

**INFERENTIALISM, THE EXISTENCE OF GOD, THE  
IRRELEVANCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, AND  
CULTURAL POLITICS**

*Tout commence en mystique et finit en politique (Peguy)*

The term “inferentialism” is of relatively recent coinage. It was first used, as far as I know, in the opening pages of Robert Brandom’s 1994 book **MAKING IT EXPLICIT: REASONING, REPRESENTATION AND DISCURSIVE COMMITMENT**. There Brandom distinguished two ways of understanding sapience. That was the name he gave to the feature that most saliently distinguishes human beings from the other animals—their ability to take part in the game of giving and asking for reasons: “One is treating something as sapient,” Brandom explained, “insofar as one explains its behavior by attributing to it intentional states such as belief and desire as constituting reasons for that behavior.” (p. 5) To understand sapience we must explain what it is to grasp intentional content—the content of beliefs and desires. One way of doing this, Brandom said, is through the notion of truth. The other is

through the notion of inference. To be an inferentialist is to take the latter route.

In this paper I want to suggest that the difference between these two orders of explanation can be aligned with the difference between two ways of thinking about the place of religion in culture. If one begins with the notion of truth, one's thinking about religion will be dominated by the question "Does God exist?" and by the further question "How could we tell whether he does or not?". If one begins with the notion of inference, on the other hand, it will be dominated by the question "Should we continue talking about God?" On the first approach, there are analogies between religion and science, and philosophy of religion revolves around exploring the disanalogies. On the second approach, philosophy of religion dissolves into cultural politics.

The two questions I have distinguished may seem merely stylistically different. For surely, one might object, we should talk about whatever exists, and only about what exists. But even if one grants this dubious claim, one can still point to the difference between starting with questions about existence and starting with questions about desirable conversational topics. Inferentialists, by starting with the latter, are following the lead provided by idealism; they think that existence a

function of, among other things, what people decide to talk about. The view that existence is in every way independent of discourse, on the other hand, is typically taken by philosophers who are, in Brandom's terminology, "representationalists". These philosophers take the notions of truth and reference as primitive rather than, as inferentialists do, building these notions out of descriptions of the social practice of giving and asking for reasons.

Representationalists think that the point of being sapient is to get in touch with what exists by representing it accurately in our beliefs. This are inclined to think that finding out what really exists is the point of human existence. They often express this opinion by saying that the most important and desirable human impulse is the love of truth, construed as accurate representation of reality.

The traditional difficulty for representationalism is that it seems to lead straight to skepticism: for there seems no way for us to compare our beliefs with reality, as opposed to comparing them with other beliefs, and thus no way to judge whether we are talking about what is really out there. One of the motives for becoming either an idealist or an inferentialist is that doing so helps one evade the skeptic's doubts. To start one's thinking about sapience with the notion of inference rather

than with that of truth is to suggest that the most important human impulse is to obey the norms of valid inference, the norms which emerge as we use language to engage in cooperative social practices. The quest for validity swings free of that for truth, for validity is a relation that swings free of truth. because inferences from false beliefs to false beliefs, or from false beliefs to true beliefs, are still valid inferences. From an inferentialist point of view, the reason the notion of truth is important is not that true beliefs represent reality accurately but that truth is the name of what is preserved in valid inference. (For somewhat technical reasons, having to do with the validity of inferences involving conditional sentences that contain other sentences as parts, the notion of truth cannot be eliminated in favor of “justifiable” or “assertible within a given social practice, This is a point on which both Davidson and Brandom have insisted.)

