From German Idealism to American Pragmatism—and Back

Bob Brandom (University of Pittsburg)

Kant's most basic idea, the axis around which all his thought turns, is that what distinguishes exercises of judgment and intentional agency from the performances of merely natural creatures is that judgments and actions are subject to distinctive kinds of *normative* assessment. Judgments and actions are things we are in a distinctive sense *responsible* for.

The classical pragmatist versions of naturalism and empiricism fit together much better than the traditional and logical empiricist versions that preceded and succeeded them. Far from being in tension, they complement and mutually support one another. Both the world and our knowledge of it are construed on a single model: as mutable, contingent products of statistical selectional-adaptational processes that allow order to pop to the surface and float in a sea of random variability. Both nature and experience are to be understood in terms of the processes by which relatively stable constellations of habits arise and sustain themselves through their interactions with an environment that includes a population of competing habits.

Fundamental pragmatism is the more specific strategy by which the classical American pragmatists sought to naturalize the concept of <u>experience</u>—to demystify and domesticate it, to disentangle it from two centuries of Cartesian encumbrances. It is the idea that one should understand knowing *that* as a kind of knowing *how* (to put it in Rylean terms). That is, believing *that* things are thus-and-so is to be understood in terms of practical abilities to *do* something.

The fundamental pragmatist aspiration is to be able to exhibit *discursive* intentionality as a distinctive kind of *practical* intentionality.

By 'lingualism' (a term meant to belong in a family with 'rationalism') I mean commitment to understanding *conceptual* capacities (discursiveness in general) in terms of *linguistic* capacities. Dummett epitomizes a strong version of this order of explanation:

   We have opposed throughout the view of assertion as the expression of an interior act of judgment; judgment, rather, is the interiorization of the external act of assertion.   [Dummett: *Frege's Philosophy of Language* p. 361.]

A weaker version of lingualism claims only that language is a *necessary* condition of discursiveness, not that it is a sufficient condition that can at least in principle be made intelligible independently of talk about discursive commitments.

Methodological pragmatism is the principle that the *point* of associating meanings, extensions, contents, or other semantic interpretants with linguistic expressions is to codify (express explicitly) proprieties of *use*.

Semantic pragmatism is the principle that in a natural language, all there is to effect the association of meanings, contents, extensions, rules, or other semantic interpretants with linguistic expressions is the

way those expressions are *used* by the linguistic practitioners themselves. Semantic pragmatism is a kind of use-functionalism about meaning.

Formal semantics for *artificial* languages can content itself with the explicit stipulation of such rules or associations of meanings, by the semantic theorist working in a semantic metalanguage. *Philosophical* semantics for *natural* languages is obliged to say what it is about the practices the users of those expressions engage in or the abilities they exercise, in virtue of which they should be understood as *governed* by those rules, or as *conferring* those meanings.

The combination of methodological and semantic pragmatism, the two senses in which semantics can be taken to answer to pragmatics, broadly construed, might be called "linguistic pragmatism." It is one natural way of applying fundamental pragmatism to systematic theorizing about language.

The lore of our fathers is a fabric of sentences…It is a pale grey lore, black with fact and white with convention. But I have found no substantial reasons for concluding that there are any quite black threads in it, or any white ones. [Quine: "Carnap on Logical Truth", p. 406]

Language is the existence [Dasein] of Geist. [Hegel: *Phenomenology of Spirit* [652], [666]]
(By 'Geist' he means the whole normatively articulated discursive realm.)

Language in its widest sense—that is, including all means of communication such as, for example, monuments, rituals, and formalized arts—is the medium in which culture exists and through which it is transmitted. [Dewey: *Logic, the Theory of Inquiry, Later Works* Vol. 12, p. 28]

Pragmatists who have made the linguistic turn take it that the most important feature of the natural history of creatures like us is that we have *come into language*: come to engage in distinctively linguistic practices and to exercise distinctively linguistic abilities. This is both an ontogenetic and a phylogenetic achievement. Understanding it requires, at a minimum, addressing three large, interconnected kinds of question. These concern the issues of *demarcation, emergence*, and *leverage*.

- The *demarcation* question is definitional. How are *linguistic* practices and abilities (and hence, the lingualist about discursivity claims, *discursive* ones) to be distinguished from nonlinguistic ones?
- The *emergence* question concerns the requirement that any account of language that aspires to being naturalistic in even a very broad sense must explain the possibility of the transition from nonlinguistic to linguistic practices and abilities. How are the abilities we can see in non- or prelinguistic creatures recruited, deployed, and transformed so as to amount to linguistic ones?
- The *leverage* question is how to characterize and explain the massive qualitative difference in capacity between linguistic and nonlinguistic creatures: the bonanza of new abilities and possibilities that language opens up for those that do make the transition.

