

BOOK REVIEW

Robert B. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002, x + 416 pp., ISBN 067400 9 037, \$39.95 (cloth).

In his “Making it Explicit”,¹ Robert Brandom set up a new philosophical paradigm, concentrating especially on the link between language and the world, but extendable (in the way familiar from the dawn of the linguistic turn) to the rest of philosophy. He views modern philosophy in terms of the tension between “representationalist” and “inferentialist” approaches to language (which, according to him, also underlies the much more commonly cited struggle between empiricism and rationalism); and elaborating on the ideas of his teacher Wilfrid Sellars he develops a distinctive kind of inferentialist framework.

After “Making it Explicit”, Brandom published the much more slender “Articulating Reasons”,² which appeared, in comparison to his *opus magnum*, to be mere *miscellanea*; and his latest book, “Tales of the Mighty Dead”, though not slender at all, is also miscellaneous in nature: it consists predominantly of Brandom’s earlier published papers, from 1977 to 2000. Each of the papers focuses on an aspect of a great philosopher (a “Mighty Dead”), the gallery of personalities – Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, Frege, Heidegger, and Sellars – cutting across any standard philosophical school.

What Brandom wants to show is that all these philosophers share an engagement with what he sees as a specific philosophical tradition, a tradition primarily characterized by its *inferentialism* (as opposed to *representationalism*), i.e. the conviction that the representational capacities of language are secondary to the fact that language is ‘inferentially articulated’. Brandom has pointed out that inferentialism is also inseparably connected with *holism* – indeed, if it is inferences that confer meaning, then having certain meaning presupposes assuming a certain place within a certain inferential structure. Moreover, insofar as having the meaning *is* assuming the place (which presupposes that we construe the concept of inference broadly enough), then this holism results into a kind of *functionalism*. Furthermore and less obviously, the kind of inferentialism Brandom has in mind is closely connected to *pragmatism* (in the sense of the primacy of praxis over theory) – for inferences are something we *do*. And as it counters the



most central tenets of empiricism, Brandom sees it also as the current stage of *rationalism*.³ Let me refer to this cluster of interconnected stances as the IHFPR (inferentialist-holist-functional-pragmatist-rationalist)-tradition.

In his essays, Brandom traces the origins of the IHFPR-stance back to the dawn of modern philosophy, namely to Spinoza and Leibniz; Spinoza for his epistemological holism and Leibniz also for his rudimentary inferentialism. But surely his most interesting – as well as most controversial – analyses of modern philosophy classics are those dealing with Hegel (who seems to be Brandom’s ‘fatal attraction’). What Brandom claims is that Hegel is an inferentialist and holist, because, according to him, “conceptual contents are identified and individuated solely by the relations of material incompatibility” (p. 49), for it is nothing else than material incompatibility to which Hegel refers by his “determinate negation”. But Brandom’s reading of Hegel is also pragmatist, for he sees him as committed to “understanding determinately contentful empirical conceptual norms as instituted by *experience*, the process of *using* those concepts by applying them in practice: making judgments and performing actions.” (56)

Of the three more recent philosophers, Sellars’ presence is of course to be expected: it is Sellars’ legacy that Brandom has developed into his own distinctive sort of inferentialism. The choice of Frege is also not overly controversial – though some scholars do regard the inferentialist strands within his works as merely marginal, the inferentialist reading is nothing unprecedented. Hence here the most novel is Brandom’s reading of Heidegger.

Of course, connecting Heidegger to pragmatism, which Brandom explains in terms of the priority of the *Zuhanden* over the *Vorhanden*, is also not new.⁴ But Brandom wants to picture Heidegger as a more integrated exponent of the IHFPR-tradition; in particular, he reads him as almost a companion of Sellars: “The practical distance from things that distinctively *semantic* relations afford – the capacity merely to take in how things are, the capacity merely to entertain thoughts about how they might be [i.e. the availability of things as *vorhandenseiende* – JP] – is available only through the institution of the equipment with the practical significance of assertings and inferences.” (80)

Brandom sees philosophy as essentially a matter of “talking with a tradition” and what he calls “bebop history”: improvisation on the “chord structures” of significant philosophical works of one’s predecessors. Thus, in the papers reprinted in the book he reinterprets the various philosophers as distinctive bearers, and promulgators, of the IHFPR-tradition.

Richard Rorty has suggested⁵ that one of the key tasks of philosophy is “the colligation of hitherto unrelated texts”; and if we accept this, then we are likely to see Brandom’s exercise in “bebop history” as an extraordinary philosophical achievement. (Those who reject this notion of philosophy, those who claim that there is *either* doing the ‘true’ history of philosophy, *or* contributing to it, *tertium non datur*, would probably think otherwise.⁶ However, I am convinced that rethinking the tradition does in fact constitute a great deal of what philosophers have always done.) And I think that Brandom’s conceptual constitution of the IHFPR-view as such is indeed a true achievement.

Before Brandom, there was already, on the one hand, the obvious connection between inferentialism, understood as a theoretical view of language intimately related to logic, and holism; and also, on the other hand, the connection between inferentialism, understood more as a view of the praxis of using language, and pragmatism. Brandom’s achievement, as I see it, is the interconnection of the two perspectives, his showing that the two kinds of inferentialism can be seen as two aspects of a single kind. And I think this is what has enabled him to throw new (and controversial, I admit) light on the views of Hegel, Heidegger and others – for example on the fact that Hegel can be read both as an (arch-)idealist and a pragmatist.

Moreover, in one of the four introductory chapters of the collection he performs a kind of ‘second-order bebop history’: he reinterprets his own papers as being integral parts of his inferentialist project, which some of them originally were not – at least not explicitly (some of them were written long before he managed to give the project clear and explicit shape). Hence Brandom carries out a kind of ‘self-application’; and moreover, in another introductory chapter he applies his own theory to his own practices in a different way: he tries to explicate his enterprise of “bebop history” in terms of his inferentialist theory of language. What we do all the time, he suggests, is oscillate between the *de re* interpretation of others’ claims (their interpretation from the viewpoint of how things ‘really are’ (for us), i.e. in the context of *our* beliefs) and *de dicto* interpretations (from the perspective of how their speakers think things are, i.e. in the context of *their* beliefs) – and the “bebop history” is nothing else than doing this when confronted with a tradition.

In this way Brandom’s book appears to instantiate the pattern made popular by Douglas Hofstadter⁷ (and before him by the snake of the mystic texts biting its own tail); and characteristic of many pieces which are often classified as *postmodern*. However, Brandom’s book indicates that being postmodern in this sense does not mean being superficial. It is original and

interesting, as well as duly provocative; though still more of a by-product of his “Making it explicit” saga than its substantial continuance.

NOTES

¹ Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1994.

² Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2000.

³ I have expressed my reservations over this classification of Brandom’s stance in my review of his previous book (see *Erkenntnis* **55**, 2001, 121–127).

⁴ Viz. e.g. M. Okrent’ *Heidegger’s Pragmatism* (Cornell, Ithaca, 1988).

⁵ See Rorty: *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth (Philosophical Papers vol. I)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 94.

⁶ It is clear that the lack of piety with which Brandom treats Hegel and others might not be hailed by those scholars who put premium on historical accuracy.

⁷ *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (Harvester, Hassocks, 1979).

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