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Interview with Robert Brandom[1]

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Résumé.

Il s'agit ici du texte de l'entretien accordé par Brandom en qualité de Professeur-invité à Guido Seddone durant le semestre d'été 2008 à l'Université de Leipzig.

Mots-clés.

Brandom, tâche de la philosophie, rationalité expressive, norrmativité, Hegel.

ملخّص.

تحوي هذه الورقة نصًا للحوار الذي أجراه «جويدو سدونة» مع «براندوم» حين كان الأخير أستاذًا زائرًا بجامعة لايبزج خلال الفصل الدراسي الصيفي سنة 2008.

كلمات مفتاحية.

براندوم، مهمّة الفلسفة، عقلانية تعبيرية، معيارية، هيجل.

Abstract.

This paper is the transcription of the interview gave by Brondom as Leibniz-Professor (Visiting Professor) at Leipzig University to Guido Seddone during the summer Semester 2008.

Keywords.

Brandom, The task of philosophy, expressive rationality, normativity, Hegel.

Introduction

Prof. Brandom, you are one of the most important and influent thinkers in the analytical philosophy; your book *Making It explicit* is translated in many languages and is object of discussions and debates in many Universities of the world. Nonetheless your philosophical interested are also addressed to the philosophers of the tradition like Leibniz, Kant, Hegel and Heidegger. You have important relations with many European Universities like the Leipzig University, where we are and where in this summer Semester 2008 you are Leibniz-Professor (visiting Professor).

Question 1: In *Making It explicit* you maintain that the task of the philosophy is to make explicit what in our practice remains implicit. This introduces the idea of expressive rationality; can you explain better this argument?

Answer: Well, I think of us as essentially normative beings, that what sets us apart from the other animals is our capacity to commit ourselves, our worrying about whether we are entitled to those commitments, whether it's a cognitive commitment as to how things are or a practical commitment as to how things shall be. I think of us as discursive beings and that means that our normativity is inferentially articulated. We're beings who engage in practices of giving and asking for reasons. And I think these two dimensions—the normative dimension and the rational dimension—are what set us apart from beings that can feel but can't think. And I think of logic and philosophy as having the task of making explicit what is implicit in those normative and rational practices.

Question 2: Another famous point of your thought is the concept of scorekeeping, which explain the way by which persons reach a shared point of view. The scorekeepings are commitive practices and you inherited this concept from the philosophy of Wilfrid Sellars and from his Idea of logical space of reasons. By a scorekeeping are produced the beliefs and the certainties of a group in pragmatic and not ideological way and this allows the persons to have a common vision or shared point of view about their problem and about the world out there. Can you explain the role of this concept and can you also explain why it's a pragmatic answer to the problem of the sociality?

Answer: Well, I think of what we do when we understand each other as a matter of our having to know what we've committed ourselves to by saying something or doing something, and thinking about what it would take to entitle us to those commitments. So what we keep score on in the metaphor are those commitments and entitlements. Each time we give a reason, each time we make a claim, what we're committed to and what we're entitled to changes. I think of the task of communication not as being exclusively a matter of coming to share

opinions, but rather of navigating rationally between our different opinions, projects, plans and so on. Understanding each other is—as when you and I speak now face to face—to be understood in I-Thou terms from which we build up a social structure, rather than in I-We terms as is traditional where we think, well, there's the community and then there's me as the individual in the community relating to it. Scorekeeping is something that's done on an I-You or an I-Thou basis. When you and I understand each other it doesn't require, it doesn't demand that you and I agree in all of our positions. It means that you know what I'm committed to, that you keep track of what I am—according to you—entitled to and vice versa. I think of language as a way of navigating between the different perspectives that individuals inevitably have because of their different interests, because of just the different trajectories we take through the world and the different information that we have. So I think of language and discourse not principally as a means of cooperation—though, of course, it is for that too—but simply as a matter of getting clear on what each other's commitments are.

Question 3: By the scorekeeping we obtain also the concept of the tenability of our statements. The statements are normally about the world around us. How can we gras the non-inferential facts and how can we bring them in our discursive practice, which are inferentially constituted. Is your thought about this problem a form of weak empiricism?

Answer: Well, if one's empiricism is weak enough, then I think everyone's an empiricist, that is, we can't know anything about the world around us without sensory experience of it. That's the weak empiricism that that's a necessary condition. But for me the form of the conceptual is an inferential form. To be conceptually contentful is to be inferentially articulated. So the question for me—the question that you asked—becomes: how do reliable causal connections in the world come to be transferred into an inferentially useable form. And I think the answer is that we can, as sentient beings, reliably differentially respond to the world around us. And those reliable, responsive dispositions can be tracked inferentially. So I take you to be a reliable observer of red things because I'm prepared to infer from your claiming that something is red that it's red. That's a reliability inference. I'm taking the causal connection between you and red things and putting it into an inferential form where your saying something, your undertaking a commitment, gives me a reason to undertake a commitment. And in that way we come inferentially to track reliable connections in the world.

Question 4: In your book *Tales of the mighty dead* you write « My interpretive claim here will be that the idealist thesis is Hegel's way of making the pragmatist thesis workable, in the context of several other commitments and insights. My philosophical claim here will be that we actually have a lot to learn from this strategy about contemporary semantic issues that we by no means see our way to the bottom of otherwise». My questions are, is it possible to conceive that the several figures in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* are a kind of a big historical scorekeeping? Is it for you the history a commitive practice? Can the ordinary language of the Pragmatism be compared with the idealistic language?

