Does language have a downtown? Wittgenstein, Brandom, and the game of "giving and asking for reasons"

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ABSTRACT

Wittgenstein's *Investigations* proposed an egalitarian view about language games, emphasizing their plurality ("language has no downtown"). Uses of words depend on the game one is playing, and may change when playing another. Furthermore, there is no privileged game dictating the rules for the others: games are as many as purposes. This view is pluralist and egalitarian, but it says little about the connection between meaning and use, and about how a set of rules is responsible for them in practice.

Brandom's *Making It Explicit* attempted a straightforward answer to these questions, by developing Wittgensteinian insights: the primacy of social practice over meanings; the idea that meaning is use; the idea of rule–following to understand participation in social practices. Nonetheless, Brandom defended a non–Wittgensteinian conception of discursive practice: language has a "downtown", the game of "giving and asking for reasons". This is the idea of a normative structure of language, consisting of advancing claims and drawing inferences. By means of assertions, speakers undertake "commitments" that can be challenged/defended in terms of reasons (those successfully justified can gain "entitlement"). This game is not one among many: it is indispensable to the very idea of discursive practice.

In this paper, my aim will be that of exploring the main motivations and implications of both perspectives.

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Does language have a downtown? Wittgenstein, Brandom, and the game of "giving and asking for reasons"

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§1. Introduction

LANGUAGE GAMES ARE EXAMPLES of ordinary word use that Wittgenstein presents in *Philosophical Investigations* to attack and dismiss the pictorial or "representational" view of language and meaning that he proposed and defended with the *Tractatus Logico–Philosophicus.* These examples are contrived to show that language is not a tool or activity that performs just one task. Describing the facts of the world is one use of language, but it is just *one* among many others. In fact, with language we can ask questions, give directions, pray, count objects, swear, give orders, marry someone, and many other things. Wittgenstein puts great emphasis on this plurality of resources. The descriptive uses, furthermore, are not even central among these: all language games stand on a par.

Language games also played a fundamental role in the "pragmatist" route traced by Wittgenstein: speakers of a language must be understood as "participants in a practice". One's use of words depends on the language game one is playing, and it may change when playing a different game. For Wittgenstein, there is a fundamental connection between making moves in a language game and participating in a social practice. This connection highlights the normative character of such practices, in accordance with Wittgenstein's later theme of "rule–following": the proper participants in a practice are those who act according to certain rules; this holds also for linguistic practices, or language games. Yet, in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein proposes an egalitarian view of language games, emphasizing their plurality ("language has no downtown").[1] There is no privileged game dictating the rules for all the others; there are as many games as purposes. This view is both "pluralist" and

[1] Wittgenstein (1953). See especially §18.

"egalitarian", but it says little about the particular connection between meaning and use, or about how a set of rules is responsible for both in practice. The underlying reason for this, we will see, is Wittgenstein's so–called *quietist* attitude, his fundamental view that theorizing about such things is something we cannot do.[2]

A non–quietist approach towards theorizing characterizes the work of Robert Brandom. With his monumental *Making It Explicit,* he attempts a straightforward answer to questions concerning the nature of language and meaning by developing, in a constructive way, certain Wittgensteinian insights: the general primacy of social practices over meanings, looking to the use of words to understand their meanings, and the idea of understanding participation in social practices as rule–following. Despite his following these insights, Brandom defends a mainly non–Wittgensteinian conception of discursive practice. Language, for Brandom, has a "downtown", what he calls the game of "giving and asking for reasons". This is the idea of a normative structure of discursive practice, consisting in the activities of advancing claims and drawing inferences.

According to Brandom, the game of "making assertions" is also relevant to other games.[3] By means of assertions, speakers undertake "commitments" that can be challenged or defended in terms of reasons (with those successfully justified gaining "entitlement"). By asserting a statement with a certain content, a speaker undertakes implicit commitments to the appropriateness of the statement and of its consequences. These commitments can be made explicit, evaluated, and even challenged when needed. When a speaker successfully defends a commitment that has been challenged, by means of good reasons, she becomes entitled to the content of her claim.

Commitments and entitlements, as normative characterizations of the linguistic moves made by speakers within discursive practice, are particularly interesting philosophically because they are a relevant alternative to "truth" in evaluating the goodness of assertory moves. What actually decides, regarding

[2] The term "quietism" in connection with Wittgenstein's late philosophy was first used by Crispin Wright. See Wright (2001, p. 169). This is the idea that philosophy, in a fundamental sense, is not a theory. For a wider presentation see Macarthur (2017).