The difference between a treatment of sapience that takes notions like “truth”, “reference”, “naming” and “representing” as primitive and one that takes social practices as primitive obviously parallels the difference between thinking about the relation of beliefs to non-human reality and thinking about the relations of beliefs to one another. It also parallels the difference between thinking about the internal coherence of

**an individual's belief system (in the manner of Descartes' MEDITATIONS) and thinking about the coherence of her beliefs with those of her fellow humans. Finally, it can be aligned with the distinction between theism and humanism, between the view that man's primary responsibilities are to something non-human and the view that our responsibilities to one another take precedence.**

**Before trying to develop this last parallel any further, however, let me quote an illuminating passage in which Brandom talks about the relation between the place of the representationalist-inferentialist distinction in the history of modern philosophy:**

**This semantic explanatory strategy, which takes inference as its basic concept, contrasts with one that has been dominant since the Enlightenment, which takes representation as its basic concept. The inferentialist approach is by no means without precedent—between Continental rationalists such as Spinoza and Leibniz, on the one hand, and British empiricists such as Locke and Hume, is, for many purposes, more perspicuously drawn between those endorsing an inferentialist order of explanation and those endorsing a representationalist order of explanation...**

**The complementary theoretical semantic strategies of representationalism and inferentialism are bound by the same pair of general explanatory obligations to explicate the concept treated as primitive and to offer an account of other semantic concepts in terms of that primitive. The representationalist tradition has developed good answers to the second sort of concern, primarily by employing a variety of set-theoretic methods to show how proprieties of inference can be determined by representational properties of the claims that serve as their premises and conclusions. The explanatory challenge to that tradition lies rather in the first sort of demand, in saying what it is for something to have representational content, and in what the grasp or uptake of that content by speakers and thinkers consists. As the inferentialist program is pursued here, the proprieties of inference that serve as semantic primitives are explicated in the pragmatics; they are implicit in the practices of giving and asking for reasons. The major explanatory challenge for inferentialists is rather to explain the representational dimension of semantic content—to construe referential relations in terms of inferential relations. (p. xvi)**

**The most startling moment in Brandom's explanation of representational relations in terms of inferential contents, comes when he**

answers the unexpected question “Why are there objects to be represented?” He answers this question by giving a sort of transcendental deduction of the necessity of there being singular terms if there is to inference that makes self-conscious, explicit, use of such logical notions as “is identical with”, “all”, “some” and “not”. (See pp. 382-383 for the conclusion of this deduction). He gives a similar demonstration of the necessity of taking these terms referring to objects about which we can be right or wrong. (See pp. 592ff.) Doing things this way amounts to dropping the old representationalist question “How does the human mind manage to get in touch with reality?” in favor of asking “Why does the human community need the notion of accurate representation of objects? Why should the question of getting in touch with reality ever have arisen?”

This change of questions is, once again, parallel to the change from a theistic to a humanistic world-view. In recent centuries, instead of asking whether God exists, people have taken to asking whether it is a good idea for us to continue talking about him, what human purposes might be served by doing so—asking, in short, what use God might be to human beings. Brandom is suggesting that philosophers, instead of asking whether we really are in touch with objects outside the mind,

should ask what human purposes are served by talking about these objects, whether talking about them was a good idea. In the course of his book he argues that it was not only a good idea but a pragmatically indispensable one. If we had not started talking about objects which are what they are independent of what we say about them, we would never have had much to say. Talk about objects independent of the mind is valuable because it serves certain human purposes, not because human beings have obligations to such objects, or to “the Truth” as the ideally adequate representation of them.

Brandom’s rationalist predecessors, such as Spinoza, typically agreed with Augustine that if we had not been able to talk about God we should never have had anything to say—that the idea of God, being somehow ingredient in all our other ideas, indispensable to sapience. Brandom is arguing that a language without singular terms and without the conceptual resources that enable us to say things like “This singular term does not refer to anything real” and “The object referred by the subject-term of this sentence is misrepresented by its predicate” we should never have achieved sapience. The “loss of the world” which idealism seemed helpless to avoid is thus not a problem for Brandom’s inferentialism, since there must be things we might forever get wrong if

there is to be sapience. As he puts it, “...objectivity is a structural aspect of the social-perspectival form of conceptual contents. The permanent distinction between how things are and how they are taken to be by some interlocutor is built into the social-inferential articulation of concepts.” (p. 597)

But Brandom is not exactly a “realist”, for that distinction is permanent only as long as we humans behave as we do--namely sapiently. This is why he can say that “the facts about having physical properties” supervene upon “the facts about seeming to have such properties.” (p. 292) No world, no human social practices, but also: no human social practices, no world. In the causal order which emerges once humans have initiated the practice of distinguishing causes from effects, the world comes before the practices. Yet space, time, substance and causality are what they are because human beings need to talk in certain ways to get certain things done. In the place of Kant’s inexplicable transcendental constitution of the mind, Brandom substitutes the necessities for the flourishing of a biological species.

