6

INTENTIONAL AGENCY AND CONCEPTUAL IDEALISM

Brandom on Hegelian reason

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After one of his more ornate descriptions of mediation and "absolute cognition" in the *Preface* of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel writes that it all amounts to the claim that "Reason is *purposive activity*" (*PG/M*, §22). We see from this slogan why Hegel's account of action in the *Reason* chapter of the *Phenomenology* is especially important for Brandom's overall reading in *A Spirit of Trust*. Action is not one topic among others in the *Phenomenology*, but *the* topic that reveals Hegel's distinctive understanding of reason, of idealism, and of philosophy itself. Having already laid out in great detail the structure of consciousness and the recognitive relations of self-consciousness, Brandom turns in Chapter 11 to an account of intentional action based rather loosely on the *Reason* chapter, and then in Chapter 12 expounds his own semantics on the model provided by Hegelian action. Through this analysis we get a full understanding of the *conceptual idealism* that Brandom holds to be the final stage that builds on Hegel's *conceptual realism* and *objective idealism*.

I share Brandom's view that Hegel's idealism is fundamentally an inferentialism, and I agree that action is the key concept for understanding Hegel's philosophy. The critical dimension of my contribution focuses on the relation of realism and idealism, which roughly tracks Brandom's semantic treatment of reference and sense. His opening gambit is to distinguish between the apparently absurd idea of the reference-dependence of objects on thinking, on the one hand, and the much more palatable idea of the sense-dependence of objects on thinking, on the other. He denies that Hegel endorses reference-dependence, for he takes Hegel to be a realist who holds that there is a world out there whether we think it or not. Yet Brandom argues, and claims that Hegel argues, that there are no referents that contrast with senses in the end, for referents turn out to be ideal senses. What then becomes of the original denial that Hegel's idealism includes a claim of reference-dependence? More generally, how does Brandom keep a realist dimension while doing justice to the radicality of Hegel's idealism? Does the model of intentional action provide Brandom with a way to thread

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the needle between a dualism of facts and interpretations, on the one hand, and unconstrained interpretation, on the other?

I. "Making realism intelligible"

Brandom sets up his discussion of action by recalling two of the main building blocks of his reading of Hegel: conceptual realism and objective idealism. Conceptual realism is the "platitudinous" view that the world—the "non-mental world" (*ST*, p. 363)—really is structured by modally robust relations of exclusion and inclusion. I am not at all sure that this view is self-evident or non-controversial, for it does involve modal realism, but I cannot adjudicate that issue here. This is a "conceptual" realism because on Hegel's "non-psychological" view concepts are "relations of material incompatibility and (so) consequence" (*ST*, p. 58). Later Brandom complicates this realism by saying that it is also a claim about "the ontological homogeneity of content between what things are *in* themselves and what they are *for* consciousness" (*ST*, p. 418). The claim that Brandom extracts from the first three chapters of the *Phenomenology* and the transition to *Self-Consciousness* is what he calls objective idealism. This is the view that there is a "*symmetrical sense*-dependence of the concepts articulating subjective processes of concept use and concepts articulating objective conceptual relations" (*ST*, p. 365). Such a sense-dependence view contrasts with a reference-dependence:

> According to this thesis, although there could and would *be* lawful connections among properties even if there were no self-conscious creatures to codify them in counterfactual reasoning, it is not possible to *understand* what laws *are* without appealing to the distinctive sort of reasoning they support (and *vice versa*). Although there could and would *be* objective *facts* (say, about the melting point of copper) even if there were no language users to discover and assert them, one cannot say what a fact *is* without appealing to the possibility of asserting one […]. (ST, *p. 365)*

Brandom admits that this idealism might not seem idealistic enough, or "crazy enough," to be Hegel's view.[1] Objective idealism describes more of a truce between the objective and subjective than a priority of the subjective suggested by some of Hegel's bolder pronouncements about the *essential* subjectivity of substance.

Brandom gives to the more radical idealist component of Hegel's view the name of *conceptual idealism*, which he formulates as an "explanatory asymmetry" (*ST*, p. 369). Conceptual idealism is "the claim that the *relations* of sense-dependence objective idealism asserts to obtain between the concepts that articulate our conception of objective relations of material incompatibility, on the one hand, and subjective processes of acknowledging incompatible commitments, on the other, must be understood in terms of the *processes* that institute those relations" (*ST*, p. 369). Intentional agency is a central topic in Hegel because it brings to the fore this conceptual idealism; the content-instituting processes just are those intentional actions "that constitute self-conscious

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individual selves" (*ST*, p. 369). The essential idea is that determinate conceptual content is to be *modeled* on self-conscious, purposive activity. Brandom summarizes the importance of intentional agency as follows: "The discussion of agency in *Reason* is of pivotal importance in the *Phenomenology* because we are to understand all of these sorts of identity-through-difference on the model and in the context of the sort of identity-in-difference that is the actualizing expression of individuality through its purposive activity" (*ST*, p. 379). Intentional agency best exhibits the "historical-developmental" structure that explains the interrelations among all the incompatibilities and social structures that Brandom lays out in the chapters leading up to this one.

Brandom brings out the methodological import of action by contrasting two models of "the unity and the disparity that action involves" (*ST*, p. 379). On the first model, which he calls LCD, for *local, contingent*, and *disjunctive*, there is *either* an identity in action (which thus counts as a success) *or* a disparity (which thus counts as a failure). It is contingent whether or not I actualize my intention in the action, and the identity (and thus success) is adjudicated in a case-by-case, or local, way. The LCD account generates a *vulgar* conception of the success or failure of an action. An action succeeds if the intended purpose is identical with the content achieved, and fails if that content is not identical with the purpose. It is vulgar in that it is all or nothing, and works with a paradigm of simple actions such as a ball going through a hoop. On Brandom's alternative *global, necessary*, and *conjunctive* (GNC) view, *every* action *necessarily* includes a unity *and* a difference of intention and result. The contrast between the LCD and GNC accounts tracks that between the Understanding and Reason, where what is distinctive of the understanding is that it takes the determinate content of the action as something given. The GNC account, on the other hand, goes together with a conception of Reason according to which the determinate content is only first intelligible through the process of determining the content in performing actions.

