

Brandom on Pragmatism

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Sami Pihlström

Department of Philosophy
University of Helsinki, Finland
sami.pihlstrom@helsinki.fi

Abstract: This paper discusses critically Robert B. Brandom's reading of the pragmatist tradition. Brandom identifies several different versions of pragmatism; these are compared to some important classical and contemporary kinds of pragmatism. Brandom's controversial views on pragmatism have been challenged by Hilary Putnam, among others; this paper contributes to this dialogue between two leading neopragmatists by further analyzing some key problems in Brandom's account of classical pragmatism. However, Brandom's way of connecting pragmatism with the Kantian-Hegelian transcendental tradition is both plausible and significant. In addition, the place of (non-reductive) naturalism in pragmatism is illuminated.

Key-words: Brandom. Naturalism. Pragmatism. Putnam. Transcendental philosophy.

Resumo: *Este ensaio discute criticamente a leitura que Robert B. Brandom faz da tradição do pragmatismo. Brandom identifica diferentes versões do pragmatismo; estas são comparadas a alguns tipos de pragmatismo clássico e contemporâneo. As visões controvertidas que Brandom tem sobre o pragmatismo foram desafiadas por Hilary Putnam, entre outros. Este ensaio contribui para esse diálogo entre dois neopragmatistas de ponta, ao analisar alguns problemas-chave no cômputo que Brandom faz do pragmatismo clássico. Entretanto, o modo com que Brandom conecta o pragmatismo à tradição transcendental kantiano-hegeliana é tão plausível quanto significativa. Ademais, buscaremos compreender melhor o lugar do naturalismo (não-reduutivo) no pragmatismo.*

Palavras-chave: *Brandom. Filosofia transcendental. Naturalismo. Pragmatismo. Putnam.*

1. Introduction

A number of leading philosophers today subscribe to pragmatism in a form or another. "Post-analytic" philosophers such as Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty have developed their own distinctive versions of pragmatism, partly by taking a fresh look at classical American thinkers, especially William James and John Dewey. Others, including John McDowell and Charles Taylor, have not labeled their positions pragmatistic, while

defending views in some ways similar to pragmatism.¹ Among first-rate American philosophers in the beginning of the twenty-first century, Robert Brandom has been more explicit about his pragmatism than, say, his long-time critic and conversant, McDowell. In addition to his *magnum opus*, *Making It Explicit*,² which defends a pragmatist and inferentialist view of meaning and normativity, he has, in a series of writings over the past few years, examined various versions of pragmatism, innovatively redescribing the pragmatist tradition by extending it not only to neopragmatists like Rorty but also to thinkers not standardly classified as pragmatists, such as Hegel or Heidegger – though it must be added that Brandom rarely, if ever, comments on the classical American pragmatists in any scholarly detail (see also section 3 below).

The purpose of this paper is to examine critically Brandom's articulation of pragmatism(s), as manifested in *Articulating Reasons* (a book whose relation to *Making It Explicit* is analogous to the relation between Kant's *Prolegomena* and *Critique of Pure Reason*), in *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, and in some of his recent papers on pragmatism.³ While I am in many ways in agreement with, and partly indebted to, Brandom's anti-reductionist conception of normativity – which is one of the central tenets of his pragmatism – I have to make a few critical remarks on his reading of the classical pragmatists, which also leads me to analyze his and Putnam's differences in responding to the pragmatist tradition. I am afraid that, while Brandom's rereading of the pragmatist tradition is indeed original and illuminating, it may not only *redescribe* but also *misdescribe* the classical philosophers belonging to that tradition.

Pragmatism is only one feature of Brandom's extremely rich position, which he describes as a “constitutive, pragmatist, relationally linguistic, conceptual expressivism”.⁴ It is also only one feature of the rich tradition he reconstructs, a tradition of “functionalist, inferentialist, holist, normative, and social pragmatist” insights,⁵ a tradition which Jaroslav Peregrin labels the “IHFPR(inferentialist-holist-functionalist-pragmatist-rationalist)-

¹ I discuss both McDowell and Taylor from this perspective, attempting to synthesize pragmatism and Kantian transcendental philosophy, in Sami Pihlström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental: A Pragmatic View* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus/Humanity Books, 2003), especially chs. 4 and 6.

² Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1994).

³ See Robert B. Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2000; paperback ed., 2001), especially “Introduction” (pp. 1-44); and Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2002); among his most relevant recent articles, see Brandom, “Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism”, in Robert B. Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics* (Malden, MA & Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 156-183; Brandom, “Pragmatics and Pragmatisms”, in James Conant & Urszula M. Zeglen (eds.), *Hilary Putnam: Pragmatism and Realism* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 40-58; and Brandom, “The Pragmatist Enlightenment (and its Problematic Semantics)”, *European Journal of Philosophy* 12 (2004), 1-16.

⁴ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, p. 9.

⁵ Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 17.

tradition”.⁶ Yet, a better understanding of what he means by pragmatism and what we, his readers, should mean by it might throw some light on some of the other aspects of his work, too.

2. Pragmatist Views on Conceptuality, Normativity, and Anti-Reductionism

Brandom distinguishes between a narrow and a broad meaning of “pragmatism”. The former is associated with the “classical American triumvirate of Charles Peirce, William James and John Dewey”, whereas the latter, denoting any philosophy celebrating “the primacy of the practical”, extends to the thought of Kant, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Quine, Sellars, Davidson, and Rorty.⁷ More specifically, Brandom links pragmatism with semantics, reserving the label “pragmatism” for views claiming that “semantic theory must answer in various ways to pragmatic theory”, e.g., by arguing for an explanatory priority of pragmatics over semantics.⁸ He has, in various publications, offered us several more specific characterizations of different pragmatist theses, which I will basically just list here, postponing my own critical comments.

In his treatment of the issue of conceptuality, i.e., of what conceptuality is and how it is possible, Brandom defines *conceptual pragmatism* – and contrasts it with platonism – as a view which “offers an account of knowing (or believing, or saying) *that* such and such is the case in terms of knowing *how* (being able) to *do* something” and which, therefore, “approaches the contents of conceptually *explicit* propositions or principles from the direction of what is *implicit* in practices of using expressions and acquiring and deploying beliefs”.⁹ Brandom, obviously, does not deny the natural (or

⁶ Jaroslav Peregrin, “Book Review of Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*”, *Erkenntnis* 59 (2003), 421-424 (see p. 422).

⁷ Brandom, “Pragmatics and Pragmatisms”, p. 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41. I wonder whether this characterization of pragmatism would accommodate thinkers such as Jaakko Hintikka, who – though being a model-theoretical semantician *par excellence* – insists on the idea that semantics is to be built on the basis of pragmatics (in his case, by means of game-theoretical semantics). In any case, what Brandom calls pragmatism *is* broad enough to accommodate Hegel and Heidegger (see Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, chs. 7, 10, and 11).