[3] The centrality of the game of assertion and the connected centrality of "judgment" as the unit of pragmatic significance should not be interpreted as a kind of "global descriptivism" as, for example, Ernst Michael Lange seems to do (Lange 2015, p. 261). According to Brandom, assertion is not explained in terms of "truth" or according to a "representational" model. His account of assertion, to the contrary, is neither truth–conditional nor representational. His inferentialism provides an expressivist alternative to such a reading; assertions are explained in terms of inferential "commitments" and as "moves" affecting the deontic statuses of speakers (see below).

being entitled or not to certain commitments, is not the "truth"[4] of the claims at stake; the explanatory notion used in this semantic framework is just that of inference —Sellars' "material inference", to be precise.[5] The asserted claims are appropriate when they are uttered in the "right circumstances" and when they entail the "right consequences". References to the circumstances and the consequences of application of a claim are the right sort of reasons for defending it or dismissing it, as is appropriate. This assertoric practice should not be understood as leaning towards a descriptivist conception of language. The fact that truth here does not work as an explanatory notion, together with the general idea that goodness of inference is not explained in terms of truth, constitutes a challenge to the representationalist conception of assertion. In fact, as we will see, Brandom endorses a weak anti–representationalism and a kind of expressivist perspective that conceives vocabularies as generally non–reducible to descriptivist accounts (representational vocabularies excluded). These points, taken together, are not only a basis for rejecting a strictly representational account of language; they are also the basis of a pragmatist type of "pluralism about vocabularies", in which different vocabularies have different expressive power.

On this basis, perhaps surprisingly and despite prima facie appearances to the contrary, I will conclude that Brandom's inegalitarian conception of language games as being governed by the game of giving and asking for reasons —let us call it the "downtown view"— is a more robust and principled philosophical pluralism than Wittgenstein's therapeutic and quietist egalitarian attitude. This is argued in two main steps. First, I argue that Brandom endorses a "pluralism of contents" with his nonrepresentational account of assertion (anti–representationalism) and a direct pluralism about vocabularies and their expressive powers (expressivism). Second, I argue for the negative view that Wittgenstein, qua theoretical quietist, would have rejected "philosophical" pluralism as a philosophical "thesis", despite his recognizing and embracing the plural nature of ordinary practices and games as a barrier against monist philosophical temptations (as was his earlier pictorial view in the *Tractatus*).

4 Brandom endorses a deflationary attitude towards the explanatory role of truth talk. See Brandom (1994, chap. 5).

5 Material inferences are those that are good not only on the basis of their logical form, but also on the non–logical concepts involved. For example, the inference from "Felix is a cat" to "Felix is a mammal" depends in an important way on the concepts "cat" and "mammal". See Brandom (1994, 2000). See also Sellars (1953). For a reconstruction of the genesis of Sellars' idea in Carnap, see Turbanti (2017, p. 71).

§ 2. Wittgenstein and the plurality of language games: therapeutic tools to escape from an image

The plurality of language games in Wittgenstein's *Investigations* is neither a flag nor a manifesto—and not only for Wittgenstein's philosophical contrariety to such things. It is more a piece of evidence of the limits and problems of his former descriptivist and pictorial conception of language. As presented in his *Tractatus*, this was the idea that language primarily "depicts" extra–linguistic facts, and that there is a fundamental isomorphic correspondence between language and reality in virtue of their sharing a common logical form—words represent, or depict, objects.

This pictorial conception promoted a descriptivist understanding of language: the usefulness, and the main point, of language was to say how things are in the extra–linguistic world. Furthermore, these descriptions were to work in a representational way: our statements directly correspond to facts.[6] The connection between language and reality depends on the *nominalist* idea that words and sentences (logical connectives aside) work as names, referring to their bearers. Just as names refer to objects, truth–functional combinations of names (and descriptive predicates) refer to extra–linguistic combinations of objects (and to their properties and relations). This, very roughly, is the main thesis of the *Tractatus*, which Wittgenstein later wanted to discredit and dismiss.

In the first paragraphs of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein gives examples showing how our ordinary practices often do not conform to such a representational conception of language. In §2, the workers communicating with utterances like "Slab!" cannot be understood as "representing", "depicting", or "describing" slabs—they do not mean anything like "this is a slab"—but rather they are giving a precise *order*: "bring me a slab!" They are "playing a different game". When one enters a store with a slip marked "five red apples", as in §1, there is a crucial difficulty in understanding it according to the denotational model—its meaning is not "these are five red apples". Words like "five" or "red" work differently because they are *used* differently. The word "five", for example, does not refer to a putative *thing* (say, the platonic entity 5).[7]

Wittgenstein's strategy puts a methodological focus on two main features: that we *use* language in many different, perhaps irreducible, ways; and that we participate in many different *practical activities*.[8] Language is a *plurality*, a

6 Wittgenstein (1922), see for example 2.1–2.13, 3.2, 3.21, 4.12.

7 Such considerations are usually connected with the so–called "placement problem". See below.

8 See for example §130 of the *Investigations*.

"toolbox" we use to participate in various practical activities, various language games. Wittgenstein uses language games systematically to emphasize the plurality of our linguistic activities as evidence against the former monist conception of language in which it is entirely devoted to describing the world. This pluralism, at least in the first part of the *Investigations*, has a mainly negative motivation: to deny the representational–denotational conception of language and to affirm a strong connection of human language with diverse practical activities.

