Pragmatism and Metaphysics in Brandom's *Between Saying and Doing*

Elena Ficara

eficara@yahoo.de
Technische Universität Berlin
Institut für Philosophie, Wissenschaftstheorie, Wissenschafts- und Technikgeschichte
Straße des 17. Juni 135
10623 Berlin

Abstract. The paper inquiries into Brandom's conception of pragmatistic metaphysics, as outlined at the end of *Between Saying and Doing*. In the reconstruction proposed, the combination of pragmatism and analytical philosophy that is at the basis of Brandom's program seems to have many aspects in common with the critical and dialectical conception of metaphysics that we find in Kant and Hegel.

My paper is divided into three parts. In the fist I give an account of Brandom's conception of metaphysics as presented in the afterword of *Between Saying and Doing*. In the second I locate Brandom's view within the debates on metaphysics recently occurred in what can be called the "new Hegelianism" of analytical philosophy. In the last part I briefly reconsider Brandom's suggestions in the light of Kant's and Hegel's views, stressing the continuity between Brandom's program of a *dynamic* and *pluralistic* metaphysics sketched in *Between Saying and Doing* and the conception of first philosophy outlined by the early Hegel.

Brandom's Pragmatistic Metaphysics

In the Afterword of *Between Saying and Doing* Brandom addresses the question of metaphysics, in its relation to analytic philosophy and to his own analytic pragmatism. In Brandom's reconstruction, the core program of analytic philosophy is the attempt to clarify the meanings expressed by one kind of vocabulary (the analysandum or "target vocabulary") in terms of the meanings expressed by another kind of vocabulary (the analysans or "base vocabulary"). The pragmatist challenge to this program (Sellarsian, Wittgensteinian, Quinean) consists in displacing the center of philosophical attention from the notion of "meaning" to the notion of "use". For instance, according to Wittgensteinian pragmatism uses of language are various and dynamic, and the same idea that there are properly meanings that universally codify disparate kinds of uses is controversial.

Brandom's program is to extend the project of analysis, by incorporating the pragmatistic critique as a positive element. In so doing, he adopts a third position between the received view of classical semantical analysis and its pragmatistic dissolutive outlets.

In *Between Saying and Doing* Brandom specifically inquiries for a meta-vocabulary able to express not only strictly semantic but also pragmatic relations between vocabularies. The relations between basic features of discursiveness are then "meaning-use-relations" and imply a dynamic articulation of meaning and use, semantic and pragmatic. The classical analytic program is thus preserved, but in a new perspective.

What Brandom rejects is the analytical commitment to some particular privileged vocabulary: and it is exactly this sort of foundational commitment that he identifies as *metaphysics*, in a derogatory sense. More specifically, in analytic philosophy two particular perspectives, *empiricism* and *naturalism*, play the role of privileged vocabularies, to which every other vocabularies must be reduced. According to Brandom's analytic pragmatism instead, the relation between base and target vocabulary is dynamic: a base vocabulary can develop into a target vocabulary and vice versa.

Brandom also observes that analytical philosophy's commitment to empiricism and naturalism is "metaphysical", insofar as it corresponds to the meaning of metaphysics as "making claims about the universal expressive power of some particular vocabulary". In this sense metaphysics is the program requiring us to quantify over all possible vocabularies, and which "crafts a vocabulary in which everything can be said".

But significantly, Brandom also observes that, even if the expression "all possible vocabularies" makes him sceptical about the concept of metaphysics, the idea of possible universality seems to entail "a sort of necessity". Brandom makes clear that beyond the "aspiration to find a universal vocabulary" there is „the aspiration to find one in which one can say everything one must be able to do in order to say anything, that is to use any vocabulary whatsoever. This is the idea of a universal pragmatic metavocabulary" (Brandom 2008, p. 230). The former specifies what we say, the latter is concerned with specifying what we should do in order to say something. Now "what I am doing in the body of these lectures" Brandom specifies,

"is neither metaphysics nor an attempt to construct a universal pragmatic metavocabulary. Rather, I am looking for a different kind of metavocabulary. It is at a higher level, making it possible to express crucial structural

features of the relations between the dimensions of discursiveness they take as their targets, relations between what is said and what is done" (Brandom 2008, p. 231).

