INFERENTIAL MAN: AN
INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT BRANDOM

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Analytic philosophy, at least to those in literary studies, seems an arid pursuit focused on technical problems of language, often conveyed in the mathematical symbols of formal logic. However, just as literary theory is quite different from common portraits of it, analytic philosophy differs from such images and has changed considerably since the days of Rudolph Carnap. Robert Brandom is an analytic philosopher, but while following in its rationalist tradition, he argues for a revisionary perspective, holding that we obtain meaning through inference rather than reference to a state of affairs. And rather than the compartmentalized arguments of much analytic philosophy, often captured in a single essay, he has aimed to construct a systematic philosophy, notably in his 741-page book, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Harvard UP, 1994). Another aspect of his revisionary stance is bringing several unlikely bedfellows, such as pragmatism and Hegel, into his version of analytic philosophy. Instead of disregarding the history of philosophy, he frequently evokes "the mighty dead."

Before he published *Making It Explicit*, Brandom gained a reputation from articles, unpublished papers, and talks as part of the "Pittsburgh School" of philosophy, which included colleagues Wilfrid Sellars, John McDowell, and others. He also co-wrote *The Logic of Inconsistency* (Blackwell, 1980), with colleague Nicholas Rescher. After *Making Explicit*, he explicated his system in *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Harvard UP, 2000). His next book, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Harvard UP, 2002), gives his idiosyncratic tour through the history of philosophy, from Leibniz and Hegel through Frege to Sellars. *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism* (Oxford UP, 2008), from the John Locke Lectures at Oxford, presents his contribution to the philosophy of logic. Two recent books, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (Harvard UP, 2009) and *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, and Contemporary* (Harvard UP, 2011), gather some of his essays, and he is finishing a long-awaited volume on Hegel.

In addition, Brandom has edited collections about Sellars and about his teacher Richard Rorty, including *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Harvard UP, 1997), featuring Sellars' essay of that title; *Rorty and His Critics* (Blackwell, 2000); and *In the Space of Reasons: Selected Essays of Wilfrid Sellars* (Harvard UP, 2007). There are already several books on Brandom's work, including Jeremy Wanderer, *Robert Brandom* (McGill/Queen's UP, 2008), Bernhard Weiss and Wanderer, eds., *Reading Brandom: On Making It Explicit* (Routledge, 2010), and more generally, Chauncey Maher, *The Pittsburgh School of Philosophy: Sellars, McDowell, and Brandom* (Routledge, 2012). See also Rorty's essay, "Robert Brandom on Social Practices and Representations," in Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 3* (Cambridge UP, 1998).

Born in 1950 in New York, Brandom attended Yale (BA, 1972) and Princeton (PhD, 1976), where he worked with Rorty and David Lewis, and took courses with Donald Davidson, among others. He has taught at the University of Pittsburgh since, although he lectures frequently in the U.S. and Europe.

This interview took place on 9 July 2013 in Robert Brandom's office at the University of Pittsburgh. It was conducted and edited by Jeffrey J. Williams, professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University, and transcribed by Bridgette Jean Powers, an MA student in English at Carnegie Mellon.

Jeffrey J. Williams: What would you say, in a nutshell, is philosophy?

Robert Brandom: I think philosophy is about what it means to be a human being. Lots of things are about that, of course, but one dimension that philosophers are particularly interested in, that distinguish us within the high culture, is how we are creatures who give and ask for reasons, which is something that I understand under the heading of inference. What is it for something to be a reason, and what it is for us to be creatures who give reasons, who care about reasons, who demand reasons? I am concerned to understand us as creatures defined by living in a normative space of reasons. These concerns overlap in the origins of philosophy—in ancient Greece, Plato and Aristotle were fascinated and puzzled by this normative force of a better reason. And so are philosophers today.

JJW: One could also say that literature and art are about what it means to be human, and psychology, sociology, and politics are about how we act as humans.

RB: Literary theorists might be concerned with how we are linguistic creatures, but what distinguishes us philosophers is that our interest extends to how we are linguistic creatures who use inference, argumentation, reasons. Psychologists might be concerned with empirical generalizations about how we reason, but the philosopher is concerned with reasons as normative, with

how we ought to reason, with reasons entitling or obliging us to think some things, more or less independently of what we actually take to be reasons.

Political theorists are concerned with our social being, which is articulated by giving and asking for reasons, but is equally concerned with power relations, which are not evidently coextensive with the normative force of the better reason. Now, figures like Foucault have argued that giving and asking for reasons has become a distinctive, modern form in which power relations exist, but that's very much a philosophical claim, not merely a political, theoretical one.

JJW: I'm interested in asking what you think of politics, but what is the task of philosophy now?

RB: The distinctive philosophical idea of the twentieth century was that language is the form in which discursive normativity is articulated. This is equally true on the Continental side as on the analytic side. Philosophers of language now, in the Anglo-American world, are looking particularly at the locutions that we use to make explicit how reasons are reasons. They are trying to understand the variety of forms of explanation, such as conditionals, "if-then" arguments, on the one hand, and on the other hand, how the expressions of normativity, varieties of "oughts," articulate the normative force of the reasons that we give and ask for. The normative expresses our notions of authority, responsibility, commitment, and entitlement.

I think that the single greatest contribution that modern philosophers have made to the culture is the development of the very notion of moral normativity as distinct from any theologically guaranteed or underwritten notion of norms, on the one hand, and a new politically arrived-at social normativity, on the other. The Enlightenment philosophers, culminating in Kant, essentially invented the idea of moral normativity that was neither merely prudential nor legal, but above all, not theological. My main interest is in the normativity implicit in us as discursive creatures, as concept-using creatures, which may be related to moral normativity in very complicated ways.

JJW: For many people in literary criticism, normativity is not a good word. They see it as a social constraint forced upon people. But the way that most philosophers use normativity is in a different sense, a more technical one related to linguistic claims.

RB: The fundamental notion of normativity is the sense in which I, by applying a certain concept, have bound or committed myself to certain consequences. That entitles me to make certain moves, and also precludes me from making other moves. I think it's one of the consequential discoveries in the development of the notion of normativity that, far from contrasting with freedom, the notion of constraint by norms actually makes possible

the notion of freedom—we are constrained by norms rather than by laws of nature. For Kant and the German idealist tradition generally, the notion of freedom as constraint by norms is part and parcel of the notion of autonomy.

Norms are binding only insofar as one has endorsed them and adopted them. For example, to take the coin in my pocket to be copper, I have bound myself to that commitment that it's copper. By binding myself by these discursive norms, particularly the contents of concepts, that's the root of substantial expressive freedom, as Chomsky has brought home to us over the last half century. Chomsky's thought begins with the observation that almost every sentence uttered by an adult speaker is radically novel, novel not just in the sense that that speaker has never uttered or heard that particular sequence of words before, but that almost certainly no one in the history of the world has ever uttered or heard that particular sentence. That expressive freedom makes it possible for us to entertain new possibilities as to how things are or might be, and to entertain new goals and new plans. This notion of discursive normativity as the constraint that liberates is one of the fundamental ideas of German idealism.

JJW: Your work could be placed in the analytic tradition, and sometimes people more sympathetic to the Continental tradition see analytic philosophy as very rigid, verging on positivism. It seems to me that analytic philosophy is in a revisionary stage now, though. Maybe you could talk about the place of analytic philosophy.

RB: I do think of myself as an analytic philosopher. I was trained as an analytic philosopher but, with my teacher being Richard Rorty, I think that the strength of analytic philosophy is the demands that it makes on the clarity with which we express the commitments we undertake and the claims that we investigate, and the rigor with which it insists that we argue for the more abstract consequences from them. I think one would do well to go to analytic philosophy for one's methodology, but to the continent for one's understanding of philosophical problems that are worth thinking about. That certainly is what I have done.

JJW: That makes you different from many analytic philosophers.

RB: Indeed. I think it is important to appreciate how analytic philosophy has changed and grown throughout the twentieth century and into this century. Analytic philosophy was born out of, and in appreciation of, the significance of language for persons, but in the first flush of our coming to a new semantic appreciation of formal, mathematical, technical, and logical languages, analytic philosophy was organized around the idea that our understanding of these formal languages could be the key to our understanding of natural languages. The promise was that it was possible to do a kind of mathematical semantics. For the first time, we had a technical, scientific

control over an understanding of meanings, something that had never been seen before. The exciting idea with which analytic philosophy was born was that the same technical tools which gave us a mathematical grip on the meanings of logical and mathematical languages could somehow be extended to enable us to understand meanings expressed in natural languages, even in their literary uses.

It's fair to say that turned out to be a lot harder to do than people initially thought it would. The question of the relation between the semantics that works well for artificial languages to our semantic understanding of natural languages, that continues to be an area of controversy and a center of inquiry within analytic philosophy. But it's important to realize that analytic philosophy began as an embattled minority position in Anglo-American philosophy. On its way to achieving the sort of predominance that it enjoys today within the sociology of the discipline in the Anglophone world, among the weapons it wielded was a kind of exclusionary principle that didn't simply urge that philosophy be done a certain way, but insisted that other ways of doing it were not doing philosophy at all. They were doing something older and less valuable than what philosophy had become. That view and that tone were dominant in analytic philosophy through the seventies.

JJW: Hence metaphysics and the tradition descending from Hegel to contemporary Continental philosophy were ruled misguided.

RB: Metaphysics was absolutely out of bounds. Russell and Moore, the founders of analytic philosophy, had rejected their own youthful British idealism, inspired by Hegel, and defined the new movement against Hegel. Indeed, they thought the Idealist rot had already set in with Kant, and allowing him into the canon of respectable philosophers would inevitably bring Hegel in its train. Now, over the last generation, we've seen a huge resurgence of analytic interest in Kant and are beginning to see a renaissance in interest in Hegel, even among analytic philosophers. That's something in which I've been instrumental, and my colleague John McDowell has been instrumental, in arguing that if one is concerned with the nature of reasons and discursive normativity, Kant and Hegel are absolutely central figures for thinking about them.

So it's a rare analytic department today that has those exclusionary tendencies. Systematic thought has returned, as has the esteem for the history of philosophy, not as an antiquarian discipline but in providing the language in which contemporary philosophy is done. These are part of the conventional wisdom today. Every once in a while, one will still hear echoes of the older, more hard-edged tone, but that is already somewhat anachronistic.

JJW: I think that would probably be a surprise to people in literary studies. It strikes me that one thing you do in your work is to bring several traditions together in a revisionist way. You try to do a synthesis among the

history of philosophy, pragmatism, certainly Hegel, and analytic philosophy, and you return to system. Analytic philosophy had an aversion to a system, at least in my understanding, and that's one thing it shared with Continental philosophy and theory, insofar as it attacked metaphysics.

RB: My own impulses and inclinations are synthetic. One of the traditions against which analytic philosophy defined itself, particularly in America, was American pragmatism, which, in its Deweyan form, had been institutionally dominant in the twenties and thirties, and was not, in its incarnation then, interested particularly in the philosophy of the physical sciences or in mathematical logic, which were at the core of analytic philosophy. So one of the exclusions by which midcentury analytic philosophy defined itself was pragmatism.

I have looked more at Charles Sanders Peirce than at James and Dewey, the three of them being the classic American pragmatists of the Golden Age, and Peirce was concerned with the philosophy of science. He was one of the great logicians of his day and this was part and parcel of his pragmatism. It was his take on pragmatism that attracted me to Rorty's way of thinking, which was transformative of the tradition of American pragmatism. Princeton in the seventies was the very center, the Vatican, of analytic philosophy in its day, having taken the mantle from Harvard, and I worked with David Lewis and with Richard Rorty. Lewis is absolutely at the center of what analytic philosophy is today, and Rorty is the great neopragmatist of his generation.

In my Oxford Locke Lectures, "Between Saying and Doing," I synthesize the pragmatist tradition and the analytic tradition out of concern with language, not as a formal structure but as a feature of the natural history of beings like us. It is an anthropological conception we find in the broadly pragmatist tradition, not only of Dewey but also of the Heidegger of *Being and Time* and the Wittgenstein of *The Philosophical Investigations*, characterizing the meanings that get conferred on expressions by their roles in discursive practices. So it's self-consciously pitched as a synthesis of the pragmatist tradition of thinking about language with the analytic tradition inspired by the formal semantics of mathematical, artificial languages.

Having seen in German idealism revolutionary ideas, particularly about discursive normativity and the relation between reasons and freedom that I mentioned a moment ago, I also found myself learning more and more from Kant and Hegel that helped me in thinking about the topics that, as an analytic philosopher of language, I was most concerned with. The overall trajectory of my thought has been, more and more, to synthesize German idealism with analytic philosophy—indeed, to recover the insights of the American pragmatists and the German idealists that both Peirce and Dewey were very knowledgeable about. Dewey thought of himself as naturalizing Hegel, and Hegel was very important to Peirce as well, but that influence had been lost in the development of pragmatism. So, these three traditions—American pragmatism, German idealism, and analytic philosophy—have been of equal

importance to me, even though it was from within analytic philosophy that I absorbed these other influences.

JJW: In a chapter in *Perspectives on Pragmatism*, you talk about how there's one view of pragmatism that portrays it as a poor cousin of European philosophy, an American consumerist version, but there's another version that is much stronger.

RB: If you ask a contemporary German philosopher about pragmatism, he or she will describe it as a reductive, psychologistic theory that seeks to understand normativity in terms of the grasping selfishness of a bourgeois shopkeeper, whose answer to every question is, "Well, what's in it for me? How can I get some advantage from this?" It is a reductively utilitarian answer to theoretical and epistemological questions in line with the practical philosophy of Bentham and Mill. But there is another way to see it, the way Rorty saw it, as announcing nothing less than a second Enlightenment. The first Enlightenment had the idea of human beings, in their practical conduct, as under the sway of some nonhuman authority, as though the norms that ought to govern our interactions with each other could be read metaphysically off the world. That is opposed to a view that it's up to us to discern moral norms, to decide how we want to behave and ought to behave. That, in Rorty's vision of pragmatism, freed us from the idea that in our account of how things are, we're subject to norms that are somehow written into the way the world is, as opposed to thinking of our cognitive activities as social undertakings where standards of evidence are to be discovered and determined by the inquirers.

My own picture of pragmatism is somewhat different from Rorty's, but nonetheless, we share the idea that the pragmatists should be seen in the line from Kant through Hegel. From this point of view, Kant's most basic insight was that what sets knowers and agents off from merely natural creatures, the beasts of the field, is not our possession of some Cartesian, distinctive mind-stuff, which is set in action by perception of the world and sets the world in action through agency, but rather that judgments and intentional doings are things we're in a distinctive sense responsible for. They should be understood as exercises of a distinctive kind of authority on our part that express our commitments. Commitment, entitlement, authority, responsibility: these are all normative notions.

Kant reconceives us as normative creatures; Hegel transposes that fundamental Kantian thought into a social key. All normative statuses are in the end social statuses, the products of reciprocal recognition. That notion is taken up by the later Wittgenstein, who does not derive it from Kant and Hegel but rediscovers this idea of our lives as articulated by discursive normativity, which is a matter of norms implicit in social practice. The American pragmatists did explicitly take from Kant and Hegel a picture of us as normative creatures and of that normativity as social normativity, and that is a radical

re-understanding of what it means to be a person. What's distinctive of human beings, which is radicalized, as I would see things, by the insight of analytic philosophers, is that language is the site of social normativity.

One of the ways in which I think the American pragmatists fell short was in underestimating just how transformative language is. It was an important phenomenon for them, but by no means was it given the priority that analytic philosophers gave it. *Geist*, spirit, was Hegel's name for all the normatively inflected doings of human beings, and language, *Sprache*, is the *Dasein* of *Geist*, he says in *The Phenomenology*. My idea is that the picture of language that analytic philosophy has insightfully derived can be immeasurably enriched by being combined with this insight, common to Kant and Hegel, to the American pragmatists, and also one of the animating experiences of the later Wittgenstein, that social normativity is the medium in which our reason-giving is embedded and is to be understood.

JJW: You're putting together pragmatism with Hegel and Wittgenstein, and it's clear that they form part of a large system for you. One thing I wonder: are these idiosyncratic connections? And does philosophy then become a matter of different but separate systems, so you choose which one you believe, and you are either in or out?

RB: I think there's a number of different streams that converge and diverge in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. One of the glories of analytic philosophy was the transformation of philosophic discourse methodologically into a mode that was self-consciously modeled on the sciences, in that philosophy was thought of as a cooperative enterprise that was conducted among people who respected each other's views and abilities. In the volume that I edited on Rorty, Jacques Bouveresse urged Rorty, as he moved away from analytic philosophy, not to lose sight of just how rare and precious this cooperative spirit of debate was. That's part of the self-conception of analytic philosophy, which was particularly strong in the Vienna circle around Carnap, a circle which was significantly to the left, politically, of where most Anglophone philosophers were at that point. These were socialists who saw a scientific attitude as politically transformative as well.

One aspect of that was an appreciation of the gem-like article as the ideal form, for something that was conceived to be a brick in the edifice of knowledge that other people could make use of. There was a kind of de-contexting because of this picture of the atomistic unit of knowledge: one was supposed to set out the problem and argument in terms that you needed no particular background to understand. I think some wonderful things were done in that genre, but internal to analytic philosophy.

JJW: That's like Quine's or Davidson's essays? And Davidson only has collections of essays, if I recall correctly.

RB: Only late in his life did he republish his dissertation, but other than that, no book. My particular hero—and in this regard, I am confessing to an idiosyncratic interest—is Wilfrid Sellars, who wrote for most of his career here at the University of Pittsburgh. He was anomalous among analytic philosophers of his generation (he flourished in the fifties and sixties) in having systematic ambitions, and systematic understanding of the philosophic enterprise, rooted in the history of philosophy. Methodologically, Sellars was not particularly influential in those two regards. He was an outlier. He was influential for some of his ideas, but not for his thought about the philosophic enterprise.

David Lewis, possibly the most influential in writing philosophy of his generation, is a paradigmatic example of writing in articles, by and large, rather than books, who nonetheless pieced together a fabulously systematic picture. He actually would write two books, but had he not written either of those, the systematic character of his work would have been evident. One of the premier English analytic journals, *Analysis*, founded by Russell and Moore, doesn't accept anything longer than five pages. You're supposed to be able to say what you need to say in a bite-sized piece. But that ideal has been displaced, about twenty years ago, by the idea of more extensively worked out, more connected philosophical views, and now, by and large, it's taken for granted that the most important work will show up in the form of books.

In having, on the one hand, Lewis, and on the other hand, Rorty as my supervisors, I thought of myself as in a tradition that Rorty articulated. Rorty was a big fan of Sellars, which was one of the things that led me to work with him at Princeton. In a pastiche of a famous utterance of one of the British idealists, Rorty had asked of Sellars, "If a man shall bind the spirit of Hegel in the fetters of Carnap, how shall he find readers?" I'd always thought of myself as binding the spirit of Rorty in the fetters of Lewis. Or, I would rather say, "expressing in the language of," because I think of those norms as enabling expressive freedom, rather than as constraining or restrictive.

JJW: I can see the ambition of wanting to build a systematic view in philosophy, but to what extent does it build one's own mind castle? It brings together incommensurable ideas in a vision of one's own, but then other people either have to buy into your system, or go on their way.

RB: My view is that it's precisely in the incommensurability of these things that invites us to step back and ask about what underlying shared background or assumptions there are, and make visible for the first time the possibly oppositional character of some of those background commitments. It's precisely in trying to see what might be right about both of these ways of thinking that one is able to step back a little further from contemporary assumptions.

I think that, within the history of American philosophy, this synthetic attempt has been very fruitful. C. I. Lewis, the American philosopher who kept Kant alive, even during the dark years, was trying to synthesize his two teachers, William James, the pragmatist, and Josiah Royce, the Hegelian idealist. He thought that there were things that they were each right about, he had both of their voices in his head, and he very usefully synthesized them into a Kantian (I would say) rather than Hegelian pragmatism. And he was one of the principal teachers of Quine, one of the central American analytic philosophers of the middle years of the twentieth century, who was trying to synthesize him with Carnap, who was his other teacher. Similarly, Rorty, insofar as the influences on him from within analytic philosophy were concerned, was concerned to synthesize Quine and Sellars, two of the great analytic philosophers of their generation, but who seemed incommensurable. Yet, Rorty could see a common enterprise in the criticisms that Quine had of foundationalist notions of meaning and the criticisms that Sellars had of foundationalist notions of experience. Rorty could distill a common pragmatist theme from them that neither of them was in a position to see.

I feel that the tension between the logician, Lewis, and the pragmatist and historicist, Rorty, among my teachers, has been the source of philosophical imagination that I've been able to bring to bear on these issues. So, I think you're quite right that the different philosophical approaches, or systems, do tend to define themselves by what they see as irreconcilable differences from the others. That's an important moment and dimension of the process of learning about things, but the next one is a synthetic moment, and my own inclinations are on that side of things.

JJW: In literary theory, a central thesis of Paul de Man, probably the most influential American critic of his generation, was that there were incommensurable readings of any literary work and they opened up an aporia, so one finally couldn't decide on meaning. For him, this was the heart of deconstruction and a profoundly negative insight. You obviously take a different tack from that somewhat bleak conclusion.

RB: I would say that the rationalist side of Hegel acknowledges that incommensurability, but sees that as an invitation to overcome it, to do something synthetic, to find a standpoint from which these options no longer seem mutually exclusive. I don't take it that Hegel thinks there's any antecedent necessity that one can do that, just that there's a normative obligation that's part of self-conscious rationality. That is, there is something unsatisfactory about the situation where one is confronted with two views that are incommensurable, that calls for a more synoptic vision, to combine them in a binocular vision that then shows up as having more dimensions than one appreciated from either of the single ones. I think a big divide in contemporary thought is the extent to which one acknowledges that as a normative obligation.

JJW: Let me ask you about inferentialism. There was a book about existentialism that was popular back in the sixties and seventies called *Irrational Man*, by William Barrett, who was associated with the New York Intellectuals. When I was thinking of a possible title for my introduction to you, I thought of "Inferential Man." You're in the rationalist tradition, believing that man is rational, but not because we are referential; we are rational because we are inferential. Maybe you could talk a little bit about the theory that you're known for, especially in *Making It Explicit*.

RB: Let me work into that from the normative point of view. A consequence of Kant's normative insight about us being discursive creatures, and normative creatures, ones who bind ourselves by norms in judgment and action, involved a transformation in thought about logic. The concept of logic that Kant inherited started with the doctrine of concepts or terms, divided into particular and general, and built on that a doctrine of judgments, depending on how some terms were classified by others, and built on that a doctrine of consequences. It was a bottom-up form of explanation.