Since, for the later Wittgenstein, philosophical "theorizing" makes little sense, these are not positive philosophical doctrines or recipes.[9] Pluralism and pragmatism are *therapies*—general strategies to dismiss an intuitive, but wrong and uncomfortable, philosophical conception of language—not attempts to promote a substantial philosophical alternative, to state official philosophical views. This means also that Wittgenstein is not, in general, defending pluralism *as* a philosophical claim. He is rather describing the plurality of human activities and defending it from representationalist philosophical "imperialism", as something that does violence both to our practice and to our understanding of language by reducing it to merely "representing how things are".

In this general context, Wittgenstein's egalitarian view of language games can be introduced. When Wittgenstein claims that the way we use words depends on the language game we are playing, and that different words belong to different games, he is not proposing a general rule like: *language games are on the same level* just as *different words are on the same level* or as *different practices are on the same level.* Neither is it a rule like: *language games are on the same level because privileging the descriptive use of language is ill–fated.* His egalitarianism about language games is a corollary of his appreciation of the plurality of practices, and it contrasts with the very idea of a philosophical view that gives meaning and order to language and practice from above —as the representationalism of the *Tractatus*, seeing language as "describing the facts", attempts to do. The egalitarian attitude of the *Investigations* takes a step back from such a questionable enterprise, not to defend a substantial philosophical thesis, but rather to promote a negative, therapeutic attitude toward the very idea of establishing such points based on general conceptions.[10]

9 See for example §128: "If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them". See also §124 and §§126–127. Furthermore, the proper job of philosophy is *describing* rather than explaining. See especially §109.

10 Here, the most famous passage expressing such attitudes is certainly §133: "[…] The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. — The one that gives

§ 3. Wittgenstein's pluralism and social normativity: the rules of the games

Another important dimension of plurality connected with language games is rule–following. According to Wittgenstein, when we play a game, we do so by following its rules. Language games are activities guided by norms. We are recognized as players of a particular game when we make the right moves and avoid making the wrong ones—and it is not enough simply to believe we are following the rules.[11] The fact that we are actually acting according to a certain rule is *not* something that is determined *only* by our own conduct: the way in which other players recognize and assess our action as appropriate or not is fundamental. Following a rule, in *this* sense, is not a solitary enterprise. Furthermore, whether one is playing by the rules depends on the accepted norms of the game, which vary across a plurality of games. In his attempt to describe what we actually do in our ordinary practices, Wittgenstein focuses on the rules that we follow and on the peculiar ways we adopt to follow the rules. For example, the game of "counting" requires following rules that are quite different from those we follow in the game of "naming". In different language games we use words differently, and this means using them according to different rules. Speaking is a normative activity like many other practical activities (it can be done correctly or not). A language game, from this perspective, can be understood both as a *context of use* for words as well as a *set of normative instructions* for their correct use.

This pluralism about rules is also therapeutic in spirit; it does not impose or defend a substantial philosophical claim. Wittgenstein is just registering how we act ordinarily to dismiss what he thinks is a wrong conception. We follow a set of rules because the very activity works *de facto* in this way. Following the rules is simply *what we do* in ordinary practice. By looking at how we actually behave, as opposed to making adventitious philosophical claims from outside of the practice (which would come at the risk of "colonizing" it), Wittgenstein takes a step back from philosophical theorizing. The method endorsed by Wittgenstein here is quite clear: trying to describe our activities without being misled by explanations in terms of general conceptions and principles.

From this point of view, Wittgenstein does not defend pluralism as a philosophical doctrine; he defends the plurality of actual practices, language

philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question. [...] There is not *a* philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies".

[11] See, in particular, Wittgenstein (1953: §202).

games, and rules that we follow, against the *invasion* of monistic philosophical conceptions like the representationalism of the *Tractatus*. He seems to warn us against certain natural tendencies and conceives philosophy as a therapeutic activity for resisting such tendencies. Often, this therapy serves just to discover the peculiar ways in which we actually act, believe, and speak, which suddenly become visible once we remove the lens of some general philosophical conception or cease to be misdirected by some simple superficial appearance. This sometimes requires the "special attention" of philosophers to be discovered: "We remain unconscious of the prodigious diversity of our language–games because the clothing of our language makes everything alike".[12] This passage denounces the very "clothing" of language as something superficial and potentially misleading, something that can wrongly invite unitary or monistic readings that mask the underlying plurality of language games. The plurality of language games stands as a collection of hard facts contraposed to our —perhaps natural— tendency to start theorizing about language by projecting general images and unitary conceptions. Yet, again, it is a plurality of facts rather than a theoretical, principled, pluralism.[13]

There is therefore an important connection between Wittgenstein's philosophical quietism and his defense of the plurality of language games. This plurality of practices, uses, and rules, is neither the basis nor the substance of a philosophical view; it is rather the basis of a quietist "step taken back" from philosophical theorizing and similar tendencies. Philosophical theorizing and focusing on an explanandum through general images are here understood as clearly connected —and the therapy is meant to cure both aspects of the disease.