It should be noted that the notion of metaphysics that Brandom is here dealing with is to be related to the idea of *philosophia prima* more than to the notion of "science of being qua being". In this sense, like he himself says, the semantical and non-ontological approach he proposes should also be seen as a form of "enlightened" metaphysics.
Actually, Brandom does not exclude that some metaphysical enterprise, in some sense, might be acceptable, and hypotizes that it might be conceived in the following terms:

"For every vocabulary one comes up with, the metaphysician is committed to the favoured base vocabulary being adequate, when suitable elaborated, to express what it expresses. We start by trying to codify the vocabularies we have, but acknowledge the commitment any more that may come along […] metaphysics in this sense is a perfectly reasonable undertaking […] it is, perhaps, a little quixotic […] It is crucial that it be pursued in the open-minded, pluralistic spirit of Lewis and not in an exclusionary one." (Brandom 2008, p. 228)

Altogether, as Brandom ultimately says, the view of metaphysics outlined in the Afterword is rather a trace, which needs to be developed and further articulated. But here we already have some positive suggestions about the intended nature of a pragmatistic-semantical metaphysics:
1. the idea that the metaphysician's concern is to inquiry universally (though in a regulative sense) into uses and meanings, more than to reduce any assertion to a base vocabulary or to produce a new universal (or base) vocabulary;
2. the idea that the enterprise should be context sensitive, and each time needed for some special contextual reasons;
3. the idea that the enterprise itself is anyway a little "quixotic", which means that a perfectly successful metaphysician is somehow unconceivable – or in other terms "metaphysics" denotes a difficult enterprise, which must be undertaken with the complete awareness of its difficulty;
4. finally, that metaphysics requires a *pluralistic*, *open-minded* spirit.

What I would like to do now is trying to briefly develop some aspects of this view, specifically showing that it corresponds (with some new points) to both Kant's and Hegel's views about metaphysics.

Metaphysics and Anglo American New Hegelianism
Before trying to show the continuity between Brandom's and the Kantian/Hegelian view, may be useful to dispel some possible misunderstandings affecting the status of contemporary Anglo American interpretations of Hegel's metaphysics in relation to Kant.
In Anglo American Hegelianism of the last 15 years there have been basically two attitudes towards metaphysics: a critical and an apologetic attitude. Pippin's and Pinkard's works belong to the so called anti-metaphysical tendency. They stress the continuity between Kant and Hegel, and interpret both Kant and Hegel in antimetaphysical terms. Pippin proposes what he calls a "nonmetaphysical" interpretation of Hegel, an interpretation "that (…) understands Hegel's speculative philosophy as an 'idealism'" (Pippin 1989, 6). He underlines the Kantian roots of Hegel's idealism, and considers the terms "idealism" and "metaphysics" as mutually exclusive. Hegel accepted Kant's "revelations about the fundamental inadequacies of the metaphysical tradition", and then: "How could he have created a systematic metaphysics as if he had never heard of Kant's critical epistemology?" (Pippin 1989, 7).
Pippin is surely right in underlying the continuity between Kant's transcendental philosophy and Hegel's idealism, but he forgets that both Kant and Hegel also defended a kind of *critical* metaphysics. The anti-metaphysical interpretation of Kant is a result of a neo-Kantian reading, proposed in the last decade of the XIX century, and further developed by Natorp and Cassirer. But it is arguable, and has been contrasted by Heimsoeth, Martin and many other interpreters. Id this holds, Hegel is certainly committed to metaphysics, and this is not to be intended as a "return", but rather as a fulfilment of Kant's attempt.
Terry Pinkard defends a similar view, but with a significant difference. He observes (1996) that his position about Hegel's metaphysics has been inspired by his teacher Klaus Hartmann, who prefers "ontology" to "metaphysics" because the latter "implies needless controversies" (Pinkard 1996, p. 21). But the distinction between ontology and metaphysics is a typically contemporary result. In Kant's and Hegel's view the terms are synonyms, and interestingly enough, Kant, while defining his own enterprise as "metaphysics", considered the term "ontology" "arrogant" and "proud".
Something should also be said of the countertendency of this line of interpretation. Against Pippin and Pinkard, Frederick Beiser (2008) has observed that Hegel was a metaphysician and that interpreting his thought in antimetaphysical terms is sign of "historical inaccuracy". Beiser defines metaphysics as "science of the

absolute", identifies the absolute with the "self positing spirit" and observes that the expression "self positing spirit" and therefore Hegelian metaphysics is, from a contemporary point of view, "odd". This oddness is exactly the reason why it has been abandoned by contemporary commentators. "The astonishing current Hegel-renaissance in Anglo American philosophy" refuses metaphysics because "contemporary culture mistrusts metaphysics". As a consequence, Hegel scholarship is – as Beiser resumes – confronted with the following dilemma:

"if our scholarship is historically accurate, we confront a Hegel with profound metaphysical concerns, alien to the spirit of contemporary philosophical culture (…) But if we continue interpreting Hegel in a nonmetaphysical manner, we have to accept that our interpretation is more a construction of our contemporary interests that the real historical school" (Beiser 2008, p. 7).