⁹ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, p. 4; see also p. 8. This, of course, is also a key to his *Making It Explicit*. In Brandom’s “Pragmatics and Pragmatisms” (p. 46), essentially the same doctrine is labeled *fundamental pragmatism*, which says that explicit theoretical beliefs can be rendered intelligible only against the background of implicit practical abilities; the contrast is “platonistic intellectualism”. Again, in *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (pp. 50, 194), Brandom defines conceptual pragmatism as the view that “grasp of a concept (conceptual content) is a practical capacity, mastery of a practice, or the capacity to undergo or engage in a process; it is the capacity to *do* something”. A couple of pages later, he speaks about a “fundamental *pragmatist* thesis” according to which “the *use* of concepts determines their *content*”, that is, “concepts can have no content apart from that conferred on them by their use” (*ibid.*, p. 52).

even material) basis of conceptuality and/or normativity (who would?),¹⁰ but contrary to “assimilationist” accounts of conceptuality and normativity, he is interested in the “discontinuities between the conceptual and non- or preconceptual”, in what is “special about or characteristic of the conceptual”.¹¹ It is puzzling, however, to hear him say that here his project is distinguished not only from contemporary naturalized semantics (e.g., Fred Dretske, Jerry Fodor, Ruth Millikan) but also from classical American pragmatism and Wittgenstein’s later philosophy.¹²

While the classical pragmatists subscribed to Brandom’s version of pragmatism by attempting to understand conceptuality in terms of concept-using practices, theirs was, he tells us, not a *linguistic pragmatism* along the lines of Wilfrid Sellars’s principle, according to which to grasp a concept is to master the use of a word.¹³ The linguistic pragmatist maintains that “engaging in specifically *linguistic* practices is an essential necessary condition for having thoughts and beliefs in a full-blooded sense”.¹⁴ Moreover, not all practices of language-use are equally relevant for the understanding of conceptuality. Brandom’s pragmatism is a *rationalist pragmatism*, emphasizing the practices of “giving and asking for reasons”, which are understood as “conferring conceptual content on performances, expressions, and states suitably caught up in those practices”.¹⁵

It is somewhat unclear (to me, at least) what exactly is the relation between the distinctions in *Articulating Reasons* and the ones Brandom introduces in “Pragmatics and Pragmatisms”. In the latter paper, he defines *methodological pragmatism* as the thesis that the “point” of our talk about the content or meaning of a linguistic expression lies in explaining (some features of the) use of that expression. Here, “pragmatic theory supplies the explanatory target for semantic theory” and provides the source of the criteria of adequacy to assess the success of theorizing about language.¹⁶ *Semantic pragmatism* is a distinct thesis, starting from the (in Brandom’s view, plausible) idea that

¹⁰ Joseph Margolis makes some reservations about this, however, claiming that Brandom’s inferentialism, because of its separation between sensory experience and belief or judgment, is “profoundly anti-Darwinian”. See Margolis, *The Unraveling of Scientism: American Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, NY & London: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 159.

¹¹ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, p. 3; cf. pp. 10-11.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 6. I wonder whether Brandom is too permissive in his acknowledgment that, in addition to the later Wittgenstein, Quine, and Sellars, even Dummett and Davidson are “linguistic pragmatists” (ibid.).

¹⁴ Brandom, “Pragmatics and Pragmatisms”, p. 47. See also Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 357, for the claim that Sellars is a methodological linguistic pragmatist.

¹⁵ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, p. 11; see pp. 23, 34.

¹⁶ Brandom, “Pragmatics and Pragmatisms”, p. 42. Brandom describes Kant as a methodological pragmatist – in the sense of “conditioning the semantic account of content on the pragmatic account of force – the way the story about what is endorsed is shaped by the story about what endorsing is” in his paper, “Kantian Lessons about Mind, Meaning, and Rationality” (presented at the conference on Brandom’s philosophy in Pécs, Hungary, April 25-26, 2005; manuscript, section 5).

“it is the way practitioners *use* expressions that makes them *mean* what they do”.¹⁷ Semantic pragmatists include philosophers as diverse as Hegel, (early) Heidegger, and (later) Wittgenstein: in all these three thinkers a “functionalism about intentionality” is formulated as the semantically pragmatist view that “the content expressed by linguistic expressions must be understood in terms of the *use* of those expressions”.¹⁸ Pragmatism in this functionalist, semantic sense is, roughly, a “use theory” of meaning and content.¹⁹

The difference between these two pragmatisms (methodological and semantic) is that while the methodological pragmatist seeks to explain the practice of using expressions (that is, what pragmatics is about) by referring to the contents associated with those expressions (semantics), the semantic pragmatist hopes to explain the association of contents with expressions by referring to the practice of using the expressions.²⁰ Furthermore, *normative pragmatism* is a fundamental (or conceptual) pragmatism acknowledging that there are norms implicit in our practices, in what we, as practitioners, do (instead of being codified as explicit rules defining the practice); a pragmatism such as Wittgenstein’s can, according to Brandom, be characterized along these lines, given its commitment to “normative pragmatics”, to an irreducibly normative vocabulary in the articulation of the notion of practice.²¹ Both Wittgenstein and Heidegger exemplify normative pragmatism, understood as the “pragmatic commitment to the explanatory priority of norms implicit in practice over those explicit in rules”.²²

In any case, the pragmatist approach in semantics is a “top-down” rather than a “bottom-up” one, because it starts with the use of concepts, that is, their applications in judgments and human action in general; indeed, here Brandom approves of Kant’s view of judgments as minimal units of experience, of what we may take responsibility for.²³ The choice of a top-down strategy motivates an interpretative suggestion. Brandom does not articulate his position in terms of the concept of *emergence* – nor do most other pragmatists. This concept, popular in recent metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of science, might, however, be employed in order to explicate certain key ideas in non-reductive naturalism that pragmatists like Brandom defend. We might say that Brandom’s discussion of what is distinctive in conceptuality and/or normativity serves as an example of the (strong) emergence of the conceptual and the normative from the “merely natural”. The bottom-up strategy is hopeless from the start: there is no way of accounting in any plausible way for distinctively human concept-use or normative

¹⁷ Brandom, “Pragmatics and Pragmatisms”, p. 43.

¹⁸ Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 32; see also p. 210.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²⁰ Brandom, “Pragmatics and Pragmatisms”, p. 44. Brandom’s complex distinctions enable him to formulate various kinds of mixed positions, including “reductive fundamental semantic pragmatism” (*ibid.*, p. 47).

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

²² Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 327.

