



Brandom's Hegel – Between Conceptual Realism, Pragmatism, and Idealism

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Abstract: Robert Brandom reconstructs G. W. F. Hegel's idealism in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in terms of mediation and determinate negation as systematic functional-relational pragmatic-semantic relations of material and formal inclusion and exclusion. The paper fleshes out the relevance of Brandom's three-part account of idealism to such semantic-pragmatic relations of material dependence. The essay articulates and raises some fundamental questions about Brandom's distinction between conceptual realism, objective idealism, and conceptual idealism as a three-part account of Hegel's absolute idealism. The sense in which conceptual realism, objective idealism and conceptual idealism form a hierarchical structure for Brandom grounded in conceptual realism is developed and challenged. Brandom's distinction between the sense-dependence of the objective world on our pragmatic commitments and reference independence of the objective world is queried. This leads to questions about Brandom's pragmatism and his anchoring of pragmatism in a Spirit-independent conceptual realism. It is suggested that such Spirit-independent conceptual realism is refuted rather than affirmed by Hegel's Dionysian revel of truth and by the German idealist tradition.

Keywords: Brandom, Robert; Hegel, Georg W. F.; Kant, Immanuel; conceptual realism; modal realism; conceptual idealism; pragmatism; Dionysian revel.

Robert Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust* is a philosophically breathtaking traversal of G. W. F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Brandom reads the *Phenomenology* with great insight as a work in pragmatic semantics:

what confers contents on acts, attitudes, and linguistic expressions is the role they play in the practices their subjects engage in. On this broadly functionalist picture, meaning is to be understood in terms of use.¹

Brandom's conception of conceptual content is pragmatic because the content of a given concept is taken to be expressed by one's understanding and the

use of that concept and its content in doing something. Brandom's reading of Hegel is semantic because he takes Hegel's primary concern in the *Phenomenology* to be with conceptual content.² With justification,

² Brandom refers to Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer, *Hegels Analytische Philosophie: Die Wissenschaft der Logik als Kritische Theorie der Bedeutung*, Paderborn, DE: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1992, and to other works by Stekeler-Weithofer to highlight a shared ambition of putting semantics front and center in a reading of Hegel, and also for Stekeler-Weithofer's lack of sympathy for the *Phenomenology* and its neo-Romantic *Bildungsroman* tendencies. Nearly a half century ago, Hans Friedrich Fulda developed an interesting and sophisticated antecedent to Brandom's semantic

¹ Robert B. Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2019, p.3. [Henceforth cited as *ST*]

Brandom attributes to Hegel a broader view of the conceptual in which anything that stands in the relations of mediation and determinate negation falls under the heading of the conceptual and stands in conceptual relations. With great ingenuity and with great insight, Brandom takes Hegel's conception of mediation to involve substantive counterfactual relations of material consequence in which having certain properties involves the necessity of having certain other properties. He affirms that mediation involves

subjunctively robust relations of material consequence: relations of inclusion of the sort that **triangular** stands in to **polygonal** and **copper** to **electrical conductor**. It is *necessary* that if a thing exhibits one property, it exhibits the other. [ST 2]

Hegel's conception of "determinate negation" is understood by Brandom as material inconsistency. Both mediation and determinate negation are understood in holistic functional terms. Involvement in mediation and determinate relations also means involvement in a holistic systematic structure of formal and material consequences and exclusions embedded in counterfactuals and modal relations. Brandom claims for Hegel a "radically new conception of the conceptual" according to which anything that has a determinate conceptual content stands in relations of determinate negation and mediation to each other and to everything else. Brandom refers to the Hegelian notion of determinate negation and of material incompatibility as "Aristotelian contrariety" (ST 2). Thus, the historical background is firmly in his view, just as it is for his teachers, Richard Rorty and even more so for Wilfrid Sellars.

The systematic conception of incompatibilities with which Hegel and Brandom are concerned goes back to Plato's *Sophist* and to its account of the dynamic

mixing of the forms. Such dynamic mixing turns out to constitute the very being of the forms, even being itself (as well as to constitute the *logos* that is the dialogue of the soul with itself and with others). Sellars alludes to the dynamic conception of being in Plato's *Sophist* in the context of developing his philosophy of pure process and especially in respect to his theory of persons as bundles of pure processes (including physiological events).³ Sellars notes that processes "conform to a basic metaphysical intuition: to be is to make a difference" (CP 87).⁴ This pragmatic difference is key to the systematic pattern of compatibilities and incompatibilities with which Plato, Kant, Hegel, Sellars and Brandom are fundamentally concerned. The notion of a power, *dynamis*, is already prominent in Plato's understanding of the soul and of its parts in his *Republic*; each part of the soul has a distinctive power, *dynamis*. Hegel was a great admirer of Plato's later dialogues and of the dynamic conception of being that Plato lays out in the *Sophist*. Hegel was especially fond of the *Parmenides* and of its skeptical critique of forms as separate and simple unities. The *Parmenides* provided an important example for Hegel of the kind of self-realizing and self-dissolving skepticism that is performed by the *Phenomenology*; it showed the notion of forms that are completely separate from their dynamic relations to each other, to sensible beings and to our knowledge, to be illusory. In the *Sophist* (258B), Plato introduces not only the notion of otherness, but also the contrast between otherness of the kind involved in polar contraries and in the kind of full-fledged opposites that are exclusive and exhaustive that characterize the systematic functional-structural incompatibilities and consequences in which Immanuel Kant, Hegel, and Brandom are interested. Plato's response to Parmenides and to the Sophists hinges in an important way on being able to articulate the way in which non-being manifests itself to human beings especially in the propositional form of *logos* (*Sophist* 259ff). These ideas are further developed and systematically pursued by philosophers from Aristotle to Proclus, and by Gottfried Leibniz; the incompatibilities and consequences in question figure in an important and systematic way in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* from beginning to end.

interpretation, especially for Hegel's *Logic* in Hans Friedrich Fulda, "Unzulängliche Bemerkungen zur Dialektik, in *Seminar: Dialektik in der Philosophie Hegels*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann, Frankfurt am Main, DE: Suhrkamp Verlag 1978, pp. 33-69. For Fulda, Hegel's *Phenomenology* is a prolegomenon to the systematic attempt in Hegel's *Logic* to retrieve reference and thus to construct the semantics both of meaning and of reference. Like Fulda, I think that for Hegel semantics is "an infinite task" (*eine unendliche Aufgabe*). I am disinclined to take the "objective world" as something given independently of human beings and thus to accept Brandom's own interpretation of semantic and conceptual realism.

³ Wilfrid Sellars, "Is Consciousness Physical?," *The Monist* 64/1 (January 1981), 66-90. [Henceforth cited as CP]

⁴ Sellars refers to Plato's *Sophist* 248C in Harold North Fowler's translation, Loeb Classical Library, London, UK: Heinemann 1961, p. 90n26.

Brandom is deeply and importantly right to take Hegel's metaconceptual conception to be indebted to Kant. Brandom takes Hegel to develop and extend Kant's non-psychological conception of concepts and of inferential and semantic role in determining systematic material incompatibilities and compatibilities. Brandom also rightly gives Kant credit for providing the starting point for Hegel's development of the social nature of normativity in terms of recognition (Johann Fichte was of course an important intermediary in his account of the constitutive role of mutual recognition in the articulation of the norms of natural right). Brandom takes Kant to anticipate Hegel's thesis that a historical account must be provided of conceptual content that grounds conceptual content in recollective rationality. Brandom writes,

features of Kant's semantics and pragmatics that Hegel takes up and builds on [include] Hegel's nonpsychological conception of the conceptual as what is articulated by relations of material incompatibility and consequence. It is recognizably a successor-conception inspired by some features of Kant's. Two other important dimensions along which Hegel builds on, transforms, and develops Kant's ideas are his social account of normativity in terms of *recognition*, and his *historical* account of the representational dimension of conceptual content in terms of *recollective rationality*. Most of the work involved in elaborating the pragmatist semantic reading of the *Phenomenology* presented in the body of this book consists of unpacking these two guiding ideas, and understanding the many-layered relations between them. [ST 10-1]

Brandom is deeply right in taking Kant to anticipate Hegel's historical and systematic account of conceptual content. "The History of Pure Reason," as Kant calls it in the final section of the first *Critique* is also crucial to the systematic character of Kant's conception of "The Architectonic of Pure Reason" and thus to the systematic structure of content in the *Critique* and for the systematic structure of the *Critique* itself.⁵ To build a scientific-systematic structure of knowledge and to reconstruct the edifice of humanity's cognitive commitments, one must always start from "the ruins of collapsed older edifices" belonging to the history of philosophy and science and to our cultural tradition (CPuR 693, A 835/B 863). Kant also remarks at the

beginning of "The History of Pure Reason" that he wishes to cast a glance at the works hitherto provided by pure reason, "edifices...but only in ruins," (CPuR 702, A 852/ B 880). One engages in this recollective-systematic process in the public sphere for Kant (CPuR 100-1n, Axi) through philosophical and scientific collaboration (CPuR 106, Bviii) and interchange mediated by publicly available books that facilitate the process of what Brandom calls "recognitionally recollective rationality," an important theme in "The Discipline of Pure Reason in its Polemical Use" in the first *Critique's* second half, in "The Transcendental Doctrine of Method," and especially in Kant's last book, *The Conflict of the Faculties*.⁶

Brandom's characterization of Hegel's indebtedness to Kant, with which I am in wholehearted agreement, is mitigated, if not taken back by the repeated appeal to the Kantian distinction between *Verstand* (understanding) and *Vernunft* (reason) to characterize the difference between Kant and Hegel (after all, *Vernunft* is itself generally taken by Kant to be part of *Verstand*). Hegel does sometimes polemically characterize the difference between his position and that of Kant in terms of the contrast between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, but this applies more accurately to a misreading of Kant by most so-called Kantians. Even, or especially, in most contemporary readings of Kant, the fundamentally public, social and historical character of *Vernunft*, emphasized by Karl Jaspers and his former student Hannah Arendt, hardly gets an appropriate hearing.⁷ The essential role of the operation of reason in preparing the way for the operation of understanding in judgment is glossed over in favor of a narrowly proposition-based and consciousness-oriented, methodologically solipsistic conception of judgment and of the understanding. Brandom's account of Kant is free of a substantive consciousness-orientation. The price that Brandom thinks he needs to pay for the anti-psychologism that the emancipation from a substantive consciousness-orientation brings with it is an assimilation of Kant's

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, transl. Mary J. Gregor, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992.

⁷ Karl Jaspers, "Kant," in *The Great Philosophers, Volume I: The Foundations*, transl. Ralph Mannheim, New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World 1962, pp. 230-381. See also Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1998, p. 125, Axxiv. [Henceforth cited as CPuR]

conception of conceptual content to the conception of propositional thought and sense as conceived by Gottlob Frege and Rudolf Carnap. So, one can see both the attraction and the danger of drawing the contrast between Kant and Hegel in terms of the opposition between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*.

Brandom's own glosses on Kant's pragmatism fall considerably short of the fundamentally public, social, historical, action-guiding (and natural normative) conception of semantic content that Kant systematically develops in the "Transcendental Doctrine of Method" (and does so in all three of his *Critiques*).⁸ Brandom recognizes an analogue to full on recognitional recollective rationality in Kant's conception of the discursive activity of judgment. Yet it is unclear how robust his conception of the synthetic unity involved in apperception and judgment is. If Kant's pragmatism is not much more substantive than a thin and fundamentally first person singular normative accountability for the propositional semantic content articulated in the discursive activity of judgment, then Hegel's Big Ideas are really and truly Hegel's Big Ideas (this is not to say that Hegel cannot be indebted to Kant as he forms less developed and far from obvious conceptions into the distinctive shape of his own Big Ideas):

The concept of recollection is one of Hegel's Big Ideas. It includes the idea of a characteristic kind of *rationality* that is on display in retrospective recollective rationalizations. Recollective rationality is at the center of the constellation of metaconceptual categories Hegel calls "*Vernunft*." As recognition is the key concept articulating the *social* dimension of his account of discursive normativity, so recollection is the key concept articulating the *historical* dimension of his account of discursive normativity. Indeed, as we will see, what is practically necessary and sufficient for us

⁸ I would emphasize not only the metaconceptual role of Kant's categories, but also the systematic unity constituted by (theoretical-practical) ideas in their unified theoretical and practical scientific operation in the sociality of human history and of science and even in a nature that includes theoretical physics. The world of nature with which humans have always already been familiar, the world of organisms that Kant calls natural ends, is included in this kingdom of ends to which humans belong as agents. This conception is developed in Kant's cosmic-cosmopolitan conception of philosophy as first articulated especially in "The Architectonic of Pure Reason" at the end of the first *Critique*.

to move beyond alienated modernity to institute the third age of *Geist* is for recognition to take the form of recollection. (He calls that final, fully self-conscious recollective form of recognition "forgiveness".) [*ST* 371]

Understanding and explanation are organized for Brandom's Hegel around normative standards involved in human beings' mutual recognition of one another and in their recollective rationalizations, trust in institutions, and cooperative endeavors. These endeavors involve *Vernunft* rather than *Verstand* in the narrow sense. And thus, to the extent to which Kant is to be regarded as a narrow advocate of the understanding of *Verstand*, these conceptions are not really Kantian at all. That would definitely encourage one to take the opposition between understanding (*Verstand*) and reason (*Vernunft*) more seriously, and to take that opposition to be the appropriate basis for a deeper understanding of the opposition between Kant and Hegel. The account of the operation of the understanding in Kant's "Transcendental Analytic" taken in abstraction from the richer conception of reason that Kant unpacks in the "Transcendental Doctrine of Method" is what the understanding as contrasted to and opposed to reason is. Taking the opposition between Hegel and Kant as appropriately lining up with the distinction between the understanding and reason would seem to involve taking the methodological solipsism and atomism of semantic content that most contemporary interpreters see in Kant seriously. It means to take the operation of the understanding in Kant's "Transcendental Analytic" (in abstraction from the richer conception of fundamentally public and pragmatic reason that Kant unpacks in the "Transcendental Doctrine of Method") as what the understanding is.

Kant's "Transcendental Dialectic" takes up the theme of sophistries of reason, and also, in the Appendix to the "Transcendental Dialectic," the systematic, but also fundamentally pragmatic, nature of conceptual content. Theoretical (speculative) reason is tempted to claim knowledge *a priori* of things that one cannot possibly know. Such temptation gives rise to the sophistries of theoretical reason. The solution to such temptation to speculate is to be found in the systematically practical and pragmatic reconstruction of semantic content that Kant develops from the beginning of the "Transcendental Doctrine of Method." Kant's version of a "practical logic" is systematically developed in its critique of meaning as dogmatic convention and in its claim that meaning is tied to inquiry in "The Discipline of Pure Reason in its Dogmatic Use." In "The Discipline

of Pure Reason in its Polemical Use" the very existence of reason is taken to lie in the normative pragmatic use of reason in public debate by "free citizens" who in the process of such debate and public reason institute the very principles of justice and of normative reasoning. In "The Discipline of Pure Reason" in its "Hypothetical Use" reasoning by hypothesis formation is restrained and constrained by the demand that hypothetical reasoning be limited to such reasoning as is pragmatically salient. And in "The Discipline of Pure Reason in its Use of Proof" the fundamentally normative character of all philosophical and legal proof is defended and the significance of transcendental deduction is articulated as the form of philosophical proof. In "The Architectonic of Pure Reason" and "The History of Pure Reason" Kant situates the systematic articulation of scientific concepts and of philosophical reason in the history of attempts to explain things both systematically and independently of experience. Especially in "The Canon of Pure Reason" and "The Architectonic of Pure Reason," Kant grounds the static metacategories of the understanding in the dynamic metacategories of reason and experience, whereas Brandom sees this as the difference between their understanding and reason-based accounts. Kant's "teleology of human reason" in "The Canon of Pure Reason" and "The Architectonic of Pure Reason" breaks with the static understanding-based conception of experience. In "The Canon of Pure Reason," Kant develops the way in which human normative practical commitments lead firstly to a systematic unity of nature according to the dictates of the moral point of view, but then also lead one secondly to see those normative commitments as ones that arise out of a reason that has been systematically cultivated for rational beings by a nature that due to their own fundamentally normative-practical commitments they cannot conceive of as systematically recalcitrant to their ends. Thus, the social and public systematicity of morality and its alethic commitments constitute conditions for the possibility of human agency in nature and in history and so of experience too.

Taken on its own and in abstraction from the pragmatic-practical, social, historical and normatively natural recollective process of reason, the understanding is doomed to dialectical illusion and failure. The problem of the analytic-synthetic distinction for judgments is a case in point. For Brandom, it is a hallmark of *Verstand* to treat concepts as fixed with the "sharp, complete boundaries, as Kant and Frege do." Here is the wider context to his claim:

As I read him, Hegel understands the *determinateness* of ground-level determinate concepts in terms of the process of *determining* their contents. Thinking of the determinateness of conceptual content in terms of such a *process*, rather than in terms of the *property* of having sharp, complete boundaries, as Kant and Frege do, is a hallmark of understanding it according to the dynamic metacategories of *Vernunft* rather than the static metacategories of *Verstand*. The process that determines conceptual contents Hegel calls "experience" [Erfahrung]. [ST 6]

The construal of Kant's concepts as sharply defined is in line with a widely shared reading of Kant that depends on sharp boundaries and semantic content molecularism for the analytic-synthetic distinction. My objection against this reading is that in the first *Critique* at the beginning of the "Transcendental Doctrine of Method" in the first section of its first chapter, "The Discipline of Reason in its Dogmatic Use," Kant rejects the possibility of such sharply defined boundaries for all but mathematical concepts that can be constructed according to strict definitions in intuition *a priori*. Kant goes on to develop an inquiry-based, social-historical and normatively natural account of conceptual content in the remainder of the *Critique*.

Brandom's frequent reference to the Frege-Kant *Verstand*-based conception of semantic content makes Brandom's and Hegel's conception of semantic content seem to be fundamentally different from the one by Frege and also the one by Kant. Brandom connects Kant not only to Frege, but also to Carnap and he juxtaposes the Kantian-Carnapian two-phase picture of application and institution of conceptual norms to the Hegelian-Quinean historical-social process of determining conceptual contents:

our discursive practices of judging and acting intentionally must be seen as both the application and the institution of determinately contentful conceptual norms. The air of paradox about that kind of Hegelian-Quinean rejection of the two-phase Kantian-Carnapian picture is to be dispelled by looking at the historical and social articulation of the process of determining conceptual contents. [ST 493]

Brandom's assimilation of Kant to the Frege-Carnap conception and to the two-phase picture of application and institution offers another variant of the charge that Kant is committed to the narrow notion of *Verstand* that Hegel criticizes. It is true that Kant seems to be committed to the two-phase picture of application and institution

in the Transcendental Analytic, but that account of rule application gives way as the Transcendental Doctrine of Method develops the full resources for understanding how humans are able to come up with rules and to follow and to obey them. Kant's conception of judgment is itself fundamentally holistic in its conception of conceptual content for the form of intuition and the form of judgment are for Kant clearly two different aspects of the (global) unity of self-consciousness (in the objective unity of apperception). As such they involve a salience that cannot be exhaustively articulated, but that ultimately differentially comprehends all levels of human individual and social agency and also of human beings' everyday experience of nature as an environmental (self-organizing) whole. Kant's kingdom of ends includes all of nature insofar as nature is at all possibly relevant to human ends. Thus far from falling victim to the objection that Kant uses a two-step procedure of concept institution and application that cannot do justice to one's competence, Kant's individual *Critiques* and the three *Critiques* as a whole address this very problem systematically from beginning to end. However, they do so at a level that, as Hegel recognized, cannot be recognized within the limits of a narrow notion of the understanding that is limited to the two-step procedure of concept application and institution. Hegel's *Phenomenology* may be viewed as a systematic development of the original unity of the three *Critiques* in their transcendental deductions of the normative-systematic conditions for the possibility of (a systematically differential and dynamic) experience.

Given his criticisms of the Fregean-Carnapian conception, one might wish to contrast Brandom's approach to conceptual content with a Fregean one in which the conceptual content of a sentence is a thought that has a kind of independence from human beings and from their practices (a thought so conceived is independent insofar as it is something discoverable by oneself and by others). However, in the end, Brandom is much closer to the Fregean conception than he initially appears to be for his semantic realism seems more basic to his view than his pragmatism. On my reading both of Kant and Hegel, it is in his rather fierce neo-Fregean semantic realism that Brandom differs from both Kant and Hegel. To be sure, Brandom rejects a Fregean *Verstand*-based notion of content and he offers

a powerful criticism of a *Verstand*-based conception. I argue that it is problematic to presuppose semantic content without making its nature or accessibility to human beings (who are finite knowing agents) intelligible to them:

The difference between an approach that presupposes a notion of determinate content without deploying the resources to make intelligible its nature, origin, or accessibility to finite knowers and agents, on the one hand, and one that concerns itself precisely with explaining determinateness of conceptual content and the processes and practices by which such contents arise, develop, and are deployed by knowers and agents, on the other hand is just the difference between the standpoint of *Verstand* and that of *Vernunft*, as those Hegelian meta-metaconcepts have been brought into view in this book. [ST 383]

Brandom's allegiance to neo-Fregean semantic realism makes Brandom vulnerable to his own charge against the narrow Fregean *Verstand* conception. As I will endeavor to show, Brandom's version of conceptual realism seems itself, ultimately, to presuppose a notion of determinate content without being able to deploy the means to make the nature, origin and accessibility of such conceptual content to finite knowers intelligible. The problem lies in the shotgun marriage of determinate conceptually real content in the form of objective laws and the complete spirit-, mind-, and agent-independence of such content. In attempting to avoid psychologism, Brandom seems to fall victim to the very erroneous choice between merely subjective psychological content and completely mind and agent independent semantic content that Kant, Hegel, the pragmatists, the Marburg School, and even Heidegger had sought to avoid and, in my view, successfully so.

An issue related to the assumption of agent-independent content is the extent to which there is such a thing as static content. Completely agent-independent content would be fundamentally static. Brandom suggests at least occasionally that Kant's conception of nature and concepts is fundamentally static. And even in Hegel's case, and presumably in his own version of conceptual realism, Brandom seems to limit the dynamic account of conceptual change to our fundamentally normative and social pragmatic commitments. He emphasizes the Bacchanalian revel of the Preface to Hegel's *Phenomenology*, restating Hegel's conception of what is true as a Dionysian revel:

The True is thus a Bacchanalian revel, with not a member sober; yet because each member collapses as soon as he drops out, the revel is just as much transparent and simple repose. [ST 101]⁹

Brandom uses a translation of the passage from Hegel's Preface in which the members that participate in the revel of the nature are male-gendered participants (in fact, the Bacchantes were more often than not women) whereas Hegel thinks of the participants in this revel of truth or rather of what is true (*das Wahre*), in what he also calls the "movement of life," as "formations" of truth.¹⁰ In Hegel's text, the truth is understood as a kind of living whole belonging to the "movement of life"; the truth has the organic unity of a living organism, the members or organs of which fail to function as true members or organs once they become separated from the dynamic process of life and truth-constitution. Immediately before the passage cited by Brandom, Hegel emphasizes that the concept is

das Wirkliche [self-actualizing]...*das in sich Lebende* [that which has inner life]...That which passes is rather to be taken as essential not in the form of something fixed that, cut off from what is true, is to be allowed to lie outside of it [the true], one does not know where, just as the true is not to be regarded as the dead positive residing on the other side [of that which passes]. [PG 34; §47]

For Brandom, Hegel's Dionysian revel seems to be limited to what human beings do and to the changes in their normative pragmatic commitments. And, thus, the objective world and what is true does in the end seem to be what Hegel criticizes as "the dead positive residing on the other side" of the passage of one's commitments (PG 34; §47). Hegel takes the unchanging truth that underlies the constant changes in the truth, the truth as it appears to humans, to lie in the whole of

the recollected (and anticipated) process rather than as a separate objective reality that is completely independent of spirit. In Brandom's rendering of this revel, the revel no longer seems to be the restless change of becoming (and of nature) and of truth and life that is also a state of simple unchanging repose; in it the change occurs only in one's pragmatic commitments. Brandom follows Hegel however in looking at nature, history and "what is whole in this movement," what is true as a whole, from the standpoint of a knowing "that *recollects* itself" (PG 34; §47). In a certain sense, to be sure, nature changes for human beings as their understanding of nature and of the world changes with the changing commitments that humans take on in their understanding of and engagement with the social and natural world. But I am not sure that Brandom truly has a place for Hegel's idea that that which is true is not something separate and unchanging apart from one's pragmatic commitment, and the changing process of nature in which they are embedded but is itself a process of change. The account that he offers of Hegel's position seems to depend on giving a subjectivist reading to the process of truth-constitution:

The revel is the restless elbowing of commitments discovered to be incompatible. Those that "drop out" are those that undergo the transformation of experience and are rejected in order to maintain the rational homeostasis that Hegel identifies as a state of "simple repose." The party continues its movement and development, because the place of those that fall away is immediately taken by other commitments. [ST 101]

For Hegel, the changes in human beings' conception of nature do not however exhaust change in nature. Brandom cashes out the Bacchanalian revel of truth in terms of what he calls conceptual idealism, according to which there is a priority to our recollective practical activity both regarding the order of understanding and regarding the order of being:

Conceptual idealism asserts the priority of recollective practical activity to the semantic representational relations constitutive of the intentional nexus between subjects and objects. The priority of the practice of recollection to the semantic relations that are constitutive of intentionality and consciousness is a priority both in the order of understanding and in the order of being. [ST 372]

This means that Brandom takes the very determinateness of objects to be a function of the pragmatic process needed for making sense of things.

⁹ With minor changes, Brandom follows the Miller (mis)translation here. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. A. V. Miller, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press 1977, p. 27, §47.

¹⁰ Hegel's text has *Glied* for "member" as in an "organ" and not as in *Mitglied*, which means "the member of a group." See the Academy Edition of the Collected Works, Volume 9: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, eds. Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Reinhard Heerde, Hamburg, DE: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1980 p. 34. [Henceforth cited as PG with the pagination from the critical edition and the paragraphing from English translations including the one by Miller. Translations of the Academy Edition are mine.]

Just as truth as Hegel understands it is not a state but a process ("a vast, Bacchanalian revel"), so, too, is determinateness. Indeed, they are aspects of the same process. [ST 431]

Brandom affirms that there is a process involved in our conceptualization of nature and of the real world (ST 369). It is part of this process that referents are fixed that are not already fixed and that one cannot already assume "that the concept object is clear and independently accessible, and so can be appealed to in explaining that of singular term" (ST 209). Brandom rejects the idea "that there is a distinction between modally insulated and modally involved properties, and further that the former are antecedently intelligible independently of the latter" (ST 228). Brandom displays a healthy skepticism with respect to Willard van Orman Quine's extensionalism and concerning the whole extensionalist tradition of semantics that takes objects to be prior to modal relations. Brandom is profoundly right in this conception of what things are in themselves for Hegel in terms of expressively ideal senses:

the truth *process* (the "Bacchanalian revel" of conceptual development) is the process of getting not only better (more successful) cognitive and practical commitments, but doing that *by* getting better inferential and incompatibility commitments to articulate them. The notion of what things are *in* themselves is the notion of how what things are *for us* ought to be. Hegelian referents are expressively ideal senses. [ST 435]

Thus the objection that Brandom has left out becoming and change in nature in his account of the Bacchanalian truth-process in favor of a mere change in our commitments appears, at least *prima facie*, to be far off the mark. From the vantage-point of conceptual idealism, the very objects both of history and culture on the one hand and of nature and of the objective world on the other hand depend on, are indeed regimentations of the processes in terms of which one makes ongoing sense of the world through what one does. In this recollective process, human culture draws on the norms that have been passed down by community and by culture including science. But in the end, one can transcend the conception of the world inherited from the past. Human beings are able to hold onto a shared historical and cultural background and natural context while also transcending that background without enforcing a fundamental alienation from tradition (ST 699). The ability to bring normative attitudes and

normative status into equilibrium with one another is an important dimension to the task of overcoming alienation from the authority of normative attitudes that is nascent in the transcendence of those attitudes instituted by a tradition.

Brandom's semantic reading of Hegel's idealism is important and illuminating and one with which I am also deeply and systematically sympathetic. But there is also another more fundamental dimension to Brandom's conception that I am concerned about that it might be inconsistent with the deep philosophical insight to be had from Brandom's pragmatic-semantic account of conceptual content, and that also threatens to wreak hermeneutic havoc on his reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. For Brandom, conceptual content is conferred on acts, attitudes, and linguistic expressions via the role that they play in the practices in which subjects engage. According to his pragmatic-functional inferential role of semantics, human beings' understanding of the world is not independent of the stories that humans can tell about what they are doing. However above and beyond such pragmatically conferred content, that makes for the sense-dependence involved in what Brandom terms Hegel's "objective" and "conceptual" "idealism," Brandom takes there to be conceptual and semantic content and conceptually contentful facts that are completely independent of what humans do; these facts involving lawlike relations are not reference-dependent, although they are sense-dependent. Brandom takes Hegel to regard the conceptual structure of the world as something that one can only understand as part of a story that includes what human beings are doing — this is the sense-dependence of the world, but that is also completely independent of any thinking being — this is the reference-independence of the world. I have difficulties in understanding the meaning of the thesis he advances that there are "contentful facts" about objects and their properties and laws that govern those objects and their properties that would hold even if there had never been any thinking subjects. Brandom repeatedly asserts counterfactual claims about the way the world would be in the absence of thinking subjects. Here is one of the more striking passages which also includes the pragmatic story to the effect that humans cannot understand the world except in terms that include their own narrative agency of coming to understand it:

Further, though there would *be* conceptually contentful facts about objects and properties standing in lawful relations even if there were not or had never been

any thinking subjects, Hegel thinks that we cannot *understand* that conceptual structure of the objective world – understand what we are saying or thinking about it when we say or think that it is determinate (which he understands in the sense of having an objective modal structure articulated by relations of incompatibility and necessary consequence) – except as part of a story that includes what we are *doing*. [ST 3]

Here the reference to lawful relations that would exist even if there were no thinking subjects is not a mere slip of the pen. Rather it is key to Brandom's considered conception of conceptual realism. According to Brandom's conceptual realism and the idealism that follows from that ground level conceptual realism, objects and properties are dependent upon human beings for the sense that they give to them. However, the laws governing such objects and properties are not reference-dependent. This means that for Brandom the objective world and its laws are completely independent of the pragmatic process through which one makes sense of them to oneself.

Right from the outset of *A Spirit of Trust*, Brandom puts weight on a conceptual realism that has its roots in Frege's conception of thought and in Frege's antipsychologism. It needs to be noted that Brandom takes his semantic reading to be grounded in a conceptual realism that

understands the objective world as always already in a conceptual...shape that it does not owe to any activity by the thinking subjects to whom it is in principle intelligible...nor does it owe anything to the thinking activity of any supersubject called "Geist." [ST 3]

Consequently, for Brandom, above and beyond the Dionysian revel that is the systematic and historical process of truth-constitution, a process from which *Geist* is inextricable, there is a completely *Geist*-independent conceptual world already in conceptual shape.

For Brandom, conceptual realism, objective idealism, and conceptual idealism comprise a threefold hierarchy of commitments that make up Hegel's idealism (ST 204-5). Somewhat later in the text, Brandom specifies that Hegel's form of idealism is "absolute idealism" (ST 213). This attribution of conceptual realism, objective idealism and conceptual idealism to Hegel is deeply insightful both from an interpretive and from a philosophical point of view, even if I have some fundamental reservations as to the sense in which Brandom is committed to and takes Hegel to be committed to conceptual realism. Conceptual realism

treats relations between concepts as embodying compatibilities and incompatibilities with regard to how things in the world are related to each other according to laws in the world. Modal realism is a key feature of conceptual realism for the laws that govern events in nature are supposed to be based on possibilities and necessities that are independent of any subject. There would, thus, be a law-governed world for Brandom's Hegel, even if there were no subjects, and no *Geist* at all. Conceptual realism involves an identity in form (a hylomorphic identity) between the pragmatic-semantic content involved in our normative commitments and the alethic modal-semantic content of thought that involves laws that are governing states of affairs in the world. Hegel's objective idealism amounts for Brandom to the interdependence of subjective thoughts and objective states of affairs that are involved in the sense that one makes of conceptual content. For Brandom, Hegel's objective idealism just is the interdependence of subjective thoughts and objective states of affairs, at least with respect to the sense that human beings make of things (ST 214). Brandom takes Hegel's objective idealism to be committed to the sense, but not to the reference dependence of the objective world on knowing subjects, but also to the sense dependence of the deontic normative on the alethic modal (ST 207-8).

Brandom claims that the existence of explaining subjects is not a necessary condition for the existence of an objective world governed by laws. From the vantage-point of contemporary philosophical realism this claim seems unimpeachable and commonsensical. The existence of an objective world and a world governed by laws and modal relations is taken to be distinguishable from one's ability to make sense of such a world, of such modalities, and of such laws. Yet it is unclear to me what an objective world is that is completely independent of subjects for whom it is objective and for whom the laws governing the world are objective. This is the juncture where I begin to find his position difficult to comprehend and even more difficult to accept as the right reading of Hegel. Brandom's response to this objection is to concede that he affirms the sense-dependence of the objective world on our understanding, but to insist on the reference independence of the objective world from the practices of human beings. It is tempting to attribute to him a position according to which one can neither meaningfully affirm nor deny that the objective world is dependent on the existence of subjects that understand it. This is I think an attractive position and one that is consonant with a robust conceptual realism.

But this does not seem in the end to be a correct reading of Brandom's conceptual realism.

Prima facie, Brandom's hylomorphic conception of conceptual content involves the identity of two forms of semantic content, one that is pragmatic and based on use and *Geist* and history and the other that is completely independent of the pragmatic conditions involving the social agency of human beings. My argument is that if what things are in themselves is how things for humans ought to be and Hegelian referents are "expressively ideal senses," then it is hard to fathom how the distinction between sense-dependence and reference-independence is supposed to work in the unpacking of the Brandom-Hegel triad of conceptual realism, objective idealism, and conceptual idealism. I just do not see how one can even make sense of a real world that might have had no subjects in it, and that has a place for the notion of things as they are in themselves that are independent of the process through which one at least ideally could make sense of them. It seems to me that Hegel's own idealism does not allow either the subject to be truly abstracted out of the real world or the real world to be abstracted out of the subjects that engage with the world and nature from within the real world. Furthermore, it is also hard for me to understand how one can bring together two fundamentally different and I would say mutually exclusive ideas. On the one hand, one is to think of the world as an inchoate process that is pragmatically shaped into determinate objects and events for human beings with the resources of the concepts and conceptions that human beings have acquired from tradition. And on the other hand, in Brandom's view, one is to commit oneself to an objective world that is completely determinate independent of there being any subjects in it at all. Yet it is this latter notion of a determinate world *an sich* and radically independent of *Geist* that Brandom wishes to take as his starting point in the unpacking of the triad of conceptual realism, objective idealism, and conceptual idealism that constitute for him Hegel's absolute idealism:

It is important to see that the concern with subjective processes of judging, experiencing, and acting comes at the end of this line of thought [leading from conceptual realism to objective idealism], not at the beginning. It begins with the notion of the objective world as determinate, moves from there to the necessity of its modal articulation, and from there to seeing it as in conceptual shape. [ST 366]

Given Brandom's qualms about simply helping oneself to well-defined objects, the very distinction

that Brandom draws between sense dependence of objects and the denial of the reference-dependence of those objects seems to be problematic. For if one cannot appeal to objects with fixed and determinate identities that are independent of the pragmatic process through which one gives sense to those objects, then the notion of a reference-independence that is independent of sense-dependence is under threat of disappearing. While Brandom insists that one departs from the objective world as determinate in making sense of the world, he nevertheless "begins with the notion of the objective as determinate" (ST 366). The notion of sense-dependence seems to rely on a different conception of objects and of reference than does the notion of reference-independence (or rather than does the denial of reference-dependence). Sense-dependence involves a notion of reference tied to sense, while reference-independence signifies independence from a notion of reference tied to sense. There is at least one sense of reference in Brandom that is sense-dependent or at any rate characterizes sense-independence in terms of "ideal senses" and is thus at least indirectly sense-dependent. But the status of such senses is somewhat unclear. The question that poses itself at this point is: Is the objective world independent even of ideal senses or are ideal senses independent even of any subjects at all or is it both true that ideal senses are independent of any subjects at all and that the objective world is independent even of ideal senses? There is a sense in which Brandom takes the real world and its laws and modal properties and relations to be independent even of an ideal sense that presupposes a subject. However, it is unclear what an ideal sense or conceptual content would be that has no weak relation whatsoever to a knower or subject at all. Brandom also seems to attribute such a view to Frege and his anti-psychologism. Whatever Frege's own elusive remarks on this topic may suggest, it would be a mistake to think that anti-psychologism requires one to subscribe to a real world independent of ideal senses and to ideal senses or conceptual content independent of any relation to a knower or subject at all.

In short, Brandom's conceptual realism and his account of Hegel's idealism faces a dilemma: Either there is only one form of conceptual content and that is a conceptual and semantic content that is completely independent of humans and of the thinking activity even of *Geist* or there are two fundamentally distinct forms of semantic content. One form of semantic content would be defined in essential dependence on and one in essential independence of what creatures like

human beings do. Brandom presents his conception as an account of how human beings come to understand conceptual content from the vantage point of their standpoint in experience and in history (ST 424). But this sophisticated and illuminating notion of pragmatic content seems to give way to a much more problematic conception of subject-independent conceptual content and to a very robust form of conceptual content and semantic realism. The brilliant account of what is involved in understanding semantic and conceptual content, including reference, is consistent with semantic realism only on a reading of modal and conceptual realism (and also of objective and of conceptual idealism) that is not based on the radical independence of modality, laws, and thought from any subjects in the world. Brandom is right in the priority that he takes conceptual idealism to affirm concerning recollective activity both with respect to subjects and objects in the representational relation and with respect to the order both of understanding and of being. But he seems to give that away before he starts by anchoring conceptual idealism in conceptual realism.

