

# Some Strange Things they Say About Pragmatism: Robert Brandom on the Pragmatists' Semantic "Mistake"

## *Algumas Coisas Estranhas que Dizem Sobre o Pragmatismo: Robert Brandom Sobre o "Erro" Semântico dos Pragmatistas*

Larry A. Hickman

Center for Dewey Studies, Southern Illinois University Carbondale – USA  
dewey@siu.edu

**Abstract:** The revival of interest in American pragmatism has been accompanied by attempts by philosophers working in the tradition of Anglo-American linguistic analysis to assess what pragmatism has to offer to their own tradition. In a 2004 essay, for example, Robert Brandom isolated "four distinct mistakes" of the pragmatists' instrumentalist program. In this essay I will analyze one of his claims, namely, that because the pragmatists looked only "downstream" to the consequences of belief, they missed an important feature of contemporary semantic theories, namely that the antecedents of belief encountered "upstream" as the circumstances of appropriate application are correlative to consequences and therefore must also be taken into account. I demonstrate that Brandom's account rests on a misreading of Dewey's theory of inquiry, which looks both "upstream" to received meanings - meanings that have been secured by means of prior inquiry - and "downstream" to the ways in which meanings can be reconstructed in order to secure goods that would otherwise prove transient. As a part of my response to Brandom, I provide an analysis of Dewey's identification of true belief as warranted assertibility.

**Keywords:** Pragmatism. Semantic mistake. Truth. Warranted assertibility. Logic. Brandom. Dewey. Consequentialism. Pragmatic maxim.

**Resumo:** O renascimento do interesse no pragmatismo estadunidense foi acompanhado por tentativas, por parte de filósofos adeptos da tradição anglo-americana de análise lingüística, de avaliar o que o pragmatismo tem a oferecer à sua tradição. Num ensaio de 2004, por exemplo, Robert Brandom isolou "quatro erros distintos" do programa instrumentalista dos pragmatistas. Neste ensaio, analisarei uma de suas alegações, a saber, a de que porque os pragmatistas sempre olharam "rio abaixo" para as conseqüências da crença, eles não perceberam um aspecto importante das teorias semânticas contemporâneas, a saber, o de que os antecedentes da crença são correlativos às conseqüências e, portanto, devem também ser considerados. Demonstro que a abordagem de Brandom se baseia numa leitura equivocada da teoria da investigação de Dewey, que olha tanto "rio acima" para os significados recebidos – significados que foram assegurados por meio de investigação prévia – e "rio abaixo" para as maneiras em que os significados podem ser

*reconstruídos para assegurar bens que, de outra maneira, se mostrariam transitórios. Como parte de minha resposta a Brandom, forneço uma análise da identificação feita por Dewey de uma crença verdadeira como assertividade garantida.*

**Palavras-chave:** Pragmatismo. Erro semântico. Verdade. Assertividade garantida. Lógica. Brandom. Dewey. Conseqüencialismo. Maxima pragmática.

For those of us who hold the classical pragmatists in high regard as a source of continuing insights, the growing number of commentaries on their work can only be construed as the sign of a welcome sea change in the literature of technical philosophy. At the same time, however, it must be admitted that attempts to translate the language of classical pragmatism into that of contemporary Anglo-American linguistic analysis (or vice versa) have not met with universal success. In this regard the well known debates between Russell and Dewey in the 1940's seem to have foreshadowed some more recent attempts at communication between these two venerable philosophical traditions.

In an essay published in 2004, for example, Robert Brandom describes what he terms “the pragmatist Enlightenment” and then details what he regards as its “problematic semantics.”<sup>1</sup> In my view, he gets off to an admirable start. He compares and contrasts what he calls the “European Enlightenment,” which sought to discover the mathematical laws that governed the world of physics, with the post-Darwinian program of the pragmatists, which emphasized the contingency and situatedness of the biological world. Somewhat less successfully, he also explores some of the connections between pragmatism and 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism.

