Robert Brandom's very ambitious, very impressive, and very long book offers the first half of a full-scale philosophical system. The second half will, I take it, emerge in his forthcoming commentary on Hegel. He describes Making it Explicit as presenting a "unified vision of language and mind", but in its closing pages it expands into something like a full-scale philosophical anthropology. To master the book, and the terminology it deploys, one will need to teach it a couple of times. Since I have read it only once, have not yet taught it, and am still digesting it, I am not in a position to give a balanced account of its achievement. So today I shall try only to assign the book a tentative location in contemporary philosophical space.

More specifically, I shall say how Making it Explicit looks to somebody who, like Brandom, is convinced that Sellars' work is central to the philosophical progress made in our century, but who has been as much influenced by Davidson as by Sellars. As an old-time Sellarsian who has been trying to work through the implications of Davidson's work, I found myself continually comparing and contrasting what Brandom is doing with what Davidson is doing. I see the two men's work as complementary, and unlikely to conflict, although very different in emphasis and in terminology.

The basic similarity I wish to emphasize is both can be viewed as attempting what Brandom calls "an account of propositionally explicit saying, judging, or knowing-that, in terms of practically implicit capacities, abilities, or knowing-how". (p. 135) Viewing rationality and cognition as a matter of terms of complex know-how chimes with Davidson's suggestion that we should erase "the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally". ("A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs", in Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson, ed. E. LePore (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 445-446). Both Brandom and Davidson are concerned to push through to completion the replacement of empiricism by naturalism which was initiated by "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" and "Two Dogmas of Empiricism".

Brandom ends his book by saying that what he has just given us--"an expressive account of language, mind, and logic" which explains all three in terms of know-how--is an "account of who we are". (650) Slightly earlier he has said that "conversation is the great good for discursive creatures". (644) One handle by which one can pick up his massive book is by contrasting this latter claim with the traditional idea that the great good for discursive creatures is getting the Way the World Is right. One can, in other words, contrast Brandom's account of human beings as conversationalists with an account of human beings as capable of penetrating through appearance to reality. The latter account is the one which says that, though we start out with descriptions of reality which are dependent upon human needs and interests, we can transcend these and move on to something like Bernard Williams' "absolute conception of reality". We can call this latter view "realism" if, as I do, one agrees with David Lewis that "realism that recognises a nontrivial enterprise of discovering the truth about the world needs the traditional realism that recognizes objective sameness and difference, joints in the world, discriminatory classifications not of our own making." (Lewis,
To be a realist in this sense is to urge that any philosophical account of language, mind and logic must divide discourse up into the part in which we get something right and the areas in which we are just conversing. In the first part, the discriminatory classifications come from the world, and in the latter they come from us. This is the sort of account which the positivists gave, and which contemporary philosophers who value what they call "our realistic intuitions" still put forward. Such an account requires that an account of word-word relations be supplemented by an account of non-causal word-world relations -- a relation such as "accurate representation" or "correspondence".

Davidson has suggested that it would be well to get rid of the idea that language and mind represent anything, since any invocation of the notion of representation seems bound to plunge us first into skepticism, and then into relativism. He would like to drop the whole topic of the purported independence of world from mind, and thus set aside the debates about realism and anti-realism. In aid of this project, he has urged that we get rid of the idea of representational scheme and represented content -- what he calls "the third, and perhaps last, dogma of empiricism." This amounts to urging that we no longer inquire, as realists must, about which discriminatory classifications are the world's, and which ours -- which are part of the representing scheme and which of the represented content.