²³ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, p. 13; see pp. 80, 195. Kant, Brandom notes, “makes a normative turn”, a shift from Cartesian ontological characterization of selves to a deontological one: selves are “loci of responsibility”, and judgments are minimal units of experience precisely because they are the minimal sorts of things we can be cognitively responsible for (*Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 21).

commitments by starting from what we share with “mere animals”. We need to view conceptuality and normativity as emergent products of specifically human forms of life. This is a view that pragmatists ought to applaud.²⁴

It is impossible to provide any full-fledged theory of emergence in these pages, but I propose to read Brandom’s statements that (1) products of social interactions (or the discursive practices humans engage in) “are not studied by the *natural* sciences – though they are not for that reason to be treated as spooky and *supernatural*” and that (2) the realm of culture “rests on, but goes beyond”, the (exercise of the) differential responsive dispositions of “merely natural creatures” as (tentative) commitments to emergentism.²⁵ Conceptuality and normativity, or anything typical of our practices and interactions insofar as we are specifically human, arise out of, but cannot be reduced to, our lives as animals. Brandom is almost explicit here:

Although of course cultural activities arise within the framework of a natural world, I am most concerned with what is made possible by the emergence of the peculiar constellation of conceptually articulated comportments that Hegel called “Geist.” Cultural products and activities become explicit as such only by the use of normative vocabulary that is in principle not reducible to the vocabulary of the natural sciences (though of course the same phenomena under other descriptions are available in that vocabulary). Indeed, the deployment of the vocabulary of the natural sciences (like that of any other vocabulary) is itself a cultural phenomenon, something that becomes intelligible only within the conceptual horizon provided by the *Geisteswissenschaften*.²⁶

This is something that anti-reductionist pragmatic naturalists ought to sympathize with. So is Brandom’s suggestion for the following way of understanding what pragmatism is: “Pragmatism ought to be seen as comprising complementary vocabularies generated by the perspectives of naturalism and historicism, of common purposes and novel purposes, rather than as restricting itself to one or the other.”²⁷ Furthermore, Brandom’s thesis that claims and inferences both sustain and transform the tradition in which there are implicit conceptual norms governing the process of sustenance and transformation.²⁸ A normative tradition is constantly emerging. “To use a vocabulary is to change it.”²⁹ The pragmatist who subscribes to this view may be seen as joining the generally processualist thought characteristic of emergentism. If emergent normativity is granted a sufficiently high level of autonomy in relation to non-normative (“merely animal”) behaviour, it will be obvious that the *use* of linguistic expressions that the semantic pragmatist insists on as a

²⁴ For a discussion of the relations (both historical and systematic) between pragmatism and emergentism, see Charbel Niño El-Hani & Sami Pihlström, “Emergence Theories and Pragmatic Realism”, *Essays in Philosophy* 3:2 (2002) [online], www.humboldt.edu/~essays.

²⁵ See Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, p. 26.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁷ Brandom, “Vocabularies of Pragmatism”, p. 171. This passage occurs in the context of a critical, yet sympathetic, discussion of Rorty’s dialectics with naturalist and historicist “vocabularies”.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

²⁹ *Ibid.* See also the discussion of a historicist conception of rationality in the “Introduction” to *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, especially p. 13.

ground for, or a condition of, the meaning or content of those expressions must not be restricted to use specified in a non-normative vocabulary; correct and incorrect – normatively described – use is something we actually (one might be tempted to say, “naturally”) engage in.³⁰

Brandom is to be blamed, however, for leaving his emergentism largely implicit. What does it actually mean that the “same” phenomena can be described in both vocabularies (that is, in the natural-scientific one and in the *geisteswissenschaftliche* one)? Are *those* phenomena (the “same” ones) themselves ultimately natural or cultural, or is this question somehow meaningless or irrelevant? *How* autonomous and irreducible, ultimately, are the normative phenomena that can be sufficiently accounted for only “top-down”, not “bottom-up”? Insofar as they are, *qua* such phenomena, causally efficacious, do we have to sacrifice the principle of the causal closure of the physical world, accepted by most contemporary naturalists? Brandom should, I am suggesting, be more directly concerned with ontological issues, and he should connect his pragmatism with ontology, not only with semantics. He should tell us, in pragmatic terms, what it means that the world is a natural world which nevertheless consists of different emergent “levels” corresponding to, say, merely natural entities or processes and cultural practices. He might start by raising the concept of emergence as a response to the question, “How does what we have *actually done* with the terms, the judgments we have actually made, settle what we *ought to do* with them in novel cases?”³¹ characterizing the normative as an emergent, or constantly emerging, structure grounded in but not reducible to the factual. He does say, in fact, if only in passing, that “a norm emerges as an implicit lesson” through prior decisions and applications;³² what is needed is an explicit way of connecting this loose notion of emergence with the philosophical notion of emergence at work in recent literature.

While Brandom does not draw any detailed attention to the emergence debates, we can speculate a bit about what a “Brandomian” pragmatist account of the emergence of normativity might look like. It is clear, given his “rationalist” and “anti-assimilationist” (and even “non-naturalist”) program, insisting on the differences between concept-using and non-concept-using beings,³³ that the conception of emergence to be invoked here must be a strong rather than a weak one.³⁴ Moreover, and more importantly, the standard emergentist debate over downward causation seems irrelevant in Brandom’s picture, given the inappropriateness of causal vocabularies for accounting for the specifically human normative and conceptual dimensions that separate us from mere

³⁰ Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 386.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³² *Ibid.* Compare, however, Brandom’s use of the term “emergent” in his description of the classical pragmatists’ conception of nature, in Brandom, “The Pragmatist Enlightenment” (e.g., p. 3).

³³ See, again, the way these doctrines are articulated in the “Introduction” to *Articulating Reasons*.

³⁴ For distinctions between various forms of emergence theories, see Achim Stephan, *Emergenz: Von der Unvorhersehbarkeit zur Selbstorganisation* (Dresden & München: Dresden University Press, 1999); cf. El-Hani & Pihlström, “Emergence Theories and Pragmatic Realism”.

animals. Yet, no dualism is assumed, because these are nothing “supernatural”; on the contrary, they may be said to be parts of our human nature.

We might argue, further, that a weak notion of emergence, emphasizing the compatibility of emergence and ontological reduction, will, when applied to the problem of normativity, only yield a causal, (socio-)psychological explanation of why people *de facto* behave as if they followed norms, or why they act in accordance with norms. The analogy would be a computer following the rules of calculation without being *committed* to them, or an animal following, invariably or *ceteris paribus*, its instincts. A stronger notion of the emergence of norms from human practices – as something, in Brandom’s terms, implicit in the very practicing within those practices – is required to account for the possibility of our being committed to norms, of our being normatively committed to certain ways of thinking and acting. The key issue here is very different from causal, scientific explanation, though not in contradiction with it – simply different. The pragmatist may here reassure us that no dualism haunts this non-reductive view: on the basis of pragmatic *pluralism*, there is no problem in there being a plurality of different perspectives from which the world (including human beings in it) can be legitimately viewed. The causal (merely descriptive) and the normative are such different perspectives. The possibility of viewing ourselves *sub specie rationis* or *sub specie legitimationis* is available to us, as it (strongly) emerges from our factual existence, our animal nature. This perspective must, indeed, be available to us, if we are to make *any* choice between, say, the two perspectives involved here. So, *for us* – the kind of normatively oriented responsible agents we inevitably take ourselves to be (even, and especially, when engaging in scientific or philosophical theory-construction) – the causal perspective cannot be the whole story.³⁵

This, in brief, is the basic rationale for strong emergence I wish to invoke here; and I believe Brandom might, at least partly, agree. Finally, it is worth emphasizing that the ultimate grounding for the strong emergence I am defending is pragmatic in the sense that what we really need (in this case, strongly emergent normativity) is *ipso facto* real *for us*. A pragmatic need to see the world in a certain way is transformed into a commitment to the way the world, for us, is.