Matters get a bit sticky, however, when he writes that “we can see that the pragmatists’ instrumentalist program involves four distinct mistakes” (BRANDOM, 2004, 11). What are these “mistakes”? The first of the four, which is the only one that I will have the space in this brief essay to address, involves his charge that pragmatist semantics suffers from a preoccupation with *consequences* at the expense of looking “upstream” to the *circumstances* of appropriate application.

In order to make his point, Brandom asks us to enter into a domain identified as “the functional role of belief in reciprocal interactions and attunements between believers and their environments” (BRANDOM, 2004, 11). So far, so good. This sounds more or less like the domain that Dewey treated in his 1938 *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* and elsewhere, regarding the role of inquiry in fixing belief – or attaining what he termed “warranted assertibility.”

This is a very important point, since if Brandom really wants to talk about “the functional role of belief ... [etc.],” then he is rejecting a treatment of semantic theory *simpliciter*, that is, in the manner in which some have tended to isolate a theory of meaning from a theory of inquiry and thus to treat meaning as a kind of “picturing of the

---

<sup>1</sup> BRANDOM, Robert. “The Pragmatist Enlightenment (and its Problematic Semantics).” *European Journal of Philosophy* 12, n. 1, p. 1-16, 2004. Page numbers in parenthesis in the text refer to this article.

world.”<sup>2</sup> He thereby commits himself to treating the role of meanings not as isolated or abstract, but as related to other meanings *within* sequences of inquiry. This is of course a domain in which Dewey was very much at home, as evidenced by his several books on logic, including his 1938 *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*.

It is worth noting in this connection that Dewey objected to attempts by Charles W. Morris to apply his triad of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics to his own work (LW 15.330, 1989)<sup>3</sup> because he thought that Morris’s claims rested on unwarranted compartmentalization of the elements of the triad. “Morris’s account,” he wrote, “effectually splits apart the very subject-matters with which Peirce labors in order to provide an integrated solution.”<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, in telling us that this is his chosen domain, Brandom appears to have undercut the basis for his criticism of pragmatist semantic theory. This is because in the context of Dewey’s logic, processes of inquiry are just that: processes. They move forward in time and are concerned with the consequences of sequences of adjudication. But they do not arise out of nothing: they depend on what Dewey termed “raw materials” and “stocks of meanings,”<sup>5</sup> that is, they depend on taking judgments that have been *warranted* as assertible in *prior* sequences of inquiry and then either utilizing them as judgments in relevantly similar cases or *affirming* them in their *new role* as propositions that turn out to be appropriate (or not) with reference to, and in the context of, novel sequences of inquiry. I ask that you keep this in mind as I continue to outline Brandom’s argument.

---

<sup>2</sup> See RORTY, Richard. *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 162-63.

<sup>3</sup> Standard references to John Dewey’s work are to the critical (print) edition, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969-1991), and published in three series as *The Early Works* (EW), *The Middle Works* (MW) and *The Later Works* (LW). These designations are followed by volume and page number. “LW.1.14,” for example, refers to *The Later Works*, volume 1, page 14. In order to insure uniform citations of the critical edition, the pagination of the print edition has been preserved in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953: The Electronic Edition*, edited by Larry A. Hickman (Charlottesville, Virginia: InteLex Corp., 1996).

<sup>4</sup> See also LW.15.143 on Dewey’s reaction to Morris. “Whether I am correct or not in my general statement about the tendency to solve problems by parceling out subject-matter into independent domains or dimensions, one has only to read Peirce to see that Morris’s account effectually splits apart the very subject-matters with which Peirce labors in order to provide an integrated solution.”

<sup>5</sup> Dewey makes this explicit in the introduction to *Essays in Experimental Logic*. “Since it is desirable to have a stock of meanings on hand which are so connected that we can move readily from one to another in any direction, the stock is effective in just the degree in which it has been worked into a system – a comprehensive and orderly arrangement. Hence, while all meanings are derived from things which antedate suggestion or thinking or “consciousness” – not all qualities are equally fitted to be meanings of a wide efficiency, and it is a work of art to select the proper qualities for doing the work. This corresponds to the working over of raw material into an effective tool” (MW 10.354, 1980).

