Brandom, Robert: Between saying and doing

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In his Locke Lectures, delivered at Oxford University in the Trinity Term of 2006 – now published under the title "Between Saying and Doing" with Oxford University Press – Brandom puts forward an original and extremely ambitious philosophical project. He aspires to nothing less than a renewel of the analytic tradition by incorporating into it the basic insight of its major competitor, i.e. of the pragmatist tradition as it is developed in a prototypical form in the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein.

According to Brandom, analytic philosophy is characterised by a particular form of philosophical explanation, namely, by its aspiration to provide reductive accounts or analyses of particular vocabularies in terms of other vocabularies. Such an account aims to show that everything that can be said or described by means of one vocabulary, the target or problematic vocabulary, can also be expressed by another one serving as the account's base vocabulary. The need for a reductive account only arises, i.e. it would only be non-trivial, in a case in which, on the face of it, the expressive resources of the vocabularies involved are quite different. In particular, this is so if no logical elementary expression of one of the vocabularies matches a logical elementary term of the other one with regard to its sense or even to its extension. Accordingly, a crucial step in providing a reductive account consists in constructing for every logical simple term of the target vocabulary a synonymous or co-extensional logical complex term that only contains non-logical simple terms belonging to the base vocabulary. So the analytic tradition assigns a special role to the logical vocabulary, or as Brandom puts it, it is committed to semantic logicism. Logical terminology neither plays the role of the base nor of the problematic vocabulary but mediates between them. That is to say, by adding to the base vocabulary the logical terminology, the former is extended in such a way that it becomes suitable for expressing or representing everything that can be said or described in the target vocabulary.

The core programmes of analytic philosophy, naturalism and empiricism, aspire to reduce all expressive or at least all descriptive resources of our language, including the special scientific vocabularies, to one base vocabulary. On Brandom's view, the main challenge to these programmes is provided by the insight into the nature of linguistic meaning – according to which the meaning of a linguistic expression is constituted by its use within a particular social practice – that lies at the heart of the pragmatist tradition. Given this picture of language, the realisation of analytic philosophy's explanatory ambition requires constructing a unified and systematic account of linguistic practice that reduces the many different ways of using linguistic expressions to a basic one, in order to make the practice of employing various vocabularies susceptible to codification in terms of a self-contained system of rules. But on the pragmatist picture, linguistic practice is constantly transformed by the addition of new ways of using linguistic expressions as well as by extending the established uses to new contexts. Therefore, in the pragmatist's perspective, in virtue of the motley and fluid character of linguistic practice, the latter principally resists the unification

and codification that is required for the realisation of the explanatory project of analytic philosophy.