And yet, the "spirit of contemporary culture" seems now to proceed in another direction. Literature on metaphysics and metaphysical topics in Anglo-American philosophical culture has utterly increased in recent time, at the point that one would speak of an effective metaphysical turn in analytical philosophy. So it seems that Beiser's diagnosis should be corrected: a metaphysical interpretation of Hegel is not only desirable for re-establishing the "historical" Hegel, but also for assessing his actuality.

Evidently, the core problem concerns the concept of metaphysics (a concept which has always been controversial indeed). The authors who defend the thesis that Hegel was a metaphysician as well as the authors who contrast this thesis, share the traditional Anglo American (Taylorian) interpretation of metaphysics as "discourse of the absolute". This reading underlines the mystical, religious and psychological components of the concept and does not consider that metaphysics has always had, since its origins, a connection to semantics (see Tugendhat (1976) which points out the connection between Aristotle's and Frege's semantics).

In particular idealistic metaphysics, as suggested, is the product (though in some point divergent) of Kant's critical and transcendental turn, and implies, as well as Kant's philosophy, beside the view of metaphysics as a dogmatic discipline, which must be criticised, the view of metaphysics as a critical enterprise, which must be defended.

It is exactly this conception that we can easily recognize in Brandom's view, as exposed in *Between Saying and Doing*, but also (it seems to me) in other works. In fact, Brandom seems to endorse a third reasonable position between the defenders and the detractors. And, what is most important, Brandom seems to accept the possibility of a critical, non-dogmatic metaphysics. As a matter of fact, Brandom has never defined his interpretation of Hegel as non- or anti-metaphysical; also in *Tales of the Mighty Dead* he refers to metaphysics as systematic history and reconstructive rationality and specifies its pluralistic character.

Kant, Hegel and Brandom on Metaphysics

Coming back to the four points stressed in section 1, it can be noted that the first is openly and specifically *Kantian* in spirit (which does not mean that it is *not* Hegelian), while the last is specifically *Hegelian*, especially with reference to the early Hegel. Points 2 and 3 are the specific pragmatistic import. Let's reconsider first the nexus Kant-Hegel.

In the *Transcendental Dialectic*, Kant shows that the themes of traditional special metaphysics result from the attempt of pure reason to think of the totality of particular phenomena as an object of knowledge. So the resulting "objects", namely the soul, the world and God, show up either to be contradictory or their thought to be fallacious. But the contradictions implied in these thoughts about totalities entail a sort of necessity, and even if we cannot think of them in constitutive terms, we must admit them as functions which orient and regulate our knowledge. In this sense, Kant criticises metaphysical thought, but, at the same time he underlines the necessity of it and he states – even if on a merely practical, non-theoretical ground – the possibility of a critical metaphysics. Hegel shares Kant's critique of traditional metaphysics and develops further the positive meaning of metaphysics resulting from the critique. The antinomies of pure reason are intended by Hegel as opportunities more than limits or hindrances for thought. The antinomies, which according to Kant are exclusively involved in cosmological thoughts about the world, are for Hegel typical of every philosophical-fundamental thought.

Even if Hegel's confrontation with Kant's critique of metaphysics in the Antithetic of Pure Reason is scattered all over his mature writings, its reasons and implications are particularly evident in his early essay: *Relation of Scepticism to Philosophy*. Notoriously, Kant derived the idea of an antinomy of pure reason from ancient scepticism. In the same line, Hegel traces here the theory of a necessary link between scepticism and Platonism. He defines scepticism in general as "the art of dissolving all that is determinate, and showing it in its nullity"; "the dialectic of all that is determinate" and as "demonstration that all that is determinate and finite is unstable". Scepticism's general principle is: pantí logo logos isos antikeitai (for every valid statement there is an equally valid opposite statement).

Here the source of the idea of metaphysics (prima philosophia) not only as a *critical*, but also as a *dialectical* enterprise, is to be found. Metaphysics is an enterprise which is endowed with a specific antinomic logic, and which must take into account the sceptical principle.

Now as to Brandom's perspective, the point 1 above indicated is clearly claimed by Kant everywhere. It should be stressed that this does not correspond to what Strawson would have called *descriptive* metaphysics, but rather to what Kant himself called *critical* metaphysics. The arrangement of a universal vocabulary cannot be properly descriptive, it must be first and foremost critical in the preliminary, dynamic and practical sense sketched by Kant. Besides it concerns the conditions of metaphysics, the structures that it uses, and the legitimacy of their use, so it is in a sense a meta-vocabulary, a higher order enterprise, with respect to traditional metaphysics.

