relations as internal to the meanings of the expressions. It is true, on that basis, he then rejects the notion of meaning in favor of an atomistic notion of reference, but I could see this as repeating Hegelian ideas in this form.

The other great hero of Rorty’s story about the criticism of the inherited logical empiricist tradition was Sellars in *EPM*. Sellars called what he was doing incipient Hegelian meditations²⁹ and invokes Hegel at the beginning and again at the end of *EPM*. So, I was prepared to find in Hegel the sources of ideas that I could see transforming the anglophone analytic philosophy of our own time.

II. Representationalism reconsidered

II: Let us now talk about your critique of and your attack on what you and Rorty call representationalism. I believe you would agree that your inferentialism is one of the ways to avoid what Sellars called the Myth of the Given. The notion of the Given is the dominant one in the representationalist approach. Even in *Asserting*, one of your early papers, it is already clear that you have this distinction in mind (between inference and representation), though you did not call representationalist the opposite to inferentialism approach. However, in *A*, you are talking about two kinds of inference. The first kind you ascribe to Frege, Russell, Carnap, and Tarski. You describe it as follows: “On this line, inferences are to be appraised in terms of their faithfulness to the objective reality that determines which sets of representations are correctly inferable from which others.”³⁰ To this kind of inference, you propose another kind, which, as I understand, you endorse in that paper and find in Dewey and the later Wittgenstein: that inferences are social practices that must answer not to an objective reality but rather to communal norms. So, my question is when and how did it become clear to you that inferentialism and representationalism are incompatible strategies for explaining how things are?

RB: Well, my Doktorvater, Rorty, and I mean some different things by representationalism. When he calls himself an antirepresentationalist, he means that he does not believe that we should think about discourse as so much as having a representational dimension. We should think of it in other terms, we should think about what we are doing when we are talking. For Rorty, in terms of our coping with our environment. It is his characteristically

²⁸ [Quine 1951: 22].

²⁹ Sellars, *EPM*, § 20.

³⁰ [Brandom 1983: 640].

understated version of Dewey's talk of our solving problems. Downstream from him, I mean something more specific by representationalism that does not involve or entail denying that there is a representational dimension to discourse, to conceptual content. I use that term to designate an order of explanation. For me, it seems clear that both that there is a representational dimension to conceptual content and that there is an inferential dimension. And the question I see representationalism is addressing is which comes first in the order of our philosophical explanation. The representationalist tradition characteristic of British empiricism and the entire anglophone analytic philosophical tradition starts with the notion of representation and representational content. It understands inferential relations ultimately in terms of something like inclusion relations among representational contents. The converse inferentialist order of explanation which, for instance, I see as pursued already in early modern period by Spinoza and Leibniz and then as having been important in German idealism begins with an understanding of conceptual content in terms of what is a reason for what, in my version inferential relations, and then proceeds to try an account for representational relations in terms of inferential ones. In my book *Tales of the Mighty Dead*,³¹ the chapters on Spinoza and Leibniz detail how I think they built accounts of representation in terms of inference.

You mentioned that inferentialism is a way of resisting the Myth. The Myth is the notion of contents that we can grasp atomistically, independently of our capacity to grasp anything else simply by having a certain kind of episode, typically a perceptual experience. We are taken to grasp or understand something. On the inferentialist picture, this atomistic conception makes no sense because what a conceptual content consists in is its role in reasoning, its role as a premise in a conclusion of inference. To grasp a particular conceptual content is to have a certain kind of practical know-how, the capacity to distinguish in practice between what follows from applying a concept and what does not follow, what is incompatible with it, and what would count as a reason for applying it. It follows that one can grasp any conceptual content unless one grasps many. Inferentialism is an essentially holistic undertaking.

II: The reason why I mentioned you and Rorty as thinkers who are trying to resist to the Myth as a central notion of representationalism is that in your introduction to inferentialism, *Articulating Reasons*, when you are tracing back the representational account in epistemology, you are talking about the Enlightenment. There you insist that the Enlightenment philosophers coined that influential notion of representation and for them, the human mind was a "mirror of nature." So, I could not help but ask why you insist that the Enlightenment philosophers coined the notion of representation when for many of them, the notion of representation was not as central as one might think. For instance, it was not a central notion for Kant, who is undoubtedly an Enlightenment philosopher.

RB: Well, it is, and it is not. His general term for mental occurrences is *Vorstellungen*, representations, that is, the genus of which intuitions and concepts are species. So, there is a sense in which he identifies the mind as a faculty of representation. He makes a brilliant and original move-in understanding the most basic form of representation as a judgment rather than concepts particular or general or, indeed, intuitions and understands those kinds of representations in terms of judgment. However, he is true to the Enlightenment in thinking of the contents of mind under the heading of representations. As I see things, Descartes invented the notion of representation as a way of dealing with new science. The entire tradition beginning with ancient Greeks had thought of the relation between appearance and reality in

³¹ [Brandom 2002].

terms of categories of resemblance, the way things appeared to us when all went well resembled the way things were. The resemblance is a matter of literally sharing properties in the way that a picture, if it is a good picture, shares properties with what it is a picture of (shape properties, color properties, and so on). Plato talked about these shared properties in terms of ideas. For Aristotle, they were forms, but the thought was that what we have in our minds, the way the world appears to us, and the appearance literally share some properties. When they do not, then, we mislead because we are relying on these shared properties, these resemblances and then we are in error.

