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Talking with a tradition.
Brandom and classical epistemology

Abstract: The present paper addresses the issue of Brandom's engagement with the philosophical tradition. I begin with an assessment of what Brandom calls "Gadamerian platitudes" and the way in which these methodological principles inform his own hermeneutic procedure. I then go on to identify a Hegelian component in Brandom's philosophical quest and contend that this constitutes a common ground between his intellectual project and Gadamer's. I conclude with an investigation of a paradigmatic example of Brandom's Hegelianized hermeneutic strategy, namely his take on Leibniz's epistemology.

Keywords: Brandom, hermeneutics, Hegel, epistemology, inferentialism, mediation.

Introduction

Historically, thinkers associated with the analytic tradition have been known to disavow any endeavor that assumed a historical dimension of the philosophical undertaking. This is not to say that analytic philosophers completely disregard any kind of reference to the philosophical tradition. One could pinpoint at least a negative approach, one that targets certain episodes that belong to the history of philosophy with the precise objective of exposing them as inexcusable departures from the standards of conceptual clarity and perhaps even as indefensible deviations from the ideal of intellectual honesty. A positive attempt, one that would consciously and deliberately build on the texts of the predecessors has not however, been a constant preoccupation within the analytic tradition.

Robert Brandom represents a notable exception. The author of *Tales of the Mighty Death* claims that the rudimentary tenets of the analytic manner of philosophizing, witch according to him include "faith in reasoned argument" (Brandom 2002, 2), "hope for reasoned agreement" (Brandom 2002, 2), and "clarity of reasoned expression" (Brandom 2002, 2) could in principle be and might even need to be supplemented with a historical component.

In carrying out his philosophical project Brandom relies on several main traits of Gadamerian hermeneutics. It has been argued that there are many incompatibilities between what Brandom envisages as a fruitful hermeneutic

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procedure and its Gadamerian counterpart (see: Wretzel 2013, Lafont 2007). In the present paper I would like to emphasize an aspect that in my opinion brings Brandom in close proximity with the hermeneutic tradition. My contention is that Brandom operates within a Hegelian framework of prosecuting intellectual history, a hermeneutic skeleton that has been embraced by Gadamer as well.

I. The way Brandom pursues his philosophical desideratum is by adopting and employing a full-fledged hermeneutic method that dwells on what he designates as "Gadamerian platitudes" (Brandom has also been compared with Habermas, see: Baynes 2007). Brandom contends that his own inferentialist theory of meaning "underwrites and explains some of the axial gadamerian hermeneutic platitudes" (Brandom 2002, 94). I will not deal with that issue here, since I am concerned only with the proximity between the two thinkers. An interpretative enterprise that could be deemed successful must productively negotiate between two radically opposed perspectives. The first, dubbed "black-letter reading" (Brandom 2002, 90), requires that we be able to precisely indicate in the text that we are interpreting the proposition by means of which something that we identify as a certain authors opinion is unequivocally voiced. The second, entitled "hermeneutic ventriloquism" (Brandom 2002, 90) describes the interpretative strategy that simply uses another authors sayings as a vehicle for the expression of one's own convictions.

Concretely, what Brandom has here in mind concerns the issue of the inevitable danger implied by any attempt to situate oneself within a tradition, namely that of artificially establishing a convenient, self-serving narrative that would legitimize ones claims. Brandom addresses this problem by emphasizing that one does not first arrive at some standpoint and then simply state that others were involved in a similar intellectual venture, but rather the very philosophical-historical practice is defined as an intrinsic part of the exercise of self-clarification of ones ideas. Although Brandom does not contend that this "autobiographical response" (Brandom 2002, 91) should be seen as his strongest argument in this situation, I claim that from a hermeneutic point of view this is indeed a powerful statement given the extended space allocated in any debate about hermeneutics to the dimension of self-understanding involved in any act of comprehension.

Brandom offers another argument, one that is his opinion goes to the heart of the problem. His strategy is to question the very "presupposition of the challenge" (Brandom 2002, 91). Accordingly, one could object to Brandom's procedure by arguing that the sense of a certain work of the past is not something that should be manufactured by its readers, but rather something that we should come upon during interpretation. On this account we should be able to access the author's rudimentary intentions. It is a

principle that was very dear to classical hermeneutics, as Brandom justly observes. He describes it as follows: "The author uses language as an instrument for the expression of thoughts that have the content they do independently of any such possibility of expression. Communication is successful if the ideas aroused in the reader have the same contents as those the speaker intended to elicit by those words" (Brandom 2002, 91). As Brandom rightly notices no serious contemporary philosopher would accept this unproductive manner of engaging with the philosophical tradition. For Brandom, as well as for Gadamer before him, the contrary perspective of taking a text as merely the pretext for the engraving from the interpreter's side of a sense of his choosing is equally undesirable.

Brandom argues that Gadamerian hermeneutics succeeds in furnishing an interpretative strategy that manages to mediate between these two extremes: "Gadamer has developed a hermeneutic idiom that articulates a via media between seeing a text as simply dictating the meaning to be found there, on the one hand, and seeing it as a tabula rasa on which readers are free to inscribe whatever meaning they wish, on the other" (Brandom 2002, 92). The sense of a given work cannot be secured by investigating the aims envisaged by the author of that particular work or by scrutinizing the purposes envisioned by the interpreter of that same philosophical artifact. The goals of both the speaker and the audience are just expressions that find themselves in need of further interpretation, or as Brandom puts it "a somewhat more capricious text" (Brandom 2002, 92).

The above mentioned idea constitutes the first Gadamerian platitude, namely the strong dismissal of the hermeneutic principle that proclaims the intentions of the speaker as the ultimate source of meaning. The second platitude concerns the inescapable contextual character of any comprehensive business: "A text can be read only from some point of view, in some context" (Brandom 2002, 92). The third platitude covers the dialogical essence of the hermeneutic enterprise. According to Brandom in the picture painted by Gadamer the work under consideration is but one of the protagonists in the game of understanding, perhaps not even the main character. An important role is assigned here to the idea of belonging to a tradition as a crucial factor involved in understanding. Consequently, a versed interpreter is the one who has mastered the ability to consider and mediate between several conflicting tendencies: "Understanding (practical grasp of meaning) consists in exercising a practical capacity to adjudicate the reciprocal claims of authority and responsibility on the part of the text and various contexts" (Brandom 2002, 93). As a result of this multitude of possible interpretive contexts a pluralism regarding the sense of philosophical woks must necessarily ensue: "Relativizing assignments of meaning to contexts entails a pluralism about the meaning of texts" (Brandom 2002, 93). Yet again, a skilled interpreter is the one who can easily and productively deal

with these dissimilar viewpoints. Finally, considering the fact that each interpretation generates new interpretative contexts we can reasonably conclude that there is no last and definitive sense that one can ascribe to a work. For Brandom's Gadamer the procedure of interpretation is open-ended.

This is the full inventory of what Brandom calls "Gadamerian platitudes":

> The denial of certain sorts of authority to the author of a text […], the relativization of meaning to context in a very broad sense, the model of dialogue, meaning pluralism, the open-endedness and mutability of semantic perspectives – I propose to call these by now familiar ways of talking gadamerian platitudes. (Brandom 2002, 94)

Brandom advises us with regard to the meaning of the term "platitude" involved in his characterization of the Gadamerian project. As one would expect, "platitude" is not used here pejoratively so as to designate something along the lines of useless truisms or statements that lack any informative content. I assume that what Brandom is trying to ascertain is that these five principles are the necessary guidelines for any hermeneutic project that takes itself seriously. You simply cannot embark of an interpretative mission without having the adequate hermeneutic tools with you: "The gadamerian platitudes are just the sort of thing it seems to me we should want to be entitled to say about the interpretation of texts" (Brandom 2002, 94).

Brandom invokes these five fundamental hermeneutic principles in order to establish his own undertaking of the concept of interpretation. As he puts it he is pursuing a narrower concept of interpretation than the one employed by Gadamer. Brandom is interested in interpretation when it is applied exclusively to philosophical artifacts and their particular features: "My concern here, though, is with specifically philosophical texts, traditions, and readers" (Brandom 2002, 94). The distinctive mark of a philosophical work according to Brandom lies in its capacity to generate conceptual content, namely "to play a role as premise and conclusion in inferences" (Brandom 2002, 94).

Brandom provides us with a conceptual model of interpretation, one that is directed towards an ideal of understanding that entails the ability to identify and deal with specific inferential roles. This is described by Brandom as the capacity to ascertain the logical consequences of a particular claim as well as those things that could be invoked in support of the claim and those things that would disprove the specific claim. Furthermore one should achieve the capability of distinguishing the particular commitments that one is taking upon himself when one is making a specific claim, as well as the entitlements that support the above mentioned commitments.

Brandom theorizes two types of interpretation or as he puts is two types of "specifications of conceptual content" (Brandom 2002, 94). The first one

entitled *de dicto* is concerned with the accurate reconstruction of the intentions of the author: "The idea of *de dicto* specifications of conceptual content is for the ascriber to use words that in her mouth express the same content that the words the target did use or would have expressed" (Brandom 2002, 96). This is something along the lines of an archaeological procedure by means of which we manage to appraise an authors commitments (and therefore credit him as holding them) by investigating other convictions that the author might have subscribed to. This would enable us, for example, to discern what exactly that author would have deemed as upholding his statements and what he would have diagnosed as refuting them. All these inferential connections are to be reinforced by what Brandom labels as "the circumstances of production of the text" (Brandom 2002, 98).

On this account one should refrain from judgment and instead get accustomed with all the details of the context in which a claim was pronounced. It is the action of fully immersing oneself into the educational, cultural or economic surroundings that contributed to the creation of a certain philosophical artifact. It involves, for example, familiarizing oneself with the shifts that may have occurred during an authors entire intellectual career, being capable to specify the role that any particular work fulfills within the entire scheme of an author's philosophical walk of life, or to acquaint oneself with those distinctly non-philosophical commitments that a thinker might have held. The interpreter involved in a *de dicto* specification must therefore secure a degree of familiarity and expertise regarding the intricacies of a thinker's intellectual activity, which in turn would effectively render him capable of answering to any request of elucidation in the exact manner as the thinker if he would have been present: "One wants to be able to say what the author *would in fact have said* in response to various questions of clarification and extension" (Brandon 2002, 99). This is the profile of what a scholar should be like, namely someone who has the legitimacy and credibility to express judgments such as the one we can observe in the following example provided by Brandom: "No-one before Hegel ever took explaining how one ought to do intellectual history as a criterion of adequacy on his theory of conceptual content […]" (Brandom 2002, 99).

But there is more to interpretation than this. Brandom institutes a second type of interpretative affair, the "*de re* specification of conceptual content" (Brandom 2002, 99). This kind of interpretation targets the same material as *de dicto* interpretation but it does so by assuming another hermeneutic scenario, namely the readers own repertoire of cherished beliefs: "[…] from the context provided by collateral premises that are, from the point of view of the ascriber, *true*" (Brandom 2002, 102). We are provided here with a methodology that enables us to evaluate a thinker's assertions despite what his declared conceptual allegiances are. For example, we ought to show the actual logical upshots of a contention mouthed by a thinker or display the

authentic proofs of a given pronouncement enunciated by that same thinker. The emphasis in the case of *de re* interpretation is on the reader and his capabilities.