The relation between intention and its realization is so important to Brandom's account because it is the central case of *expression*, of making the implicit explicit. Brandom thinks that Hegel's distinctive conception of expression comes out when one pays attention to the difference in the paradigmatic actions for Hegel and for someone like Davidson. Instead of "momentary, punctiform events such as flipping a switch or letting go of a rope, the paradigms of the actions Hegel addresses are to be found rather in complex, extended processes such as writing a book or properly burying a slain brother" (*ST*, p. 400). Hegel's paradigmatic actions have the complex structure typically associated with planning agency, in which there is an overarching goal and various subgoals. This structure enables us to tell a story that connects the original intention to the achieved result, a story that will unite the intention and the achieved result in some progressive manner (thus securing the unity side of the conjunctive view), even if the action is a failure in the vulgar sense. So too, no vulgarly successful achievement of an intention is pure in the sense of realizing exactly what the abstract intention contained, for there are always contingencies that enter into the process of realization (thus securing the side of *difference*).

This treatment of action is fundamental to conceptual idealism because the GNC structure holds not only for intentional actions, but for the development of

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conceptual content in general. In this sense the structure and unity-in-difference of conceptual content is the same as the structure and unity-in-difference of intentional action. Brandom thus writes,

> The way this works for the case of agency will then be available to serve as a model of the process in terms of which we are to understand the relation of necessity to contingency (norm to actuality) through which determinateness arises or is revealed as traditions of concept application develop. […] the key to the development/expression of determinate conceptual norms through the incorporation of contingency in agency is the distinction of *historical* perspective between *pro*spective and *retro*spective perspectives on actions (the distinction between purposes and intentions).
>
> (ST, *p. 405)*

We learn here that the thesis of conceptual idealism will rely on the conception of a *dynamic process* conceived of as a tradition. Brandom specifies this process through the concept of action as a certain kind of *cycle* or loop. There is a feedback loop in an extended action that allows subjects to recalibrate their intentions in response to contingency in the world. "Fulfilling a complex intention is a cyclical process of intervention according to a plan aimed at a goal, observation of the results of the intervention, adjustment of the plan, further intervention, further observation of its results, and so on" (*ST*, p. 411). This loop is operative not just in intentional action, but in traditions of conceptual content development in general. In his reformulation of conceptual idealism at the end of the chapter, he writes that "the constellation of objective, conceptually articulating relations and subjective, conceptually articulating processes should be understood in the first instance in terms of the recollective phase of the *process* that is the cycle of intentional action" (*ST*, p. 419).

While the specifically *semantic* themes of Brandom's reading largely stay in the background in Chapter 11, they return to the forefront in Chapter 12, "Recollection, Representation, and Agency." The chapter opens with an extended comparison of Hegel with Frege on sense and reference, terms that Brandom has used throughout *A Spirit of Trust* but that are given a full Hegelian explication here. He begins with the bold mapping of several Hegelian oppositions onto that of sense and reference: for consciousness and in itself, phenomena and noumena, appearance and reality. While the "senses" are the way that objects and relations are presented to us, the "*referents* determined by and presented to us by those senses are the objective things and relations our thoughts and (so) judgments are *about*" (*ST*, pp. 422f.). Referents "set standards" (*ST*, p. 423) for the assessment of our cognitive and practical activity. In the Fregean picture, senses are "*what* we are saying or thinking" (*ST*, p. 423), the *content*, whereas referents are "what we are talking or thinking *about*" (*ST*, p. 423). In the *Phenomenology*, we begin from the way things *appear* to us, and the reality "is to emerge from consideration of *dynamic* features of the expressive *development* of those appearances" (*ST*, p. 424).

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According to Brandom, Hegel's account of sense and reference diverges from Frege's on a number of basic points: Hegel is a holist while Frege is an atomist. Brandom himself has defended a non-atomist interpretation of Frege, but here he writes that "however it might be with Frege himself, many contemporary neo-Fregean theories are thoroughly atomistic about senses" (*ST*, p. 426). Hegel has a comprehensive view that examines the sense of cognitive and practical activity, whereas Frege deals only with "*theoretical* or *cognitive* activity: paradigmatically, judging" (*ST*, p. 426). Hegel endorses the "categoreal homogeneity" of sense and reference, whereas for Frege "senses and referents are different *kinds* of things" (*ST*, p. 426). This last point contrasts Frege's conception of senses as "ontologically *sui generis*" with the Hegelian point, key to his conceptual realism, that "[n]oumena are a kind of phenomena" (*ST*, p. 427). The final main difference between Hegel and Frege "concerns the *determinateness* of senses" (*ST*, p. 429). Brandom notes that Frege understands senses as determining "classes of referents whose boundaries are *sharp, fixed*, and *complete*" (*ST*, p. 429). Brandom thus thinks that Frege would fall prey to the same criticism that Hegel directed against Kant, namely that he is not critical enough about the conditions of conceptual determinacy. Such conditions require nothing less than the whole Hegelian program in which development and process play central roles.

Brandom's functionalist theory of reference is complex, and getting it straight is crucial for understanding his overall account. He takes from Kant the idea that the "explanatory function" of reference (of a conception of what one is *referring* to) is "a *normative* function" (*ST*, p. 432). Objects or referents "provide a standard for assessments of the *correctness* of judgments and deeds" (*ST*, 432). Hegel's pragmatist move is, according to Brandom, to ask the following question: "What must one *do* in order thereby to be taking it that one's cognitive and practical commitments answer to such a standard?" (*ST*, p. 433). It is essential to conceptual contents that they have an "of" dimension, a representational dimension of being "directed at objects" (*ST*, p. 433). On Brandom's view of Hegel (this is also Brandom's own view), this dimension "can be understood to begin with" in terms of taking the conceptual contents "to stand to one another in relations of material incompatibility and consequence. That is, taking it that commitments to some contents *preclude* or *exclude* commitments to some others, and *include* commitments to still others" (*ST*, p. 433). Just as we learn in the cycle of intentional action which steps are incompatible with our original intention, so too we learn of *any* content that it is incompatible with other content. Brandom preserves his realist element in holding that "how [things] are *in* themselves swings free of how they are *for* the subject" (*ST*, p. 434). The question of *what* is referred to cannot be answered through some kind of direct inspection or by Fregean "truth," but can only be answered by "correct inferences," or "the truth *process*" (*ST*, p. 435). There is no other way to think of reference except in terms of sense. "The notion of what things are *in* themselves is the notion of how what things are *for* us *ought* to be. Hegelian referents are expressively ideal senses" (*ST*, p. 435). It follows from this view that reference can only be constructed with others who can challenge one's commitments, or by an individual over time through a series of experiences, in

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which the commitments of earlier selves are joined in a narrative of self-correction with her current commitments.

The sense–reference relation for Brandom's Hegel comes down in the end to telling a certain kind of retrospective story about one's experience. One must "perform a recollection," providing a "rational reconstruction" of conceptual content that exhibits that content "as the culmination of an *expressively progressive* trajectory selected from one's actual experiential past" (*ST*, p. 437). One leaves out the "wrong turns, blind alleys, and retrograde steps" (*ST*, p. 437) in one's actual experience in order to show how one's current commitments were always implicit in one's previous experience. Brandom is happy to call such recollection "Whiggish history," triumphalist in ignoring the retrograde in favor of the progressive. He continues, "performing such an *Erinnerung* is treating all the senses as *cognitively presenting* the referent, in that they actually *produce* knowledge of it as the culmination of the reconstructed trajectory through the actual course of development" (*ST*, p. 439). Tying the sense–reference claim back to his main argument for conceptual idealism, Brandom argues that the expressive "truth process," a continuous process of improvement recounted after the fact, "secures the semantic and cognitive relations between senses and their referents" (*ST*, p. 440). The conceptual idealism and conceptual realism turn out to be mutually supporting, for "a *realist* commitment is implicit in practically acknowledging the representational dimension of concept use. As Hegel often tells us, following Kant, his idealism is his way (he claims, the *only* ultimately satisfactory way) of making realism intelligible" (*ST*, p. 440). Just as our initially abstract intentions become intelligible in becoming actual, the real world of facts becomes intelligible through our theoretical and practical engagement with the world.

II. Three issues

In this section, I raise questions about how three elements of Brandom's view impact the conceptual realism–objective idealism–conceptual idealism triad. One aspect of these two chapters that separates them from the adjacent chapters is that Brandom does not thematize the dynamics of recognition here. This abstraction from the intersubjective processes of giving and asking for reasons makes it easier to draw out some essential tensions in his interpretation. For each of these three issues, I suggest an Hegelian solution that I believe is implicit in Brandom's view, but whose absence makes his conclusions less clear than they could be. My suggested corrections will be sketchy and tentative, but will gain definition in section IV when I turn to Hegel's text.

My first concern is with a potential bait-and-switch move in Brandom's realism and the sense–reference distinction. With his initial appeal to conceptual realism as a claim about the mind-independence of the world's relations of incompatibility, and his treatment of objective idealism as fully compatible with that realism, Brandom invites the reader to think of Hegel's view as a sober interpretive superstructure on an already constituted realm of objective relations. Brandom first introduces the sense–reference distinction into his interpretation of Hegel in laying out the nature of the objective idealism claim. The objective relations and subjective processes are said to be

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"reciprocally sense-dependent." Opposed to this is the (genuinely crazy) claim of "reference-dependence," which he glosses as a claim about existence.[2] But—and here comes the *switch*—the sense–reference distinction seems to break down in the Chapter 12 discussion, and Brandom seems *to aim* to break it down with a deflationary understanding of reference. The claims that "referents are expressively ideal senses" (*ST*, p. 435) and "referents are a privileged kind of sense" (*ST*, p. 436) are claims about referents as *normative standards* revealed in processes of sense-making. The problem is that it is not clear where that leaves his initial claims about realism, or the initial claims about the reference-dependence that contrasts with sense-dependence. When he moves to the claim that senses *produce* the referents, I really start to lose my grip on how the distinction could underwrite the conceptual realism and the objective idealism. It seems that the reciprocal sense-dependence claim, suitably amped up, *becomes* a reciprocal reference-dependence claim. His conceptual realism seems to disallow this, but it is hard to tell how it would be avoided in the end. Is there enough left of the sense–reference distinction to preserve the realist point?