With the rise of the new science, this quickly became untenable. For Copernicus, the reality that corresponded to the immovable Earth was a spinning Earth, and the reality that corresponded to the Sun moving in an arc overhead was an unmoving Sun with us spinning. There is no resemblance, no shared properties between the stationary Earth as it appears and the spinning Earth that is the reality, no sharing properties between the reality of the stable unmoving Sun and the appearance of it as moving in a circle. Something more abstract was needed. In Galileo's case, he finds that the best appearance of the reality of a period of time is the length of a line. We take this for granted, but there are not any shared properties. There is no resemblance, and worse, he found that the best representation of the acceleration of a falling body was the area of a triangle. If you want to understand how the physical world works, he says that the book of nature is written in the language of mathematics, and he like everyone else at that time meant by mathematics geometry. But the geometrical figures that were the best appearance of the reality were triangles where one side of the triangle is a period of time. There is no resemblance here and what is a resemblance between a triangle and acceleration of a falling body.

Descartes completes this. His model of the relation between appearance and reality is the relation between algebra and geometry, between discursive representations and equations, on the one hand, and the geometrical reality of the Galilean world. But there is no resemblance between the equation $x^2 + y^2 = 1$ and the geometrical circle. He invented accordingly a more abstract notion of representation to replace the notion of resemblance in response to the new science that became the most important philosophical concept. Indeed, it was because he had given up the notion of resemblance in favor of this more abstract notion of representation that skepticism became an issue anew. If representations did not need indeed so much as resemble what they represented, how were we sure that the world was the way we represented it to be. Now, in his philosophy, Descartes took being a representation to be an irreducible ontological fact about a certain kind of stuff. There was stuff that is by nature representational, mental stuff that comes "tanquam rem," as he put it, as if of things. He divided the world into the things that were by nature representings and the things that could only be represented, the extended world. Downstream from that, people were more interested in giving an account of this relationship, particularly, as I have mentioned, the rationalists (Spinoza, Leibniz). But in this whole period, Descartes's notion of representation was at the center of our understanding of the world through science. Enlightenment philosophy was in no small part philosophy of science trying to understand what we can understand about us and about the world now that we knew that the natural science was the best way to find out about the world. And at the center of our understanding of that was the notion of representation.

Rorty is a radical thinker in thinking that concept has done all the good work that it has to do and has now embroiled us in un-get-overable difficulties, in an oscillation between skepticism and some kind of epistemological foundationalism, foundationalism that ends up appealing to what he called privileged representations. Principally, the sensory given and the

semantic given, meanings of the sort that Quine criticized and the sensory given of the sort that Sellars criticized.

II: While talking about Descartes, you emphasized the new science, meaning, of course, the rise of natural sciences during his time. It is interesting that one of the greatest and, at the same time, most underestimated philosophers of the Enlightenment, Giovanni Battista Vico, called his philosophy the New Science as well. However, his understanding of the new science was opposed to that of Descartes. In Vico's conception, representation is not a central notion. On the contrary, he claims that the civil world (as he called the space of reasons and norms) was made by men, which is why we can understand it and make the science of it by making explicit what is already implicit in our social practices.³² I believe that many of Vico's insights are compatible with your inferentialism which is definitely worthy of independent research.

RB: I think Vico belongs in the lineage that than goes through John Dewey and Rorty and so on. I believe that is right.

II: Now, I want to talk about Sellars's early essay *IM*, which you quote extensively in both *MIE* and *AR*.³³ In this essay, Sellars introduces the crucial concept of material inference, which is essential for your version of inferentialism as well. However, when I read your early essay *A*, I could not help but notice that, unlike the early Sellars whose early essay influenced the later Brandom in *MIE*, the early Brandom does not talk about inference in terms of world-directedness but rather in terms of social practice. So, I wonder how Sellarsian insights from *IM* influenced your early account of inference?

RB: Well, it did. I was certainly familiar with that essay and impressed with it. I came to think of asserting as a principal speech act because I tried to look at language from an anthropological point of view as a setup of social practices, as a feature in the natural history of social creatures like us. As American pragmatists did, as the Heidegger of *Being and Time* did, as the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations* did by contrast to thinking of language on a monological model of a mathematical calculus as Frege had, as the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* had, as Carnap and Tarski did. I came to think that the principal thing that we do is saying that things are thus and so, saying how things are. I turned with great interest to the speech act tradition, to see what they had to say about this crucial central speech act of assertion and found in John Searle's book *Speech Acts* the definition that an assertion of *p* is "an undertaking to the effect that *p*."³⁴ I was desperately disappointed by this – what "effect" is that? This is the whole question! It seemed to me making no explanatory progress whatsoever. And yet this was the account of not just some speech act or other but of the paradigmatic and central speech act. And I came to see that the speech act tradition only addressed derivative speech acts. Searle spoke for that tradition in having no better idea of what asserting is than its representing the world as being some way. But representing is not a doing in a robust sense. It is, at most, something that you do by doing something else – for instance, claiming that things are thus and so.