3. Brandom vs. Putnam on Classical Pragmatism

Articulating Reasons contains little historical interpretation of pragmatist philosophers (and *Tales of the Mighty Dead* even less), but Brandom does make the claim that the classical pragmatists committed the sin of “identifying propositional contents exclusively with the *consequences* of endorsing a claim, looking downstream to the claim’s role as a premise in practical reasoning and ignoring its proper antecedents upstream”.³⁶ One should, in order to identify conceptual or propositional content, look both upstream and

³⁵ An analogous (transcendental) argument against reductive naturalism can be found in Sami Pihlström, “On the Concept of Philosophical Anthropology”, *Journal of Philosophical Research* 28 (2003), 259-285, as well as in Pihlström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental*.

³⁶ Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, p. 66.

downstream, identifying the role the claim plays in inferential practices. Brandom describes pragmatist classics like James and Dewey as *instrumental pragmatists*, for whom (to put it in Rortyan words) the use of vocabularies is to be modeled on the use of tools.³⁷ Thus, he criticizes the classical pragmatists' view of rationality as "instrumental intelligence" and, more generally, their utilitarian conception of instrumental reason.³⁸

A more detailed statement from "Pragmatics and Pragmatisms" is worth quoting at length:

As I read them, [the classical American pragmatists] are pragmatists in *all* of the senses I have distinguished so far. They manifest their endorsement of what I have called 'fundamental pragmatism' by giving pride of place to habits, practical skills and abilities, to know-how in a broad sense, and in the way they distinguish themselves from the intellectualist tradition in terms of this explanatory priority. They manifest their endorsement of methodological pragmatism by taking it that the point of our talk about what we mean or believe is to be found in the light it sheds on what we *do*, on our habits, our practices of inquiry, of solving problems and pursuing goals. They manifest their endorsement of semantic pragmatism by taking it that all there is that can be appealed to in explaining the meaning of our utterances and the contents of our beliefs is the role those utterances and beliefs play in our habits and practices.

I also think that the classical American pragmatists endorse a normative pragmatics, and therefore, given their fundamental pragmatism, a normative pragmatism. But this generic commitment is to some degree masked by the specific account they go on to offer of the norms they see as structuring our broadly cognitive practices. For they focus exclusively on *instrumental* norms: assessments of performances as better or worse, correct or incorrect, insofar as they contribute to the agent's success in securing some end or achieving some goal. [...] They understand truth in terms of usefulness, and take the contents possessed by intentional states and expressed by linguistic utterances to consist in their potential contribution to the success of an agent's practical enterprises. Peirce, James and Dewey are *instrumental* normative pragmatists.³⁹

Brandom goes on to emphasize the classical pragmatists' evolutionary approach: construing norms instrumentally demystifies them and helps us to reconcile the Kantian emphasis on the normativity of discursive practices with "post-Darwinian naturalism".⁴⁰ He finds, however, the broader pragmatism captured in his above-cited theses much more plausible than the narrowly instrumental construal of norms he reads into classical

³⁷ Brandom, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism", p. 159. See also Brandom, "Pragmatics and Pragmatisms", pp. 55-58. Brandom's criticism of instrumental pragmatism (see below) should be seen as a rejoinder to Rorty's all too easy reading of him (and Sellars) as a pragmatist in the sense that "truth is a matter of the utility of belief rather than of a relation between pieces of the world and pieces of language". See Richard Rorty, "Robert Brandom on Social Practices and Representations", in Rorty, *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 122-137 (see p. 127).

³⁸ Cf. Brandom, "The Pragmatist Enlightenment".

³⁹ Brandom, "Pragmatics and Pragmatisms", p. 50 (emphases in the original, endnote omitted).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

pragmatism,⁴¹ ending up with his familiar account of implicit conceptual commitments as social statuses instituted by participants' practical attitudes in the context of irreducibly social linguistic practices.⁴²

Brandom's reading of the classical pragmatists is, as Putnam persuasively argues, unfortunately naive – which is all the more deplorable given Brandom's otherwise interesting and plausible pragmatist project.⁴³ According to Putnam, the instrumentalist interpretation of “the classical American triumvirate” is “completely wrong”: none of the three great pragmatists of the past either reductively identified what is true with what promotes success in desire-satisfaction, or eliminated truth in favor of such success-promoting, or even held that promoting success in the satisfaction of wants or desires is more important than what is true.⁴⁴ James is perhaps the most difficult among the classics (at least more difficult than Peirce) to accommodate to this non-instrumentalist account, but Putnam draws attention to the “epistemologically realist” passages in his work, passages characterizing truth as “agreement with reality” and acknowledging a “pre-human fact” that we did not simply make up, yet insisting on the need to explain (pragmatically) what such agreement or correspondence is.⁴⁵ Dewey, too, can be saved from Brandom's charges, given his refusal to identify the resolving of a problematical situation with the satisfying of wants – because we might have the wrong wants.⁴⁶ Putnam even notes (correctly) that the misunderstandings Brandom is now guilty of were already corrected by James and Dewey themselves in their lifetime.⁴⁷ These

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 51-54.

⁴² Ibid., p. 54.

⁴³ Putnam also acknowledges Brandom's brilliance and points out that his criticism is limited to Brandom's interpretation of the classical pragmatists: Hilary Putnam, “Comment on Robert Brandom's Paper”, in Conant & Zeglen (eds.), *Hilary Putnam*, pp. 59-65 (see p. 59). According to Putnam, Brandom should have spoken about Rorty's narrowly instrumental pragmatism, instead of ascribing that view to Peirce, James, and Dewey (ibid.).

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 59-60.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 60-63. Instead of directly citing James's pronouncements on truth here, I simply refer the reader to my discussion of his pragmatism (with some comparisons to Putnam, among others) in Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology: Understanding Our Human Life in a Human World* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998); see also Pihlström, “Peirce's Place in the Pragmatist Tradition”, in Cheryl Misak (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Peirce* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 27-57.

⁴⁶ Putnam, “Comment on Robert Brandom's Paper”, p. 61. Putnam's own favorite version of pragmatism, which focuses on the fact/value entanglement in particular, is largely indebted to Dewey (though also to the other classical pragmatists, especially James, as well as Wittgenstein). See here especially the following relatively recent works by Putnam: *Words and Life*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1994); *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Oxford & Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995); *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2002); *Ethics without Ontology* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2004). I discuss Putnam's pragmatic (Deweyan) defense of moral objectivity in Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatic Moral Realism* (Studies in Pragmatism and Values, New York & Amsterdam: Rodopi, forthcoming in 2005), chs. 1-2.

