

## The “Cautionary” Use of the Concept of Experience

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### 1. Uses of the Notion of Truth

My discussion is centered on the concept of experience and its relevance for the truth of assertions. I move from the uses of the notion of truth described by Richard Rorty to show the plausibility of a “cautionary” use of the notion of experience. According to this use, philosophy ought to abandon notions such as those of “intrinsic nature of reality” or “correspondence with reality”. If we take this idea seriously I think that our task is also to change the notion of “experience” because our analysis is not devoted to grasp the objective representation of reality from the part of the subject of knowledge. Thus experience ought to be intended in a pragmatic sense namely by reference to the line of thought that goes from Dewey to Sellars and Brandom. I argue for a normative concept of experience as that process structured by the social and discursive game of giving and asking for reasons. In his essay *Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth*, Rorty moves from the slogan introduced by Donald Davidson “correspondence without confrontation” which alludes to his refusal of what he calls the “dualism of scheme and content” i.e. the idea that something like mind or language can bear some relations such as “fitting” or “organizing” to the world. Rorty sees Davidson’s vicinity to Quine and Quine’s vicinity to Dewey. Nevertheless, he gives plausible argument for not interpreting Davidson’s thought as representative of the pragmatist tradition. The pragmatist thought rules out the classical “explanatory” use of the notion of truth and introduces three alternative uses:

1. an “endorsing” use such as that proposed by William James whereas “True “ must mean something like “justifiable”;
2. a cautionary use which resembles Peirce’s definition of belief “Your belief that S is perfectly justified, but perhaps not true” – reminding ourselves that justification is

relative to, and no better than, the beliefs cited as grounds for S, and that such justification is no guarantee that things will go well if we take S as a “rule for action”;

3. a “disquotational” use: to say metalinguistic things of the form “S” is true iff...

In footnote seven Rorty writes:

There is much to be said about the relations between these three uses, but I shall not try to say it here. The best attempt to do so which I have seen is found in an unpublished paper by Robert Brandom called “Truth Talk”. Brandom shows how the “primitive pragmatism” which tries to define truth as assertibility is defeated by the use of “true” in such contexts as the antecedents of conditionals. But he then suggests a way of developing a sophisticated pragmatism, which, invoking Frege and the Grover-Camp-Belnap prosentential theory of truth, saves Dewey’s intentions. Brandom not only shows how “anaphoric or prosentential theories” can, as he says “retain the fundamental anti-descriptivist thrust of the pragmatist position, while broadening it into account also for embedded uses on which primitive pragmatism founders”, but suggests ways of reconciling those theories with Davidsonian disquotationalism (Rorty 1986).

I would introduce the thesis that deflationism as Brandom intends it implies a cautionary use of the concept of experience. Brandom’s deflationism is based on the linguistic use of the notion of “truth” and “reference” which does not intend to conflate linguistic items with extralinguistic items. The Fregean echo of this theoretical option is still present in the Brandomian option for the “anaphoric” account of truth and reference:

For present purposes it suffices to say that treating tokens of the type (the referent of the expression ‘Leibniz’ as anaphorically dependent on tokens of the type (Leibniz) commits one to the propriety of the intersubstitution that would be made explicit by endorsement of the assertible identity

Leibniz is (=) the referent of the expression ‘Leibniz’

And does not commit one to the propriety of the intersubstitution that would be

made explicit by endorsement of the assertible identity

Leibniz is (=) the expression ‘Leibniz’ (Brandom 1994: p. 325).

Facts are true claims not because claims as “snow is white” possess semantic contents under robust truth conditions; at the same time, deflationism could avoid circularity if does not reduce claims to nonsemantic facts. A “relaxed” deflationary view could say that whatever is contentful will, in consequence, have truth condition; this thesis implies however the rejection of truth conditions as part of the explanation of propositional contentfulness.