§ 4. Brandom's privileged game: the centrality of asserting

Even though inspired by a number of lessons from the late Wittgenstein, Brandom is not at all a theoretical quietist. To the contrary, he proposes a systematic theory of discursive practice that consciously develops, in a constructive way, many Wittgensteinian insights. Brandom's conception of language is based on three main pillars: an inferentialist conception of conceptual content; a normative pragmatics of discursive commitments and entitlements; and a general expressivism according to which discursive practice permits to make explicit, in propositional form, what we implicitly do in

[12] Wittgenstein (1953: §224).

[13] The passages in §§23–24 of the *Investigations* can very easily be read in this way.

practice.[14]

According to Brandom's inferentialism, conceptual content depends on certain inferential moves or transitions between statements. For example, the content of "Felix is a cat" depends on its being a good premise from which to infer "Felix is a mammal" and on its being a good conclusion from "Felix purrs"; these moves constitute our grasp of that claim. We grasp concepts, and conceptually articulated claims, by means of our mastery of certain inferences, *material* inferences, whose goodness does not depend only on having valid logical form but also on the contents of the non–logical concepts involved. From this point of view, "Felix purrs" and "Felix is a mammal" are useful in *spelling out* the content of "Felix is a cat". This semantics understands these inferential moves in normative, not causal, terms: "Felix purrs" is a *reason* to utter "Felix is a cat", not what *causes* it.[15] Such an account of meaning is devoted to explaining the proprieties of the *use* of linguistic expressions; it is therefore a kind of "theoretically constructive approach" to Wittgenstein's legacy. Though many interpreters have argued that Wittgenstein did not promote a *substantial* use–theory of meaning, his idea of looking at the use of words in order to grasp their meaning (Wittgenstein 1953, §43) is one that opens the way to such constructive attempts and indeed influenced a number of proposals. Brandom's inferentialism is certainly one of the prominent attempts —along with, e.g., Wilfrid Sellars' and Michael Dummett's accounts— inspired by *this* legacy.

According to normative pragmatics when we advance a certain claim *C*, whose content depends on a number of inferences, we undertake a special set of responsibilities concerning *C*: we are *committed* to having good grounds for uttering *C* and to accepting what follows from *C*. When challenged about *C* we can show that we have reasons that support it, and so we are *entitled* to it. The practice of advancing, challenging, and defending claims is the game of giving and asking for reasons. Here, by undertaking and attributing commitments and entitlements by means of reasons —i.e., by spelling out claims by means of suitable inferences and then assessing them— speakers acquire deontic status from the social recognition that their linguistic performance conforms to the right reasons or not. In this view, therefore, discursive entitlement is understood as a basic scheme of default and challenge. Discursive practice in a social group involves reckoning the deontic scores of speakers, what Brandom calls "deontic scorekeeping": every speaker keeps the score of his own and other speakers'

[14] For recent presentations that focus on this tripartite understanding see Salis (2016) and Turbanti (2017).

[15] See Peregrin (2014), and Turbanti (2017), for a special insistence on this contrast between a normative understanding of inferentialism and other causal accounts.

commitments up to date, distinguishing the commitments each is or is not entitled to. This conception shows a constructive approach to Wittgenstein's idea, namely, that participation in a practice is rule–following. The rules that govern discursive practice in particular are norms that Brandom, inspired by Wittgenstein (1953: §219), understands as *implicit*. As Wittgenstein writes, we follow the rules *blindly*, without full awareness of their content.[16]

The inferential articulation of conceptual contents and the normative structure of discursive practice invite an expressivist understanding of their connection. This understanding is provided by what Brandom calls "logical expressivism": this is the idea that logical vocabulary makes conceptual contents and relations explicit. The normative practice of undertaking commitments by means of assertive moves is complemented by the capacity to defend such claims by *spelling out* their contents —by making the implicit supporting inferences explicit (in propositional form). Inference is here a basic move that we make in discursive practice, but it is also something that can be made explicit by means of conditional expressions, and such spelling out helps us to elucidate conceptual contents. This is possible on the basis of an expressivist reading of logical expressions such as conditionals. Conditional expressions make explicit "what follows from what" in the context of our assertive moves when a particular assertion is challenged by an interlocutor. They work, according to this perspective, as inference *licenses*, whereby certain good inferential transitions are made explicit. This possibility is fundamental when we are interested in establishing whether a particular inference is good or bad. This assessment is crucial, because such material inferences are normatively responsible for the contents of our assertions and commitments. Therefore, these expressive resources, among many others, are special in improving the reckoning of deontic scores of speakers. According to a general expressivist conception, many vocabularies that we deploy and adopt improve our general capacities for action and cognition by permitting us to specify in many useful ways what we do in our practices.[17]

If the game of giving and asking for reasons, with the combination of expressive resources that it carries, is a fundamental normative practice, then, according to Brandom, this means crediting it as a kind of "center" or

[16] Brandom's defense of the implicit nature of discursive norms is heavily influenced by Wittgenstein's arguments, or by *certain* readings of them. See Brandom (1994, pp. 20–30).

[17] See, for more details, the special diagrams (meaning–use diagrams —MUDs) deployed by Brandom to make certain expressive relations between practices and vocabularies explicit. See Brandom (2008). See below for a more detailed account of expressivism in the relations between vocabularies.

"downtown" for discursive practice. This, on the basis of our former reconstruction, appears opposed to Wittgenstein's pluralist and egalitarian attitude towards language games. The following is an interesting passage where Brandom endorses such a view by marking an explicit distance from Wittgenstein:

> What makes something a specifically *linguistic* […] practice is that it accords some performances the force or significance of *claimings*, of *propositionally* contentful commitments, which can both serve as and stand in need of reasons. Practices that do not involve reasoning are not linguistic or (therefore) discursive practices. Thus the 'Slab' *Sprachspiel* that Wittgenstein introduces in the opening sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* should not, by these standards of demarcation, count as a genuine *Sprach*spiel. It is a *vocal* but not yet a *verbal* practice. By contrast to Wittgenstein, the inferential identification of the conceptual claims that language (discursive practice) has a *center*; it is not a motley. Inferential practices of producing and consuming *reasons* are *downtown* in the region of linguistic practice. Suburban linguistic practices utilize and depend on the conceptual contents forged in the game of giving and asking for reasons, are parasitic on it. Claiming, being able to justify one's claims, and using one's claims to justify other claims and actions are not just one among other sets of things one can do with language. They are not on a par with other 'games' one can play. They are what in the first place make possible talking, and therefore thinking: sapience in general. Of course we do *many* other things as concept users besides applying concepts in judgment and action and justifying those applications. But […] according to this sort of semantic rationalism, those sophisticated, latecoming linguistic and more generally discursive activities are intelligible in principle only against the background of the core practices of inference–and–assertion (Brandom 2000, pp. 14–15).

For Brandom, the game of giving and asking for reasons is not merely one among many: it is indispensable to the very nature of discursive practice. This game of assertion plays a fundamental role within discursive activities. It is, in Sellars' jargon, an *autonomous* practice, "a language–game one could play though one played no other" (Brandom 2008, p. xvii). Prima facie, this centrality seems to tell against the endorsement of a pluralist attitude, especially when Brandom says that the game of giving and asking for reasons is not on a par with other games. This inegalitarian statement seems to invite a reading according to which assertory practice comes first, while all other language games are second rate.

On the contrary, since this is not a representationalist conception of assertion and language is not understood as a denotational device, this game is rather a sort of "contentless general scheme" for endorsing, challenging, and eventually rejecting assertive moves bearing *all kinds* of content. Once we stop

understanding the game of assertion via a kind of general descriptivism[18] and stop understanding assertion in terms of "truth" or "accurate representation", we find ourselves free from this image. I can defend in terms of reasons —i.e., in terms of good inferences— claims about how things are in the world as well as claims dealing with normative or aesthetic evaluations. These claims profit not only from the very fact that we have practices devoted to performing such evaluations, but also from the fact that we have adopted certain vocabularies that improve those practices in a decisive way. The game of giving and asking for reasons is the practice in which we make assertions using the conceptual resources provided by *all* our vocabularies, in which we say that things are thus and so, that the death penalty is wrong, that a landscape is beautiful, and so forth.

Therefore, the game of giving and asking for reasons shapes our moral and aesthetic claims in terms of reasons, just as it shapes our stating and describing facts. We have multiple special vocabularies —the normative, the logical, and many others— that are useful for certain aims and practices. Thanks to them, as Brandom says, we can say and do many things that we could not say or do without them. And they enable us to specify, in many ways, our moves within discursive practice. The game of assertion —understood in terms of the giving and asking for reasons, not in representational or truth–conditional terms— is particularly fit for explaining the correctness of clearly nonrepresentational claims, including moral, logical, mathematical, probabilistic, and other claims. These various vocabularies count as expressive resources that we deploy to achieve a form of progress that is both cognitive and practical. This is a core feature of Brandom's expressivist conception of vocabularies.

Huw Price —another theorist who embraces an expressivist and anti–representationalist perspective— wrote the following about this contrast between Brandom and Wittgenstein:

> Brandom doesn't claim that making assertions is the only game we can play with language, of course, but he does claim that the assertoric game is both central and indispensable. Contrasting his own view to Wittgenstein's, he explains that his view requires that language 'has a downtown' – that assertion is a fundamental linguistic activity, on which others depend (Price 2013b, p. 32).

[18] This anti–descriptivist view was first defended by Sellars. The *locus classicus* is the following: "[…] once the tautology 'The world is described by descriptive concepts' is freed from the idea that the business of all non–logical concepts is to describe, the way is clear to an *ungrudging* recognition that many expressions which empiricists have relegated to second–class citizenship in discourse are not *inferior*, just *different*" (Sellars 1957, §79).