Point 4 is Hegelian insofar as it shows that in dealing with fundaments (the basic categories of being), the metaphysician is forced to face up to the *contradiction* which is typical of philosophical (second order, universal) language. Informally this means that the meta-vocabulary should be continually revised, in the light of the controversial nature of concepts and theses that it deals with. Significantly enough, in Hegel's view dialectics (sceptical method) does not prevent metaphysics from being in some sense a *systematic* construction (also in Kant's view there is an architectonic, constructive side of reason). Though, the construction is affected by the specific sort of dynamic (practical) movement which is typical of a rigorous metaphysical enterprise (see point 3).

Point 3 is also similar in spirit to Kant's idea that metaphysics seems to be a *desperate* enterprise. Being aware of the intimate difficulty of metaphysics, given the extremely doubtful nature of its field, is the only way a metaphysician has to free herself from dogmatism. So in a sense the point 2 is a pragmatistic version of Kant's critical cautiousness.

Point 2 is similar in spirit to Hegel's view of *system* as *historical* product. In Hegel's view metaphysics is a positive, not only critical enterprise, despite its dialectical-sceptical nature, only insofar as its constructions are *historical*, temporally determined. This locates the searched meta-vocabulary within the time, and states the relativity of its acquisition. The pragmatistic version of this stance proposed in point 3 consists of stressing the *contextuality* of the research. "Context" takes the place of "history".

Many things should be said of each of these points, and I think that possibly Brandom's further inquiry will specify the entire matter. I do not even know, otherwise, if this reconstruction is in accordance with Brandom's true intention. I would like here to stress only one aspect, namely the fact the Brandom's combination of classical analytic program with pragmatism may recall Hegel's arguments about the antique nexus between scepticism and Platonism (a nexus notably established by the same early followers of Plato).

For Hegel, the relations between vocabularies follow dialectical patterns, which are modelled on sceptical ones. According to ancient scepticism, for every claim there is an opposite claim which is equally valid; from a sceptical point of view, this means the failure of theory and the fallback into the practical realm. This also seems the direction of Kant's thesis of the primacy of practical philosophy. Fundamental theses are controversial, and this means that they have only practical, say non-ontological, relevance. Apparently, this has also been the general direction of traditional pragmatism. However, this ultimately implies that there is not properly "metaphysics", but rather contextual and generic discussion about possible vocabularies. The meta-language cannot be expressed as language, but only as "practice", as "action".

Hegel takes another way. And also Brandom's fusion of analytic philosophy and pragmatism preludes to another solution. For Hegel, the sceptical principle does not imply the failure of first philosophy tout court, but rather the failure of a particular, intellectual kind of metaphysics (Verstandesdenken/common sense thought) and rather enlightens the very nature of philosophical thought (Vernunftdenken). The sceptical principle rather than being a rhetorical artifice is for Hegel the ontological feature of philosophical thought. In this sense scepticism and dialectics are for Hegel not only methods; they also suppose a being which is the domain of philosophical analysis and can be grasped by sceptical method.

Even if Brandom hasn't developed the question of his metavocabulary's ontological counterpart yet, the fact that he opens the question of metaphysics after the sceptical contribute of pragmatism is the premise for a contemporary adaptation of Hegel's intuitions about scepticism and Platonism.

References

Beiser, F. C. (2008), "The Puzzling Hegel Renaissance", *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, second and new edition 2008.

Brandom, R. (2002) *Tales of the Mighty Dead. Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Cambridge (Mass.)/London, Harvard University Press 2002.

Brandom, R. (2008) *Between Saying and Doing. Towards an Analytic Pragmatism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Carnap, R. (1950), „Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 4, pp. 20-40.

Gadamer, H.-G. (1987), "Die Idee der Hegelschen Logik", in: Gadamer, H.G., *Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger*, Tübingen, Mohr, pp. 65-86.

Haack, S. (editor) and Lane, R. (associated editor) (2006), *Pragmatism. Old and New*, New York. Prometheus Books.

Hegel, G.W.F. (2000 [1802]), "The Relation of Scepticism to Philosophy", *Between Kant and Hegel. Texts in the Development of Post-Kantians Idealism*, translated, with introductions, by G. Di Giovanni and H. S. Harris, Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett.

Kant, I. (1998 [1787]), *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by P. Guyer and A. Wood, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Pinkard, T. (1996), "What is the Non Metaphysical Reading of Hegel?", *Bullettin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 34, 13ff.

Pippin, R. (1989) *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Redding, P. (2007) *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Rorty, R. (1982) *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Tugendhat, E. (1976) *Vorlesungen über die sprachanalytische Philosophie*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp.