

Robert Brandom  
*A Spirit of Trust.*  
*A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*  
Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2019, 856 pages.

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Last year saw the long-awaited and widely anticipated publication of Robert Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust. A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*, which had been in the making for over a quarter of a century. The flight of Brandom's Owl of Minerva, after all these years of feather-grooming and wing-stretching, is a strange sight to behold, both awe-inspiring and bewildering. Just what are we to make of this odd bird? What wisdom are we to garner, in the evening light of a lifetime's work? And who might benefit from it?

On the face of it, *A Spirit of Trust* is, of course, a reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As such, it joins a long chain of strongly diverging and competing interpretations and undoubtedly will come under the scrutiny of their proponents. Readers well-versed in Hegel's philosophy are likely to approach *A Spirit of Trust* with a fair amount of skepticism, as it puts forward a reading of the *Phenomenology* that is very unconventional. Indeed, it presents an analytic reading of Hegel, in the footsteps of Wilfrid Sellars's analytic reading of Kant, with which it shares the ambition to unstitch the historic interlacement of analytic philosophy with British Empiricism and interweave it with the rationalism of the German Idealists. Or at least with some of its threads. Brandom admits that his "semantic" reading of Kant and Hegel as the champions of inferentialist theories of conceptual content is not only anachronistic, but also highly selective, thus lending an unwilling support to those of his critics who will take issue not only with some of the finer details of his interpretation, but with its whole approach, notably with what Brandom calls his "strategy of semantic descent".

According to a common understanding of Hegel's agenda, Hegel, in his Encyclopedic system, aims at developing and applying categories of thought that are to enable us to eschew the stultifying dichotomies of undialectical thinking and thereby to rationally comprehend and in this sense make ourselves at home in an increasingly complex modern world. Hegel's *Phenomenology* can be understood as an introduction to his system, one that shows us its

necessity and leads us up to its threshold.<sup>1</sup> Brandom, by contrast, takes the *Phenomenology* itself to contain Hegel's philosophy, which he understands not as an elaboration of the special concepts that frame our ways of thinking, but as a theory of conceptuality in general. He understands experience not as the process in which traditional categories time and again reveal themselves to be inadequate, but as the practice of applying and developing concepts in general. This downward move from speculative to ordinary concepts is what Brandom calls his "semantic descent". If the first reactions to *A Spirit of Trust* are any indication, it will attract the lion's share of criticism.<sup>2</sup>

A source of skepticism that Brandom might have a better chance to defuse is the anti-Hegelian prejudice of many analytic philosophers, to whom Brandom offers a sturdy bridge to the shores of German Idealism, open to anyone willing to pay the toll that is a basic sympathy for Brandom's views. What *A Spirit of Trust* does not provide, however, is an entrance into Hegel's work for those who wish to approach Hegel with as few theoretical presuppositions in mind as possible. Such readers will be better served with introductory texts such as Robert Stern's guidebook (Stern 2013) or Georg Bertram's recently published systematic commentary (Bertram 2017).

*A Spirit of Trust* is indeed not merely a reading of the *Phenomenology*. It is what Brandom calls a "magnanimous" reading – which is in fact a reconstruction of the *Phenomenology* in the light of his own philosophy. This project only makes sense if Hegel can be shown, by and large, to hold positions that Brandom himself endorses. There is certainly some wiggle room for criticism and differentiation, but if the gap between Hegel's and Brandom's positions were to widen beyond a certain point, the whole construction would threaten to collapse. The disadvantages of this supposedly generous approach, which Brandom at times seems to present as the only rationally or even morally commendable one, are obvious. It makes Brandom's reading subject to two constraints, pulling in different directions. His reading must both be faithful to Hegel's text and show it to conform to his own philosophy. The resulting tension might be immensely productive, as Brandom's often fascinating reading proves. It remains problematic nonetheless. What amount of twisting and bending of Hegel's text is permitted? Where are we to draw the line? And how are these tamperings presented? Are they highlighted at all? If not, we risk ending up with an awkward kind of doublethink.