³² «The world of nations or civil world, which, since men had made it, men could hope to know.» [Vico 1948: 85]. The Italian edition by Fausto Nicolini, see paragraph 331. However, in the Italian original Vico does not mention a hope but talks about a *possibility of the science*: «questo mondo delle nazioni, o sia mondo civile, del quale, perché l'avevano fatto gli uomini, *ne potevano conseguire la scienza gli uomini*» (italics added).

³³ [Brandom 1994: 102-103; Brandom 2001: 54-55].

³⁴ [Searle 1969: 66].

What I took and take to be the most important lesson of *IM* is its inferentialist account of meaning, of meaning as inferential role, as a role with respect to material proprieties of inference. I feel like I had already learned that lesson, taken it on board. In 1983, I was already seriously at work on *MIE*. I spent eighteen years working on that manuscript. So, the inferentialist commitments that I saw already in *IM* and as far as it goes in Dummett, whom I started reading in graduate school. I also saw inferentialist commitments in him. And then in Frege. So, the three sages of the first chapter of *AR* were already the avatars of inferentialism for me. However, the specific question in *Asserting* was not about meaning. It was on the side of pragmatics rather than semantics. The question was how we should think about what you are doing in saying something, in what I took to be the core sense of saying something, claiming or asserting it. Where the tradition only had as a model taking to be true or putting forward as true. So I needed a completely new account. And Sellars, Frege, and Dummett were of no help in that regard. Their semantic inferentialism did not extend to that point. It still seems to me it provided the clue even though none of them had accounts of the pragmatics that were of any help to me in this enterprise. But I asked myself what would the inferentialist analog be. The traditionalists were taking over the semantic notion of truth to use in their pragmatics. What would the inferentialist notion be? Well, putting forward something like a fit premise to make inferences from, as fodder for inferences was the sort of clue that I started with and then transmuted that idea as putting something forward as fit to make inferences from into the normative language of authority and responsibility.

The account of asserting in that early paper takes as its central idea the coordinate character of asserting with inferring. That assertings are the endpoints of inferences, the positions that go with the moves that are inferences. Inferring, moving from one claim to another (that is doing in a robust sense). And asserting, it came to seem to me, is putting something forward as, on the one hand, fit to be used as the premise in inference and, on the other hand, something that is fit to be the endpoint or terminus of a movement of inferring. It is putting something forward as fit to be a premise or a conclusion of inference. That was the basic idea that you should think about asserting in terms of the inferences you were authorizing people to make. As authorizing them to use your claim as a premise, and the responsibility that you took to justify your claim that is to exhibit it as the conclusion of inference from other reasons that had justified it. So I came to think of asserting as taking up a position in the space of reasons, a space articulated by the moves from one such position to another, which were inferences. All of this was inspired by Sellars's picture of meanings as articulated by relations of material inferences, i.e., inferences that are good in virtue of the content of the claims and not merely of the forms. But inspired by Wittgenstein and by the American pragmatists, I was more concerned, than Sellars was, with the doings that were assertings and inferences. Downstream from Carnap, who is in the logistical rather than in this anthropological tradition in thinking about language generally Sellars focused on relations of inference, implication relations, I would say, rather than on the process of inferring and the termini of that. So, to that extent, I was reading Sellars with a more explicitly pragmatist inflection.

II: Yes, but those moves that are inferences take place within the community. In *A*, there is a passage where you are talking about justification as follows: “a justification is whatever the community treats as one—whatever its members will let assertors get away with.”³⁵ It seems to me that what you do here is quite different from what Sellars does in *IM* and what you do in *MIE* when you are talking about singular terms.

³⁵ [Brandom 1983: 644].

RB: I mean, the phrases that you quote are Rortyan phrases. That the notion of what the community will let you get away with that is Rorty speak. It is his phrase rather than mine, and I was merely parroting him, and it measures how close I was to his view at that point, always inspired by it, but gradually developed his ways of thinking in my own forms. The thought there was – the tokens that we are exchanging, the counters we play in the game by uttering words that have a public meaning considered just as what Sellars calls the sign designs are meaningless. They acquire their meaning by being caught up in these games. Sellars himself thought this way, not in *IM*, but in *Some Reflections on Language Games*,³⁶ the other hugely important essay roughly contemporary with *IM*. In *SRLG*, he dissects discursive practice into (a) language entry moves in responding non-inferentially to the world by taking up a position in the space of reasons, inferential language moves moving from one such a position in the space of reasons to another. And (b) language exit moves in a practical activity where we respond to acknowledging an intention of practical commitment by doing something that is not itself a saying. What I was doing in this period was integrating those two Sellarsian essays, *IM* and *SRLG*, in a way in which it seemed to me he had not done.