⁴⁷ Putnam, “Comment on Robert Brandom's Paper”, p. 64.

thinkers simply did not hold that the truth of our beliefs consists in the beliefs' being useful tools or instruments for us to get what we want. Putnam concludes: "[S]erious students of pragmatism have spent almost a century rebutting this sort of travesty of the thought of the classical pragmatists. It is regrettable that Brandom is putting it back into circulation."⁴⁸

It ought to be noted, however, that Brandom's worries about classical pragmatism are set in a context of significant sympathy, especially in his 2004 paper, "The Pragmatist Enlightenment". He admits that the classical pragmatists ideas were "progressive" in several respects: they were evolutionary naturalists; they offered a conception of experience as *Erfahrung* rather than *Erlebnis*, emphasizing experience as "situated, embodied, transactional" learning process; they found semantic issues explanatory prior to epistemological one, thus learning of one Kant's lessons; they understood the normativity of semantic concepts; they strived after a "nonmagical", functional, and scientific theory of content by seeking to explain content in terms of what we do (practice); and they privileged "practical knowing how", thus offering a corrective to classical enlightenment intellectualism.⁴⁹ Their mistakes – that they, as noted above, only emphasized the role of beliefs as premises in practical inferences, as well as only their role in justifying or producing actions (and not their role in justifying further beliefs); that they (in Brandom's view) emphasized actions and beliefs at the cost of the "third component", viz., desires, preferences, goals, or norms, as independent of beliefs;⁵⁰ and that they equated the success of actions with the satisfaction of desires – were only mistaken specifications of these broadly plausible ideas.⁵¹ Moreover, Brandom's instrumentalist account of classical pragmatism is an instrumentalism about the assessment of practices; he says (in discussion) that he does *not* think (*pace* Putnam) that the pragmatists proposed a naively instrumentalist theory of truth, although he does claim that they had a "successor notion" to the classical concept of truth.⁵² Brandom's criticisms may be partly justified from the perspective of his own program in semantics, but he ought to realize that the classical pragmatists' philosophical pursuits may simply have been quite different. They did not, as he notes,⁵³ share the interest in language characteristic of twentieth century philosophy, and they should not be blamed for living before the linguistic turn.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 65.

⁴⁹ Brandom, "The Pragmatist Enlightenment", pp. 14-15. In particular, I agree with Brandom that the pragmatists reconceptualized both theory and practice "in terms of ecological-adaptational processes of interaction of organism and environment of the sort epitomized by evolution and learning" (ibid., p. 10; see also pp. 2-5).

⁵⁰ This charge against pragmatism can hardly be even understood. Upon really reading the classical pragmatists, one can hardly get the impression that they overlooked the role played by goals or preferences in our actions. It is almost as hard to believe that the pragmatists – say, Dewey, for whom problematic situations were the starting point of inquiry – would have ignored circumstances in favor of consequences (ibid., p. 12). Also, the claim that pragmatists were materialists (ibid., p. 6) is too straightforward and misleading.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 11-13.

⁵² Ibid., p. 12.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 15.

Be that as it may, Brandom's recent reservations undercut parts of Putnam's criticism. Nevertheless, even if they partly miss their mark, given Brandom's more positive larger-scale picture of pragmatism, Putnam's critical points are still worth emphasizing in the discussion of the pragmatist classics; in any event, it is beyond the scope of this essay to investigate whose (Brandom's or Putnam's) interpretations of the classical pragmatists are historically more reliable. In my own work, I have ended up with promoting views much closer to Putnam's than to Brandom's, and to some extent inspired by and indebted to his.⁵⁴ This, however, should not prevent me – nor, of course, anyone else – from learning a lot from Brandom's positive project, the one he detaches from classical pragmatism. As I suggested in the previous section, an emergentist re-reading of pragmatism might even enforce this kind of non-reductively naturalist pragmatism about what is distinctive in normativity and conceptuality. In any case, it may seem, surprisingly, that Brandom has not kept in mind his carefully laid out principles of historical interpretation⁵⁵ in his own discussions of the classical pragmatists.

Another historical issue related to the interpretation of classical pragmatism, not discussed by Putnam, is the role played by Hegel as a background figure of the pragmatist tradition. It is true that Hegel can, according to Brandom, be classified as a pragmatist only in a broad sense; yet, it is worth noting that some pragmatists, most prominently William James, found Hegelian absolute idealism as their main enemy. On the other hand, Peirce and Dewey were crucially influenced by Hegel, and even James's processualist, panexperientialist metaphysics of "pure experience" has, arguably, its Hegelian roots.⁵⁶ In Brandom's view, it is Hegel who (in contrast to Kant) "brings things back to earth" by treating the transcendental structure of our "cognitive and practical doings" as being "*functionally* conferred on what, otherwise described, are the responses of merely natural creatures, by their role in inferentially articulated, implicitly normative social practices".⁵⁷ Hegel stands to Kant as W.V. Quine stands to Rudolf Carnap: both Hegel and Quine offer a monistic "one-level account" of meaning and normativity, refusing to accept the Kantian and Carnapian "two-level" view that theories about the world are tested on the basis of experience only after meanings are first stipulated. Our practice of language-use is not merely the application of concepts but simultaneously

⁵⁴ See Pihlström, *Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology*, as well as *Naturalizing the Transcendental*.

⁵⁵ See Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, ch. 3, on the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* interpretations of historical figures. Perhaps Brandom's statements about classical pragmatists should be read *de re*, that is, as attempts to say what "*really* follows" from the claims these thinkers made, what "is *really* evidence for or against them", and what they were really committed to, regardless of their own opinions (*ibid.*, p. 102). However, if Putnam is right, nothing like naïve instrumentalism "really follows" (*de re*) from a view like James's, nor did James believe so (*de dicto*).

⁵⁶ Cf. here T.L.S. Sprigge, *James and Bradley: American Truth and British Reality* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1993). For James's polemics against Hegelianism, see especially William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1975).

⁵⁷ Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 47.

the institution of the conceptual norms governing the correct use of our linguistic expressions; it is our actual use of language itself that settles the meanings of our expressions.⁵⁸

Nonetheless, James might have strongly resisted the inclusion of Hegel in the pragmatist school. The monism associated with Hegelian idealism was, for James, the very opposite of pragmatic pluralism. If this Jamesian criticism is taken seriously, Kant might, after all, be judged the more important background thinker for pragmatism – though James did not much like him, either.

Yet another historical issue might be raised regarding Heidegger's entitlement to membership in the pragmatist tradition. Heidegger himself saw pragmatism as one element of the technologically oriented, scientific and naturalistic philosophical tradition that was destroying our original relation to Being. However, Brandom – together with some other pragmatist interpreters⁵⁹ – describes Heidegger's basic project in *Sein und Zeit* as a pragmatist one of grounding *Vorbandensein* in *Zubandensein*: a necessary (transcendental?) background for understanding how it is possible for us to judge, state, or represent how things are from a disinterested perspective is found in “our practical nonconceptual dealings with things”; thus, “knowing *that*” is to be explained in terms of “knowing *how*”, and the possibility of conceptually explicit contents is to be explained in terms of what is implicit in nonconceptual practices.⁶⁰ Brandom explicitly regards Heidegger's strategy for explaining how the *vorbanden* “rests on” the *zubanden* as “pragmatism about the relation between practices or processes and objective representation”.⁶¹ He explicates this as “pragmatism concerning *authority*”: matters of (particularly epistemic) authority are matters of social practice, not simply objective factual matters; the distinctions between ontological categories such as *Zubandensein* and *Vorbandensein* (and indeed *Dasein* itself) are social.⁶² Heidegger is also explained as maintaining a normative pragmatism (cf. section 2 above), in which norms implicit in practice are taken as primitive and explicit rules or principles are defined in terms of them.⁶³ Brandom in effect takes Heidegger's normative pragmatism to be the combination

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 53, 214-215. Brandom explicitly speaks about “Quine's *pragmatism*” (ibid., pp. 53, 214, 390; original emphasis); it is another historical issue, not to be decided here, whether Quine should be included in the pragmatist tradition or not – and, if so, whether he should really be included in this, or any, tradition as a companion of Hegel (!).