## 2. The Role of Causality

The role of logic becomes “expressive” rather than “explanatory”. The role of “pragmatics” acquires its relevance for a plausible interpretation of the notion of truth while not “losing the world”:

Words form a distinct and largely independent realm within the world – in this sense not only that the nonlinguistic facts could be largely what they are even if the specifically linguistic facts (thought of as a class of facts about words) were quite different, but also in the sense that the words – as noises, marks and so on – could be largely what they are, even if nonlinguistic facts were quite different. But discursive practices as here conceived do not stand apart from the rest of the world in this way. The nonlinguistic facts could be largely what they are, even if our discursive practices were quite different (or absent entirely), for what claims are true does not depend on anyone’s claiming of them. But our discursive practices could not be what they are if nonlinguistic facts were different (Brandom 1994: p. 331).

Brandom maintains a form of substitutional holism according to which mastery of the use of one expression as a singular term involves mastery of the use of many: the substitutional holism reflects the inferential holism according to which mastery of the use of one expression as a sentence (even in case of noninferential reports) involves

mastery of the use of many. He appeals to the notion of “triangulation” to explain the inferential structure of conceptual contents but he rejects the approaches to triangulation which are grounded on causality. This is the main argument against naturalistic accounts. He moves from a popular argument proposed by Donald Davidson:

Why say the stimulus is the ringing of the bell? Why not the motion of the air close to the ears of the dog – or even the stimulation of its nerve endings? Certainly if the air were made to vibrate in just the way the bell makes it vibrate it would make no difference to the behavior of the dog. And if the right nerve endings were activated in the right way, there still would be no difference (Brandom 1994: footnote 42).

Brandom rejects the “proximal” theory of stimuli (Davidson) as it does not pick up objects but stimuli which are at the sensory surfaces or within the nervous system of the responding organism: they are states of the responding organism. Let us briefly refer to an insightful criticism to Davidson’s triangulation. James Swindler refuses the necessity of the existence of a public object for speakers and interpreters beliefs to be “about” and speaker and interpreter must be in mutual communication about that public object. An immediate conclusion of this thesis is that both public and social realms are necessary conditions for interpretation and moreover for there are beliefs at all. A second consequence is the exclusion of massive disagreement (i.e. massively false beliefs) between speaker and interpreter. Disagreement seems to presuppose the knowledge of the things we are talking about. According to Swindler:

In the first place, the triangulation scenario is supposed to make it perspicuous why it is impossible for a speaker to have any belief at all prior to being interpreted. But clearly the causal lines run to wrong way for this point. My interpreting you cannot by itself cause you to have intentional states. Second, if we include in the scenario the stipulation that the agents are mutual interpreters, we seem to have added a relation that was crucially left out of the situation of radical interpretation, viz. the speakers interpreting of his interpreter. Radical interpretation is radical precisely because the agents cannot communicate, i.e.,

they have no common language. It is supposed to be a task for the interpreter to discover the speakers' beliefs but, if they already share a mutually interpretable language, is not much of a task. Third, let us look again at the basic argument. The speaker needs the concept of truth in order to have beliefs, for he must understand that his beliefs might be right or wrong. This purportedly requires a public world, which in turn requires a social world (one in which interpretation actually occurs). But again, there appears a great lacuna in the argument. Why must interpretation by another person occur for one to have beliefs? Why must one be interpreted in order to understand the distinction between getting one's beliefs right and getting them wrong? Why must one be in agreement with another to have any beliefs at all? (Swindler 1991: pp 11-12).

It seems more plausible to appeal to a distal strategy that is based on the notion of "triangulation". Dretske for example chooses a triangulation strategy that picks out the distal stimulus by looking at the intersection of two distinct "flows of information" (or causal chains of reliably covarying event-types) that reliably culminate in responses of the same type. For example, consider a thermostat that keeps the temperature of a room within a certain range by turning a furnace on and off. If the thermostat can measure temperature for instance only by the bending of a bimetallic strip until it touches either the left electrical contact (too cold) or the right one (too warm) it is difficult to determine whether the thermostat is responding to the temperature of the room or to the temperature of the bimetallic strip or the curvature of the bimetallic strip or the closing of the circuit between the bimetallic strip and one or the other of the contacts. The entitlement to a right description can be gained if we provide another causal route to the same response. If the thermostat has a second sensor namely a column of mercury supporting a float with an electric contact that completes one circuit to turn the furnace on whenever the float is below one point (too cold) and turn it off whenever the float is above another point (too warm), then the system has two ways of responding to the change of temperature in the room. In this case the reliability of the description is due to the intersection of the two together considered routes in two places: upstream at the change of temperature in a room and downstream in the response of turning the furnace on or off. According to Brandom, in this case it is difficult to establish whether what is responded is a proximal stimulus