The obvious disanalogies between Brandom’s brand of rationalism and Spinoza’s go back to the fact that Spinoza thought that the point of philosophy was to bring God and man together—to show that we humans

are not as separate from him as we might seem. But Brandom thinks the point of philosophy is to eliminate the abyss that representationalism has dug between human beings and objects, the abyss to which the sceptic constantly directs our attention. Another big difference between Brandom and Spinoza is that the latter thought of knowledge in terms of the coincidence of subject with object. Brandom thinks of it in terms of the coincidence of opinion among human beings.

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I shall come back toward the end of this paper to some further similarities and differences between Brandom and his predecessors in respect to their approach to the concept of God. But in the next few sections I shall leave God to one side and outline what Brandom has to say about existential commitment. One of the most striking and original portions of MAKING IT EXPLICIT is chapter 7, in which he defines existential commitment as “a species of substitutional commitment” (p. 440). I shall try to explain what he means by this, and by his further claim that one can only make an existential commitment by reference to a set of “canonical designators”.

For representationalists both the concept of “object” and that of “existent, non-fictional, object” are primitive. That is: you need to

understand these notions in order to understand what sapience is. But for Brandom you know what sapience is if you understand what it is to keep tabs on the discursive commitments of your fellows and their coincidence and lack of coincidence with your own. In other words, you know what sapience is if you know how to use expressions like “Your premises do not support your conclusion”, “You are being inconsistent”, “We are not talking about the same thing”, “You are not justified in saying that, even though what you say is true”, “We are talking about the same people, even though you call them ‘terrorists’ and I call them ‘freedom fighters’,” and so on. So it looks as if Brandom might be saying: if you know how to talk you don’t need to worry about what you are talking about, or indeed whether you are talking about anything at all. His social-practice approach seems to suggest that intentionality is a philosopher’s myth—that aboutness is not essential to the use of language. If you know how to make speech-acts, then it is not clear that the idea that you are trying to represent things as they really are need ever cross your mind.

But, as I said earlier, Brandom proceeds to offer a demonstration that if you did not understand about aboutness and about getting things right you would not be able to take part in the social practice of keeping

track of discursive commitments. It turns out that you couldn't be trying to say the right thing at the right time, trying to get people to agree that your beliefs are both true and justified, trying to obey the norms of current social practice, unless you were also able to think of yourself as trying to do more than just conform to those norms. You have to be trying to get objects right as well. "Representing objects" and "words as names of objects rather than merely vehicles of speech-acts" turn out to be necessary notions—practically necessary notions-- even though not primitive. "It may be questioned," Brandom says, "whether the concept 'particular object' can be made intelligible without appeal to the concept 'singular term'." (p. 360). Anybody who accepts Sellars' psychological nominalism—the doctrine that all awareness is a linguistic affair—will indeed question that claim. Sellarsians, like Wittgensteinians, think that the fact that people know how to use certain expressions is, in philosophy through not in science, the ultimate explanans. Only if Brandom can explain what it is to use a singular term without reference to the notions of name and bearer-of-name, will he have explained what it is to take oneself to be talking about objects. Further, if he can explain why singular terms are a practical necessity for sapience, he will have explained why giving reasons requires that latter ability.

**Brandom's explanation of what a singular term is entirely by reference to the role of a portion of a sentence (a "subsential" expression) in determining the permitted inferential moves made with that sentence. Singular terms, he says, "are grouped into equivalence-classes by the good substitution inferences in which they are materially involved, while predicates are grouped into reflexive, transitive, asymmetric structures or families." (p. 372) The idea is that to know how to use a singular term is to know which other singular terms can be substituted for it in a sentence while retaining the inferential force of the sentence. Whereas it is "a necessary condition for identifying some subsential expression-kind as predicates that expressions of that kind be materially involved in some asymmetric substitution inferences,...it is a necessary condition for identifying some subsential expression-kind as singular terms that expressions of that kind be materially involved only in symmetric substitution inferences. (p. 376)**