To illustrate this predicament, I will cite just one example, chosen not for its centrality, but precisely because it can be considered in isolation from the

<sup>1</sup> For an interpretation along these lines, see e.g. Stern 2013.

<sup>2</sup> For a collection of first responses, see Bouché 2020.

bigger picture. In *Sense Certainty*, Hegel makes two points. First, the This that is the object of Sense Certainty must be universal, since, as we can point at any spatiotemporal object, it is each one of them, “This as well as That”, but, at the same time, not identical with any one of them, “neither This nor That” (Hegel 1977 § 96). Second, even if we could somehow focus on just one spatiotemporal object as the This, this object would again turn out to be universal, precisely because it is extended in space and time. The This is a Here and Now that is a synthesis of many Heres and many Nows, a synthesis that Hegel likens to the movement, through space and time, of retracing the contours of the object rather than just pointing at it (Hegel 1977 §§ 107-108).

Brandom takes Hegel in the same passages to make two points as well, but very different ones, points that allow him to claim that Hegel anticipates Sellars’s debunking of the “Myth of the Given”. First, by pointing at an object as a This, we already implicitly admit a universal, namely a Non-This as that which all objects incompatible with the This have in common (118-124). Second, deixis presupposes anaphora (124-129). While I take both points to be valid, it is just as obvious to me that they are not at all what Hegel is saying. So obvious indeed, that I am certain that Brandom himself must know that his reading does not fit the text. What then is Brandom doing in ascribing these points to Hegel? And what are his readers supposed to do? Are they simply to ignore the fact that Hegel is actually saying something quite different? Whatever Brandom is doing, he certainly does not provide us with a faithful and reliable close-reading of Hegel’s text.

That is not at all to say that Brandom’s idiosyncratic approach is without merit. Its greatest merit, in my view, is that it forces him to provide a reconstruction of the *Phenomenology* that is perfectly clear and unequivocal. No remnants of obscurity and vagueness are tolerated, which sets Brandom’s reading very positively apart from more deferential interpretations that are happy to reproduce the darkness of Hegel’s jargon and gladly follow his steps to the dark end of any blind alley. It has also the merit, regardless of its hermeneutic value as an interpretation of the *Phenomenology*, of giving us an extensive and painstakingly crafted systematic presentation of Brandom’s own philosophy. *A Spirit of Trust* gives Brandom the opportunity to sum up his life’s work and to extricate its main lines from more accidental accretions, but it does not constitute his whole legacy. Too many of the intricate details masterfully worked out in *Making It Explicit*, in which Brandom’s thought revealed itself in its systematic form for the first time, are left out (Brandom 1994). But together, the two books form formidable twin peaks standing out from the rest of his work and towering high above the bulk of today’s philosophy.

Indeed, *A Spirit of Trust* can be read without as much as having a passing glimpse at Hegel's *Phenomenology*, purely as the culmination of Brandom's philosophy, which might be good news for readers interested more in the evolution of Brandom's thought than in a reassessment of German Idealism. To those new to Brandom, it might even serve as a point of entry into his system. It is certainly more orderly and honed and polished than Brandom's notoriously unwieldy early masterpiece. Though, for most newcomers, a detour through some secondary literature might still prove the shortest route to Brandom's teachings.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, readers already familiar with Brandom's work might wonder: What then is genuinely new in *A Spirit of Trust*? First, of course, the presentation of Brandom's philosophy as an explicitly Hegelian one, as an absolute idealism. Second, an account of the continuous development of concepts through rational reconstruction. Brandom's aim, already in *Making It Explicit*, is to describe a practice in which we, just by taking there to be objective concepts, effectively institute objective concepts. But, in his first major work, he merely casts a still image of this practice. It exhibits of course the ongoing movement of experience, of making and unmaking assertions, of inhaling and exhaling commitments, as Brandom puts it, but this continuous motion takes place against the background of a firmament of fixed concepts, maintained by nothing but our own activity, yet already fully determined.