Although he does not cite any work by Peirce, James, or Dewey as evidence of their semantic “mistake,” it might be reasonable to assume that the type of consequentialism with which Brandom charges the pragmatists – a reductive consequentialism that ignores or cannot take into account what is “upstream” – turns on his understanding of what has been termed “the pragmatic maxim.” Peirce’s well known statement reads in part as follows: “consider what effects which might conceivably have practical bearings we conceive the object of our concept to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.”<sup>6</sup> When this statement is coupled with Peirce’s well known treatment of truth as what will come to be determined within a community of scientific inquiry, then it is easy enough to see why Brandom might think that he has caught the pragmatists in the act of committing this error.

So if this is Brandom’s smoking gun, then he might appear to have good cause for charging the pragmatists with being inappropriately preoccupied with *consequences* at the expense of *circumstances*. Here is how he spells out his charge: with respect to inquiry (what he terms “the functional role of belief ... [etc.]”), “the pragmatists look only *downstream*, to the practical *consequences* of beliefs.” Put another way, the pragmatists look only at the role of beliefs as “premises in practical inferences.” Their instrumentalist semantics offers “*success*” conditions, but not “*truth*” conditions. This is because they fail to look “upstream, to the *antecedents* of belief, to their role as *conclusions* of inferences or as the results of other processes of belief formation” (BRANDOM, 2004, 11).<sup>7</sup> (If you’ve read Dewey’s 1938 *Logic* with care, then I expect that you are already beginning to feel a bit uneasy about Brandom’s account.)

To illustrate what he takes to be the pragmatists’ mistake, he attempts to construct a situation in which (functionally) equivalent sentences utilized in one context (circumstances) will have different meanings in the other context (consequences). Looking upstream, they will appear to have one meaning. Looking downstream, they will have another. He thinks that the problem with pragmatist semantic theories is that they’ve taken only one half of the semantic situation into account. But both aspects – conditions and consequences – are essential to a fully fleshed out theory of meaning. The two elements of the pair must match.

Looking upstream, he says, the sentence “‘I foresee that I will write a book about Hegel’ is appropriately asserted [...] in the same *circumstances* as the sentence ‘I will write a book about Hegel.’”<sup>8</sup> What he means by “appropriately asserted,” he tells us, is that “the belief it expresses [is] appropriately acquired.” (He does not, by the way, elaborate on what he means by “appropriately acquired.”) But looking downstream, he continues, we can construct conditionals such that the two sentences (now embedded in the conditionals) do not have the same meaning. Looking downstream, the sentence

<sup>6</sup> *Writings of Charles S. Peirce*, vol. 3, 1872-1878, C. J. W. Kloesel, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) p. 266.

<sup>7</sup> In this case Brandom is attempting to drive a wedge between success (adaptation) and truth. This is an interesting move that Alvin Plantinga also makes as a part of his assault on naturalism. See BEILBY, James, ed. *Naturalism Defeated?: Essays on Plantinga’s Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> This is a strange example to start with. Brandom admits as much when he writes that he might “regiment” the meaning of “foresee” (BRANDOM, 2004, 11).

“If I will write a book about Hegel then I will write a book about Hegel” is true (in virtue of its form). But the sentence “If I foresee that I will write a book about Hegel, then I will write a book about Hegel” is problematic. Its truth depends on how well I can look into the future. The upshot of this, he claims, is that “pragmatist semantic theories are defective because they make the [...] mistake of ignoring the circumstances in favor of the consequences,” thus coming up short in terms their ability to offer a full account of meanings. Put another way, Brandom seems to think that pragmatist semantic theories either can’t avoid this problem or can’t account for it once it arises.

There are several possible points of entry into an analysis of Brandom’s claim. First, we might inquire about precisely what meaning is at issue. Is it the meaning of the two sentences, as he suggests, or more specifically the meanings of the terms “will” and “foresee” within those sentences that is at issue? In terms of context (or what Brandom terms “circumstances”), it seems fairly obvious that the English term “will” in both sentences is ambiguous. German speakers, for example, can be much more precise. A German speaker in this circumstance would be able to choose either “Ich werde,” or “Ich will.” The force of the first is an expression of a more or less vague intention, in the sense that one could also imagine using the present progressive (or present continuous) tense: “I’m going to go to the beach this afternoon, and next semester I’m going to write a book about Hegel.” The force of the second is much stronger: “I have the will to write a book about Hegel and by God I’m going to do so.” Regardless of which interpretation you accept, however, the important point for Dewey’s pragmatist theory of inquiry is that in neither case does the statement have logical import. Both statements enjoy only the status of what Locke called “civil language.” I’ll return to this point in a moment.