**The crucial point here is "symmetrically". Roughly speaking, you tell a singular term from a predicate by the fact that you can substitute an alternative term for it without changing the inferential force of the sentence in which the substitution occurs. As Brandom goes on to explain :**

**“...some predicates are simply inferentially weaker than others, in the sense that everything that follows from the applicability of the weaker one follows also from appropriate application of ‘...walks’ form a proper subset of those of ‘...moves’. Singular terms, by contrast, are not materially involved in substitution inferences whose conclusions are inferentially weaker than their premises. To criteria of application but also criteria of identity, specifying which expressions are intersubstitutable with it.”**

**(p. 372)**

**The importance of this last sentence is clarified when Brandom remarks that**

**“It follows from the substitutional definition of the object-specifying equivalence classes of terms that it makes no sense to talk of languages in which there is just one singular term (pace ‘the Absolute’ as Bradley and Royce tried to use that expression) nor any objects that can in principle only be referred to in only one way.” (p. 375)**

**One consequence of this inferentialist approach to the identifying of objects is that Wittgenstein’s private-language argument and his critique of ostensive definition turn out to be built into the very idea of**

**“object”. You cannot, Brandom is saying, identify an object merely as “that very thing there” or as “that very quality you are experiencing now” or “the sensation I had then”. A fortiori, you cannot say that “I know there is such a thing as X because I experienced it”, unless you can say a lot more about X than just that.**

**But being able to say a lot more about X does not mean that your claim to knowledge will or should be granted by your peers. It will not be granted unless it is part of the social practice of your community that non-inferential reports of the presence of X by people who can say a lot about X’s, and who therefore can be viewed as understanding the meaning of ‘X’ are reliable.**

**In an early article on Heidegger, Brandom interpreted that philosopher’s doctrine of the priority of the *Zuhanden* to the *Vorhanden*—of knowing-how to knowing-that, roughly speaking, as illustrated by the fact that it is a social decision what matters are left up to something other than social decision. The two examples he gave are cases in which individual members of society are given authority (as in the case of reports of being in pain or seeming to see something red) and cases in which non-human things are given authority (as in the case of an instrument—a thermometer or a spectroscope, for example--having the**

authority to decide what statements about some physical fact are to be taken as true).

This Sellarsian and Wittgensteinian view of the nature of appeals to experience means that such appeals cannot be used to settle controversial—e.g., religious or philosophical—questions. Two obvious examples of values of “X” for which people are tempted to make this sort of conversation-stopping appeal are “God” and “consciousness”. I shall come back to God below, but for the moment I shall simply note the relevance of psychological nominalism to the controversy between philosophers of mind who (like Dennett) pooh-pooh the idea of “raw feels” and “qualia” and those (like Nagel and McGinn) who insist that we all know perfectly well what consciousness and pain are because we know what it is like to be conscious and to be in pain.

The latter philosophers agree that “pain” could be given a place in the language-game of zombies or robots simply by virtue of its role in explaining the familiar correlations between, for example, hot stoves with avoidance behavior. But these philosophers presumably think that zombies and robots would have no use for the expression “what it is like to be in pain”. To philosophers who hold this view, the only possible explanation of Dennett’s claim not to understand what this term could

mean is either sheer disingenuous perversity or the regrettable fact that Dennett is himself a zombie, and therefore disqualified from taking part in a discussion of consciousness.

On Brandom's account of the matter, however, things are not so simple. Carrying through on Wittgenstein's no-private-language and Davidson's "no untranslatable language" arguments, Brandom would say that the zombies and the robots are in just as good a position to use "what it is like to be in pain" as they are to use "pain". For they too can learn how to play the language-game played by Nagel and McGinn, a game which contains a lot of expressions which can be substituted for "what it is like to be pain". These include "pain from a first-person point of view", "the immediate sensation of pain", "the sheer awfulness of pain", "what pre-linguistic infants and language-users who touch hot stoves have in common, over and above their behavior and their neurological state", and the like. The expression "what it is like to be in pain" does not just hang there in a linguistic void; it is buttressed by dozens of other equivalent expressions. If it were not so buttressed, nobody would know how to use it.

The moral of all this is that Dennett and others who are dubious about the notion of "consciousness" should not claim not to be able to

understand the expression ‘what it is like to be in pain’. They should rather say that it and the rest of the expressions which go to form the relevant equivalence-class, the one that permits this singular term to have a use in the social practice of debates between philosophers of mind, should no longer be used. More generally, questions about what exists should never be debated in terms of the “meaninglessness” of terms, for a philosopher who really thought a term meaningless would not be able to understand the issue being debated.. They should, in most of the cases that philosophers discuss, be debated by reference to the social utility of an entire equivalence-class of mutually supporting expressions. They are always, to use a slogan which I shall enlarge upon below, questions of cultural politics.

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Before applying this claim about the irrelevance of appeals to experience to the case of God-talk, I shall try to make it clearer and more plausible by turning to Brandom’s discussion of the nature of existence—a large topic which he deals with in a rather brief excursus in the middle of chapter 7 of MAKING IT EXPLICIT (pp. 440ff).

**Brandom starts out by agreeing with Kant that existence is not a predicate, but his way of making this point is very different than Kant's. Kant distinguished between "logical" notions such as "thing" and "is identical with", which apply to both the phenomenal and the noumenal, and categories of the understanding such as "substance" and "cause" which apply only to the former. Brandom thinks that both Kant (and later Frege) erred by thinking of "thing" and "object" as what he calls "genuine sortals", and also by thinking of identity as a property which can be attributed to things without specification of the sorts to which they belong. Doing so lends aid and comfort to the bad that things come in two varieties—the existent and the non-existent—and thus to the idea that one ought to be able to figure out what all the existent things have in common. It also encourages the idea that the sentence "everything is identical with itself" is more than what Wittgenstein said it was—a splendid example of a completely useless proposition. (PI, paragraph 216).**

**To get rid of these bad beliefs, Brandom thinks, he thinks, we have to take "thing" as always short for "thing of a certain kind" and "identical with" as always short for "identical in respect of....with". He thinks that Frege should have seen quantifiers as coming with sortal**

restrictions on the admissible term substituends. For quantifiers quantify, they specify, at least in general terms, how many, and how many there are depends (as Frege's remarks about playing cards [remarks in which Frege says that it matters whether it is packs, or cards, or honours that are being counted] indicate), on what one is counting—on the sortal used to identify and individuate them. (p. 439)

Whereas Kant's discussion of existence takes for granted that it comes in two sorts—the generic sort had both by pencils and God and the more specific sense had only by the pencils and their fellow-occupants of space and time. Brandom says that it comes in many sorts, as many as there are sets of what he calls canonical designators. For him, an existential commitment—a belief that something of a certain description exists—is “a particular quantificational commitment in which the vindicating commitments that determine its content are restricted to canonical designators”. (p. 443)

This dark saying can only be unpacked in the way Brandom himself unpacks it, by giving examples. He gives three: numerical, physical, and fictional existence. To show that a natural number of a certain description (e.g., the smallest natural number such that every larger one is the sum of distinct primes of the form  $4n+1$ ) exists is to

identify it with one of the designators in the series “1, 2...etc” (in the example mentioned, to identify it with 121). The numerals are the canonical designators in this area of logical space, and so the question of their existence does not arise. Their referents are always already existent, so to speak.

Analogously, the characters mentioned by name in Doyle’s stories about Holmes, and the characters whose existence is entailed by what is said in those stories, function as canonical designators presupposed by such questions as “Does Holmes’ housekeeper exist?” and “Does Holmes’ fairy godmother exist”. To say that the former exists is to identify her with Mrs. Hudson, and to say that the latter does not exist is to confess our inability to identify her with somebody mentioned in the stories or whose existence is entailed by the stories (as is that of Mrs. Hudson’s spouse, for example).

The only sort of existence that Kant thought we could discuss intelligibly was physical existence, and in this area of logical space the canonical designators are the same ones Kant implicitly describes. “The analog in the case of physical existence of the structured address space defined by the successor numerals,” Brandom says, “is the structured address space defined by egocentric spatiotemporal coordinate

descriptions.” (p. 445) To say that okapis exist and unicorns do not is to say that one can go from where one is now to a place on those coordinates and find an okapi, but cannot go to such a place and find a unicorn--just as to say that the largest prime between 20 and 30 exists but that the square root of  $-1$  is merely imaginary is to say that one can find the one, but not the other, in the sequence of numerals.

In Kant’s system, God inhabits logical space but not empirical, physical, space. So, Kant thought, the question of the existence of God is beyond our knowledge, for knowledge of existence is co-extensive with knowledge of physical existence; but it is somehow not beyond the reach of moral faith. For Brandom, however, the matter is more complicated. We have lots of logical spaces at our disposal, and canonical designators are in place for many of those spaces. Physical existence might have been good enough for God-talk of the sort spoken by Homer or by Moses, and perhaps even by Dante, who can (just barely) be imagined taking the question “Are the heavens empty, or is actually God up there where the Paradiso says he is?” seriously. But if we are talking about a God without parts, passions or location, things are otherwise.

Theologians such as Tillich are right in saying that if God is Being-as-such, and not a being among others, then the attempt to identify him with one of a list of always already present canonical designators is hopeless. Tillich rightly concluded that “Does God exist?” is a bad question—as bad, to revert to the analogy I was pursuing earlier, as “Is there really something it is like to be conscious?” or “Do the numerals denote real things?” There is no problem about giving either “what it is like to be conscious” or “God, a being without parts or passions” a place in a language-game. We have had lots of experience watching both games being played. But in neither case is there much point in raising questions about existence, because there is no neutral logical space within which discussion can proceed between people inclined to deny and people inclined to affirm existence of the relevant entity.

In this respect, the question “Does God exist?” is like the questions “Do spatio-temporal objects exist?” and “Do numbers exist?”. There is no way to discuss the latter questions, because there are no non-local canonical designators by reference to which they could be answered. Given a set of canonical designators whose existence goes unquestioned—a set of such as the points on the egocentric coordinate system of spatio-temporal locations, or the numerals—existence becomes discussable. But

**“existent thing”, a universal as opposed to a local sortal, is just for that reason only a pseudo-sortal. The very idea of a universal sortal is incoherent, for to be a sortal is to come with a set of canonical designators in tow.**

**Brandomian inferentialist semantics thus seems to have landed us back in a all too familiar dialectical quandary. Looking at the question of the existence of God through Brandom’s spectacles seems merely to leave us reiterating the lowest common doctrinal denominator of negative theology, Kant and Tillich—of all the thinkers who say that God’s existence is not a proper question. But I think this conclusion would be over-hasty. Brandom’s non-representationalist approach to language and mind suggests a way of thinking about the place of religion in culture that is interestingly different from those of his predecessors.**

**Those predecessors thought that there was a big philosophical distinction to be made between our ordinary logical space (or spaces) and the very special one needed to talk about something as special as God. For Tillich, it is important to distinguish between literal and symbolic truth, just as for Heidegger it is important to draw one between the ontic and the ontological. For Kant it is important to distinguish between Verstand and Vernunft, to draw a firm line between the cognitive and the**

**non-cognitive of the sort later redrawn more harshly and invidiously by Carnap. For the negative theologians, the use of a string of negations (neti, neti...) is a unique kind of discourse appropriate for a unique sort of object. All these thinkers want to say: God has a special status, so talking about him has to be very different than talking about anything else.**

**For Brandom, to say that the existence of the God of orthodox monotheism is undiscussable is like saying that the existence of experiences of what something is like is undiscussable, or like saying that the existence of numbers (as opposed to the existence of some number of a particular description) is undiscussable. Undiscussability is not a matter of special status, but simply of sociological fact. No canonical designators in the background, no possibility of discussing existence. It is the absence of the social practice of listing canonical designators, not the peculiar nature of the object whose existence is undiscussable, that matters. That absence is why the controversy between Dennett and Nagel, or that between realists and nominalists discussing the status of universals, can never get beyond table-pounding on both sides. It is why we might suspect that the controversy between theists and atheists cannot either.**