II: What I had in mind when I quoted this passage from A is that we can look at a scientific community (chemists, biologists, etc.) as a social group whose members are not dealing with matters of fact but rather agreeing on something. In other words, in such a community, the truth would not depend on our access to the world (whatever epistemic status of such access might be).

RB: I think, at that time, I did not have a clear picture of how the objective dimension came into view through by meanings as inferential roles. What I wanted to focus on was how meanings are not only articulated by the roles that they play in a social practice but conferred on otherwise meaningless things. The analog of what Wittgenstein talks about as the sign-post considered just as a piece of wood, so our utterances considered only as noises and marks. It is not as though they already mean something before we start using them in these practices, already mean something that we could get right or wrong. Any meaning they have is the matter of the role that they play in our practices. The challenge is to say how and in what sense by deploying these vehicles in accordance with the norms implicit in our own social practices, we can end up doing something that is intelligible as making ourselves responsible for the correctness of what we say. One of the principal tasks of *MIE* was to describe how these norms of objectivity could be understood as precipitating out of a soup of social practices where we answer only to each other. The final chapter of *AR* is the epitome of one solution to that problem. A companion essay of the *A* essay written year or two earlier is my piece, *Freedom and Constraint by Norms*,³⁷ which was the first place where I began to explore the notion of norms implicit in social practices and the Kantian idea of kind of positive freedom, freedom to do something rather than freedom from some sort of constraint. The notion of positive freedom consists in being bound by norms rather than merely by natural laws and thinking of norms as products of our social activity, social things in the sense of things that the community has the final say about what is correct about those things. I was inspired by Rorty's eliminative materialism and his understanding of Cartesian mental things as things that the individual has a complete, total authority about. *Incorrigibility as the Mark of the Mental*³⁸ is the title of his classic essay. He saw a Cartesian mind as coming

³⁶ [Sellars 2007: 28-56].

³⁷ [Brandom 1979].

³⁸ [Rorty 1970: 399-424].

into existence historically when sincere first-person reports came to be treated as incorrigible. Then we started to have Cartesian minds. And he was envisaging a time when that authority structure within the community will change. We would allow cerebroscopes or other things to override them and no longer have Cartesian minds, things that individuals are completely authoritative about. And I was struck that he thought of social things, things that the community has a total authority about as instituting the norms in virtue of which they were mental things, Cartesian minds. I raised the question in that essay about how we should understand objective things as things that neither individuals nor communities have total authority over. And whether objective things too like social things and mental Cartesian things were a social category. Whether it was a matter of the community and the community's norms, saying not only the individuals do not have total authority over these objective matters, but neither do we as the community. And if that was right, the question was how could we do that, what our practices need to have in order to acknowledge some things that we did not have authority over. And that is the question that then in *MIE* and *AR* I tried to answer. I tried to say what structure a setup of social practices could have that would make it intelligible as involving representational relations understood in this normative way.

II: I read *A* after having read *MIE* and *AR*, and I could not help but notice your crucial idea which reappears in your later work almost verbatim: "In asserting a claim one not only authorizes further assertions, but commits oneself to vindicate the original claim, showing that one is entitled to make it. Failure to defend one's entitlement to an assertion voids its social significance as inferential warrant for further assertions."³⁹ When I think about your major claim in *MIE*—namely, that, unlike the regulist, intellectualist tradition, inferentialism is trying to make explicit things that are already implicit in our practices—I cannot stop asking myself a question about the range of its applicability. For when we are trying to apply such an approach to different social practices or even to different *cultures* of social practice, we can quite easily find out that asserting a claim is not always followed by a commitment to (let alone entitlement to) vindicate the original claim. In other words, it might seem that your version of inferentialism either makes explicit what is implicit in a *particular culture* of social practice (we may call it the Western culture), or it is purely prescriptive and idealistic in the sense of universal norms and laws.

RB: Well, let me say a couple of things. In the early *A* essay, I understood assertion in terms of what happens upstream and what happens downstream. So, downstream, I saw it as a matter of assertions serving as premises for inferences that one could draw conclusions from both oneself and others. And upstream as the conclusion of inferences whose premises would give reasons for the claim one had made. That was one inferential dimension. But I also understood it in terms of authority and responsibility. What you were doing in making an assertion was, on the one hand, authorizing others to appeal to one's claim as a premise and, on the other hand, undertaking a responsibility oneself to vindicate one's entitlement to that commitment. I came to see in *MIE* that what I had implicitly done was distinguish these two normative statuses of commitment and entitlement or responsibility and authority. Where the tradition such as it was on the pragmatist side, paradigmatically Dewey here, had wanted to understand the truth in terms of assertibility that was a one-sorted normative notion. What I was putting in place was a two-sorted normative vocabulary, looking at what

³⁹ [Brandom 1983: 641].

you were committing yourself to and what would entitle you to it. And in making this distinction instead of an undifferentiated notion of propriety, yes or no question, only one dimension, I was introducing a distinction between authority and responsibility or commitment and entitlement. This two-sorted normative pragmatics was much more flexible and expressively powerful than the previously one-sorted one. So, this was a big clue for me, leading from *A* to *MIE*.