Both Brandom's recasting of his philosophy as an absolute idealism and its supplementation by an account of concept-development are already carried out in more or less detail in various minor works published in between his two magna opera. However, *A Spirit of Trust* contains another, far less expected novelty, one that in previous work is merely dimly hinted at and that now emerges as the "one, far-off, divine event, to which the whole creation moves" (568): something akin to an ethics. Why should Brandom, the analytic philosopher of language, want to present us with an ethics at all? To understand this urge, we have, in my mind, to understand the constitutive limitation of his philosophy.

Brandom's philosophy starts with a rationalistic conception of human nature that sets us human beings apart from the rest of creation: We are endowed with language and reason, of which other creatures merely possess a shadow. The rationalism of this conception is so pronounced, however, that Brandom is led to eliminate from his account of us all that is not absolutely essential to us as rational beings, notably anything that pertains to a specifically human culture. This radical abstraction, which Brandom himself mischievously re-

<sup>3</sup> For helpful introductions to Brandom's philosophy, see Wanderer 2008 and Loeffler 2018.

fers to as “vandalizing Neurath’s boat,” (Pritzlaff 2008: 378) might be entirely legitimate, and maybe even indispensable, as a heuristic device. But it threatens to turn Brandom’s system into a glass bead game that, as impressive and awe-inspiring as it might seem to like-minded philosophers, has little to offer to a wider circle of educated readers who expect philosophy to help them see through the culture that surrounds them and grapple with existential or political issues that arise in it. Brandom’s stabs at an ethics are, in my opinion, a response to this threat of irrelevance. He does not address culture as a proper topic of philosophical inquiry, which would take him far beyond his home turf, but attempts to show that his rationalistic philosophy, beautifully self-contained as it is, has ethical implications that point beyond it.<sup>4</sup>

To work out these implications, Brandom needs to draw on material from outside his philosophy of language, namely on Hegel’s accounts of action and modern culture expounded in the *Reason* and *Spirit* chapters of the *Phenomenology*, from which he extracts premodern, modern, and postmodern conceptions of action. The premodern conception is tragic: We are crushed by the responsibility we are called on to assume for our actions together with their unintended and unforeseeable consequences. The modern contraction of our responsibility to the intended and foreseeable raises the possibility of our innocence before the law, but, as it is difficult to determine where the intended and foreseeable ends and the unintended and unforeseeable begins, we can make sure to seize this prize only by not acting at all: The modern conception threatens to alienate us from our actions. Now, according to Brandom, the practice already described in *Making It Explicit* is not only inescapable, but also implies a just-as-unshirkable commitment to realizing a community in which individuals are neither crushed by nor alienated from their actions, but in which responsibility for the actions of each one of us is shared by all of us — a “magnanimous” and “postmodern” community not of censoriousness and hypocrisy, of finger-pointing and virtue-signaling, but of goodwill, trust, and mutual help and forgiveness in the face of limitations that, otherwise, would render us helpless before an unforgiving fate. Brandom’s philosophy is thus exactly what he ascribes to Hegel: “It is, remarkably, a semantics with an edifying intent.” (32).

Remarkably indeed. Against the background of contemporary philosophy, this project seems so outlandish that we might struggle to properly situate it in the philosophical landscape. Brandom himself has hinted at a connection

<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that Brandom’s philosophy as a whole can be read as a longwinded reply to the challenges to analytic philosophy mounted by Richard Rorty’s in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. See Bouché 2020a.

to the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas, whom he takes to be involved in the same project of establishing “a point of contact between [...] large, weighty cultural issues and [...] detailed, painstaking work in the philosophy of language,” (Brandom 2015: 32) albeit along more Kantian lines (Brandom 2015: 34). And Habermas, who was instrumental in propagating Brandom’s philosophy in Europe, placed much hope in Brandom’s philosophy of language before he had to resign himself to the fact that Brandom’s rationalism is too rarefied to allow for the ethical and political conclusions that he wants to draw, as Brandom admits.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, what sets Brandom and Habermas apart is that Brandom has no theory of society, no theory of culture or, as we might put it in Hegelian terms, neither a theory of objective spirit nor a theory of art and religion as forms of absolute spirit, understood as the practices in which we engage to reflect on ourselves, our institutions, our forms of life.

While Brandom’s combination of a pure philosophy and an edifying intent is anathema to the social philosophy of Habermas and the Frankfurt School in general, it is far from unprecedented. It is reminiscent, notably, of the thought of early twentieth-century philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Heidegger, in both of whose works the aspiration to ground philosophy on a new and purer foundation, logical or phenomenological in nature and shielded against encroachments of the natural, social, and cultural sciences, went together with the existential aspiration to an authentic way of life and with a very modern longing for a premodern belonging that courts disaster when it ventures into the political realm, as Heidegger’s collaboration with National Socialism and Wittgenstein’s romantization of life under Soviet communism testify.

The edification that Brandom evokes is of course very different. Like Habermas, he forgoes any conception of a good life, which in diverse modern societies cannot possibly lay claim to universal validity, and in this substantial sense does not offer an ethics. And while Wittgenstein and Heidegger are very monological thinkers, cultivating self-images as solitary geniuses, Brandom’s moral edification concerns precisely the nature of interpersonal relationships. He embraces the modern experience that in the absence of a Big Other to which we might strive to belong, be it Tolstoian faith, Being, or immediate *Sittlichkeit*, there is nothing to hold on to but other people. As a consequence, Brandom’s edification necessarily remains very formal, akin to a maxim, wherein it resembles Kant’s categorical imperative. Which does not make Brandom’s message irrelevant to our times. On the contrary, in times marked, in many societies around the world, by a weakening of the political middle and a polarization between so-called progressives and populists, caught up in a destructive dia-

<sup>5</sup> See also Pritzlaff 2008: 377-378.

lectics of self-righteousness and resentment, we might more than ever stand in need of mutual trust and “goodwill and more goodwill and more goodwill”, as E.M. Forster bids us (Forster 1989: 70-71).

What sets Brandom apart from Habermas also separates him from Hegel, in whose work metaphysics and a diagnosis of the times, a timeless philosophy of language and a philosophy of culture that grasps its time in thought, are mysteriously intertwined, with an edifying surplus reminiscent of the *Bildungsroman* of Hegel’s time: The young man must grow up, come to grips with alienation as a necessary and constitutive fact of life, and make himself at home in a necessarily complex and imperfect world – or share the tragic fate of the romantic figures in *Wilhelm Meister*, whose author famously likened romanticism to a disease.<sup>6</sup> One aspect of Hegel’s thought, a diagnosis of the times with an antiromantic stance, might have been pursued most clearly in the sociological work of Max Weber, who, in times that were as revolutionary and unstable as Hegel’s, warned against the dangers of political enthusiasm and a juvenile ethics of conviction, to which he opposed an ethics of responsibility (Weber 1919). Meanwhile, the philosophical dream of wedding a social philosophy to a fundamental metaphysic seems well and truly over.<sup>7</sup>

What then is Brandom’s philosophy? What will it have been? It is shrouded in an ambiguity of expansion and retreat. On the one hand, Brandom has combined a myriad of jigsaw pieces scattered over the canon of analytic philosophy into a unified vision in which they fall into place and make sense for the first time. He has freed logic and semantics from the shackles of their formalism by grounding them in a pragmatics of what we recognize as our actual doings. He has reconnected an overly specialized scholastic literature to the tales of the mighty dead. In all these respects, Brandom’s philosophy is exhilaratingly expansive. Yet he has also retreated into a pure, timeless, self-contained rationalistic metaphysics whose cogwheels gear into one another a tad too neatly and which we seem to be at a loss to connect to a wider understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. But perhaps the last word on this has not been spoken yet. Perhaps the time has not yet come for commentators to paint their grey in grey.

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<sup>6</sup> An antiromantic Hegel shines through the pages of Pirmin Stekeler 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Which does not prevent its reverberations from lingering on, for instance in the work of Alain Badiou.

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