If Brandom's commitments stopped at the pragmatic comprehension of understanding and being then his reconstruction of Hegel's idealism would be an unqualified success. However, Brandom repeatedly insists on a metaphysical realism concerning semantic content whose intelligibility I find questionable. Given the underlying metaphysical realist semantic conception in the form to which Brandom subscribes and that he also ascribes to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, I cannot see how the *Phenomenology*, human beings in their participation in *Geist*, and *A Spirit of Trust* could in principle bridge the gulf between (the "for human beings of") pragmatic content and (the "in itself of") realist semantic content in the strong form of reference-independence to which Brandom is committed. Brandom also points the way to a more satisfactory reconstruction and philosophical position than the version of conceptual realism to which he seems unfortunately to be committed. As I see it, one needs both to give up on the existence of ideal senses that are completely independent of any subject and real things that are completely independent of ideal senses. Having engaged in such epistemic and semantic modesty one then can go ahead and defend the revised version of Brandom's triad of conceptual realism, objective idealism and conceptual idealism. In the revised version of the triad, conceptual realism is no longer fundamental, but constituted in its very significance by objective and conceptual idealism.

In his reading of Hegel's "Introduction," Brandom already seems simply to presuppose his version of conceptual realism, rather than establishing realism first from within the normative commitments of perception and an ideal notion of sense. In Brandom, the chasm between the account of recollection and trust and the narrative history of recollection and social dimension of trust and absolute knowledge that Hegel endeavors to fill in the two final chapters of the book is left largely unbridged and replaced with the opposition between the social-pragmatic dimension of reference and sense and semantic realism. I take the conclusion of Chapter II, "Perception: Or the Thing and Deception," of Section A, "Consciousness" in the *Phenomenology* already to refute any such conception of in principle independence as that which Brandom's semantic realism presupposes (the *Phenomenology* does however embrace an objectivity and realism linked to the normativity of what human beings do of the kind that Brandom identifies with objective idealism). According to Brandom, Hegel does not introduce even such objective idealism let alone what he calls "conceptual idealism" until much later in the *Phenomenology*.

Conceptual realism emerges in the course of the *Consciousness* chapters. It is on display already in *Perception*, in the way in which discussion of the metaphysics of objects and properties based on determinate negation opens up the issue of error [*Täuschung*] on the part of the perceiver (picking up on the discussion from the *Introduction*). Objective idealism is introduced already at the end of *Force and Understanding*, and provides the rationale for the expository transition to *Self-Consciousness*. Conceptual idealism becomes available only at the end of *Reason's* discussion of intentional agency. [ST 373]

I take Hegel to defend a more modest version of conceptual realism. Modest conceptual realism is consistent with an important strand of Brandom's conceptual realism, although modest conceptual realism is not consistent with the fierce independence claims that he makes for conceptual realism. Brandom sometimes characterizes conceptual realism in terms that I regard as being completely unproblematic. Conceptual realism commits one to the idea that things both for consciousness and in themselves are always already in conceptual shape:

Conceptual realism says that what things are in themselves, no less than what things are for consciousness, is always already in conceptual shape. [ST 220-1]

One can take (and I would argue that Hegel and also Kant, Fichte, and Schelling do take) what things are in themselves always already to be in conceptual shape without considering things in themselves to be in conceptual shape independent of any thinking activity at all. Hegel is committed to a kind of subject naturalism, as Brandom notes, thereby borrowing a term from Huw Price. Subject naturalism is:

naturalism about the practices of acknowledging and attributing normative statuses, not an attempt to find such statuses among the furniture of the world describable in the language of *Naturwissenschaften* rather than *Geisteswissenschaften*. [ST 264]

However, Brandom's conception of "subject naturalism" depends on a divide between the natural sciences and the sciences of culture and *Geist* that is unacceptable to Hegel. As a result, Brandom limits subject naturalism to "the practices of acknowledging and attributing normative statuses" and hence to the activities of self-conscious reasoning beings, that is to human beings, who have histories rather than natures:

Because what they are in themselves is at any point the outcome of such a developmental process depending on their attitudes, essentially self-conscious beings do not have *natures*. They have *histories*. Or, put differently, it is their nature to have not just a *past*, but a *history*: a sequence of partially self-constituting self-transformations, mediated at every stage by their self-conceptions, and culminating in them being what they currently are. The only unchanging essence they exhibit is to have what they are in themselves partly determined at every stage by what they are for themselves. [ST 236]

It is true that Hegel claims against Kant, that nature does not have a history, but contrary to what is often postulated, this does not mean for Hegel that nature consists of unchanging species and natural kinds. Indeed, Hegel already argues in Section B, "Self-Consciousness" that nature does not embody the universal in the process of life. Hegel follows Schelling and Kant (already in the Transcendental Doctrine of Method in the first *Critique* and especially in the third *Critique*) and Leibniz in defending such subject naturalism for all living beings, for all organisms. The argument of Section C, "Reason," Chapter A "Observing Reason," is that nature and especially organic nature is fundamentally a dynamic process involving that which is concretely universal, that is, in which the universal is not separate from the process in the knower and the

known that constitutes the particular and the individual in its environment. In the second half of "Observing Reason," Hegel develops the dynamic structuralism of this conception of concrete universals and of organisms also with respect to the nature and genesis of logical laws (including Kant's logical functions of thought and categories), and then with respect to the genesis and function of psychological laws. Hegel goes on to relate the dynamic of human life to the always (environmentally) mediated, physical embodiment of psychological states in brain states and in their expression in what human agents do in the world. It is clear from Hegel's argument in "Observing Reason" that his subject naturalism is not to be regarded as setting up a discontinuity in nature between self-conscious beings and other organisms. Perhaps it is a bit more controversial to say that for the German idealist tradition there is nothing about the organic world that involves natures. But, for Hegel, as for Kant, the way in which scholars divide up the natural world according to individuals and species and phyla is a matter of their interests in classification rather than a matter of cutting nature at its intrinsic joints; this is, indeed, a key part of Hegel's argument in "Observing Reason" (PG 139-75; §§244-55). Only human beings are capable of relating to the world in truly universal terms and also in truly individual terms, as Hegel emphasizes at the beginning of his discussion of self-consciousness in relation to life. Employing the "instinct of reason," human beings are inclined then to search for and to stipulate abstractly universal structures in nature where no such structures actually exist. And since Hegel is not committed to the existence of abstract universals in nature, I take Hegel (and Leibniz) to be closer to a reading of Aristotle according to which substance is being-in-self-organizing process (*energeia* and *entelechy*) and substance is understood as forming something fundamentally individual rather than generic. This makes self-conscious creatures less different from other organisms than they at a superficial level might seem to be.