Though Brandom would agree that this inquiry is profitless, he is less dismissive of the notion of representation. He recognizes that the "issue of objectivity is perhaps the most serious conceptual challenge facing the attempt to ground the proprieties governing concept use in social practice" (P. 137) -- an attempt which eschews such "representational primitives" as "conscious experience" or "perception". So he devotes his final to arguing that his account can "explain the representational dimension of thought and talk". (p. 495) This last chapter's thesis is that "the representational dimension of propositional content is conferred on thought and talk by the social dimension of the practice of giving and asking for reasons." (p. 496)

The idea that propositional content has a representational dimension boils down to what Brandom calls "the objectivity of conceptual norms" (p. 497). He goes on to say that our conversational practises institute "implicit norms according to which the truth of claims and the correct use of concepts answer to how things objectively -- rather than how things subjectively, or even intersubjectively -- are taken to be." (p. 498). He undertakes to show us how "the notion of propositional contents as truth conditions -- as depending for their truth on the facts about the objects they represent -- gets its grip". (p. 517) It gets its grip from the fact that "commitments undertaken against one doxastic background of further commitments available for use as auxiliary hypotheses can be taken up and made available as premises against a different doxastic background". (p. 517) Their use in this way results in de re ascriptions, and Brandom thinks the ability to make such ascriptions all that is needed for objectivity to be distinguished from intersubjectivity. As he says "Locutions such
as 'of', 'about' and 'represents' play the expressive role of representational locutions in virtue of their use in de re specifications of the contents of ascriptions of propositional attitudes". (p. 584)

Philosophers with strong realistic intuitions, however, are going to say that there is a lot more to the notion of representing X as it is in itself than the ability to say that we were all wrong to think that X has the property P. They will be inclined to insist that Brandom's inferentialism can indeed explicate "about" and "of", but that there is more to representing reality than being about it. Brandom himself admits that "the notion of de re belief that has exercised philosophers since Quine has more epistemic oomph to it than the thin notion reconstructed here" because, as he goes on to say, the former notion "involves being en rapport with a particular object in a stronger sense than merely having some way or other of denoting it." (p. 548)

Brandom, however, will have no truck with the idea that "directly referential expressions, paradigmatically indexical ones, make possible a fundamental sort of cognitive contact with the objects of thought, a kind of relational belief that is not conceptually mediated—in which objects are directly present to the mind." (p. 551) For Brandom is loyal to Sellars' psychological nominalism—the doctrine that all awareness of anything, even of particulars, is a linguistic (and thus a conceptually mediated) affair. He has, I take it, no sympathy with Kripke's attempt to squeeze realism out of indexicality by construing de re ascriptions as latching on to objects by a reference relation which swings free of the inferences made to and from such ascriptions.

One might epitomize the difference between Brandom, Sellars and Davidson on the one hand and self-described defenders of our realistic intuitions on other hand by saying that the former reduce all word-world relations other than causality to word-word, conversational, relations, whereas the latter insist that there are at least one such relation—representation, correspondence, or what Crispin Wright calls "being under cognitive command"—which is reducible neither to causal relations nor to conversational relations. Then one might say that the only interesting difference between Davidson and Brandom is that Brandom talks about norms and Davidson about regularities.

The latter difference, however, seems insignificant. Consider Davidson's claim that "the ultimate source of both objectivity and communication is the triangle that, by relating speaker, interpreter and world, determines the contents of thought and speech". Compare it with Brandom's claim that the only difference between objectivity and intersubjectivity is that the language gives us, in de re ascriptions, a way of saying that everybody has always been wrong in one or more of their beliefs about X. Since I assume that Brandom would grant Davidson's point that everybody could hardly have been wrong in most of their beliefs about X, there seems little for them to disagree about. Brandom quotes Davidson's claim that "One cannot be a thinker unless one is an interpreter of the speech of others" approvingly. (p. 629) Davidson, I think, would approve of what Brandom calls "tactile Fregeanism"—the view that our practice puts us in touch with facts and the concepts that articulate them. (p. 632)
As far as I can see, he would have no reason to object to Brandom's claim that enough has been said about objectivity once we have explained our ability to understand the possibility of perpetual and unanimous false belief.

Neither Brandom nor Davidson sees a need for the notion of "in itself", nor for that of "correspondence," to explicate either the idea of objectivity, or the claim that most spatio-temporal events antedated mind and language. But neither, as far as I can see, can grant the realist his claim that there was some particular Way the World Was prior to the emergence of mind and language. For both, the idea of distinguishing joints in the world which coincide with present linguistic discriminatory classifications and those which do not is, at most, a gesture in toward a possible future: a future which contains more useful linguistic discriminatory classifications than those we are presently making. It is a contrast between less and more useful social practices rather than David Lewis' distinction between the world's discriminatory classifications and ours. Both Brandom and Davidson would presumably say that there were as many Ways the World Was before language and mind as there are descriptive vocabularies which language-users will manage to formulate, and that none of these vocabularies is more closely related to the world than any other.

Brandom could endorse Davidson's rejection of the scheme-content distinction and also his doctrine that most of anybody's beliefs must be true. The latter doctrine, indeed, seems implicit in Brandom's doctrines that linguistic ability, rationality, and cognitive ability are invariably compresent. (p. 203) Both doctrines entail that the idea of pervasively false belief-systems makes no sense. Brandom would, I take it, insist on Davidson's point that "belief is in its nature verdical."

This insistence amounts to saying that saying something true should not be seen having brought about a desirable relation between a description and an undescribed world—a relation which holds only if these two relata divide up along the same lines—any more than winning a game should be seen as a relation between a social practice and something outside that practice. Alternatively, it amounts to reiterating that the only relations between the described and the description that matter are causal ones, and that those causal relations are far too complex to be described in terms of matching, corresponding, or fitting. The holism involved in ascribing truth, like that involved in ascribing belief, defeats attempts to cut non-language up into fact-sized chunks which stand in causal relations to sentences.

Nevertheless, it may seem that a great gulf divides Davidson's Tarskian approach to semantics from Brandom's insistence that "representational locutions [such as 'true' and 'refers'] are not suited to play the role of primitives in a semantic theory." (p. 285) One can easily imagine Davidson balking at Brandom's claim that "Truth and reference are philosophers' fictions, generated by grammatical misunderstandings." (p. 324) Davidson explicitly says that Tarski's truth predicate is a "legitimate" predicate (The Structure and Content of Truth, Journal of Philosophy LXXVII (1990), p. 285), and Brandom explicitly says that one can avoid the paradoxes of deflationism only by denying that it is a predicate. (See pp.
Still, it is not clear that these disagreements between the Brandom and Davidson make any difference, at least in comparison with their agreement that, in Davidson's phraseology, no one will ever "define a predicate of the form 's is true in L' for variable L". ("The Structure and Content of Truth", p. 285.) Both agree on the indefinability of truth, and share the same attitude toward critics of Tarski such as Hartry Field. Both think that we are never going to have more of an understanding of how words hook on to the world than we have now, and that we do not need anything like a new, improved, theory about how reference works.

Both ridicule the idea of "truth-makers"--of chunks of the world which nestle up against sentences and thereby make them belief-worthy. (See p. 328) Davidson could, I think, cheerfully grant Brandom's point that there are no such things as semantic facts, since "mastering semantic vocabulary just gives us a new way of getting at a range of nonsemantic facts we already had access to". (p. 329)

But surely, one might expostulate, Davidson could never agree with Brandom's claim that "one ought not to explain propositional contentfulness in terms of truth conditions" (p. 329). Notice, however, that Brandom is not denying that anything that has a propositional content has truth conditions. (Look further down p. 329.) He is simply saying that what gives it both that content and those conditions is the same social practise, and that philosophical perspicuity in this area consists in saying that both logic and semantics are just ways of calling attention to features of that practise. Notice also that Davidson is not about to answer the question "Why do you think that this noise has propositional content?" by saying "Because it has truth conditions". He would presumably agree with Brandom that this would be a "dormitive power" sort of explanation. He certainly would agree that "This sentence is true because it corresponds to reality" is that sort of explanation. (See p. 330, and compare with "The Structure and Content of Truth", p. 305).

Consider a Davidsonian field linguist constructing a truth theory for a natural language, trying to attain the know-how necessary to bicker like a brother with the natives. She looks for evidence of social norms which dictate what marks and noises are to be made in which environments, and which actions, linguistic and other, typically ensue upon the production of these marks and noises. She may, as she builds up her interpretive know-how, convert it into knowing that by writing down T-sentences. But, if she had not read Tarski, she might do the same job by composing a translation manual. The difference is merely that between using "is true if and only if" as the term which connects native sentences with sentences of her mother tongue and using "means" as such a connective. She would do no better or worse if she spoke explicitly of norms and proprieties and connected such sentences with some compound-sentence forming operator as "They say so-and-so only in the conditions under which we should say such and such." The equal utility of all three ways of hooking up unfamiliar social practices with familiar ones suggests that the question "Is truth a word-world or a word-word relation" has something wrong with it.
If he does the former he may view himself as describing word-world relations, and if he does the latter he may view himself as describing

If Davidson were asked whether he, like Brandom, takes truth-locutions to be force-indicating rather than content-specifying (see p. 296), I can imagine him demuring at having to choose. But I take his view that the word "true" is indefinable and unanalyzable to amount to agreement with Brandom. Davidson, I take it, shares Brandom's enthusiasm for Frege's insistence that "truth is indefinable, something the understanding of which is always already implicit in claiming" (p. 112). And, as far as I can see, the line between indefinable words and definable ones is pretty much the line between words used to indicate force and words used to specify content--between words whose use you have to just pick up, and words whose use can be explained by other words without obvious circularity. Brandom thinks that both logical terms like "and" and semantical terms like "true" indicate force. This is why he says that "the truth condition on knowledge" is best thought of not as the claim that what is known must have a property called "truth" but as the claim that an endorsement of someone's knowledge-claim is automatically an endorsement of what she says she knows. (See p. 297)

From the field linguist's point of view, the difference between the Tractatus and the Investigations, or between Tarski or Sellars, or between Davidson and Brandom, is irrelevant. Its relevance arises only when choosing primitives for a philosophical account of what the field linguist is doing.

(But see chapter 5).
People for Blackwell's Reading Rorty:
(Send list to Brandom with my Wright, Searle, Taylor and Cerisy papers)

Crispin Wright
Hilary Putnam and James Conant
Bjorn Ramberg
Barry Allen
Michael Williams
Donald Davidson
Ernie LePore
Daniel Dennett
Susan Haack (?)
Doug Maclean (?)
Bouveresse's old piece w/my reply
John Searle (?)
Diego Marconi (?)
Juergen Habermas
Arthur Fine
Dear Bob,

Here's a list of possible people for a new Reading Rorty sort of book:

Hilary Putnam and James Conant--they seem to be a team nowadays, and somebody told me they were meditating a joint reply to my "Putnam and the Relativist Menace", which contained some remarks on Conant

Crispin Wright--he might want to write a reply to my "Wright and Davidson on Truth", or more generally, to Quineans who can't see the point of Dummettism

Akeel Bilgrami

Michael Williams

Barry Allen--an old student of mine from Princeton days, author of Truth in Philosophy, an interesting book recently published by Harvard U.P.; has written a nice piece on Putnam in a recent CJP issue

Robert Brandom

Bjorn Ramberg--he wrote the best article I've read on my stuff on morals and politics; he's good on Putnam, Dennett, et al, and might want to write something about my other stuff

Ernie LePore--he said he was writing a piece on "Rorty's Davidson", which would fit in nicely

Dan Dennett--would only be in point if he wanted to rethink his "Real Patterns" and my criticisms of it

Arthur Fine--probably wouldn't be interested, but I'd be interested to know how he thinks my stuff about anti-representationalism fits in with his "NOA" stuff

Donald Davidson--probably wouldn't be interested, but might feel like defining himself in relation to my descriptions of him

Juergen Habermas--probably ditto, but might want to write in reply to my "Universality and Truth"
I'm sending under separate cover some recent preprints, including the pieces on Wright and on Habermas, as well as an up-to-date bibliography.

There is a volume called Lire Rorty in French which exchanges with Putnam, Nehamas, McCarthy, Descombes, and Bouveresse. The only interesting item not already available in English is Bouveresse's piece, which is about analytic-vs.-Continental philosophy (he's for analytic). My reply to him has been published, obscurely, in Stanford French Review. The exchange between us might perhaps usefully be published in the volume you are thinking of.

All the best,

April 21, 1994