The first thing to note in sorting out this issue is that Brandom's conceptual realism is not quite as baldly realist as it seems. It is, from the beginning, a claim about conceptual content, where this content is *for consciousness*. Reference is a relation to be achieved from the side of consciousness, so it is not like Brandom begins with an endorsement of naive or direct realism, even though some of his formulations do make it seem that way. Even with this softening of the initial realism, there remains the issue of what kind of realism results once the conceptual idealism argument has been completed. What counts as reality once we have accepted that the "whole constellation" of sense and reference is to be understood on the basis of subjective processes? Does Brandom aim to leave the world the way it was anyhow, and the idealism is just a question of our *access* to that world? He does seem to have Wittgensteinian leanings in this direction, but I do not think that is his view. Or, to put it slightly differently, it ought not to be his view of Hegel. Granting that there is some kind of natural scientific realist level (involving such claims as Brandom's favorite example of the melting point of copper), the question is how to leave that in place while arguing that Hegel's idealism goes beyond that in its attention to normativity. My suggestion is that what Brandom ought to say is that there is an order of the real that is constituted by conceptual activity, and in particular by the element of *self-reference* that looms so large in Hegel. Brandom's conceptual idealism can seem like a thesis adding another metalayer to material already constituted anyway. We should read it instead as the elevation to the status of reality of the ideal processes of sense-making through which we understand ourselves and put other items in the world in their place.

My second question is closely related to the first, for it concerns the way in which senses and referents are supposed to relate to each other. Brandom holds that the role played by truth in Frege's version of the sense–reference relation is played in Hegel "by concern for *correct inferences*, for what a sense or content *really follows* from and is *really incompatible* with what" (*ST*, p. 435). There must be a way that things *are* independent of our attitudes, but we cannot access this directly. We must, rather, approach how things really are through making inferences about how things show up for us,

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present themselves to us. Brandom clearly wants to have it both ways here: to adhere to a realism about how things really are, but to determine how things really are only through how they appear, so that the best current story about appearance really is how things are.[3] This seems unstable as a truce between realism and idealism. The realists will always feel like the account is one step short of saying what the really real amounts to, and the idealists will feel like the account only aims at discovery of what is already there. To the realist Brandom's Hegel will seem like a radical social constructivist, while to the idealists the view will seem to be, to use Pippin's phrase, an "inferential positivism" (Pippin 2005, p. 392).[4]

Once again the challenge is how to do justice to the theoretical paradigm of the world as it is anyway while giving priority to the practical activities of reasoning. The issue, which Hegel presents most explicitly in the third part of *The Science of Logic*, is how to relate "the Idea of the true" and "the Idea of the good." Hegel's answer there would fit Brandom's view in so far as Hegel stresses the superiority of the practical inference of action to the merely theoretical inferences. Hegel calls the practical inference "the *inference* of the self-subsistent free Concept" (*GW* 12, p. 159). In Hegel's view there is a certain givenness in the theoretical conception of the true that makes it inferior to the practical conception of the good. Brandom does pick up on this in emphasizing the active character of the subjective processes. But I would take this one step further and emphasize the *evaluative* character of the practical inferences, the way in which they incorporate and subordinate the causes and effects of the theoretical inferences in making the world conform to our purposes.

This brings me to my third and final question, which concerns the relation of "modeling" that Brandom invokes to connect the theoretical and practical domains. This is basically a question about his pragmatism, and about how he sees pragmatism informing Hegel's idealism. Take, for instance, Brandom's claim that "[i]ntentions in this sense are the guiding norms on the practical side that we are to use as the model of *facts* that guide the development of concepts on the theoretical side" (*ST*, pp. 443f.). What kind of model is this? One way to read this would be Deweyan, and roughly instrumentalist. Treating intention as an experimental hypothesis, we could say that the action-experiment consists in putting the hypothesis-intention into effect, and the successful experimental result is the realization of the hypothesis. On this parallel, the intention-like facts are contained in the hypothesis, and should the hypothesis need to be revised as a result of the experiment, the facts would change along with it. The hypothesis or intention plays the role of fact by partly determining the circumstances of its own application upfront, in the construction of the experiment. We *aim* for a certain theoretically specified determination of the facts, and the agreement or disagreement of the results with the hypothesis will lead us to revise our conception of the facts, or in Brandom's language, our commitments. This makes good sense on Brandom's view, as long as we keep in focus that there is a "cycle of action" involving both intentions and the facts modeled on them. My worry, though, is that this talk of intention-like facts is too indeterminate. The talk of facts leads us to expect something that is independent in some sense from the subject. We may access facts through what we *do* (especially through revision of our commitments), and in this limited sense the

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facts would be the result of our action. This threatens to reduce the conceptual idealism to the objective idealism, for it amounts to the claim that the processes of cognition determine the sense-dependence of objects and concepts. It is not clear what extra work the metalevel subjective processes are supposed to do.

To locate the advance beyond objective idealism through the cycle of action we should attend more to Hegel's insight that there are different *kinds* of objects, different *kinds* of facts, where the distinguishing feature of the facts is their level of self-determination. Instead of seeing the facts as *modeled on* intention, Brandom should see the intentional as the paradigm kind of fact in terms of which all other facts are evaluated. One of the most striking omissions from Brandom's account of Hegel is an in-depth discussion of the living, of organic entities, but it is precisely there that we have objects or facts that have an internally self-revising process within them. Of course, in one sense Brandom is constantly talking about such an entity, for human community or *Geist* is the ultimate form of the living. The worry, though, is that in his realism–idealism discussions too much attention is paid to the epistemological project of making sense of facts that are already there, and not enough to the specific relations within the internally purposive, living wholes.

