

Review of Robert Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA. and London, 2009.

For a long time the popular image of Hegel was of a murky, rather disreputable figure. His jargon-ridden prose may have hinted at profundity - in a half-baked, nineteenth-century sort of way - but it paid scant regard for the basic principles of logic and science. Hegel never much cared for the Enlightenment values of reason and freedom, according to this image of him. His philosophy rather aimed at their opposite: the subordination of the individual to the 'Absolute', which in political terms, meant a defense of the totalitarian state. This image of Hegel as a harbinger of tribalism and totalitarianism was common not just in the English-speaking world (due partly to Karl Popper's influence), but also in Continental Europe, where it provided a foil against which a series of influential poststructuralist philosophers defined themselves.

The picture of Hegel that emerges from Robert Brandom's latest book could hardly be more different. For Hegel's great achievement, according to Brandom, was to have provided the resources we need for making full and proper sense of the idea that human beings are rational animals. On this Hegelian conception, human beings are like other animals in having sentience, which is to say awareness of an environment and biological needs that press for satisfaction. But unlike other (non-rational) animals, human beings also have what Brandom calls sapience, which is to say cognizance of a world and self-awareness. The key feature that makes sapience possible - and this is an insight Hegel picked up from Kant, in Brandom's story - is concept-use. Human beings have sapience insofar as they are 'concept-mongers', as Brandom puts it. Concept-mongering, or the application of concepts, does not come about as an effect follows a cause, that is, as a determined natural consequence of some given state of affairs. Rather, it is an activity that is bound by norms. There is always a right way and a wrong way to apply a concept (otherwise there would be no content to the concept, and so no concept at all), which is to say that concept use is intrinsically normative. The capacity to be bound by norms is thus essential to sapience, the feature that marks us off as rational beings.

But it is not just sapience that requires boundedness by norms: freedom requires it too. Indeed to be free and to be rational, in the Kant-Hegel-Brandom account, is one and the same. This is because the rational agent, in binding herself to a norm, gives the law to herself, and thereby acts autonomously and freely. Human freedom consists not just in doing what one wants, as merely sentient creatures can do, but in taking responsibility for the norms one binds oneself to and the commitments one makes, including the rational consequences and presuppositions of those commitments, which is integral to sapience. While this much was seen by Kant, Hegel's innovation, as Brandom recounts it, was to see that rational responsibility was a social status, granted in communities of mutually recognizing agents. It is only in the mutual recognition rational beings bestow upon themselves in discursive or linguistic communities that their rationality and freedom becomes fully comprehensible. Brandom considers this at once 'the crowning achievement of German Idealism' and the best philosophical vindication we have of the ideals of the Enlightenment.

The 'progressive rationalism' outlined in the essays that make up this book, and elaborated by Brandom elsewhere, is sophisticated and, in many respects, persuasive. Brandom's expertise ranges over a bewildering array of topics, from philosophical logic and semantics to cognitive science and political philosophy, and his ability to integrate positions in these areas within a single philosophical framework is remarkable. But there is a nagging problem. For all their logical prowess, do Brandom's reflections really add up to a convincing view of the human? Do they really amount to a plausible philosophical anthropology? As I've indicated, Brandom's attention is wholly focused on the feature that distinguishes human beings from other animals, namely rationality. Because he takes rationality to be bound up with concept use, his focus turns directly to our linguistic capacities. But there is surely more to being human, and more worth focusing on philosophically, than the sentience we share with the beasts and the sapience we owe to language. Hegel certainly thought so. In the writings of his so-called Jena period, Hegel identified not only language, but work and love as key forms of constitutive expression of human subjectivity. The recognition we struggle for in love and work is just as important in making us who we are, Hegel thought, as the recognition we receive and bestow in language.

Brandom's rationalism would be even more progressive if the philosophical anthropology underlying it were able to incorporate this bit of Hegel as well.

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