The expressive preeminence of the game of giving and asking for reasons is a fundamental element for the functional diversification of the vocabularies we deploy, for the improvements we may contrive, and for those vocabularies still to be deployed; this is the main reason why there must be a "downtown" in discursive practice. The game of giving and asking for reasons is the general platform from which we manage and deploy our multifunctional expressive resources; it is the practice devoted to assessing the goodness of our inferences involving concepts from various vocabularies, from ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary to the metalanguages that we develop and use to specify and illuminate this vocabulary in many ways. At this point, we should look more closely at the connection between this game and the pluralism of vocabularies.

§ 5. Brandom's downtown: discursive practice, expressivism, and pluralism

According to representationalism, language is used to describe the world, and the job is well done if the descriptions are accurate representations of the reported facts. The idea is that there is a general correspondence between linguistic expressions and facts; for example, the statement "the cat is on the mat" corresponds to the fact that there is actually a cat on the mat. So far, this has an intuitive appeal, but it is just half of the story. If we consider statements like "the death penalty is wrong", "the Sagrada Familia is beautiful", "snow is very unlikely today", or "the truth of a conjunction depends on both the conjuncts being true", things change. The notion of *correspondence with the facts* loses much of its appeal. To keep it in place, we would need to endorse what Brandom and Price call "metaphysical extravagance": we would need moral facts, aesthetic facts, normative facts, probabilistic facts, logical facts, and many others, corresponding to the various kinds of statements.[19]

Expressivism is, firstly, the rejection of this representationalist understanding of language.[20] It says, roughly, that language is a collection of vocabularies performing various functions, which are hardly reducible to mere representation. When we use normative vocabulary, for example, we are not representing norms or normative facts, but making normative claims that deal with other statements

[19] This is often called the "placement problem". See Price (1992, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c) and Brandom (2013).

[20] Simon Blackburn's *quasi-realism* is a straightforward expressivist reply to this challenge dealing specifically with moral vocabulary. For a reconstruction of this perspective in a wider expressivist context, see Blackburn (1993, 2013) and Price (2013b, 2013c).

or actions. The use of vocabularies of philosophical interest —normative, modal, semantic, and so forth— permits us to achieve particular goals because such vocabularies permit us to perform moves that would not be possible otherwise. Representationalism alone is unable to account for the many uses of language.

According to Brandom's expressivism, certain expressively powerful vocabularies permit us to make some things propositionally explicit that would otherwise remain implicit in our practices. The idea that certain metavocabularies play such an elucidating role is fundamental for this kind of expressivism. The power to elucidate, to make the content of certain notions explicit, provided by a new adopted vocabulary is akin to a practical empowerment; it permits one to say, to think, and to do things that were not possible before the adoption. Imagine, for example, that we were deprived of the use of arithmetical vocabulary. How many activities and practices would become much more difficult or impossible? It would be both a cognitive and practical catastrophe.

The function played by such vocabularies is better understood by looking at the example of logical vocabulary. This vocabulary —including "and", "or", "not", "implies", and so on— permits us to make it explicit that a certain consequence follows from a particular statement. By mastering conditional expressions —such as the conditional "if X is a cat, then X is a mammal"— I can make it explicit that "Felix is a mammal" follows from "Felix is a cat". This is a fundamental expressive resource for our linguistic practices, one that also offers a straightforwardly plausible alternative to positing putative and extravagant "conditional facts" as corresponding to the use of conditionals. Logical negation plays a similar role dealing with incompatibilities between statements. By mastering the locutions of negation, one can point out that certain statements are mutually incompatible, that one cannot endorse both. Losing the expressive power given by conditional expressions or negation would amount to a "radical impoverishment" of discursive practice, to the point of its becoming something else. According to this *logical* expressivism, such a loss would amount to a collapse of the possibility of our making propositionally explicit what we do in discursive practice.

Brandom promotes a perspective according to which many other vocabularies of philosophical interest can be understood similarly. Every expressively powerful vocabulary, according to Brandom, embodies a form of "local" expressivism: these vocabularies, which Brandom defines properly as *pragmatic metavocabularies*, correspond to specific ways in which we may be empowered in relation to specific goals. For example, we have the expressive power of the representational vocabulary, of "truth locutions", of the normative vocabulary, and many others.

Just as the logical vocabulary plays an elucidating role, making conceptual contents explicit, these vocabularies permit us to explicitly characterize certain aspects of what we say and do in connection with possibility and necessity, correctness and incorrectness, aboutness, and so forth. They provide substantial improvements to our practices, particularly our discursive practice, which coordinates the use of such vocabularies.

Local expressivism here is a kind of "pragmatist pluralism" about our most important vocabularies of philosophical significance.[21] These vocabularies differ because they are useful for different tasks; the expressive improvement of our vocabularies, in principle, can be as multidirectional as the plurality of our goals and activities. The vocabularies that Brandom presents as embodying forms of local expressivism (normative, modal, intentional, and so forth), in fact, play a mainly plural *metalinguistic* function: they specify, *each in its own terms*, what we say and do in our discursive interactions.

However, this plurality of vocabularies should not, says Brandom, be interpreted as a sort of "mutual independence" of vocabularies: different vocabularies may be connected to others by what Brandom calls "pragmatically–mediated" relations. For example, normative vocabulary and modal vocabulary are *strictly* connected: we could use the normative vocabulary as a pragmatic metalanguage to specify the practice of making modal claims. A modal statement like "It cannot be Monday today and not be Tuesday tomorrow" can be read as implicitly containing conditionals that work as inferential licenses, and hence as *norms*.[22] The pragmatically–mediated relations between specific vocabularies implies that the plurality of vocabularies does not entail an egalitarian view of vocabularies: not all vocabularies have the same level of expressive power. For example, ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary is of fundamental importance for discursive practice (in general, for every autonomous practice);[23] without it we could hardly have discursive practice (or other vocabularies) at all. Very roughly, we could describe the hierarchy of expressive vocabularies as having an

[21] See Price (1992: 388). Price considers this feature as almost Wittgensteinian in spirit: "something akin to a Wittgensteinian linguistic pluralism". However, this is a point where Brandom and Price differ in their endorsing expressivism: Price endorses, in fact, a *global* version of expressivism, extending the expressive analysis to all possible vocabularies and not only to certain expressively powerful vocabularies of philosophical interest, as Brandom does. See Price (2013b, 2013c) for a wide discussion about such differences.

[22] Brandom (2008, p. 104). The example is taken from Gilbert Ryle.

[23] See Brandom (2008, p. 3). As the former example, dealing with the relation between normative and modal vocabularies, shows, such vocabularies can play metalinguistic functions dealing with our use of other metalanguages.

ordinary empirical observational vocabulary as its base, a practical layer permitting the possibility of assertive and inferential moves, and then the various pragmatic metavocabularies that help us to specify and to improve what we say in the base vocabulary and do in the practice. This hierarchy confers a central position to some vocabularies and impedes an easygoing egalitarian assimilation.

This anti–egalitarian attitude, prima facie, suggests a contrast with pluralism. Usually, inegalitarian views about vocabularies have been considered "anti–pluralist" in spirit. Richard Rorty famously complained about understanding certain vocabularies as more fundamental or significant than others in virtue of their putative correspondence with reality. Rorty called for a culture liberated from the bad metaphors of "correspondence" and "accurate representation" and claimed that pluralism was the main upshot of this pragmatist liberation. This is not mandatory, however. One can be pluralist even granting a different weight to different vocabularies; the preeminence that Brandom assigns to some vocabularies is immune from Rorty's criticism, since it is based on expressive power, not on correspondence with the way things are. In a sense, the centrality of the game of assertion is what *warrants and permits* the "pluralist proliferation" —the multifarious blossoming— of other vocabularies. The hierarchy of expressive power can be understood more as a pluralist expansion of discursive practice than as a substantial obstacle to it.

The connection between the centrality of the game of assertion and a pragmatist and expressivist pluralism about vocabularies is efficaciously contrasted with a Wittgensteinian attitude in the following quotation by Price:

> […] Brandom's project is to link different kinds of vocabulary to different kinds of practices and pragmatic tasks. So while Brandom's account may impose a degree of uniformity on language that some Wittgensteinian pluralists might wish to reject –offering us a uniform account of the way in which Wittgenstein's common linguistic 'clothing' is held together, so to speak– it not only allows but actually requires that this uniformity coexist with an underlying functional diversity of the kind that expressivists such as Blackburn and Gibbard require. It not only allows but insists that different pieces of linguistic clothing do different things, even though there is an important sense in which they are all put together in the same way and all belong to the same assertoric game (Price 2013b, p. 34).

There is, therefore, no real tension between the expressivist prominence of the assertoric game and the plural diversifications of our vocabularies. The game of giving and asking for reasons is not just one vocabulary among others; it is rather an underlying condition for their development, improvement, and diversification.

Despite appearances, therefore, pluralism is not the underlying source of the contrast between understanding language as having or not having a "downtown". Both views are quite open to pluralism and, in general, both meet important requirements of pluralist philosophers —they both subscribe to fundamentally anti–representationalist lessons, for instance. From this point of view, their common dismissal of representational accounts of language shapes a general agreement that is *far wider* than their difference with respect to recognizing a downtown in our language.

§ 6. Conclusion: pluralism beyond downtown and representationalism

Does language have a downtown? Is such a downtown a problem for pluralism? Did Brandom and Wittgenstein reply to the very same question by diverging on this point? Or were these just different responses to very different questions?

