Jeremy Wanderer: *Robert Brandom*

Durham, Acumen Publishing 2008, xiii + 240 s.

When Bob Brandom, six years after publishing his *opus magnum Making it explicit* (hereafter MIE)[1], produced his slender *Articulating reasons*,[2] many people expected that finally they would have a concise introduction to his philosophical views. Their expectations, however, were to be dashed: *Articulating reasons* is a heterogeneous collection of texts elaborating on some of the topics of MIE and hardly digestible without the background of MIE.[3]

As yet, Brandom has produced nothing that could be taken as introductory. His subsequent books are either collections of essays addressing topics contained in or connected with MIE (*Tales of the mighty dead*,[4] *Reason in Philosophy*[5] or the not yet published *Perspectives on Pragmatism*[6]), or engaged with Brandom's new philosophical doctrine, *viz*. analytic pragmatism, which is the case of *Between Saying and Doing*.[7] The last one, of course, is not unrelated to MIE, but it emphasizes different aspects of the enterprise; hence it is unlikely to pave the way to MIE for a perplexed reader.

Until recently I was convinced that no readable introduction to Brandom's views therefore existed. Now I see I was mistaken. Though I knew that there was a book devoted to Brandom, by Jeremy Wanderer, I suspected it was more of a scientific biography than an introduction to the inferentialism of MIE; but in fact it is precisely the book I was missing: a congenial and comprehensible introduction to the ideas of Brandom's MIE. Hurrah!, a book my students, desperately wrestling with MIE, can be referred to!

The philosophy program of the British publishing house Acumen Publishing, based in Durham, is quite remarkable. Its offerings include a

1 Brandom (1994).

2 Brandom (2000).

3 See Peregrin (2001, 121 – 127).

4 Brandom (2002).

5 Brandom (2009).

6 Brandom (to appear).

7 Brandom (2008).

number of series, one being devoted to key philosophical concepts (such as *Meaning, Death, Relativism* etc.), and another to introducing the key figures of recent and contemporary philosophy. Among the volumes published within this latter series there are treatises on, e.g., David Lewis, John McDowell, Saul Kripke and Wilfrid Sellars;[8] and it is here that we find Wanderer's introduction to Brandom's inferentialism.

In what follows I give an overview of the content of the book, occasionally adding some critical comments or marginal remarks. The comments and remarks are usually targeted at both Brandom and Wanderer; I think that Wanderer's exposition is so transparent that there is no real need to distinguish 'Wanderer's Brandom' from 'real Brandom'.

The book is divided in two parts, called *Sapience* and *Inferentialism*. The first part dwells on the difference between an animal or a mechanism emitting sounds that *sound like* meaningful pronouncements and us, thinking, rational and discursive creatures, who emit sounds that *are* meaningful pronouncements. From the Brandomian viewpoint, we can move from the former to the latter in two steps, but Wanderer thinks a third is necessary.

The initial step takes us from "parrots", viz. entities capable merely of differential reactions to external stimuli, to what Wanderer, following Brandom, calls "rational beings". It takes the development of reactions to external stimuli into a rich inferentially structured collection of utterances no longer tightly tied to external stimuli. The important thing is that the emergence of the inferential articulation goes hand in hand with the emergence of a network of inferential relationships: the inferences are governed by proprieties, and hence by rules which in turn are underlain by the participants starting to treat each other as agents and keeping each other's score of normative statuses.

The second step takes us from "rational beings" to "logical beings", and amounts to making explicit the inferences which were implicit in the former beings' practices. This involves the introduction of logical and other explicitating vocabulary (e.g. explicitly semantic words, such as *truth* or *denotes*) and empowers the logical beings with a measure of control over the inferential rules they endorse – fostering what Brandom would call their "semantic self-consciousness".

8 As for the last one, see Peregrin (2008, 131 – 135).

The next step is the controversial one – it takes us from "logical beings" to the very kind of beings we are. The chapter devoted to this step is exceptional because it is almost utterly polemical. The point is that Brandom does not see the need for this third step: for him we simply *are* logical beings; fullstop. However, Wanderer, drawing on the ideas of McDowell and others, thinks there could be logical beings distinct from ourselves; and hence that there is still something distinctive about the kind of logical beings we are.

The second part of the book is devoted to normative pragmatics, inferential semantics and their interplay. In the first chapter of this part, Wanderer reviews how sentences acquire their meanings, *viz*. inferential roles, in terms of inferential articulation. Wanderer tells us the Brandomian story about sentences coming to mean what they do in terms of being subjected to inferential rules, and again he tells it perspicuously. A few comments concerning the material presented in this chapter:

First, a very pedantic terminological remark. The author uses the term "non-inferential" in a rather nonstandard way. While Sellars introduced this term to mark specific pieces of knowledge and consequently claims (*viz*. those that are not derived from other claims), Wanderer uses it as an adjective applicable to *circumstances* and *consequences*. This may be a little bit confusing.

Then, another terminological, but less pedantic remark, concerning the author's employment of the term "inference". Though it is a common (bad) habit (of which, I regret I too am guilty), it is dangerously confusing to use this word to refer to an inferential *rule*. (As, for example, the author does when he poses, on p. 111, the question "Which of the inferences that a sentence can enter into are meaning-constitutive?".) Though this is barely more than a discrepancy in terminology, I am afraid that lack of meticulousness here creates confusion, in particular by promoting the conflation of the Brandomian, normative inferentialism (where meanings are roles vis-à-vis rules) with various other versions of causal inferentialism which, contrastingly, strive to explain meanings as roles established by actual acts of inferring. Wanderer discusses the difference under the heading of Harman's distinctions between inferential *relations* and *processes* very clearly, but I think his usage should reflect this.