⁵⁹ Including, among others, Mark Okrent: see his *Heidegger's Pragmatism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988). Rorty's version of pragmatism also makes heavy use of Heidegger: see, e.g., Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁶⁰ Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 77.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 80. However, the dependence of *Vorbandensein* on *Zubandensein* is not the whole story. Heidegger's pragmatism must be qualified by the interpretation that, for him, there can be no *Dasein* (nor, therefore, *Zubandensein*) without language, “thematizing”, and thus without *Vorbandensein*. Brandom seeks to establish a reciprocal sense dependence between these ontological regions. (See ibid., p. 81 and especially ch. 11, pp. 329ff.)

⁶² Ibid., p. 301.

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 324-325. This kind of pragmatism might *not* be congenial to the emergentist proposal made above: while the philosophical tradition treats the factual as basic, explaining the normative as an addition, the Heideggerian proposal, on Brandom's reading, is that

of two theses: (1) the factual is to be understood in terms of the normative; and (2) propositionally storable rules, explicit norms, are to be understood in terms of implicit norms, viz., “skillful practical discriminations of appropriate and inappropriate performances”.⁶⁴

Social normativity, then, is irreducibly present in the very project of ontology. What is *zubanden*, “ready-to-hand”, that is, “equipment”, is (Brandom notes) characterized by Heidegger himself as *pragmata*, “that which one has to do with in one’s concerned dealings”.⁶⁵ Pragmatism, for Brandom’s Heidegger, is not simply semantic, conceptual, or normative, but also *ontological*:

Heidegger sees social behaviour as generating both the category of equipment ready-to-hand within a world, and the category of objectively present-at-hand things responded to as independent of the practical concerns of any community. In virtue of the social genesis of criterial authority (the self-adjudication of the social, given pragmatism about authority), fundamental ontology (the study of the origin and nature of the fundamental categories of things) is the study of the nature of social Being – social practices and practitioners.⁶⁶

The Heideggerian worlds, in short, is “a holistic totality of [...] practical normative equipmental involvements”.⁶⁷ It is hard to think of a more fitting one-line description of the pragmatist’s world, and I am happy to accept such an ontologically pregnant picture of pragmatism. Although Brandom, as we have seen, is not primarily dealing with ontological issues – for instance, he is reluctant to invoke the concept of emergence in any ontologically strong manner – his reading of Heidegger interestingly, yet problematically, ends up with an “ontologically pragmatist” picture of social practices as “generating” the categories of fundamental ontology. I do believe the pragmatist (even the non-Heideggerian pragmatist) should say something similar, redescribing ontology as the project of identifying and classifying the most fundamental categorial features of a humanly inhabited and (practically) conceptualized reality. Yet, it is an open issue how closely Heidegger should actually be tied to this pragmatist ontological framework – and, as we shall see next, it is an open issue how the relation between pragmatism and ontology should be understood.

social normativity should be seen as primitive and the factual should be explained as a special case by “subtracting” relations to human projects (ibid., p. 324). If this is so, then the normative does not emerge from the factual; rather, one might say that the factual emanates from the normative.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 328.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 303. The reference is to section 15 of Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1961; first published 1927).

⁶⁶ Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 322.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 325.

4. Pragmatism and Ontology

Insofar as pragmatism is one of the central philosophical frameworks in the market today, it is a worthwhile task to investigate whether some of the most widely read philosophers of our time can be seen as pragmatists in some sense. This is particularly interesting in the case of someone like Brandom who labels his position “pragmatism”, while maintaining some distance to the classics of the tradition. I have in this paper suggested that there is much to be said for the compelling articulation of a pragmatically naturalist yet anti-reductionist picture of conceptuality and normativity Brandom holds, though we might invite him to clarify the relations between the various versions of pragmatism we have seen him distinguish – conceptual, linguistic, rationalist, methodological, semantic, normative, instrumental, ontological, and so forth. Such a plethora of pragmatisms may not, after all, be helpful for the one who seeks to understand the unifying features of the pragmatist tradition.⁶⁸

Brandom, clearly, is extremely good at spelling out a distinctively pragmatist account of conceptuality and normativity; for the pragmatist who does not merely want to appeal to the normativity of social practices as something given but who needs a conception of what normativity actually amounts to, his inferentialist position is a highly recommendable choice, partly because of his willingness to connect pragmatism with the Kantian-Hegelian tradition.⁶⁹ It is compatible with this attitude to his work to question his interpretation of

⁶⁸ Let me note that I have left several possible criticisms of Brandom’s pragmatism intact here. For an argument to the effect that pragmatism in semantics, such as Brandom’s, ties understanding too closely to mastery of epistemic practice, see S. Rosenkranz, “Pragmatism, Semantics, and the Unknowable”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81 (2003), 340-354.

⁶⁹ In terms of the “transcendental pragmatism” I defend elsewhere (see Pihlström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental*), we might speak about the transcendental role played by Brandom’s practices of giving and asking for reasons in the constitution of normativity and conceptuality, hence of the very possibility of thought. Occasionally, Brandom’s formulations are almost explicitly transcendental: in addition to some of the passages already quoted in section 2, he says, for instance, that inferential practices – claiming, justifying claims, using claims to justify others, etc. – are “what in the first place make possible talking, and therefore thinking”, and that sophisticated linguistic or discursive practices are “intelligible in principle only against the background of the core practices of inference-and-assertion” (*Articulating Reasons*, pp. 14-15). In the same introductory chapter, he describes Hegel’s views by John Haugeland’s dictum that “*all transcendental constitution is social institution*”, adding that “[t]he background against which the conceptual activity of making things explicit is intelligible is taken to be implicitly normative essentially *social practice*” (*ibid.*, p. 34; see also Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, pp. 47-49, 216-217). See also Brandom’s interpretation of Rorty as a Kantian – contrary to Rorty’s self-pronounced statements – on the basis of his (Rorty’s) sharp distinction between the natural (causation) and the normative (justification) in Brandom, “Introduction”, in Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics*, p. xv; cf. Brandom, “Vocabularies of Pragmatism”, pp. 160-161. What Brandom here calls “pragmatism about norms” is also transcendentially formulated: “only in the context of a set of social practices – within a vocabulary – can anything have authority, induce responsibility, or in general have a normative significance for us” (*ibid.*, p. 161). (Cf. also the above-cited discussion of “normative pragmatism” in Brandom,

the classics, however. James and Dewey arrived at much more sophisticated views than Brandom – or many other critics of classical pragmatism – have been willing to admit. We need not endorse Brandom’s views on these classics in order to make pragmatic use of his inferentialism in debates with non-pragmatists or reductive naturalists who want to explain normativity away.