III. Two comparisons

In this section I will attempt to home in on Brandom's conceptual idealism by comparing it to two other accounts inspired by Hegel. The first comparison is with Brandom's own teacher, Richard Rorty. In this case, Brandom has in effect done much of the comparative work for us in his essay on Rorty's pragmatism entitled "Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism." There he worries about elements in Rorty's position that bear no small similarity to elements of the position he extracts from Hegel in *A Spirit of Trust*. In what follows, he may, like the natural consciousness in the *Phenomenology*, thereby "suffer violence at his own hands." If so, I hope it is with similarly productive results. Since he advocates measuring one's previous selves by one's current commitments, Brandom could eliminate (as retrograde) his earlier text from his performative recollection, but I am guessing that he would not.[5] As the title of the piece indicates, the concern throughout is with Rorty's emphasis on our vocabularies, where vocabularies are the vehicles of meaning and truth. The criticism of Rorty around which Brandom bases his essay turns on Rorty's Davidsonian claim that "[t]he world consists of things and their causal relations, and they can only cause and not justify a claim or a belief" (*VP*, p. 161). Justification is inferential, and what justifies a claim or a belief is only another claim or belief. Every truth and fact depends on a human vocabulary, so that without vocabularies there are no truths and no facts (*VP*, p.161). Brandom chastises Rorty for doing away with facts that can make claims correct or incorrect. That is, he criticizes Rorty for doing away with the realistic core that Brandom attributes to Hegel. Rorty could be said to rely for justification solely on the subjective processes that figure in the reciprocal sense-dependence claim of objective idealism, for a vocabulary just is such a sense-making. Rorty has the metalevel story or metavocabulary—Brandom calls it the metavocabulary of vocabularies (*VP*, p. 169)—

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that is pivotal for conceptual idealism, but he is lacking the conceptual realism and thus has no anchor for the content in the world.

My question here is whether Brandom himself can still retain his conceptual realism in light of the two varieties of idealism, or whether his own reading of Hegel falls prey to the same criticisms that the earlier Brandom had leveled against Rorty. Is his phenomenological semantic reading of Hegel just what it sounds like—a doctrine of appearances or vocabularies that floats free of realistic constraint?

Brandom's summary of Rorty's view presents the link to action in Deweyan terms. We assess the success or failure of a vocabulary based on its instrumental success as a tool to achieve our purposes. Brandom thematizes the difference between naturalistic and historicist modes of assessment of the success of vocabularies. He characterizes the historicist mode in much the same language that he uses in *A Spirit of Trust* to characterize Hegel's conceptual idealism: success can only be judged retrospectively, and he uses as his example the proposal to "rewrite the history of art Whiggishly" (*VP*, p. 171) from the perspective of nineteenth-century realist painting. One of the nice things about reading this essay in conjunction with Chapter 12 is that Brandom actually expresses here some of the worries that come naturally in reading Brandom's own endorsement of Whiggish history. He writes, "Historicist pragmatism courts the dangers of smugness and empty self-satisfaction. For it is far too easy to tell Whiggish retrospective stories, rationally reconstructing one's tradition as a monotonic approach to the pinnacle of one's current vocabulary" (*VP*, p. 171). He also states nicely the dangers of the naturalist pragmatist, who, runs the risk of "reductionism and philistinism" (*VP*, p. 171) by indexing all progress to the basic goals of welfare. Though Brandom clearly favors the historicist approach, he does think that the naturalist perspective is a good antidote to the "self-satisfied parochialism" (*VP*, p. 171) that is the hazard of the historicist. In the end, Brandom largely agrees with Rorty in arguing for a pragmatism of complementary vocabularies, each able to check the excesses of the others, and all subject to the metavocabulary of vocabularies, a modestly metaphysical, inclusionary semantics.

In his reply, Rorty is doubtful that Brandom's move to *the social* is enough to get a robust account of "facts" off the ground. Rorty is especially doubtful that any such account of facts is *desirable*. Encouraging a view in which there are "hard facts" accessed through immediate perception seems to give too much comfort to the enemy, that is, to the "authoritarian" view that treats hard science as having a privileged kind of reality compared to literature or baseball (2000, p. 187).

This argument highlights an interesting tension in Brandom's view: the tension between conceptual realism as an abstract thesis about the independence from human practices, on the one hand, and the *intelligibility* of that realism as a thesis about sense-making and the subjective social processes of reason-giving, on the other. Brandom does not say that the world is "well lost," yet he is willing to say that we make and remake the world with our developing conceptual arsenal. It is striking that Rorty is happy to take on board Brandom's shift to metavocabularies, for that move promises to further distance us from the truth-making qualities of facts that Brandom had proposed as an antidote to Rorty's view.

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One further noteworthy point from this reply is Rorty's remark that Brandom exposes himself to the charges (frequently leveled against Rorty himself) of "pseudo-aristocratic condescension and ivory-tower aestheticism" (2000, p. 189). In the essay, Brandom had joined Rorty in saying that contributing to the great conversation of humanity is what fundamentally gives us moral worth. The danger with focusing on these most distinctively human capacities is not hard to find in Brandom's claim (flagged by Rorty) that "pain, and like it various sorts of social and economic deprivation, have a second-hand, but nonetheless genuine, moral significance" (*VP*, p. 178). One could summon a similar unease in reading *A Spirit of Trust* because its focus on *expressivity* does not encourage us to dwell on the basic needs and travails of the finite, embodied agent.