Brandom claims that historically we are in a time that seems to favor the painstakingly constituted *de dicto* interpretation thus putting an end to a period that inclined towards the critically oriented *de re* interpretation. As far as Brandom himself is concerned he sees no definitive reason to adhere to one rather than the other hermeneutic strategy, provided that one is accustomed with the specific requirements of each procedure and honest about the nature of the endeavor one is pursuing:

> Both are wholly legitimate ways of specifying the contents of the very same conceptual commitments expressed by the words on the page. It is only if one masquerades as the other, or is just unclear about the rules it acknowledges in selecting auxiliary hypotheses […] that error or confusion results. (Brandom 2002, 104)

II. In the previous section I have outlined the basic tenets of Brandom's hermeneutic method. But in order to properly understand the nature of his engagement with the philosophical tradition a few more considerations are required.

First, Brandom insists on the issue of dialogue, or as he puts it "talking with a tradition" (Brandom 2002, 110). This describes a special scenario of *de re* interpretation, namely "*de traditione* ascriptions" (Brandom 2002, 107). There are indeed two ways of connecting with a tradition. These two manners that Brandom is talking about attend to the two different meanings that we can assign to the term "with". The first is "instrumental" while the second is indeed truly "conversational". The instrumental style of doing intellectual history allows us to particularize the tradition that we are considering with regard to its commitments. The conversational style however exhibits a more critical purview. We engage a certain tradition in order to negotiate our own allegiances: "For it is manifested in the process of moving back and forth between the perspective provided by the tradition and what is true (according to the ascriber): the commitments the ascriber is herself prepared to undertake and defend" (Brandom 2002, 110).

The result is nothing else than a Hegelian inspired technique of performing intellectual history. One recasts the entire historical evolution of a philosophical tradition with the purpose of integrating oneself into that particular tradition as the most advanced point of it:

> A conceptual perspective or context can be called phenomenological in a hegelian sense if it is *both* a retrospective interpretation of a text *de traditione* and an immediate de re reading – that is, when it is one in which the ascriber herself occupies the most developed position in the tradition: the inheritance structure of phenomenal view. (Brandom 2002, 110)

This Hegelian dimension is operational in Gadamerian hermeneutics as well. Gadamer adopts a Hegelian variant of hermeneutics in order to leave behind the unsatisfactory account of modern hermeneutics: "And so I had to decide – between the alternatives of the "psychological reconstruction of past thought" and the "integration of past thought into one's own thought" – against Schleiermacher and in favor of Hegel" (Gadamer 2007, 328).

The panoply of thinkers that Brandom sees as belonging to the same tradition is admittedly a surprising one, hence announcing quite a hermeneutic challenge. The figures invoked are: Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, Frege, Heidegger and perhaps less surprisingly Wilfrid Sellars, the notorious founder of the Pittsburgh school of philosophy (see: Maher 2012, Redding 2007). Brandom sets himself to investigate these authors opinions on matters of semantic: "their understanding of the contents of thought, beliefs, and practical comportments, and with the accounts they give of their representational aboutness" (Brandom 2002, 16). Brandom's analysis revolves around the issue of intentionality, or more precisely around a twofold account of intentionality seen as: "what it is to have a thought" (Brandom 2002, 16) as well as "what it is to be thinking of or about things in a certain way" (Brandom 2002, 17). The terms involved in the clarification of the notion of intentionality by these authors are: "functionalist, inferentialist, holist, normative and social pragmatist" (Brandom 2002, 17). While it is true that no single term is endorsed by the totality of the thinkers invoked and that no single author accepts the entire array of terms one can still on the basis of "those family resemblances bind these philosophers into a distinctive and recognizable retrospectively discernible tradition" (Brandom 2002, 17).