Brandom is also extremely good at identifying a philosophical tradition which is only implicit in the standard narratives of the development of modern philosophy. In the introduction to *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, he describes a historical conception of rationality as a conception that understands rationality “as consisting in a certain kind of reconstruction of a tradition – one that exhibits it as having the expressively progressive form of the gradual, cumulative unfolding into explicitness of what shows up retrospectively as having been all along already implicit in that tradition”.⁷⁰ The tradition he finds most important for his own systematic philosophical concerns is, of course, the “rationalist” and inferentialist (if also, to some extent, pragmatist) one extending from Spinoza and Leibniz through Hegel and Frege to Heidegger and Sellars. The “historicist” or traditionalist understanding of rationality is an addition to inferentialism, because it does not take for granted the inferentially articulated norms we use but asks further, “under what conditions are determinate conceptual norms possible?”, emphasizing a pragmatist answer.⁷¹

Putnam’s recent admiration of classical pragmatism culminates in his criticism not only of certain naturalistically distorted ontologies but of the very project of ontology.⁷²

“Pragmatics and Pragmatisms.”) Rorty’s “Response to Robert Brandom” (in Brandom, ed., *Rorty and His Critics*, pp. 183-190) does not address the Kantian reading but repeats polemics against realism and representationalism familiar from many of Rorty’s recent writings; Rorty’s above-cited paper, “Robert Brandom on Social Practices and Representations” also takes up Kantian issues while culminating in standard Rortyan antirepresentationalism. Furthermore, note that Brandom at least once labels the tradition he is sketching in *Tales of the Mighty Dead* as a “Kantian” one (p. 89). I have nothing against combining Kantianism and pragmatism, two heterogeneous traditions, in this manner, although we must also remember that Brandom’s reading of Kant is not intended as pure Kant scholarship but is subordinated to his systematic concerns and heavily influenced by his Hegelianism (cf. Brandom, “Kantian Lessons about Mind, Meaning, and Rationality”).

⁷⁰ Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 12.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13. Of course, not all the “mighty dead” Brandom discusses can be called pragmatists even in a broad sense. For instance, it would be difficult to read Frege as a pragmatist. But even Frege can, Brandom suggests, be seen as “open[ing] the doorway” to the kind of pragmatism about content described above as a Wittgensteinian-like “use theory” of meaning, “though he clearly is not tempted to pass through it himself” (*ibid.*, p. 75). In any case, it is a problem worthy of further investigation how the unorthodox tradition Brandom identifies and reconstructs is actually related to (identifications and reconstructions of) the pragmatist tradition.

⁷² Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, Part I.

Here I do not follow his interpretation of pragmatism, however.⁷³ I believe that pragmatism should be developed as an ontologically – not only semantically or epistemically – relevant philosophical framework, and this is one of the reasons why I think that the concept of emergence, invoked above in section 2, ought to be employed within pragmatism, too (and partly explicated through pragmatism). In relation to Brandom, no one has pointed this out better than another recent pragmatist, Joseph Margolis (which is not to say that I would entirely agree with his treatment of pragmatism, either):

The fatal weakness in Sellars's argument – very possibly in Rorty's (and, it may be added, in Robert Brandom's "Rortyan" treatment of Sellars) – lies with the metaphysical standing of language itself: it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to treat selves eliminatively (as Sellars does) *and* yet allow the continued objective standing of truth (and language) in the scientific realist's sense. You cannot find in Rorty or Sellars [or, we may add, Brandom] any explanation of how to admit language without admitting the realist standing of mind.⁷⁴

While his criticism of Brandom remains implicit, hidden under the more explicit criticism of Rorty and Sellars, Margolis makes a very important point: the pragmatist ought to be a (pragmatic) realist about the various normative structures, including language and the mind (or the self), which s/he anti-reductionistically acknowledges. In Margolis's preferred terms, the emergence of cultural entities (including language) should be accepted – and human selves should also be seen as cultural products in this ontological sense, yet fully real, *contra* the kind of eliminativism we find in the work of Brandom's and Rorty's quasi-pragmatist hero, Sellars.⁷⁵ This adds a further reason for seeking (for instance) a pragmatist account of emergence, or alternatively, an emergentist reconceptualization

⁷³ Cf. Sami Pihlström, "Putnam's Conception of Ontology", forthcoming in a Book Symposium on Putnam's *Ethics without Ontology*, to be published in *Contemporary Pragmatism* 3 (2006). I discuss the ontological significance of pragmatism at greater length in Pihlström, *Structuring the World: The Issue of Realism and the Nature of Ontological Problems in Classical and Contemporary Pragmatism* (Acta Philosophica Fennica 59, Helsinki: The Philosophical Society of Finland, 1996). See also the brief remarks on Heidegger and ontological pragmatism in the closing of section 3 above.

⁷⁴ Joseph Margolis, *Reinventing Pragmatism: American Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, NY & London: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 61. Margolis argues in a similar manner in several other works of his, though seldom against Brandom in any textual detail.

⁷⁵ Margolis frequently claims (and I am tempted to agree with him) that Rorty's and Brandom's attempts to put Sellars's work to do a pragmatist job fails. Sellars, he says, "cannot be made into a pragmatist of any sort (as Rorty and Brandom pretend to do) except by deliberate deformation – which I'm bound to say both are willing to embrace" (Margolis, *The Unraveling of Scientism*, p. 5; see also pp. 107, 142-143). The reason for this, from Margolis's perspective, is Sellars's stubborn scientism, according to which "manifest image" entities such as tables and chairs and human persons do not exist in the ontologically privileged "scientific image". For critical discussion from the point of view of pragmatism, see also Pihlström, *Structuring the World*, ch. 4.

of pragmatism (more specifically, of pragmatic realism about irreducible cultural entities we need to commit ourselves to ontologically) – a project in which Brandom’s non-reductive naturalism may be helpful, as indicated in section 2 above.⁷⁶

Accordingly, while we certainly have to make the normative and pragmatic “turns” away from Cartesian ontological assumptions, turns that Kant (as well as the pragmatists later) taught us to make,⁷⁷ we should now, in the current situation in the development of pragmatism, be prepared for another turn, the ontological one. This, however, should not be a turn back to Cartesian assumptions but a turn forward, to a new, still developing Kantian-cum-pragmatic understanding of what the ontologically inescapable transcendental categories of a humanly inhabitable world are. Such an understanding will have to take seriously what has been learned in the normative and pragmatic turns Brandom celebrates.