Another Hegelian, one of a decidedly more conservative bent, who developed the concept of a historical *tradition* as a response to the shortcomings of analytic *moral* philosophy, is Alasdair MacIntyre. Reading *A Spirit of Trust* alongside MacIntyre's account in *After Virtue* raises the question of whether the concept of tradition entails substantive commitments that Brandom might not be willing to accept. MacIntyre is dealing specifically with moral vocabulary, and advocating a return to an Aristotelian teleology, whereas Brandom's account is semantic and for the most part stays in a deontological register, but both are focused on the Hegelian issue of determinate content. MacIntyre writes in an unmistakably Hegelian vein, "Without those moral particularities to begin from there would never be anywhere to begin; but it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists. Yet particularity can never be simply left behind or obliterated" (1984, p. 221). This is not far from the idea of the common law as an interpretive tradition that Brandom endorses. For MacIntyre we are "bearers of a tradition" (1984, p. 221) whether we like it or not, and yet he has a surprisingly open-ended, self-critical view: "A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition" (1984, p. 222). For MacIntyre, the notion of a tradition puts some substantive constraints on what a coherent moral theory and practice could be. Specifically, a tradition is closely bound to a unified human life. Tying his discussion into his overall polemic, MacIntyre writes, "Unsurprisingly it is the lack of any such unifying conception of a human life which underlies modern denials of the factual character of moral judgments and more especially of those judgments which ascribe virtues or vices to individuals" (1984, p. 225).

From MacIntyre's substantive moral standpoint, it is not clear whether Hegel is part of the solution or part of the problem. Is Hegel's modernism a decisive break with the Aristotelian tradition? Or is it a heroic attempt to reconcile a Kantian Enlightenment view with Aristotelian naturalism and teleology?

The comparison with Brandom gets even more interesting when we look at MacIntyre's postscript to the second edition of *After Virtue*. There he cites Rorty as drawing the consequences of the breakdown of the Kantian distinctions, and as showing that analytic philosophy's "competence has been restricted to the study of inferences" (1984, p. 267). On this view of inferences, they can only stand in justificatory relation to each other, and coherent systems of such inferences can be

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immunized from critique by the others. This has the effect that analytic, non-historicist philosophy "can never establish the *rational acceptability* of any particular position in cases where each of the alternative rival positions available has sufficient range and scope" (1984, p. 267). What is interesting here is that Brandom's conception of philosophy, and his effort to move analytic philosophy from its Kantian to its Hegelian phase, shares MacIntyre's concerns about the inadequacy of ahistorical, anti-realist inferentialism to meet the purposes of philosophy. MacIntyre's historicist conclusion about the need for rethinking what counts as a successful theory also resonates with Brandom:

> our situation in respect of theories about what makes one theory rationally superior to another is no different from our situation in regard to scientific theories or to moralities-and-moral-philosophies. In the former as in the latter case what we have to aspire to is not a perfect theory, one necessarily to be assented to by any rational being, because invulnerable or almost invulnerable to objections, but rather the best theory to emerge so far in the history of this class of theories. So we ought to aspire to provide the best theory so far as to what type of theory the best theory so far must be: no more, but no less.
>
> *(1984, p. 270)*

I take it that Brandom has given us in his Hegel interpretation just such a meta-theory. We might worry, though, about whether the inclusionary, pragmatist pluralism of his meta-theory will really admit of genuine judgments about specific theories, or about specific moral and political practices. We need not even focus on the *best* practices, but only on better and worse, in order to generate this worry. How do we get beyond coherence as a standard for our recollective narratives? What kind of arguments can we make to justify one coherent story as superior to another?

IV. Locating conceptual idealism in the *Phenomenology*

I have not yet said much about Brandom's views in Chapters 11 and 12 as a reading of Hegel. Brandom's exegetical style has at times caused undue suspicion of the inferentialist interpretation; there is a tendency to assume that he is imposing his own concerns on Hegel rather than accurately *expressing* what is already there. This tendency is unfortunate, because Hegel *is* an inferentialist, and Brandom's interpretations generally *are* well-grounded in the text. That being said, the path from Hegel's texts to Brandom's formulations is harder to make out in Chapters 11 and 12 than in other parts of *A Spirit of Trust*. Where exactly in the *Reason* chapter does Hegel make an argument for conceptual idealism? Brandom writes that the thesis "emerges" in the course of the chapter, and his own account places the emphasis on the account of action at the beginning of *Reason C*. On the face of it, *Reason C* is a treatment of early modern individualistic forms of agency, and thus does not seem fit to bear the weight that Brandom assigns to it. Yet I do see a

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textual basis in *Reason* for an idealist thesis similar to Brandom's, and I will take this closing section to draw it out in relation to Brandom's view.

Why should we think that anything like Hegel's distinctive brand of idealism emerges in *Reason*? The chapter is strange, to say the least, consisting of a first long section on Observing Reason which deals mainly with the emerging natural sciences, a section entitled *The Actualization of Rational Self-Consciousness through Itself*, and finally a third section *Individuality Which to Itself Is Real in and for Itself*. While the importance of Hegel's discussion of action has been recognized by many commentators, the lessons of the chapter have most often been construed *negatively*: the failure of "observation," the failure of one-sided reference to one's own standards of morality, the failure of individualist models of action. There is strong evidence that Hegel's change in plan for the *Phenomenology* happened in the middle of writing the *Reason* chapter, which only adds to the conundrum of what exactly is accomplished in these three sections.

The most efficient way to get a grip on the systematic function of the *Reason* chapter is by looking at Hegel's recapitulation of the argument in *Absolute Knowing*. Much of that enigmatic text is Hegel's attempt to join together the structure (he says "form") of objectivity laid out in Chapters I–III with the social and historical account in Chapters V and VI. (Chapter IV is not thematized in detail, but it does play a crucial role.) Hegel's recapitulation is oriented by the goal of overcoming consciousness, which means uniting the form of objectivity in the *Consciousness* chapters with the account of Self-Consciousness and Spirit in the rest of the book. He describes the joining of the two accounts as the "reconciliation of Spirit with its own genuine consciousness" (*PG/P*, §793) and the "reconciliation of consciousness with self-consciousness" (*PG/P*, §794). These formulations indicate that something fundamental for Hegel's idealism is captured in the unification of the two accounts, and Hegel does indicate that this unification gets under way within *Reason*. He describes in more detail just what has happened in Chapters V and VI as follows:

> This overcoming of the object of consciousness is not to be taken one-sidedly, as showing that the object is returning into the self, but rather, it is to be taken more determinately, both that the object as such exhibited itself to the self as vanishing, as well as being instead the self-relinquishing [*Entäusserung*] of self-consciousness that posits thinghood, and that this self-relinquishing does not only have a negative meaning but rather a positive one as well, and not only for us, or in itself, but also for self-consciousness itself.
>
> (PG/P, §788)

What follows this passage is a summary description of the structure of objectivity in Chapters I–III, culminating with a description of the inferential structure resulting from the "inverted world" at the end of *Force and the Understanding*. There are four principal conceptual moments: (1) immediacy (*Sense-Certainty*), (2) relation or determinacy (*Perception*), (3) essentiality or law (most of *Force and the Understanding*), and (4) holistic inferential relations (inner difference and infinity). In his recapitulation, Hegel aligns (1) with the end of *Observing Reason*, (2) with the "utility" that

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is the truth of the Enlightenment, (3) with the Kantian moral worldview, and (4) with conscience, including confession and forgiveness.[6]

There are a host of interpretive problems raised by this mapping. Why is phrenology such a significant concept within *Reason*? Why does Hegel skip from Observing Reason all the way to utility, which had seemed like a relatively minor moment in *Bildung*? The recapitulation clearly does emphasize the end of *Spirit* that looms so large in Part 3 of *A Spirit of Trust* (and in my own 2011), the recognition of conscience as agency in confession and forgiveness. A full account of action in the *Phenomenology* would indeed need to focus on that holistic culmination, but we can get a grip on the main issue through looking just at the first two moments.

First, let us try to reconstruct Brandom's argument in light of Hegel's statement of the recollective task of Absolute Knowing. In Brandom's argument for objective idealism, the key idea is the reciprocal sense-dependence of relations of objectivity (Hegel's categories of Consciousness) on the subjective process of experience (Hegel's Self-Consciousness). This bring us up to Chapter V, *Reason*, setting up the project of understanding how the objective relations of nature are related to the subjective processes of living human beings. Conceptual idealism, then, is the answer to a choice that Brandom presents as follows: do we understand the constellation of objective relations and subjective processes through "the relational categories of objectivity or the practical-processual categories of subjectivity?" (*ST*, p. 369). Conceptual idealism is the claim that there is an explanatory priority of the latter categories, and intentional agency is so important because it is the prime exemplar of those processes.

In light of Hegel's recapitulations in *Absolute Knowing*, one might think that something has gone very wrong in Brandom's interpretation. The point of the *Absolute Knowing* presentation is not to choose between different categories of objectivity and subjectivity. Rather, Hegel's argument is that those categories are *fundamentally the same*. Overcoming the form of the object means reconciliation with the structure of consciousness through demonstrating that subjectivity has produced a world which allows it to experience itself as objective, as embodying those very same relational categories. So, whereas Brandom asks us to choose between *two* sets of categories, Hegel takes his own demonstration to show that there is only *one* set of categories. The reconciliation of consciousness and self-consciousness is the realization of that identity in the rationally reconstructed history of Spirit.

But this criticism of Brandom is too simplistic. Looked at in another way, we *can* read Hegel's account in *Absolute Knowing* as the claim of a certain kind of priority. In the last part of the description above (from *PG/P*, §788), Hegel writes that in *Reason* and *Spirit*, the categorical structure of the object is shown to originate in the activity of self-consciousness itself, and to gain a meaning that is known by self-consciousness as the product of its own (self-alienating, or "self-relinquishing") activity. This can be seen as supporting Brandom's conceptual idealism in that the objective relations considered on their own are subordinated to the self-conscious form that they take in the subjective practices and processes of Reason and Spirit. Conceptual idealism would then be the claim that the practical, processual versions of immediacy, relation, essence, and holistic infinity take priority over the versions

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of those categories that seem to structure the world independently of whether or not there are subjects to know it. Viewed in this light, it is certainly *misleading* for Brandom to talk about *two sets of categories*, but his basic point about the priority of the subjective processes is sound.

Returning to my concerns from section II, I would like now to suggest how Brandom's framework could give a more robust priority of the practical while also more clearly preserving the objects of the theoretical domain. I criticized his account as wavering between doing too little to the theoretical (leaving alone the realist core) and doing too much (replacing referents with senses, etc.). When we examine the practical recapitulation of the *Phenomenology*, what we find is a shift from the theoretical to the practical that maintains a difference but establishes a clear superiority and priority of the practical.

A closer look at Hegel's description of the transition from *Observing Reason* will bring out what I think Brandom *should* say about conceptual idealism's subjective processes. Hegel's recapitulation of the transition from phrenology to active reason and the Enlightenment conception of utility does support a version of conceptual idealism similar to Brandom's. Hegel writes,

> Thus, with regard to the object, insofar as it is immediate and is an *indifferent being*, we saw observing reason *seeking* and *finding* itself in these indifferent things, i.e., as consciously aware of its doing as external doing as much as it is consciously aware of the object merely as an immediate object.—We also saw its determination at its highest point expressed in the infinite judgment that the *being of the I is a thing*.—namely, as a sensuous immediate thing. […] Taken in that way, that former judgment is spiritless, or instead spiritlessness itself. However, according to its *concept*, it is in fact the richest in spirit, and this, its *inner*, which is not yet *present* in the concept, is what is expressed in the two other moments which are still to be examined.
>
> *(*PG/P*, §790)*

Hegel criticizes physiognomy and phrenology for trying to predict human action, to read intention and character, by observing the face and the shape of one's skull. Hegel thus clearly argues against theories that try to give priority to "objective relations" of face and cranium over the subjective processes of action. But he finds in the judgment that expresses the extreme version of Observing Reason the key to overcoming the observational conception of knowledge, the key to introducing the priority of the subjective, of the I.