In what follows I will attempt to illustrate Brandom's hermeneutic quest as it is applied to Leibniz's epistemological thought. The notion of representation informs both classical epistemology as well as classical metaphysics. Accordingly, Descartes for example posited that both extension and thought where to be considered as being real in the very same manner. Reality, properly understood, therefore comprises that which is representable and that which does the representing. Brandom situates Leibniz within this narrative by assigning him a special place: "Leibniz with a reservation of profound consequence for subsequent German Idealism, would deny metaphysical reality to what is representable but not itself a representing" (Brandom 2002, 143). At the bottom of Leibniz's metaphysical edifice lies a fundamental principle proclaiming that "to be is to perceive" (Brandom 2002, 143). Everything that cannot perceive including such entities as matter and color are defined as "true phenomena" and considered as being characterized by a "second-class metaphysical status" (Brandom 2002, 143). If one is to get a proper hold of the Leibnizian theory of perception, than one ought to bear in mind the four tenets that structure it. According to the first characteristic, when considered as a species it belongs to the genus of

expression. The second characteristic paints a picture in which the specific difference involved in the definition of perceptual representation embodies the idea "that in perception a multiplicity is expressed in a unity" (Brandom 2002, 144). The third trait reveals the metaphysical truth that any monad conveys its "whole world" (Brandom 2002, 144), Finally, the fourth tenet discloses the metaphysical statement that the matter of perception for Leibniz is defined in terms of degrees, namely "degrees of perfection and distinctness" (Brandom 2002, 144). The forth trait seems to be the most important for Brandom's analysis:

> The last of these features is of cardinal metaphysical importance, since it is explanatory responsible for both the diversity of points of view of the monads and for the preestablished harmony between them that is Leibniz's systematic synthesis of the principles of unity and of maximal multiplicity. (Brandom 2002, 144)

The demarcation forged at the metaphysical level between monads is traced back to distinctions between perceptions functioning at the epistemological level. The scale used for the measurement of these epistemic discrepancies is delimited by the values of "distinct" at one pole and "confused" at the other. Many commentators before Brandom have committed the error of interpreting the Leibnizian thesis regarding the issue of the "degrees of perception" in terms of a hypothesis of "degrees of *clarity* of perception" (Brandom 2002, 149). This has happened in spite of Leibniz's vigilance in avoiding himself such an unfortunate confusion. Russell is identified as the source of this particular misconception. Avoiding this philosophical trap goes to the very heart of Leibniz's take on matters epistemological: "There is good reason for his care on this point since the centerpiece of Leibniz's epistemology is a set of technical definitions of what it is in virtue of which an idea may be called clear, rather than obscure, and distinct, rather than confused" (Brandom 2002, 149).

Brandom's interpretation of Leibniz's theory of the degrees of perception is a complex and painstaking piece of intellectual history. It involves a thorough investigation of Leibniz's early as well as mature writings, references to other commentators or to Leibniz's contemporaries. I could not do justice to it by proving a summary of it here. I would like however to say a few words about the main results of Brandom's hermeneutic exercise. By employing the method described above Brandom manages to discover in Leibniz a strong case for inferentialism and therefore integrate him into a tradition: "This observation is important for evaluating the theoretical role assigned to the notion of inference in the portions of Leibniz's epistemology and philosophy of mind which I have taken to be metaphysically fundamental" (Brandom 2002, 176). As a result inferentialism appears as a possible theoretical token that Brandom could exploit himself and become

part of the same tradition: "For instance, before I finished the Leibniz essay, inferentialism had not been visible to me as a possible order of explanation, never mind as one embodied in an actual tradition" (Brandom 2002, 91).

Conclusion

My main purpose was to draw attention to a possible affinity between Brandom's engagement with the philosophical tradition and Gadamer's hermeneutic project. I have identified a common Hegelian heritage as the basis for this philosophical kinship. I do not claim that this common Hegelian ground would completely explain the hermeneutic enterprises in question, but I do think that it is an essential part of both. Hegel is a key figure for Brandom as well as for Gadamer. In order to render this explicit I have examined Brandom's take on the methodological principles of Gadamer's hermeneutic endeavor and I have provided an example of the way in which Brandom engages with themes from classical epistemology in a manner that is Hegelian in nature.

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