or a *disjunctive* one. The system turns on the furnace just in case *either* the temperature of the bimetallic strip is low enough or that of the mercury column is low enough, or alternatively, in case the curvature of the bimetallic strip is far enough to the left *or* the mercury column is short enough. The final conclusion of this example is that mere differential responsiveness is not sufficient for identifying the responses in question as application of *concepts*. The triangulation strategy requires a clarification of the conceptual as the *inferential* role played by the responses that stimuli differentially elicit. Let's use the Quinean example of the word "gavagai" which corresponds to the word a speaker elicits to respond to the presence of rabbits. Let us suppose that a man elicits the word rabbit in the presence of a distinctive rabbit flies or that the visual cue he is using, as determine by a physiologist of perception, is a glimpse of the fluff around the tail of the rabbit. How can we establish whether he is reporting the presence of the rabbit flies or of the fluffy tail instead of the presence of a rabbit? This possibility depends on the "inferential" role of the response "gavagai" and not on reliable responsive dispositions or on the causal chain of covarying events that culminates in the response "gavagai". The inferential role of the response "gavagai" includes, for instance, the commitment to the claim that what is reported can fly; or whether the claim expressed by "gavagai" is incompatible with further characterization of the item reported as flying. In this sense, causal triangulation given by the intersecting of causal chains associated with reliable differential responsive dispositions must be supplemented by inferential triangulation associated with different concepts. According to Brandom, the minimal condition on singular reference that has been extracted from Frege amounts to the demand that objects be picked out by substitutional triangulation. In this sense, taking it that an expression is being used to pick out an object is taking it that that same object could be picked out in some other way – that some commitment-preserving substitutions involving that expression are in order:

Substitutional commitments are compound inferential commitments, corresponding to patterns of simple inferential commitments. Substitutional articulation is a kind of inferential articulation, and substitutional triangulation is a kind of inferential triangulation. (...) The significance of causal triangulation is

to be understood in terms of the supporting role it can play in this sort of substitution-inferential triangulation. It cannot by itself provide an analysis of picking out objects. And as Frege's discussion of picking out abstract objects shows clearly, however important a role it plays in the way perceivable objects are given to us, causal triangulation is not even a necessary component of the substitution-inferential triangulation that is what our cognitive grip on objects in general consists in (Brandom 1994: p. 431).

### 3. A "Normative" Concept of Experience

As we noticed, deflationism in its relaxed interpretation involves reference in an indirect way namely through a complex substitutional mechanism that reveals itself in the game of giving and asking for reasons. In this context, the concept of experience acquires its "cautionary" use. The way in which we can intend the notion of experience reflects some ideas of Dewey: for instance the fact that knowledge is not absolute, immutable and eternal so that we can say that a claim is true only until there is negative evidence sufficient to disconfirm the hypothesis. This "cautionary" vision of knowledge is extended to the social environment and implies a flexible "identity" characterized by cooperation and rational tolerance for diverse points of view. In chapter six of *Between Saying & Doing* Brandom underscores some representative passages from Dewey's late *Experience and Nature* and alludes to the necessity of providing a useful notion of experience. Indeed, Brandom does not use the word experience in his works because he thinks that inferentialism does not need this form of knowledge. However, it is possible to distinguish between a narrow form of experience as the one suggested by empiricism and a larger one which implies the learning of the use of concepts so that it bridges the gap between mind and world (as James recalls us). The scorekeeping model replaces the Kantian notion of transcendental apperception with a kind of synthesis based on incompatibility relations: «In drawing inferences and "repelling" incompatibilities, one is taking oneself to stand in representational relations to objects that one is talking about. A commitment to A's being a dog does not entail a commitment to B's being a mammal. But it does entail a commitment to A's being a mammal. Drawing the