How does Hegel justify the switch from the spiritless to the most rich in spirit? By a reversal of consciousness, which in this case takes the form of a reversal of the judgment "The I is a thing." Phrenology leaves us with the result that Spirit is a bone. But if we reverse sides, taking what is for-consciousness as the new in-itself, we find that the identity of Spirit and thinghood is our new object. We henceforth can treat things in the world as material expressions of Spirit.

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This transition is so momentous because it represents a shift from fact to value, where the trajectory henceforth is to show that value and valuing have a rational structure. A clue to this reading comes in the *Absolute Knowing* recapitulation in Hegel's quick (and rather jarring) move to the Enlightenment.[7] He writes,

> *The thing is I*: In fact, in this infinite judgment, the thing is sublated. The thing is nothing in itself; it only has any meaning [*Bedeutung*] in relationships, only *through the I* and *its relation* to the I.—In fact, this moment emerged for consciousness in pure insight and Enlightenment. Things are purely and simply *useful* and are only to be considered in terms of their utility.
>
> (PG/P, §791)

Utility is a way to think about meaning in relation to human purposes. It is a *value* term that enables us to think of the items in the world as potential for human agency. The counterpart of utility in *Consciousness* is the perceptual category of relation, which consists of two moments, for-itself and for-another. Utility provides a substantive correlate of this relationality in terms of a world of value and a form of *agency* that views objects as nothing more than functions of its purposes.

So, let us ask again Brandom's conceptual idealism question: what gives the subjective inferential processes priority over the objective inferential relations? Brandom stresses the pragmatist dimension: there is something we must do, a normative act, a question of responsibility that is not determined, and cannot be determined, by the objective inferential relations alone. This is fine, as far as it goes, but I think the explicit introduction of value into the picture gives us something more to say, something that makes better intuitive sense of the idealism in play here. On the value reading we can say that the subjective processes take priority because they are what determine relationships of value—most basically, what is essential and what is inessential. That is true of science as an active practice, but also, and more importantly, of ethical practice. The true is what is good in the way of belief, and the ethically good (Hegel's "Idea of the Good") incorporates and subordinates the world that consists of merely objective causal relations. The priority of process in this absolute idealism should be cast as the priority of practices of value over matters of fact. (I would also stress that there is an underlying structure of valuing that we can identify with the Concept, but I cannot go into that argument here.)

This value-oriented conclusion should really not be that surprising once the importance of action has been acknowledged. Sometimes Brandom's emphatic deontology gets in the way, but in so far as meaning and value are closely related concepts, I think that this shift towards value can be seen as implicit in Brandom's inferentialist reading. His specific analysis of action lends itself to interpretation in terms of value conceptions such as utility. While utility does not involve the full-blown distinction between Brandom's intentional and consequential conceptions of action, Hegel's description of the object of action as involving the contradiction between for-itself and for-others does clearly highlight the tension between the two sides of that distinction. In fact, we could say that the Enlightenment's utility-

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based ethics is an initial stabilization of the tension between the intentional (for-itself) and consequential (for-another), though one destined to give birth to the French Revolution and then to destroy itself because of the absence of stable patterns of value.[8] Critics of modernity such as MacIntyre basically think that the dead end of the Revolutionary terror is the ultimate fate of modern freedom. The question for Brandom's reading of the *Spirit* chapter is whether his Hegel can demonstrate that recognition and conscience can save modern freedom from itself.

The question for my value interpretation is whether it leads to an overly edifying picture of philosophy that rests on a wishful Platonic value metaphysics. Hegel did worry about one-sided claims for the primacy of the practical, but that does not mean that his ultimate goals were merely theoretical. Hegel's philosophy is an ethical idealism, and his theory of value is crucial for understanding his metaphysics as well as his practical philosophy. If we see value as standing in irreconcilable opposition to the real or to the true, that is our fault, not the result of a fissure in the concepts or in reality itself. Brandom is right to stress that this reconciliation is our responsibility, something that is up to us. Before we can make the claim that the good is the measure of the real and the rational, we have to do the work, theoretical and practical, to demonstrate that we are entitled to that identity.

Notes

1 Brandom responds to Pippin's charge (in Pippin 2005) that his idealism is too "anodyne" (*ST*, pp. 213ff.).
2 "That is, even if the concept nail is sense dependent on the concept hammer, it would not follow that it was impossible for there to *be* nails without there being hammers to drive them" (*TMD*, p. 195).
3 Brandom's view is similar to that of Peirce, who wrote, "Upon our principle, therefore, that the absolutely incognizable does not exist, so that the phenomenal manifestation of a substance is the substance, we must conclude that the mind is a sign developing according to the laws of inference" (1981–, vol. 2, pp. 241f.).
4 See Bernstein's essay in this volume for further reflections on this point.
5 The piece is in fact included in one of Brandom's more recent collections of essays, *Perspectives on Pragmatism*.
6 I give a more thorough treatment of this recapitulation in Moyar 2017.
7 It is especially strange that Hegel switches right away to the Enlightenment, since he already introduces these relational considerations in the first paragraph of *Reason B*. The basic issue here is the curiously overlapping histories of *Reason* and *Spirit*: there is a sense in which the shapes of *Reason B* are also Enlightenment shapes, even though they are not presented as shapes of a world.
8 This view of the relation between intention, consequence, and value is supported by the placement of "subjective value" in the *Philosophy of Right* §122, where Hegel thematizes means–end chains.

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