What about the statement “I foresee that I will write a book about Hegel”? This sentence – already somewhat odd on its face – is also ambiguous. In one sense it might express simple intent. “I intend to write a book about Hegel.” In the second instance, however, the term migrates from the sense of “I intend” to the sense of “I can accurately predict the future and ...” (or something of that sort). If we follow Dewey’s account in his 1938 *Logic*, the first alternative does not have logical import. Standing alone, the second statement does not have logical import, but it *might*, under certain circumstances, be affirmable as a proposition within a sequence of inquiry.

Given these ambiguities, it should come as no surprise, even to a fuzzy-thinking pragmatist, that in terms of standard logic the first conditional is true in terms of its form and the second conditional is problematic. Another way of putting this is that the first conditional is true but vacuous, and the second conditional raises all sorts of questions about precognition, determinism, opportunity, mental health, and so on. But it is difficult to know how any of this supports Brandom’s claim against the classical pragmatists. Is this supposed to cast doubt on the pragmatists’ ability to connect the “upstream” circumstances with the “downstream” consequences? This is far from clear. So perhaps we should attempt another approach.

Perhaps Brandom’s intent is just to stipulate that the pragmatists can’t look upstream; that in well ordered semantic theory the “upstream” and “downstream” elements of the semantic pair must match; that the pragmatists’ semantic theory cannot, by definition, fulfill this requirement; and therefore that it is defective.

To address this argument, it might help to take a step back and inquire about the nature of the subject matter under discussion. In his 1938 *Logic*, as a part of his discussion

of the positivist's preference for "sentence" and "word" in place of the more traditional "proposition" and "term," Dewey warned that "without careful statement, the new terminology does not discriminate between language that is adapted to the purposes of communication (what Locke called 'civil' language) and language that is *determined solely by prior inquiries* related to the purposes of inquiry – the latter alone being logical in import. This serious difficulty cannot be overcome by considering sentences and words in isolation, for the distinction depends upon an intent which can be adjudged only by means of context" (LW.12.284, 1986; emphasis added).

I ask you to note that there are three important points in this passage. *First*, Dewey reminds us that there is a difference between ordinary language and language that has logical import. This presumably includes "belief" language. *Second*, he claims that language that has logical import is *determined by prior inquiries*. In other words, *as inquisitorial* it looks *upstream* to the results of logical work already done and thus to judgements that have been warranted as assertible. *Third*, he claims that it is a mistake to attempt to determine meanings in the absence of context. (I will discuss the first two points in detail. The third point – regarding the importance of context – is a thread that runs through my discussion of the first two.)

Regarding the first point, it is essential to know whether Brandom thinks he is working with the loose, scrappy terms of ordinary language – what Locke called "civil language" (and what Russell once characterized as "notoriously ambiguous and vague") – or whether he thinks he is working with language in its role as the bearer of logical import. This is an important question, since grammatical form often obscures logical distinctions. I suspect that his move from the apparent equivalence of "I foresee that I will write a book about Hegel" and "I will write a book about Hegel" to their apparent difference in the hypotheticals he constructs depends on a shift from language used in the first sense to an attempt to use language used in the second sense. My suspicion is based on the fact that he has moved from sentences that he characterizes merely as "appropriately asserted" to sentences that appear to have logical import in the sense that one of them has been designed to be true in terms of its logical syntax, and the other has been designed to be contingent but syntactically similar to the first. It is not apparent either that he appreciates this distinction or that he is aware of this shift.