inference from a dog-judgment to a mammal-judgment is taking it that the two judgments represent one and the same object. Again, the judgment that A is a dog is not incompatible with the judgment that B is a fox. It is incompatible with the judgment that A is a fox. Taking a dog-judgment to be incompatible with a fox-judgment is taking them to refer to or represent an object, the one object to which incompatible properties are being attributed by the two claims: The normative rational unity of apperception is a synthesis that expands commitments inferentially, noting and repairing incompatibilities. In this sense, one's commitments become reasons for and against other commitments; so the rational critical responsibility implicit in taking incompatible commitments obliges one to do something, to update one's commitment so as to eliminate the incompatibility. Modal incompatibility relates to states of affairs and properties of objects that are incompatible with others and presupposes the world as independent of the attitudes of the knowing-and-acting subjects. Normative incompatibility is related to discursive practices on the side of the knowing-and-acting subjects: the agent cannot be entitled to incompatible doxastic or practical commitments. If one finds himself in this situation he is obliged to rectify or repair the incompatibility. In this context, I would refer again to an interesting argument introduced by Swindler against the Davidsonian's "omniscient interpreter". What Swindler tells us about the imaginary dialectic between the Cartesian demon and the speaker is compatible with a cautionary use of the concept of experience:

Davidson's omniscient interpreter argument, like Wittgenstein's rejection of a private language, entails that the demon argument is unintelligible. But the relation Descartes evidently intends for the demon's beliefs (not its activity) to stand into mine is simply that, contrary to Davidson's claims, the demon's belief set, although agreeing with mine in no particular, is intelligible to me just because it is necessary but also sufficient condition on the possibility of having a belief that one be able to distinguish between affirmation and denial of the content of that belief, and the demon, by hypothesis, simply believes the negation of whatever I believe. Nor should the irony of Davidson's interpretation of Descartes thought experiment escape us. While, in the scenario, the demon is supposed to be effectively omniscient, the reason is precisely to *guarantee* that one beliefs might all be false, rather than, as in the omniscient interpreter

argument, to guarantee that most of them have to be true (Swindler 1991: p. 15).

I think that to stress on a normative concept of experience is relevant to grasp the sense in which we can conceive rational rectification and personal autonomy. Autonomy could be considered as a capacity that develops in the game of giving and asking for reasons as the game in which we make experience of our common objective and social worlds (Giovagnoli 2008, 2009). This common experience has a sense when it is intended both as learning and “growth of understanding”. The endorsement of commitments in the “social” space of reasons is the fundamental condition for an agent to be autonomous. The endorsement is not only “rational” (as performance of correct material inferences), but also “normative”, as it implies the “taking responsibility” to justify the corresponding actions. According to Bransen, the fundamental condition for an agent to be autonomous is therefore the “discerning” of commitments:

Discerning commitments is not the same as making them explicit, but in making commitments explicit one is likely to improve the chance of discerning commitments one is or is not endorsing, or is and is not entitled to. In preferring to speak of “discerning” I am to highlight the fact that understanding is a dynamic and relative capacity, always a matter of growth (or decline). The idea is simple enough: a child who says for example the same things about movements made by cars, rocks rolling down hills, pets, friends, and strangers walking down the street lacks the discriminative capacity to distinguish between, among many other things, animate and inanimate objects. Making explicit to the child what she is committing herself to could help the child in discerning the difference between the commitments that come along with the concept of the animate and the commitments that come along with the concept of the inanimate. Being able to discern these commitments – i.e. being able to make a longer list of separate commitments available in the game – makes one better at playing the game. Thus, an important variety of growth of understanding consists in the improvement of one’s capacity to discern commitments (Bransen 2002: p. 188).

Beyond this interesting point on the growing of knowledge I want to focus on another

dimension that is fundamental for a normative concept of experience. In the game of giving and asking for reasons we do not only learn to discern commitments but we reinforce our capacity for expressing our opinions through the performances of fundamental speech acts. In my view our capacity for autonomy requires a consideration of the expressive rationality we develop in the game of giving and asking for reason. Expressive rationality becomes evident in the performances of assertion, refusal, query and challenge which show the force attached to the propositional content structured by certain discernable commitments.

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