Kant seems to me already to have thought of self-consciousness as grounded in the self-organizing and in this sense implicitly referential process of life; this becomes increasingly important in Hölderlin, Schelling, the Romantics, and Hegel. The objection that they make to Kant's subjectivism relates to something else than that to which it is normally assumed to relate. Having had their philosophical beginnings in their commitment to the revolutionary social thought of Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* and *The Conflict of the*

Faculties, they recognize that Kant has a new notion of fundamentally social and intersubjective objectivity that results from the expression of his conception of subjectivity. The *Critique of Judgment* also taught them that it is only in relation to the whole of nature and Geist, to be grasped only in the full individuality, particularity and universality of its process only by an intuitive intellect, that Kant's conception of objectivity falls short. Hegel had carefully worked this out in his earlier discussion of Kant in "Faith and Knowledge."

Like the skeptical realism of Thomas Nagel, Brandom's semantic and modal realism entails costs. Brandom asserts that "conceptually contentful facts about objects and properties standing in lawful relations" are completely independent of any thinking subjects (ST 3). This kind of realism opens the way precisely to the kind of skepticism that Hegel intended to combat in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The "conceptual structure of the objective world" is supposed to obtain independently of any thinking subjects. However since "we cannot *understand* that conceptual structure of the objective world...except as part of a story that includes what we are *doing*" (ST 3), the conceptual structure of the objective world must turn out to be fundamentally different, for human beings as thinking agents, than it is independently (of its involvement in a story that includes what one is doing). Brandom, perhaps inadvertently, embraces a transcendental realism that neither Kant nor Hegel thought to be a viable position. For Brandom is committed to two mutually and fundamentally inconsistent conceptions of conceptual content. One notion of conceptual content, the pragmatist one, is fundamentally dependent on the role that content plays in the story of human beings, in their history and in what humans are doing. The other conception is completely independent of any such roles and indeed of the very existence of thinking beings of all kinds. In Brandom's articulation of the relation of objective idealism to semantic realism, one can find the ambiguity between two different readings of semantic realism expressed:

Objective idealism tells us we cannot understand the ontological structure of the objective world (its coming as law-governed facts about the properties of objects) except in terms that make essential reference to what subjects have to *do* in order to count as *taking* the world to have that structure – even though the world could have that structure in the absence of any subjects and their epistemic activities. [ST 215]

If the claim that "the world could have" the "ontological structure" that it does independently of any "essential reference to what subjects have to *do* in order to count as *taking* the world to have that structure" makes sense, then it would also seem to make sense to say that the world could also fail to have that structure. Brandom's response to this concern seems to be that one must distinguish the sense-dependence of the objective on the subjective from the causal and existential independence of the objective world (ST 213). Brandom is right in stating that neither Fichte or Hegel, and arguably not even George Berkeley, are guilty of the "obviously crazy sort of idealism" (ST 213) that takes the objective world to be causally or existentially dependent on individual minds:

The objective world is understood as *semantically* mind-dependent, not *causally* or *existentially* mind-dependent. The latter extravagant and implausible view is a kind of subjective idealism sometimes extrapolated from Berkeley and sometimes libelously attributed to Fichte. Whatever the justice of those associations, there is nothing of the sort in Hegel. [ST 213]

Brandom's rejection of psychologism means that he also finds a dependence of sense on individual minds, a crazy idealism of sense, indefensible. And I wholeheartedly agree with that rejection of psychological idealism. Brandom endorses semantical mind-dependence in contrast to causal or existential mind-dependence. The "practices of empirical subjects" are relevant to sense, but following Kant's conception of schematism, Hegel seeks an account of sense that allows for both the subject-dependent sociality of our practices and the subject-independent normativity of the meanings that are displayed to us through our participation in those practices. The practice-dependence of sense no more undermines the subject-independence of sense than the practice-dependence of reference undermines subject-independence. In virtue of that insight, I take Hegel to defend semantic realism. This is I think consistent with Brandom's own understanding of Hegel's objective idealism. Brandom seems to concede that referential practices are subject-dependent. However, he still wishes to ground such practices in objects and concepts that are completely independent of human beings' practices. Again, I take it that the normativity of one's practices involves a certain independence of concepts and of objects from those practices. It is never simply a matter of what one does, but always also a matter of whether one is doing the

right thing. But unless this is all that Brandom means by his semantic realism, I do not even understand the kind of independence of concepts and of objects from any subject, even from a "supersubject called 'Geist'" to which Brandom takes Hegel to be committed (ST 3).

The kind of semantic realism that Brandom seems to ascribe to Hegel would also under-mine Hegel's response to the subjective limitations that Hegel perceives in Kant's revolutionary conception of idealism and of objectivity. For it would open Hegel up to the same worry that Hegel broaches against Kant, namely that given such objective idealism the noumenal structure of the world might be inaccessible to human beings and thus what is objective for humans might in the end be radically subjective. I would argue that Hegel rejects the intelligibility of the very idea that there might be a conceptual reality completely independent of and divorced from what humans do together. I think the answer that Kant would give to Hegel is the answer that I have suggested above which is that such a conceptual reality is just barely intelligible to humans. For them, things as they are in themselves are nothing but the fundamental normativity of what they do,

another conception of what things in themselves might be is a completely empty notion (a noumenon in the negative sense) and one cannot even comprehend what it would be like to grasp the world and things in a non-normatively discursive way (the notion of an object of intellectual intuition is the illicit, non-discursively mediated, positive notion of noumenon).

Brandom's semantic pragmatism is a deeply insightful way of reading Hegel. *A Spirit of Trust* shows the great insight that analytic philosophy at its best can give to classical philosophical texts. But Brandom's pragmatism, like much of contemporary analytic neo-pragmatism, is pragmatism that seems ultimately grafted onto a problematic modal and semantic realism. In advancing the thesis of a fundamental and practice-independent conception of meaning, and of a conception of the conceptually real that is independent of any activity on the part of human or other subjects (even God) to grasp it, Brandom's conception shows the limits of his *Spirit of Trust*. For in an anchoring reference and modal realism, Brandom's trust in Spirit (*Geist*) comes in a certain sense to an end already before it begins.