The second point I would like to make before actually addressing your question is about the stakes of the idealization that you describe. When Jürgen Habermas was visiting as the regular to the North-Western University in Chicago, another Rorty's student, Michael Williams, was doing a multi-year graduate seminar reading *MIE*. Habermas attended it and, as he describes, finding in it the possibility of filling in what he had come to see as a hole in his own systematic thinking about language. He had come to realize a foundational claim to what he was doing and the way he was thinking about the language and the conclusions that he wanted to draw (particularly the political ones) from a communicative theory of action. It was the claim that in saying something, one was making a validity claim that opened you up to demands for legitimation, vindication, justification. For instance, understanding the different kinds of validity claims made by a political claim or an empirical natural scientific claim and thinking about moral and political normativity in terms of the norms implicit in making validity claims. He saw the prospect of the conceptual apparatus of *MIE* as justifying this assumption that he had made about the normative significance of meaningful utterances. This was the reason for his interest that he has taken over the years in the apparatus of *MIE*. It is the idea that it is the essence of claiming that one is authorizing others, and what the validity claim is making, doing something that makes you responsible for justifying it if appropriately challenged. He needed precisely that claim at the foundation of his systematic thinking about language. So, this is exactly the point that you are focusing on. But is that realistic?

Now, to be clear about the claim and its status. Where Wittgenstein claimed that language is a motley, and it has no downtown, it is all suburbs, my claim is that language does have a downtown. It has the principal speech act, and it is asserting, which is the definitive speech act of discursive practice. So, to be a linguistic practice, in my understanding, is to be a practice in which some performances have a significance of assertions, of saying that things are thus and so. That is what determines whether something is a discursive practice, whether it is sufficient to confer on some of its performances the significance of assertions. So that, for example, Wittgenstein's *Sprachspiele*, language games, are mostly, from my point of view, vocal games but not verbal games. They are not language games if we think of the opening *Sprachspiel* of the *Investigations*,⁴⁰ the slab game. The builder says "slab" or "pillar," and the assistant brings him differently sized and shaped pieces. It is in response to what Wittgenstein calls *Ruf*, call. He does not say these are orders. And, indeed, from my point of view, this is not a language game, and they are not orders. There is more to being an order than just being a call, a *Ruf*, that is appropriately responded to in a particular way that is by bringing, say, a slab. An order, in addition, says what you are to do, it describes how things are to be. The order "shut the door" is not just a noise that appropriately responded to only by shutting the door, it says what you are to make true that the door be shut. You can have the orders only in a language in which you can say, "the door is shut." You need to have assertions in a language to have imperatives in a language. The content of imperatives is parasitic on the content of assertions. It is just an example of how assertions can be at the center of discursiveness as such. In addition, and this is the claim you were focusing on, I

⁴⁰ Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 2.

claim that assertions are essentially and not just accidentally moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons. They are essentially things that can stand in need of reasons and can serve as reasons, i.e., they can play the role both of the premise and conclusion of inference. That is what is to be propositionally contentful. There is, as I see it, an iron triangle that relates semantics, pragmatics, and syntax. On the syntactic side, declarative sentences. On the semantic side, expressing propositions. And on the pragmatic side, assertions. From my point of view, one starts with the pragmatics, with the notion of assertion, understands propositions as what is assertible, and understand declarative sentences as the noises you make when you are asserting something which would be a proposition. I understand all of those in terms of assertions in a game of giving and asking for reasons.

Now, it is compatible with that understanding of assertion as the pragmatic downtown of language, and understanding assertion in terms of role in practices of giving and asking for reasons which is a rationalist, inferentialist way of thinking about it. It is compatible with thinking of that as what determines whether something is so much as a discursive practice so that we do not spend very much time giving and asking for reasons. I mean, we philosophers do, in high culture, maybe we spend a lot of time doing that, but it is not a consequence of that claim that people spend most of their time doing that. Those sentences mean what they mean because of their role in giving and asking for reasons. It is parasitic on the role in giving and asking for reasons. That is what makes “the door is shut” mean “the door is shut.” We do not argue about shutting doors very much. We do not need to! But if we could not, then we could not say “the door is shut” or “shut the door!” That is the claim.

II: By the way, in *MIE*, you are raising the problem of what you call “bare assertions;”⁴¹ that is, assertions one does not commit oneself to vindicate.

RB: Or at any rate, claims where I do not pretend to be able to justify it. But, again, these are fringe phenomena. We can do that because we have a solid base of notions like copper and arm, etc. And relative to that, we can support some that are degenerate in many ways in failing of the full inferential articulation. It is also true, by the way, that it is really important that we do not know very much about the inferential roles of many of the words we use. I can wonder whether this new kind of coin is an alloy that has molybdenum in it or aluminum in it even though I know very little about what follows from something being molybdenum or aluminum or what would be evidence for or against it. I play this counter in the public game, and I use the word, and what I commit myself to I am not expert on.