According to our reconstruction, Wittgenstein denies the idea of a downtown in language in his very attempt to undermine the representational–denotational model of language presented in the *Tractatus*. He wants to affirm especially that the representational model of the *Tractatus* is *not* downtown in linguistic practices. The late Wittgenstein's target is general descriptivism, not the idea of a "privileged" or "special" language game, an eventuality which he does not even mention. He was stunned and impressed by the rich diversity of ordinary linguistic practices, in contrast with the representational model of the *Tractatus*. He probably just wanted to give due emphasis to his important discovery. To attribute to him a substantial view of language that rules out (or admits) certain special explanatory features would be to ignore his well–known theoretical quietism. So, we have a number of reasons to think that he would not be interested in systematic attempts to understand language, such as Brandom's.[24]

Should we understand Brandom's defense of a downtown in language as a substantial obstacle to pluralism? Is his view a regress in understanding language from the point of view of Wittgenstein's egalitarian pluralism about language games? According to our reconstruction, Brandom's downtown is thoroughly compatible with pluralism: in an important sense, it is the key feature that permits the very proliferation of different vocabularies. The game of giving and asking for reasons is downtown precisely because it plays a quite different role than those played by other vocabularies. In an important sense, it is not a vocabulary: it is rather the very structure of developing, using, and improving our vocabularies.

[24] The later Wittgenstein might, however, have been tempted or interested in expressivism, I would guess.

And it is a structure that fits almost all types of content coming from different disciplines and vocabularies.

Brandom and Wittgenstein diverged on a "downtown of language" at the question of the nature of philosophical theorizing and the possibility of isolating relevant explanatory features to provide a systematic philosophical account of language. While Wittgenstein saw the reference to "practices and use" as an unavoidable limit to our philosophical understanding of language, Brandom had the advantage of knowing that pragmatics can be a fruitful object of philosophical understanding, one that can be helpful in developing a systematic account of language. Their difference in views does not depend only on attitudes about philosophy, but also on their endorsement of different premises —about pragmatics, for example. When Wittgenstein was working on his *Investigations*, pragmatics, as we know it, did not even exist as an autonomous discipline. They also differed with respect to their endorsement of expressivism (though Wittgenstein was of fundamental importance in influencing it). Their difference in premises and presuppositions is particularly relevant to shaping their general attitudes.

According to these reconstructions, the real differentiator between the two prima facie opposing conceptions of language is certain attitudes concerning the scope and nature of philosophical theorizing. We have a sharp contrast between a straightforward quietism —a kind of "no–theory" view, suggested by Wittgenstein, that sees philosophy as therapeutically expelling misleading conceptions derived from superficial conflations and misunderstandings— and a positive, systematic, theoretical investigation into the structure of discursive practice, as proposed by Brandom's work. Without entering into the evaluation of the support for these contrasting views,[25] we might grant Brandom's perspective a certain advantage, since his had the opportunity to incorporate important lessons coming from the wide and highly refined discussions of the second half of the 20th century (many of which followed Wittgenstein's ideas and insights). The role of pragmatics is one such lesson; a self–aware conception of expressivism as a theoretical possibility is another. These are ideas of great importance in transforming Wittgenstein's remarks on "meaning and use" within the philosophical project of providing a systematic theory of meaning as use. Here, the legacy of Dummett and Sellars plays a crucial role in Brandom's perspective. In a sense, the feasibility of theories of meaning is almost taken for granted in the argumentative context where Brandom moves, while

[25] See Brandom (2019) for a detailed discussion of this contrast.

Wittgenstein's quietism is certainly not the mainstream view.[26]

According to this fundamental difference in attitude, we could conclude that many important aspects of Brandom's philosophy can be understood as attempts to look at Wittgenstein's lessons with a "constructive spirit", to go beyond his quietist reservations. What Wittgenstein thought were insurmountable obstacles to theorizing about language —for example, the diversity of ordinary practices— have become, in Brandom's perspective, as well as in philosophy of language in general, legitimate objects of philosophical investigation.

This contrast leads, finally, to a surprising upshot. In an important sense, Brandom's inegalitarian conception of language games, with its master idea of a game of giving and asking for reasons, ends up as a "philosophically principled" type of pluralism —what we might call a *genuine* type of philosophical pluralism— in which pluralism can be defined and defended on the basis of explicit principles. Wittgenstein's egalitarian conception of language games, on the contrary, cannot be understood as a philosophical pluralism *strictu sensu.* His quietism —his reluctance to advance philosophical theses, in general— prohibits Wittgenstein from endorsing pluralism as a substantial view. This does not mean, in an important sense, that Wittgenstein is not a pluralist. He is clearly a pluralist in spirit, and he clearly adopts a pluralist strategy in his therapeutic perspective on language; he would just deny that pluralism is a valid philosophical thesis or truth. He would, perhaps, reject it *as* a principled view.

[26] Even though varieties of quietist attitudes have been endorsed by important philosophers such as John McDowell and Richard Rorty. See McDowell (1996) and Rorty (1982). For a wider overview on quietism see Macarthur (2017).

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