Another comment is no longer terminological. I hoped that I might be able to learn from Wanderer what I was not able to learn from Brandom, namely what is the reason to suppose that the three types of Brandom's inferential relations (commitment-preserving, entitlement-preserving and

incompatibility) are distinct. (This is a question several critics of Brandom have raised, including myself during my comment on Brandom's lecture V of his Locke lectures as presented in Prague;[9] but Brandom has never given a clear answer.) Unfortunately I could find no answer in Wanderer's exposition.

My final comment on this chapter concerns my personal musings about the conceptual foundations of Brandom's inferentialism. Brandom claims, and Wanderer correctly reproduces the claim, that correctness of inferences (and hence inferential rules) reduces to preservation of normative statuses. I wonder whether the direction of this reduction is reasonable. It seems to me that correctness as such is simpler, and hence should be seen as conceptually more primitive than normative statuses – that it should be seen as something that emerges together with the emergence of our discursive practices and especially the game of giving and asking for reasons. Normative statuses, it would seem to me, would be more plausibly reduced to it – as what emerges as certain person-centered invariants across correct inferences.

I am aware this view marks no minor deviation from Brandom, but nevertheless I believe that it is sound. It leads to an approach where we take as basic, not the normative attitudes of holding a person for committed or entitled to something, but rather the normative attitudes of holding something (especially an inference) for correct. (This also brings the whole enterprise within a stone's throw of Davidson's approach, especially his treatment of *holding true* as the unexplained explainer of his theory of radical interpretation.)

The next chapter of Wanderer's book is devoted to subsentential expressions. Wanderer shows how these expressions' inferential roles are derived from the inferential roles of sentences via the criterion of intersubstitutivity, how the inferential roles of individual kinds of subsentential expressions differ and may help us inferentially characterize grammatical categories, and how the character of the specific features of the category of names may lead us to getting a grip on seeing names as referring to objects, and indeed to the very concept of object.

Again, there is an issue here, which I was not clear about when reading MIE and I am no clearer after reading Wanderer's book, namely the distinction between the expression that is *substituted for* and the *substitu-*

[9] See http://www.pitt.edu/~rbrandom/multimedia/locke-5.mov.

tional frame. These terms are introduced in the obvious way, the former is simply whatever we happen to take out of an expression and the latter is what remains and thus comes to stay fixed. However, immediately thereafter Wanderer talks about replacing one substitutional frame by another, which seems to indicate that the distinction has some validity independent of what we decide to vary, and this I do not understand.

The topic of the following chapter is communication. At first, it seems that Wanderer presents things so that we have to choose between a 'Lockean' model of communication, according to which semantic contents get somehow transported from the head of the speaker into those of her audience, and the pragmatic model according to which contents are wholly dissolved within practices. Just when I was about to protest that while Brandomian inferentialism clearly rejects the former model, the latter is also not its choice (for it would mean dissolution of *any* concept of semantic content, which is not what Brandom wants), Wanderer comes to point out the same thing. There *is* room for semantic content (and hence for semantics as something relatively independent of pragmatics) in Brandom's worldview, though it is not a content that would tangibly figure within the communication process; it is rather a kind of invariant of the process. It is thus nothing that the speakers and hearers would have to have 'in their minds', as the Lockean content requires.

However, there is again an issue related to the topic of this chapter which I was not able to understand in MIE; and unfortunately Wanderer's exposition has not helped. This is Brandom's claim that the notion of objectivity he reaches consists in "a kind of perspectival form". I do not see how this can be so. It seems to me that the objective semantic content that is shared (though, of course not necessarily shared in the Lockean, mentalist sense) is a matter of the roles of expressions vis-à-vis the rules involved, and the roles go beyond anything that can be reasonably called form or structure.

The final chapter deals with the frequent challenge to inferentialism: does it not collapse into an absurd linguistic idealism? Wanderer sorts out the various strands of challenge that are raised against inferentialism in this context and tries to clarify the sense in which Brandom wants to get rid of the referential relations that are seen, by many, as the ineliminable anchors of language within the world of things. He duly contends that though Brandom resists the employment of the concept of reference as a global unexplained explainer, he sees a role for reference to play in local explanations.

Wanderer also deals, in detail, with McDowell's worries about the danger of rendering the mind as "frictionlessly spinning in the void" as another potential threat for inferentialism. He contends that though Brandom offers a "conciliatory" answer to this objection, he might, and perhaps should, be more radical. The point is that the objection presupposes a conceptual framework that is alien to inferentialism. What McDowell ultimately urges is the answerability of knowledge to *experience*, but what the inferentialist, according to Wanderer, should require, is answerability *to the world*, not to the experience thereof. (As Brandom keeps repeating, "experience is not one of my words".) I think this is a deep point.

To summarize, this is a very good book in itself, and also extremely helpful. Wanderer presents the basic thoughts of Brandomian inferentialism, clearly, concisely and illustriously. (The reader should not be confused into thinking otherwise by my critical comments; it was my feeling of general congeniality with the book that freed me to anatomize those cases where my comparing of notes with Wanderer did not yield identical results.) He is more concerned about novice readers than Brandom himself; and this makes the book a very useful tool for teaching inferentialism.

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