In support of my suspicion that Brandom has silently shifted from one type of discourse to another, I offer the following additional evidence. In the first instance, the meaning of both sentences could reasonably be understood as "I intend to write a book on Hegel." But this is not a logical proposition in the sense understood by writers of logic textbooks. As simply a statement of intent, it is not assertible as either true or false.<sup>9</sup> In terms of Dewey's theory of inquiry, however, it might be *affirmable* as a

---

<sup>9</sup> I freely admit that under certain circumstances a statement of intent is *treated* by agents of law enforcement *as if* it were true in the sense that the possible *outcome* of its stated intent is *treated* as possibly creating sufficient harm that the person who made the statement is apprehended in order to prevent the anticipated harm. An example of this would be threats made to high governmental officials: these are properly actionable. This is more or less to say that this type of statement of intent is treated as a performative. But I would add that this is at best a Pickwickian sense of "true" and that under most circumstances statements of intent are not treated in this fashion.

proposal (or proposition) under certain circumstances in the sense that what a baseball pitcher serves up to a batter is a proposal (or proposition).<sup>10</sup> The appropriateness of the pitcher's proposition must be viewed in the context of the judgment made by the batter (and another judgment made by the umpire). It is the judgment of the batter (and the umpire) that is true or false, and not the pitcher's proposition. It is also the case that the batter's judgment may result in a new proposal to a fielder.

To take another example, a proposal (proposition) of marriage is neither true nor false, although (as a kind of memorandum of record) the judgment that a proposal has been made may be true or false. It is instead the judgment of the person to whom the proposal is made – a judgment about the value of the proposal – that becomes either true or false.<sup>11</sup>

In the case at hand, "I intend to write a book about Hegel" might function as a proposition within a sequence of inquiry as follows. First proposition: I have a sabbatical coming up next year. Second proposition: I will (intend to) write a book about Hegel. Third proposition: Hegel's German is difficult and my German stinks. Conclusion: There is not enough support for my proposal (intention) to write a book about Hegel (so maybe I'll write a book about Brandom instead).

Note that even though the first and third propositions are merely *affirmed* in this sequence of inquiry, in another of their roles they may well have been the *consequences* of previous sequences of inquiry. In other words, they may be judgments that are assertible because warranted by previous deliberation. Looking "upstream," they may be said to be true. In the case at hand, I have checked with my department chair, for example, and she is prepared to *assert* that I have a sabbatical coming up next year because that judgment is warranted by a letter from the dean and she has the letter in her file. And my friend who is the chair of the department of modern languages is prepared to *assert* that Hegel's German is difficult, at best, because his judgment is warranted by long experience with the texts. There is simply no doubt that these judgments can be asserted over and over again as needed in relevantly similar situations, given the warrants that they possess.

So Brandom is simply wrong about the pragmatists looking only "downstream": in Dewey's book, these judgments are true (warranted as assertible) as consequences of prior inquiries. They look "upstream" for their warrant. But in their role as propositions

---

<sup>10</sup> Here is Dewey: "The terms *affirmation* and *assertion* are employed in current speech interchangeably. But there is a difference, which should have linguistic recognition, between the logical status of intermediate subject-matters that are taken for use in connection with what they may lead to as means, and subject-matter which has been prepared to be final. I shall use *assertion* to designate the latter logical status and *affirmation* to name the former. Even from the standpoint of ordinary speech, assertion has a quality of insistence that is lacking in the connotation of the word 'affirmation.' We can usually substitute the phrase '*it is held*' or '*it is said*' for '*it is affirmed*.' However, the important matter is not the words, but the logical properties that are characteristic of different subject-matters" (LW.12.123).

<sup>11</sup> Even in the old days when one could sue for alienation of affection, it was the judgment of the one to whom the proposition was made that rendered the situation potentially actionable.

that are appropriate (or not) to settling a new sequence of inquiry, they are neither true nor false. Dewey's account of inquiry thus departs from standard logic textbook accounts in this interesting way: he views propositions in general as neither true nor false, but appropriate or inappropriate, valid or invalid, with respect to their support for judgments, which are themselves the terminations (or sentences - the judicial metaphor is intentional) of processes of inquiry.