The metallurgist is an expert. I have committed myself to that. I have bound myself by a norm that if I say it is aluminum, whether I know it or not, I have committed myself to it melting at 660,3 degrees Celsius. However, I do not need to know that in order to have aluminum thoughts. It is enough that there be in the community people who do know what I am committing myself to. That is what gives it its meaning and what makes it possible for things to follow from its being aluminum that none of us know yet. But we have made our word mean aluminum and hook up to that stuff in a way that makes it possible for us to be responsible to how it is with that stuff, aluminum. No one needs to know that, and, indeed, all of us can be wrong about some of it. It is the community rather than the individual, and we just need to be right about enough of it to hook us up to the things that we then count as representing. It is a fascinating thing to see what structure of practices makes it possible for us to grant the authority over the correctness of our utterances about aluminum, to how it is with that stuff. That is a remarkable achievement, and it depends on intricate features of the

⁴¹ [Brandom 1994: 229].

structure of our practices to make ourselves empirically responsible to how it is with what we count as talking about in this normative sense of granting authority to those things, to serve as a standard of assessments of the correctness of what we say.

II: Would you agree that “an expressive transcendental deduction of the necessity of objects”⁴² is your way to defend your version of inferentialism from the possible accusation of being an isolated social game or even some sort of collective epistemological solipsism? For without such an argument, it would be difficult to avoid such kind of accusations.

RB: There are three prongs to the response to the worry about losing the world in *MIE*, and I would say the most important is the argument in chapter 6 of *AR*. If we distinguish between commitments and entitlements, we can make sense of claims that have contents that go beyond what anybody is committed or entitled to. The argument goes through the notion of incompatibility where two claims are incompatible if the commitment to one precludes entitlement to the other. The simplified version of the argument there is even if we take two claims that are co-assertible that is under any circumstances under which you could assert the one you could assert the other, we could still see them as having different contents. So, for instance, the claim “I foresee that I will write a book about Hegel” and “I will write a book about Hegel.” Any time I could say the one I could say the other, but we want to say: no, they are objectively something different. Well, we can understand that in terms of what is incompatible with them. “I will write a book about Hegel” is incompatible with me being hit by a bus in the next five minutes. “I foresee that I will write a book about Hegel” that is not ruled out by my being hit by a bus in the next five minutes. Though you can be entitled to those claims under the same circumstances, they have different incompatibilities. So, we can begin to separate what the content is from what somebody is entitled to apply. This argument, the objectivity proofs as the grand name for it in *MIE* and in the corresponding final chapter of *AR*, is an absolutely central prong in the three-pronged argument against thinking that it all dissolves into just social practices that spinning a void unconnected with the real world.

The second prong of this is the crucial account of the representational dimension of discourse in terms of the distinction and relation between *de dicto* and *de re*, of what is expressed by *de dicto* and *de re* ascriptions of propositional attitude. The claim is that the home language game of our representational locutions in the ordinary language where we distinguish between what we are thinking or saying and what we are thinking and talking *about*. That notion of what we are thinking *of* or talking *about* when those words have that representational sense, so not the “of” of “the pan of my aunt” and not the “about” of “the book weighs about three pounds.” The intentional directedness is their use in forming *de re* ascriptions of propositional attitude, I claim. Saying things like “Henry Adams believed of Benjamin Franklin that he did not leave in Philadelphia” that is *de re* ascription and the “of” is saying what his belief was about, what he was representing. I give an analysis also in *AR* of the distinction of social prospective that is being expressed by this representational dimension, the difference between what I am committed and entitled to, and what you are committed and entitled to. Maybe, a crucial piece of that story is the analysis of what you are doing in saying that someone knows something where basically ever since Plato we have thought about that canonically in terms of knowledge as a justified true belief, the JTB account of knowledge. You cannot know if you do not believe it, you cannot know if it is not

⁴² [Brandom 2001: 41].

true, and you cannot know if you do not have reasons if you are not entitled to the claim. In my picture, the belief condition you are taking somebody to be committed, the justification condition you are attributing commitment and entitlement. What about the truth condition? That is when you undertake commitment. That is a distinction of social perspective, and what people find peculiar about truth is because they are thinking of truth as something you are attributing when you take someone to know something in the way that you are attributing belief or justification, commitment, or entitlement. In fact, you are doing something different. You are not attributing those statuses to someone else, but rather you are committing yourself, you are undertaking a commitment, and it is that distinction of social perspective that is expressed in the difference between *de dicto* and *de re* ascriptions. That is the second prong in the response that the world does not get lost because we can talk about what we are talking about and thinking about, we can understand that in these social terms. All this, of course, is against the background of having not just language-language moves but language entry moves and language exit moves that I have talked about early in those books.