In order to meet this pragmatist challenge to the analytic tradition, Brandom tries to show that the theoretical quietism of the pragmatist tradition is not forced on us by the nature of linguistic practice. He does so by developing a systematic theory that specifies something like a logic of the relation between meaning and use, or between practices and vocabularies. The most fundamental concept of this theory is that of practice/vocabulary-sufficiency – PV-suffiency for short – that holds between the practice of using marks or sounds in a particular way and a vocabulary – e.g. the normative, intentional or indexical vocabulary – iff that practice confers on these marks or sounds the semantic content of expressions belonging to the vocabulary, that is, iff mastering that practice is sufficient for being a competent user of the vocabulary.   However, the question whether a practice is PV-sufficient for a vocabulary lacks a clear sense, unless it is determined in terms of which set of concepts the practice is to be specified, that is, which vocabulary serves as the pragmatic metavocabulary for the former vocabulary. Thus, the basic pragmatic-mediated relation between vocabularies that is addressed by the theory is that of being a pragmatic metavocabulary for another vocabulary. This relation holds between a vocabulary that is sufficient for specifying a practice – which is, as Brandom puts it, PV-sufficient for that practice – and the vocabulary for which that practice is PV-sufficient. As Brandom points out, one can create a potentially infinite hierarchy of pragmatically mediated relations by recursively applying this conceptual apparatus. However, in keeping with his purpose of renewing the analytic tradition on a pragmatist basis, he focuses on two such relations that constitute a pragmatist counterpart to the relation between base and target vocabulary. One of these relations Brandom calls pragmatic bootstrapping. It holds between a pragmatic meta-vocabulary and the corresponding object-vocabulary, iff the expressive resources of the former go beyond those of the latter. The other one is a form of practice/practice-sufficiency (P/P-sufficiency for short). A practice is PP-sufficient for another one iff each is PV-sufficient for a specific vocabulary respectively and someone who possesses the capacity to participate in one of these practices is in principle able to engage in the other practice. One way to spell out what "in principle" means here is by appealing to the notion of algorythmic elaboration. A practice can be turned into another practice by algorythmic elaboration iff the capacity to engage in the latter practice can be reconstructed as a sequence of performances that instantiate more elementary capacities, all of which are constitutve for the capacity to participate in the former one. Besides providing a method for elucidating one vocabulary in terms of another, the concept of algorythmic elaboration plays another important role in Brandom's pragmatist reconstruction of analytic philosophy: By appealing to that concept, Brandom closes a gap in the justification of the explanatory strategy of analytic philosophy that concerns its commitment to semantic logicism. Logical vocabulary can only fulfil the special role within a reductive account that is assigned to it by the analytic tradition if adding logical terms to the base vocabulary does not introduce new semantic contents into that vocabulary. For, it is the aim of a reductive account to demonstrate that the expressive resources of the base vocabulary alone are sufficient for expressing everything that can be described or expressed in the target vocabulary. In order to show that the logical vocabulary satisfies the requirement of semantic transparency imposed on it by semantic logicism, Brandom offers the following account of logical vocabulary: Sentences have semantic content in virtue of being caught up in inferential relations. It is the characteristic task of logical terms to make these inferential relations explicit. Therefore, the capacitiy to use an autonomous vocabulary essentially involves the implicit mastery of inferential patterns, which can be turned into the capacity to use logical terms by algorythmic elaboration. Correspondingly, these terms serve to make explicit a constitutive aspect of any practice of using an autonomous vocabulary, namely, the ability to draw inferences. So, by adding logical terms to the base vocabulary one confers an explicit form on semantic contents that are already implicit in the use of the base vocabulary.

Does the analytic pragmatism proposed by Brandom in his Locke Lectures fulfil the task he assigns to it, i.e., does it show a way to overcome the problems that the analytic tradition faces? What answer one gives to this question obviously depends on how one specifies these problems. On Brandom's view, the most important of these problems is the pragmatist challenge. However, there is another one that is at least as crucial as that challenge. It concerns the metaphysical underpinning of a reductive account. As such an account is tradionally conceived, it presupposes a metaphysical belief of a particular form, prototypical instances of which are provided by naturalism and empiricism, namely, a conception of the general form of reality. Such a conception provides a point of view as to what kind of vocabulary is needed in order to describe everything that is the case. The vocabulary singled out in this way is the base vocabulary. According to the Phytagoreans, the base vocabulary is the vocabulary of arithmetics; according to the contemporary proponents of naturalism, it is the vocabulary of natural science – in particular of physics, and empiricism is the view that the base vocabulary consists of observation terms. For someone who accepts a particular conception of the general form of reality, and who is faced with a vocabulary – a problematic vocabulary – the expressive resources of which are, on the face of it, quite different from those of the base vocabulary, but which is well entrenched in our discursive practice, a cognitive tension arises. For, because the problematic vocabulary plays a crucial role in our discursive practice, we are compelled to acknowledge that it is suitable for describing reality, while it seems suspect in this regard because it is doublful whether one can describe the (potential) facts that are specified in terms of it by means of the base vocabulary. The function of a reductive account of the problematic vocabulary in terms of the base vocabulary is precisely to overcome these doubts in a way that is consistent with the presupposed conception of the general form of reality.

