

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 19th 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.

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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.

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