The third prong is the one that you focus on. It says – well, this is all very well with sentences, but the world is not just facts, it is facts about objects and the properties that objects have. Where did they come in? The inferentialist starts with sayables, propositions. We can understand assertions as statements of fact. In the order of explanation, I am pursuing, we understand the fact in terms of assertion, not the other way around. Of course, there were facts before there were assertions, but to understand what a fact is, we have to understand it as something that is statable, assertible. But still, there is more to the world than the facts. What about the objects? At this point, we have to say, well, the inferentialist owes an account of the parts of the language that contribute to saying things but are not themselves sayables, in the sense of assertibles. What do you say about the content of bits of language that cannot serve as or stand in need of reasons that cannot be premises and conclusions of inferences? And here, I use the substitutional scalpel to talk about the indirectly inferential role that is characteristic of singular terms and predicates where, to a first approximation, for two singular terms to be co-referential is for them to be substitutable saving the goodness of inferences involving them. And in the complicated chapter of *AR* that you are pointing to, I give a precise characterization of the contribution that a subsentential expression needs to make to the inferential role of a sentence it occurs in. For it to be a singular term or for it to be a predicate, a verb rather than a noun. That is the third prong of sort of world-directedness of this story.

III. The Pittsburgh school of philosophy

II: In 2012, Chauncey Maher published a book⁴³ with quite an unambiguous title—*The Pittsburgh School of Philosophy. Sellars, McDowell, Brandom*. I believe it is for the first time someone explicitly identified *the Pittsburgh school of philosophy*. A school of philosophy, by definition, is a group of philosophers who share at least some theoretical convictions and ideas. On the one hand, your and John McDowell's philosophies are direct reactions to Sellars's philosophy in general and *EPM* in particular. For both of you, Sellars's attack on the Myth is crucial, and both of you appreciate his interest in classical German philosophy. On the other hand, however, your readings of Sellars's work and unfolding of his ideas in your own work are quite different, to say the least,

⁴³ [Maher 2012].

let alone your interpretations of classical German philosophy. Indeed, his seminar dedicated to your reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology* in this spring term, which I attended, McDowell commenced with a claim that he was going to show that your reading of Hegel is wrong. Now, what I want to ask you: would you agree with Maher talking about *the school of philosophy here in Pittsburgh*?

RB: Well, the phrase had been in circulation (informally) for perhaps a decade at that point [Maher's book]. That was the first explicit and formal mentioning.

However, neither John McDowell nor I use this expression. Partly, because it is disrespectful to all the other wonderful philosophers in Pittsburgh. It is shorthand, as Maher makes clear, for what we share in taking Sellars as seriously as we do, and therefore, I want to say, taking Kant and Hegel seriously in the way we do. That is what ties together the people he is using the rubric of the Pittsburgh school for. We do share a lot. The essentially normative character of the space of reasons is the fundamental commitment of all of the figures that we are talking about. And taking that seriously reverberates through one's views about practically every other philosophical topic. It seems from the outside John, and I looked to resemble each other much more that we looked to differ from one another. Indeed, one of the reasons that our discussions and disagreements have been as intense and as gripping to us as they have been is that John and I find ourselves agreeing with each other about many topics with which both of us disagree with almost everybody else. From our point of view, we are moving along in parallel for a long way and then, at a certain point, simply turn off in diametrically opposed directions. It astonishes us even after all these thirty years, we have been having this conversation with each other. How someone who understands as much of the way we see the world as we do could suddenly go so wrong? We would have thought that anyone who agreed about all of these basic things would draw the same conclusions that we do. That anybody who agreed with me about all these things would agree with me about all these other things as well. And yet the point comes when we really go off in diametrically opposed directions. And as we drilled down that if you look at the figures who mean so much to us: at Kant, at Hegel (though until he attended my seminar in the 80s, as he says in *Mind and World*,⁴⁴ he had not seen that these issues were really engaged there), at Frege, at Wittgenstein, and above all at Sellars (because more proximal than the others), we found although, of course, there is some overlap in what we got from them, we really read them very differently, every one of them! And over the years we have worn down at this issue and that issue. For instance, exactly how does Wittgenstein's discussion of what has come to be called rule-following considerations work? I see that argument as having a very different structure than McDowell does even though many of the conclusions we draw are consonant with one another. The parts of Kant that he cares most about, the B-Deduction, play almost no role in my reading of Kant. When we pressed down to a fine level of detail in our reading of the criticism of the Myth and where that should leave you with respect to empiricism, I see it as a devastating argument against essentially all forms of empiricism⁴⁵ and John sees it as providing a recipe for "a reformed empiricism."⁴⁶ Well, that is a pretty big difference! I think both of us have found the process of clarifying these differences fascinating and the discussion immensely productive in clarifying our own views. When we started out, we would not have realized that the commonalities of the conclusions we came at could have come from such a

⁴⁴ [McDowell 1996: ix].

⁴⁵ [Brandom 1997: 168].

⁴⁶ [McDowell 2009: 223].

different take on the texts we were finding our inspiration from. Our hope is that other people will find these disagreements equally productive because we continue to believe these figures are really deep and important and worth wrestling with and trying to get right.

II: In your paper for the above mentioned thematic issue of *Philosophical Topics—Kantian Lessons about Mind, Meaning, and Rationality*—you described Kant’s philosophy as a semantic turn in Western philosophy.⁴⁷ Given that Kant is probably the higher point in the philosophy not only of German Enlightenment but the Enlightenment in general, would you agree that the Pittsburgh school is the continuation of the Enlightenment tradition in philosophy, understood this way?