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**This point may be clearer if we contrast the Hesiodic pantheon with monotheism. Hesiod's stories and Conan Doyle's are on a par, inasmuch as that we can extract from both lists of canonical designators, and thus justify such statements as "The daughter of Uranus and Aphrodite does not exist" and "Mycroft's wife does not exist." We might be able to do the same with the New Testament and thereby justify the statement "A Fourth Person of the Trinity does not exist, though the Third does". But if we are strict unitarian monothesists, and say that God can only be picked out as the eminent instance of those fine old pseudo-sortals unum, verum, bonum, ens, aliquid, and so on, we are stuck. God's uniqueness, like the uniqueness of what is like to be conscious, condemns his existence to undiscussability.**

**Whereas his predecessors say "we have to talk in non-ordinary ways about God because God has a special kind of existence, or is is so special", Brandom says that there is no such thing as a certain kind of object demanding a certain kind of language. All there is are the presence or absence of sociological facts—of logical spaces that enable us to discuss the existence of certain sorts of objects. Like Wittgenstein, Brandom is prepared to say that anything has a sense if you give it a sense. More consistently than Wittgenstein, he can follow up on this**

remark by saying that whatever philosophy is, it is not (pace Kant. the Tractatus, Carnap, and some misbegotten passages in Philosophical Investigations) the detection of nonsense. The language-game played with the transcendental terms, and the one played by philosophers of mind who talk about the independence of qualitative experience from behavior, is as coherent as that played with numbers or physical objects. But the coherence of talk about X does not guarantee the discussability of the existence of X. Talk about numbers is ideally coherent, but this coherence does not help us discuss the question of whether the numerals denote real things.

To put this another way: you cannot step back from a language-game and ask “Are we talking about anything real”, unless you can give a sense to “anything real” by recourse to a “background” set of canonical designators. We can do this in the case of Doyle’s stories by taking as our canonical designators, for example, all and only the names found on the tax rolls of the Borough of Marylebone, documents that list all the occupants of Baker Street at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Against that background, Holmes counts as a fictional character, as does Mrs. Hudson’s spouse. But what similar background can we find which would let us argue that numerals or physical objects are fictional?

**If you go along with Brandom on these points, you will have to conclude that the question of whether to take the persons described in Hesiod, or Conan Doyle, or the New Testament, or the numerals, or spatial-temporal locations, “seriously” cannot be settled by asking whether these various objects really exist. The only way to discuss questions about what canonical designators to take seriously is to discuss which sociological facts we would like to obtain, which social practices we would like to continue and which to abandon, which we should bring into existence and which we should allow to lapse.**

**Brandom’s favorite philosopher is Hegel, and in this area the most relevant difference between Kant and Hegel is that Hegel does not think philosophy can rise above the social practices of its time and judge their desirability by reference to something that is not itself an alternative social practice (past or future, real or imagined). For Hegel as for Brandom, there are no norms which are not the norms of some social practice. So when asked “Are these desirable norms?” or “Is this a good social practice?” all either can do is ask either “By reference to what encompassing social practice or we to judge desirability?” or, more usefully, “By comparison to the norms of what alternative social practice?” Unlike philosophers who see language and thought as**

**instruments to get a job done (e.g., finding out what there really is)**

**Brandom agrees with Hegel that to see either in this way is to recreate the skeptical problematic which is the inevitable outcome of a representationalist starting-point for philosophical reflection.**

**Early in the Introduction to THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT, there is a passage that anticipates what James said in “The Will to Believe” about Clifford—namely that Clifford was willing to sacrifice too much possible truth in order to be certain that he would never fall into error. Hegel wrote as follows:**

**...if the fear of falling into error sets up a mistrust of Science, which in the absence of such scruples gets on with the work itself, and actually cognizes something, it is hard to see why we should not turn round and mistrust this very mistrust. Should this fear takes something—a great deal in fact—for granted as truth, supporting its scruples and inferences on what is itself in need of prior scrutiny to see if it is true. To be specific, it takes for granted certain ideas about cognition as an instrument and as a medium, and assumes that there is a difference between ourselves and this cognition. Above all, it presupposes that the Absolute stands**