5. Concluding Critical Notes

Another critical point that might be raised about Brandom’s project as a whole concerns the very notion of “making it explicit”. Charles Taylor has argued, in a recent paper criticizing Rorty, that we should appreciate what he calls the “background”, defined as “the skein of semi- or utterly inarticulate understandings that make sense of our explicit thinking and reactions”, something to be drawn from Heidegger’s notion of “being-in-the-world” or from Wittgenstein’s and Merleau-Ponty’s similar notions.⁷⁸ *Could* this background be made explicit? Would something be lost, if it were? For Taylor, the background plays a transcendental role as a condition for the possibility of thought or intentionality, and he is also a pragmatist in the sense of treating the background as more or less equivalent with our worldly practices, similar to Wittgenstein’s “form of life”. But is Taylor’s theory of the background *either* a pragmatist *or* a transcendental theory in the sense in which Brandom’s is? Hardly: he is, it seems, more willing to *leave* certain things implicit in our thought and language-use. The true transcendental pragmatist, someone like Taylor might argue, will abandon the project of semantic theory, however irreducibly normativist, and just leave the background inarticulate.

Taylor’s criticism of Rorty proceeds along these lines. He argues that Rorty – just like Quine and, perhaps, also Brandom? – fails to get rid of representationalism, after all,

⁷⁶ See Pihlström, *Structuring the World*, ch. 5, as well as El-Hani & Pihlström, “Emergence Theories and Pragmatic Realism”. Margolis is one of the few contemporary pragmatists to explicitly employ the vocabulary of “emergence”. Putnam, for instance, refuses to use this concept, although his anti-reductionism, too, would be naturally explicable in emergentist terms. Brandom admits (in discussion) that he *is* a realist about culture and social statuses and that emergence may be an appropriate notion to describe his position in this regard.

⁷⁷ See Brandom, “Kantian Lessons about Mind, Meaning, and Rationality”.

⁷⁸ Charles Taylor, “Rorty and Philosophy”, in Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley (eds.), *Richard Rorty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 158-180 (here p. 159). For further discussion of the “background” along similar lines, see also Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), especially ch. 4.

if representationalism is committed to the claim that “the only inhabitants of the space of reasons are beliefs”.⁷⁹ Rorty fails to note “the embedding of our explicit beliefs in our background grasp of things”,⁸⁰ the way in which “[o]ur explicit thinking about the world is framed and given its sense by an implicit, largely unarticulated background sense of our being in the world.”⁸¹ While Taylor avoids attributing Rorty’s (failed) position to Brandom, he does take issue with Brandom’s defense of Rorty’s pragmatism as a project continuing the Enlightenment by liberating us from modern gods and authorities (such as the commitment to the way things really are, etc.):⁸²

But to assume that the transition from the infantile-dependent to the mature-emancipated sums up the movement of the twentieth century [...] is a simplification of almost comic-book crudity. It adopts a naively flattering view of self and an utterly unobservant view of the other. If we were dealing with one culture’s view of another, we would speak of “ethnocentrism”; what is the corresponding word when it’s a matter of metaphysical views? (And some of these people call themselves pragmatists! What would William James say to this?)⁸³

This is indeed one of the questions we should bear in mind. When Brandom tells us his stories about pragmatism, and about the ways in which his preferred tradition (however it is described: inferentialism, rationalism, functionalism, holism, the “Kantian tradition”, or just IHFPR) is related to the pragmatist tradition properly so called, or carries “enlightening” pragmatist themes along with it, we should remember to ask what pragmatists such as James would have said. Would James – or should the contemporary pragmatist – accept the project of making explicit implicit practice-laden norms in order to produce a systematic semantic theory? Would he – or should we – view the pragmatist tradition culminating in Rorty as a continuation of Enlightenment? Are we really, genuinely, liberated if we follow Rorty in the rejection of accurate representations and the way things are, or, indeed, in the rejection of the very issue of realism itself? Moreover, similar questions ought to be asked not only in relation to the classical pragmatists, such as

⁷⁹ Taylor, “Rorty and Philosophy”, p. 169.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 176.

⁸² Cf. Brandom’s introduction to *Rorty and His Critics*, p. xi. See also Robert B. Brandom, “When Philosophy Paints Its Blue on Gray: Irony and the Pragmatist Enlightenment”, *Boundary* 29:2 (2002), 1-28, as well as Brandom, “The Pragmatist Enlightenment”. Brandom’s own position and his reading of Rorty on this issue may, however, be more nuanced than Taylor acknowledges, but he does talk, with a Rortyish voice (and referring to Rorty), about a second (pragmatist) enlightenment which sees norms for belief and action as “our doing and our responsibility”, without need for an alien authority or “non-human Reality” (Brandom, “The Pragmatist Enlightenment”, p. 9).

⁸³ Taylor, “Rorty and Philosophy”, p. 179. For Taylor’s (to a large extent sympathetic) reading of William James’s pragmatist philosophy of religion, see Charles Taylor, *The Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2002).

James, but also to the thinkers Brandom unorthodoxly describes as pragmatists, such as Heidegger.⁸⁴

Here I cannot further review these debates, however. Putnam, Margolis, and Taylor are very different critics, but they all rightly question the Rortyan (and Sellarsian) commitments of Brandom's pragmatism. The main thing I hope to have achieved in this paper, with the help of these authors, is a critical stance toward Brandom's interpretation and appropriation of the pragmatist tradition, combined with an endorsement of his synthesis of systematic philosophical theorizing and historical reconstructions,⁸⁵ and with a significant agreement about the various things he hopes to be able to do with the help of the tradition(s) he reconstructs, including (*pace* both Brandom and Putnam) a promise of a future synthesis of pragmatism and emergentist metaphysics, to be developed as a substantial ontological rearticulation of a pragmatic non-reductive naturalism about normativity. Thus, I hope it is clear, by now, that we can learn a lot from thinkers like Brandom (or Putnam), if we want to "soften" naturalism (which today takes all too scientific forms)⁸⁶ both *methodologically*, e.g., by allowing transcendental reflection on the enabling conditions of meaning, and *metaphysically*, e.g., by allowing rich emergent "levels" of reality. This interplay of metaphysical and methodological insights into non-scientific naturalism should receive more attention as the critical discussion of pragmatism and naturalism unfolds.⁸⁷

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⁸⁴ There is also the further issue of whether *all* the major neopragmatists – Putnam, Rorty, Brandom, and others – understand pragmatism (and philosophy in general) in a too strongly linguistic manner. Some Deweyans, for instance, argue that "primary experience" is something more fundamental than language or "vocabularies" and that the linguistic turn has thus obscured some of the most plausible ideas of classical pragmatism. See, e.g., David L. Hildebrand, *Beyond Realism and Antirealism: Dewey and the Neopragmatists* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003).

⁸⁵ See Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, pp. 15-16. I also sympathize with Brandom's notion of "talking with a tradition", which can be understood "instrumentally" (the tradition is employed as a means of expression) or "conversationally" (moving back and forth between the tradition and our own commitments) (*ibid.*, p. 110).

⁸⁶ See, again, Margolis's criticisms in *The Unraveling of Scientism*.

⁸⁷ I want to thank Janos Boros and Zsolt Garai, the organizers of the Brandom conference at Pécs University, Hungary (April 25-26, 2005), for their kind invitation to present this paper, as well as Robert Brandom for his engaging comments.

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Sami Pihlström

Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy
P.O. Box 35
FI-40014 University of Jyväskylä
FINLAND

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