Upon the whole, professed transcendentalists have been more aware than have professed empiricists of the fact that language makes the difference between brute and man. The trouble is that they have lacked naturalistic conception of its origin and status. [Dewey: *Experience and Nature, Later Works* Vol. 1, p. 134.]

Any theory that rests upon a naturalistic postulate must face the problem of the extraordinary differences that mark off the activities and achievements of human beings from those of other biological forms. It is these

differences that have led to the idea that man is completely separated from other animals by properties that come from a non-natural source….The development of language (in its widest sense) out of prior biological activities is, in its connection with wider cultural forces, the key to this transformation. The problem, so viewed, is not the problem of the transition of organic behavior into something wholly discontinuous with it—as is the case when, for example, Reason, Intuition and the A priori are appealed to for explanation of the difference. It is a special form of the general problem of continuity of change and the emergence of new modes of activity—the problem of development at any level. [Dewey: *Logic, the Theory of Inquiry, Later Works* Vol. 12, p. 50.]

The evidence usually adduced in support of the proposition that lower animals, animals without language, think, turns out, when examined, to be evidence that when men, organisms with power of social discourse, think, they do so with the organs of adaptation used by lower animals, and thus largely repeat in imagination schemes of overt animal action. But to argue from this fact to the conclusion that animals think is like concluding that because every tool, say a plow, originated from some pre-existing natural production, say a crooked root or forked branch, the latter was inherently and antecedently engaged in plowing. The connection is there, but it is the other way around. [Dewey: *Experience and Nature, Later Works* Vol. 1, p. 215.]

The demarcation question is prior. If one is going to say how Geist precipitates out of nature, and how it transforms sentient organisms into sapient ones, one should try to say what it is. The challenge is to offer satisfactory responses to *both* the emergence question *and* the leverage question. Focusing on just one of them makes it too easy. In the passage above, Dewey says in effect that the neo-cartesian intellectualists make the leverage question too easy to respond to, by ignoring (or making it impossible to address) the question of emergence. I have just accused him of making the complementary mistake. In any case, it is clear that the hinge that connects the issues of emergence and leverage is the question of demarcation. For the challenge is to show that the *same* phenomenon that one has accounted for the emergence of can leverage sentience into sapience. So demarcating the realm of linguistic or discursive practices and abilities is an absolutely essential element of the philosophical project I have been describing: the development of pragmatism after the linguistic turn, a lingualist fundamental pragmatism.

My idea is that pragmatism can usefully be combined with a *rationalist* criterion of demarcation of the linguistic—and hence of discursiveness in general. Pragmatically, what distinguishes the linguistic practice in virtue of which we are sapient and not merely sentient beings is its core practices of giving and asking for *reasons*. A necessary and sufficient condition of being a discursive practice is that some performances are accorded by it the pragmatic significance of *claimings* or assertings. Semantically, claimable or assertible contents are *propositional* contents. Syntactically, what expresses those contents is declarative sentences. This combination of pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic features is the iron triangle of discursiveness. The pragmatist order of explanation of course starts with the pragmatics. The thought is that to have the *pragmatic* significance of an assertion is to be able both to serve as a reason, and potentially to stand in need of reasons. So, *semantically*, propositional contents are those that can play the role both of premise and of conclusion in *inferences*. Discursive practice is accordingly understood as essentially inferentially articulated.

Rationalism as I have described it is not a form of the intellectualism that stands opposed to fundamental pragmatism. It is wholly compatible with understanding discursive intentionality as a kind of practical intentionality: specifically, as the kind that includes practices of making claims and giving and asking for reasons. It aims to say what structure a norm-instituting social practice must have in order properly to be understood as such a practice: a *discursive* practice. It offers a specific proposal for how to understand the kind of practical knowing *how* that adds up to cognitive claiming *that*: it is practical

mastery of broadly inferential relations and transitions. And answering the demarcation question about discursive practice in a rationalist manner neither makes it impossible in principle to answer the emergence question nor obliges one to give a cartesian answer to it.

The move beyond Dewey and Wittgenstein to a rationalist, more specifically inferentialist pragmatism that I am recommending is accordingly also a return to pragmatism's roots in German idealism. As Kant synthesized empiricism and rationalism, and the pragmatists synthesized naturalism and empiricism, I'm suggesting that a way forward is to synthesize pragmatism and rationalism—in the form of the rationalist response to the demarcation question.