RB: Well, I absolutely think so. Indeed, the full subtitle of my Hegel book is *A Pragmatist Semantic Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology*. I used that phrase in the introduction. I accepted the wise counsel of the President of Harvard University Press that that was too much of a mouthful to put on the cover of the book and that “a reading” would do just fine. But the working subtitle for many years was “a semantic reading,” and that is definitely what it is. I take it that the characterization of Kant as having made a semantic turn is at least not very controversial. It seems clear that, for instance, the kind of skepticism that is a foil for him is not the epistemological skepticism that Descartes wrestled with that took for granted a notion of representation. He was merely concerned with skepticism about the idea that we were representing the world as it is. In contrast, the kind of skepticism that is on Kant’s radar is about the very notion of representation itself. What are the conditions of intelligibility, of things being about or answering for their correctness in the way representings do to representeds? It is fundamentally normative relation where what is represented exercises authority over the representing in the sense of providing a normative standard for assessments of the correctness of what counts as a representing of it just in virtue of being responsible for assessments of its correctness. This, I see, is the central problematic of Kant’s. McDowell would not agree with this characterization of Kant’s central concern, nor would he think of himself as pursuing a semantic program. We can come together in seeing the issue being about the normative force of a better reason. But the concept of representation is one John does not find philosophically problematic and does not think that Kant found it problematic. Again, I mean, a figure we did not mention just now but who is also a great admirer of Sellars and who both John and I learned a lot from (and greatly admire) is my Doktorvater Richard Rorty. It may well be that it was Rorty who taught me to see the concept of representation as central and as problematic as he does. Rorty, of course, thinks that the concept of representation is one of two great bads of the modern tradition where the other big concept is immediate experience (experience as a sensitive *Erlebnis* rather than Kantian or Deweyan *Erfahrung*). McDowell admires Rorty’s critique but mostly admires his anti-metaphysical spirit. He sees Kant not so much as a semantic theorist but as an anti-metaphysical theorist and Hegel the same way. This anti-metaphysical strand connected to Wittgensteinian quietism has no attraction for me whatsoever. As a systematic thinker comfortable with at least a certain kind of metaphysical thinking, I see it as an overreaction to a healthy anti-scientism.

The only sentence that occurs almost verbatim in Wittgenstein’s early *Tractatus* and his late *Philosophical Investigations* is the sentence “philosophy is not one of the natural sciences.”⁴⁸ I agree with that. All the figures we have talked about Kant, Hegel, Sellars, Rorty, McDowell, and I endorse that claim. However, Wittgenstein and McDowell (I am not sure

⁴⁷ [Brandom 2006: 2].

⁴⁸ Wittgenstein, *TLP*, 4.111; Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 109.

about Rorty) identify theorizing in the sense of deploying theoretical entities merely inferentially accessible entities as the method of science and think that, accordingly, theorizing in philosophy would be a simulating philosophy to natural science. I think that the method of postulating theoretical entities is much broader than the method of natural science, which does employ as many other special features as well. So, I consider it a mistake to eschew theoretical reasoning in the philosophy out of the fear that doing so will end up assimilating philosophical theorizing to natural scientific theorizing. From my point of view, the difference is one to be found in semantics to bring us back to our topic that the broadly hermeneutic methods involved in understanding propositionally and broadly conceptually contentful items, discourse are fundamentally different than those employed in the natural sciences. However, they can include theoretical reasoning *inter alia*.

The big divide is between whether the things you are theorizing about can talk or not. If they can talk, different methods are required than are sufficient for understanding things that cannot talk. Philosophy is principally concerned with understanding things that can talk.

ABBREVIATIONS

Sellars

IM – Inference and Meaning (1953).⁴⁹

SRLG – Some Reflections on Language Games (1954).

EPM – Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind (1956).

SM – Science and Metaphysics. Variations on Kantian Themes (1967).

Brandom

A – Asserting (1983).

MIE – Making It Explicit (1994).

SG – Study Guide (1997).

AR – Articulating Reasons. An Introduction to Inferentialism (2000).

Rorty

PMN – Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979).

C. I. Lewis

MWO – Mind and the World-Order. Outline of a Theory of Knowledge (1929).

Wittgenstein

TLP – Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921).

PI – Philosophical Investigations (Ger.: Philosophische Untersuchungen) (1953).

⁴⁹ In brackets are mentioned years of the original publication.

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Robert B. Brandom, Ivan Ivashchenko

The Commitment to Inference

In this conversation, American philosopher Robert Brandom talks about the historical background of his inferentialism, reconstructing the influence of his teachers Wilfrid Sellars and Richard Rorty.

Роберт Б. Брендом, Іван Іващенко

Обов'язок мислити

У цій розмові американський філософ Роберт Брендом говорить про історичне тло свого інференціалізму, реконструюючи вплив своїх вчителів Вілфріда Селарса та Річарда Рорті.

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