In the 20th century, the only prima-facie acceptable candidates for a conception of the general form of reality are naturalism and empircism. But, as Brandom himself emphasises, empiricism has been generally discredited in the analytic tradition as a result of the forceful attack launched against it by Quine and Sellars. Furthermore, the dogmatic character of naturalism has been exposed by the vigorous and perceptive criticism that has been directed against it in the last decades by philosophers like Davidson, McDowell and Rorty. So, it seems that no acceptable conception of the general form of reality is presently available to back up reductive explanatory programmes. Brandom fails to address this problem for the analytic tradition explicitly. However, he responds to it indirectly by expounding his analytic pragmatism in a way that avoids a commitment to such a conception, particularly a commitment to naturalism. Thus, according to his presentation of analytic pragmatism, no vocabulary essentially possesses the status of a base vocabulary, so that also no vocabulary is intrinsically problematic and in need of justification. On this reading of Brandom's position, the roles of base and problematic vocabulary are assigned to particular vocabularies provisionally and heuristically, i.e. to a certain extent at random. However, if this construal of his account was right, that account would run into serious difficulties. For, by cutting the project of providing a reductive account loose from its metaphysical context, the point of engaging in that project becomes completely obscure. It is no longer clear why one should embark on it, nor in which respect the target vocabulary would be illuminated by following through with that project.
This defect is manifested symptomatically by certain ruptures and gaps in Brandom's account.They occur in the first instance in connection with his appeal to an automaton-theoretical framework. In the first lectures, that framework merely serves to provide a syntactic model for the pragmatically mediated relations between vocabularies that take centre stage within analytic pragmatism. Already at this point his appeal to an automaton-theoretical framework seems arbitrary, because he avoids to privilege a particular compartment of our language metaphysically, i.e. to take it as the base vocabulary. But this problem becomes much more severe when it turns out in the latter

lectures that the automaton idiom plays a much more crucial role in Brandom's account, namely, that of being its pragmatic meta-language. The choice of an automaton-theoretic language as a pragmatic meta-vocabulary for his account of linguistic practice is motivated by one of the explanatory functions that that account is supposed to fulfil: It should make intelligible, ontogenetically as well as phylogenetically, how non-linguistic creatures can acquire the capacity to use an autonomous vocabulary. In order to shed light on the process of language acquisition, Brandom appeals to a particular feedback mechanism, namely, to the test-operation-test-exit circle (for short TOTE-circle): In that circle, the effects of a performance that an automaton, more precisely a tranceducer, produces as output is feeded back to it as input negatively or positively reinforcing the performance. By going through a TOTE-circle, a tranceducer can learn step by step to perform certain tasks or to adapt to certain aspects of its enviroment. According to Brandom, a non-linguistic creature turns into to a participant of a discursive practice by instantiating a particular TOTE-circle. By offering this account of linguistic practice, he implicitly takes the advent of semantic intentionality to be a mystery for the solution of which an account is required that specifies in a non-intentional as well as non-semantic vocabulary, namely in a automaton-theoretic and kypernetic idiom, sufficient conditons for being a participant of a discursive practice. However, nothing is mysterious in itself, but only relative to a conception of what is clear, self-evident or normal. As was pointed out above, Brandom's analytic pragmatism, at least on the most natural reading of it, does not yield such a conception. Furthermore, in the context of the present philosophical debate, the only conception of this sort that is suitable to provide a motivation for his account of how non-linguistic creatures acquire the capacity to use an autonomous vocabulary is a naturalist outlook. For, only in the perspective of naturalism is the intentional and semantic vocabulary to be clarified or vindicated by specifying in a non-intentional and non-semantic language conditions the fulfilment of which are sufficient for that vocabulary to be applicable. So, Brandom implicitly undertakes a commitment to naturalism, thereby contradicting the official presentation of his position according to which it is metaphysically neutral.

There are many other places in which he tacitly relies on a naturalist framework (unfortunately, I lack the space to show this in detail). So, it is tempting to interpret his position in the spirit of rational reconstruction as a version of naturalism. However, even on this reading Brandom's account turns out to be ultimately unacceptable. This is so even if one sets aside the dogmatic nature of naturalism to which I alluded above. For, on this reading, Brandom faces a dilemma, the two sides of which correspond to two possible interpretations of the automaton-theoretical language that serves as the pragmatic meta-vocabulary of his account of discursive practice. On the one hand, one can take the programme of an automaton as a norm for its correct functioning. However, it is only within a discursive practice in which the automaton is used as an artefact that the programme can play the role of a standard for assessing the performances of the automaton as right or wrong. From this it follows that, on this construal of the automaton-theoretical language, that language is not intelligible apart from the semantic and intentional vocabulary for which that language should serve as pragmatic meta-vocabulary, so that Brandom's account of discursive practice is circular. On the other hand, the programme of an automaton can be understood as an empirical hypothesis that is confirmed or disconfirmed by the actual output of the automaton. Thus, the automaton-theoretical language does not articulate a normative structure, but only describes an empirical regularity. Therefore, Brandom's account would seem to be inappropriate, since it fails to do justice to the essential normative nature of its target vocabulary.