**on one side and cognition on the other, independent and separated from it, and yet is something real; or in other words, it presupposes that cognition which, since it is excluded from the Absolute, is surely outside of the truth as well, is nevertheless true, an assumption whereby what calls itself fear of error reveals itself rather as fear of the truth.**

**Since Brandom is now writing a commentary on the PHENOMENOLOGY, and will doubtless supply his own gloss on this passage, I perhaps should not try to anticipate him. But I think it fairly safe to say that in place of the words “Science” and “cognition” in Hegel’s text Brandom would be inclined to put “conversation”, This is suggested by one of the few unargued dicta to be found in MAKING IT EXPLICIT, a dictum which is also of my favorite sentences in that book: “Conversation is the great good for discursive creatures”. (p. 644)**

**If one makes this substitution, one will construe Hegel as saying that we should not think that there is a difference between ourselves and the discursive practices in which we are engaged, and that we should not think that those practices are a means to some end, nor that they are a medium of representation used to get something right. A fortiori, we should not think that there is a goal of inquiry (call it “the Absolute”)**

**which is what it is apart from those practices, and fore-knowledge of which can help us decide which practices to have.**

**We should rather, as Hegel says elsewhere, be content to think of our philosophizing as our time (that is to say, our present discursive practices) held in thought (that is to say, compared to alternative past or proposed practices). We should stop trying to put our discursive practices within a larger context, one which forms the background of all possible social practices and which contains a list of background designators which delimit the range of the existent once and for all. If there were such a context, it would of course be the proper object of study of an expert culture charged with determining the future direction of the Conversation of Humankind. But there is no such context, and we should stop imagining that there will ever be such an expert culture.**

.....

**I said earlier that the existence of God should be viewed as a question of cultural politics. Now I want briefly to develop this point. As I see it, the question of whether to keep on talking about God, whether to keep that logical space open breaks down into a series of sub-questions. The first of these is “Have I the right to practice whatever form of religious devotion I please even though, because there is no social**

**practice that legitimizes inferences from or to the sentences that I employ in this devotional practice, I cannot make sense of this practice to my fellow humans?**

**I think James gave the right answer to this question, namely “Sure”. People have the same right to this sort of private devotion as they do to write poems or paint pictures that nobody else can make any sense out of. But another question arises naturally from this answer to the first. It is: “Have I the right to join with others who have learned about my form of religious devotion, develop a discursive practice around these devotional practices, and thereby create a church?”**

**Mill had the right answer to that one, namely “Sure, if the existence of your church does nothing to harm, or limit the freedom, of non-members?” James would, I think, have said the same. But their answer immediately suggests the following bristling bundle of further questions: “Does the existence of churches indirectly harm others by creating a cultural environment in which such desirable ends as social justice and freedom of inquiry are hard to pursue? Does the persistence of God-talk act as a drag on social progress? If so, can this drag be eliminated by privatizing religion, getting rid of the churches and letting people be religious on their own, though not in groups? If so, can we get**

**rid of churches without violating the very rights we want to protect? Can we find room for exclusivist religious congregations within a democratic society, and if so, how?"**

**Each of these latter questions has been vigorously debated from the time of Jefferson to our own current presidential campaign. I have nothing new to say about any of them. All I want to claim is that they are more fruitful questions than questions about the nature of God or of our knowledge of him. They are the questions which remain once we dismiss appeals to religious experience as mere table-pounding, and have come to regard natural theology (at least when it comes to orthodox unitarian monotheism) as pointless. . We shall dismiss religious experience if we follow Wittgenstein, Sellars and Brandom in thinking that there is no intermediary called "what the experience was really like" in between the altered state of the nervous system induced at the time of the claimed experience and the discursive commitments undertaken by a member of a language-using community that can be traced to that alteration. We shall dismiss natural theology if we see the undiscussability of God's existence not as a testimony to his superior status but as a consequence of the attempt to give him that status. These inferentialist philosophers of mind and language help us see why neither appeals to experience nor**

**appeals to what is really out there are of any use in deciding what to talk about.**

**Richard Rorty**

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