This brings us to the second claim of the passage cited (and one that I have already begun to touch on): language that is logical in import is determined by prior inquiries. In other words, pragmatic inquiry looks upstream to the results of logical work already done and thus to prior judgements that have been warranted as assertible. Brandom has not told us what he means by "appropriately asserted" in the context of his "upstream" circumstances, other than that "the belief it expresses [is] appropriately acquired." But Dewey has told us exactly what he means by a judgment that is the result of some prior sequence of inquiry being properly asserted: it is the result of a process of inquiry that has provided its warrant so that it *was and is now* assertible consistent with the pragmatists' doctrine of fallibilism. It continues to be assertible as long as there is no "hitch."

In some cases, of course, it would be difficult to envision what such a "hitch" would be. Under what conditions, for example, would a pure sample of tin *not* melt at 232 degrees Celsius at one standard atmosphere? That is one of Dewey's own examples of a judgment made in the past (warranted as the result of experimentation "upstream") and that continues to be assertible "downstream" every time someone wants to melt a sample of tin. Put another way, this judgment captures one of the many meanings of "tin" that connects the pairing about which Brandom is so concerned: the pairing of meanings in circumstances and consequences. What he thus fails to note is that (non-linguistic) experimental *success* provides the basis for (logical/linguistic) warranted assertibility (*truth*).

Does Brandom think that pragmatists *deny* that well-ordered inquiry depends on meanings that have been isolated and refined in ways that allow them to be utilized in the proper circumstances? One hopes that he does not, since this would be evidence of a significant misreading of Dewey's instrumentalism. In his 1916 *Essays in Experimental Logic*, for example, Dewey provides a genetic account of the development of logical objects through time and as they undergo processes of refinement. And in his 1934 *Art as Experience* he examines the ways in which the crude meanings of decoration and celebration become refined in the process of attempts to secure otherwise transient goods. The point here is that pragmatic inquiry does in fact look "upstream" to meanings as they are employed in everyday speech as well as in scientific inquiry. Dewey's instrumentalist inquiry attempts to reconstruct those meanings as needed.

Brandom's own example of the shift from the "European Enlightenment" to the "pragmatic Enlightenment" in fact provides an excellent illustration of this point. In applying the insights of Darwin, Dewey argued that classificatory terms should no longer be regarded as ontologically fixed, but should be treated instead as functional. This, I take it, is an example of looking "upstream" to the ways in which propositions and terms are used - and how they may be reconstructed in the light of novel insights.

Contrary to Brandom's charge, then, Dewey's pragmatic logic did in fact look upstream and Dewey was also not shy about talking about truth. In his 1941 exchange with Russell, for example, he noted that Russell had accused him of attempting to

substitute warranted assertibility for truth. Here is Dewey's reply.

[M]y analysis of 'warranted assertibility' is offered as a definition of the nature of knowledge in the honorific sense according to which only true beliefs are knowledge. The place at which there is pertinency in the idea of 'substitution' has to do with words. As I wrote in my *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, 'What has been said helps explain why the term 'warranted assertibility' is preferred to the terms belief and knowledge. It is free from the ambiguity of the latter terms.' But there is involved the extended analysis, given later, of the nature of assertion and of warrant. (LW.14.169, 1988)

In brief, I believe that Brandom has misread the classical pragmatists - or at least that he has misread Dewey - on this point. Dewey's theory of inquiry is in fact quite capable of looking both "upstream" and "downstream." By failing to recognize the dynamism of Dewey's theory of inquiry, Brandom seems to have misunderstood one of the key features of his version of pragmatism.

## References

- BEILBY, James (ed.) *Naturalism Defeated?: Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.
- BRANDOM, Robert. The Pragmatist Enlightenment (and its Problematic Semantics). *European Journal of Philosophy*. 12, n. 1, p. 1-16, 2004.
- DEWEY, John. *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*. Ed.: Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969-1991.
- PEIRCE, Charles S. *Writings of Charles S. Peirce*, v. 3 (1872-1878). Ed.: C. J. W. Kloesel. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.
- RORTY, Richard. *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

Artigo recebido em 11/12/06 e aprovado em 19/3/07.