Answer: Well, I do think of the Phenomenology as a large allegory and that what it's an allegory for is a story about conceptual contents, about selves and about the kinds of normative communities that we institute by our re-cognitive relations to one another. I think one of the principal lessons that we can learn from the *Phenomenology* is indeed the lesson that the classical American Pragmatists learned from it and is what deeply binds together German Idealism and American Pragmatism and Neo-pragmatism. And that is that we'll never understand our interaction with the world if we think in antecedent terms of what subjects are—say the way Descartes did—and what objects are—say the way contemporary natural science tells us they are—and somehow try to clamp those two together to understand subjects as able to know about objects and act on objects so understood. Hegel's recommendation—what was taken up by the Pragmatists—was that we have to think about our interaction. We have to start with the transactions that we have with things, the skilful practical doings that we build on. And we have in a more sophisticated form what one can already see primitive versions of among animals dealing skilfully with their environment. There's a cycle of perception and thought and action, followed by perception of the results of action, that lets us calibrate what we do to what's happening, to what we're making, to what differences we're making in our environment. And it's by thinking about that sort of skilful, practical interaction with our environment that we'll come to understand what knowing subjects and intentional agents really are, that we can then abstract notions of subject and object of mind and world from.

Question 5: In your Philosophy is very important the role of the conceptual contents to determinate the dimension of the normative; you argue that Kant and Hegel have a different approach to the question of the normative. Can you explain this difference and your point of view about the question of the conceptual content in these two classical thinkers?

Answer: Well, Kant's great insight is that we're fundamentally normative creatures, that the difference between knowers and intentional agents, on the one hand, and merely natural creatures, on the other, is that the judgements that potentially express knowledge and our intentional doings are things that we are in a distinctive sense responsible for. They express commitments of ours. Those are normative notions. I believe Hegel's great insight is that to understand the nature of that normativity—the way in which it's possible for us to bind ourselves by concepts—we have to think of normative statuses as essentially social statuses. Hegel had the idea that social substance—normative substance—and the self-conscious individuals who become self-conscious by coming to be able to bind themselves by conceptual norms are synthesized by reciprocal recognition. Reciprocal recognition is a matter of my making myself responsible for something, in part by doing something that socially makes it appropriate for others to hold me responsible. And his idea was that the notion of responsibility didn't make sense outside of a context in which others could hold me responsible. I have to be recognized by them as doing something that has that normative significance, and I have to recognize them as able to recognize me in that way in order for me genuinely to be responsible for anything. So I see Kant as having had this fundamental insight into the essentially normative character of human being and Hegel as having had the insight into the essentially social character of that normativity.

Question 6: In your interpretation of the dialectics between Master and Slave, you maintain that the concept of Mastery is strongly related to the concept of Autonomy. Can you explain better this topic?

Answer: Kant distinguished normative constraint from causal compulsion by using a criterion of autonomy that he had developed from the earlier philosopher, Rousseau. According to this view, what makes something genuinely, normatively binding on me is that I take it to be normatively binding on me. Only I can normatively bind myself, commit myself. Anything that doesn't depend in that way on my acknowledgement of it as authoritative is not normatively authoritative, but is some sort of non-normative compulsion. This was Kant's development of a fundamental Enlightenment idea: that normative statuses like authority and responsibility, commitment and entitlement, are not part of the pre-nonhuman, the pre-human world or even any supernatural world. They're in the end creatures of our normative attitudes. Until people held each other responsible, treated each other as authoritative, as committed, as entitled, there were no such normative statuses. This dependence—of normative status on normative attitudes—Kant came to see as one of the great achievements of the Enlightenment, and his notion of autonomy was a

development of that. Hegel's discussion of the dialectic of the master and slave is an attempt to show that asymmetric re-cognitive relations are metaphysically defective, that the norms they institute aren't the right kind to help us think and act with, to make it possible to think and act. Asymmetric recognition in this way is authority without responsibility, on the side of the master, and responsibility without authority, on the side of the slave. And Hegel's argument is that unless authority and responsibility are commensurate and reciprocal, no actual normative statuses are instituted. This is one of his most important and certainly one of his deepest ideas, though it's not so easy to see just how the argument works.

Question 7: In Hegel's philosophy it's central the constitution of the Self; the basis of the Self is the self-consciousness in the relation with the other self-consciousness; the structure of this relation is for Hegel an historical structure of desire and recognition. In a second stage from this structure come all the institutions like society, states, rights. In which way is this Hegelian conception a pragmatic conception?

Answer: One of Hegel's big ideas is that once we've understood from Kant that we're normative beings—that to be a self is to be able to be responsible and authoritative in distinctive ways, in ways that are conceptually articulated, because in cognitive judgement we commit ourselves by applying concepts, committing ourselves as to how things are (in intentional agency we commit ourselves by applying concepts as to how things are to be)—Hegel's idea that once we've understood those normative statuses to be social statuses, we'll see that the notion of self-conscious selves, selves who can apply concepts and take themselves to be applying concepts theoretically and practically, is a fundamentally social achievement. Self-consciousness is not something that happens principally between our ears. It's something that happens between our selves; it's a social achievement, a matter of reciprocal recognition. I am what I'm recognized to be by those I recognize as having the authority to determine what I really am. I have authority over whom I recognize in that sense, but I'm granting them authority over me in turn. Hegel has a very delicate and sophisticated account of the relation between self-conscious individual selves and the normative re-cognitive communities that they constitute by their re-cognitive practical attitudes to one another. This social notion of self-consciousness—this notion of self-consciousness as a fundamentally social achievement because it is fundamentally a normative status—is one of his 88 most important ideas.