But for Kant, the basic unit of thought had to be the minimum unit we could take responsibility for, and that was the judgment, not the concept. He thought of concepts as functions of judgment—that is, you understand concepts in terms of the roles they play in making judgments. So, in this Kantian tradition, the beginning of wisdom in thinking about meaning is to think about the meaning that's expressed by sentences, not subsentential bits. Again in Kant, what one needs to do in taking responsibility for judgment is to integrate it with one's other commitments and to acknowledge the consequences of those commitments. To acknowledge the commitment is to give and to have reasons for it, and to give up other claims that are incompatible with it. That is, judgment consists in its broadly inferential relations to other ones.

The modern philosophical tradition of thinking about meanings starts with the notion of representation. That was Descartes' gift at the beginning of the modern period. Whereas the entire tradition of ancient and medieval philosophy had thought of the relation between appearance and reality on the model of resemblance, Descartes, looking at scientific advances, saw Copernicus telling us that the appearance of a stationary Earth and a revolving sun bore no relation of resemblance at all to the reality of a stationary sun and a revolving Earth. Galileo, saying that the Book of Nature was written in the language of geometry, had gotten the best grip anyone had gotten on the movements of the earth, by things like representing the acceleration of an object by the area of a triangle. There's no resemblance there at all. Descartes' innovation was to introduce a much more abstract notion of representation that swung free of resemblance. By doing that he also opened up a skeptical possibility that hadn't been there before resemblance.

So, in one way or another, the entire tradition focused on representation as the key to meaning, understanding, and knowledge.

JJW: The hope being it would get the world right, then? But you flipped that around.

RB: To represent it correctly. I seized on this minority inferentialist tradition that looked at what was a reason for what, and hoped to be able to recreate within that a very different picture of the mathematical successes of possible worlds theory and normative semantics. That was the aspiration. This had the advantage that giving and asking for reasons, making assertions and giving reasons for them, treating them as reasons for and against other things—that's something that people actually did. That was a social practice and it was something you could see norms governing.

It was a daunting challenge to develop a semantics based on inference that would be as sophisticated as formal representational semantics had become. One of the reasons I went to Princeton to work with Lewis was the kind of mathematical grip he had on meaning. He understood the meaning of a sentence as the set of possible worlds in which it's true, and he understood the meaning of a singular term as the object in some possible world that's picked out by it. In formal semantics, that meant if he picked up Fido as an object, and Fido walks as the set of possible worlds in which it's true that Fido walks, then we now ask, "What kind of thing is the meaning of 'walks?'" Lewis would say, "That's a function from objects to sets of possible worlds, a function from objects to worlds in which they walk." But what's the meaning of an adverb like slowly? Well, "Fido walks slowly" is also a function from objects to sets of possible worlds in which they walk slowly. So "slowly" must be represented formally by functions from functions from objects to sets of possible worlds to functions from objects to sets of possible worlds.

What we notice now is that adverbs come in two flavors, attributive ones where, if something walks slowly, then it follows that it walks. But there's also others, for instance "in your imagination" as opposed to "in the kitchen." If you walk in your imagination, it doesn't follow that you walk. Now we can say exactly what the difference is between the function from objects to sets of possible worlds that is in the kitchen and in your imagination, what the semantic difference between attributive and non-attributive adverbs consists in, in set-theoretic terms of functions. This is a kind of mathematical grip on meaning that we had never had before, and I was not willing to give up that sort of mathematical power. The question was, could one take the philosophical advantages of thinking about meaning in terms of inference, of what's a reason for what, and reproduce this kind of fine-grained mathematical representation that representational semantics had made possible?

That's what my work, *Making it Explicit*, set out to do. It was to recover that sort of formal control of the expression of fine grains of meaning in a

broadly inferentialist and pragmatist framework, instead of in the traditional representationalism. While most people who do formal semantics still do model theoretic possible worlds representational semantics, for the first time we have the possibility of some kind of binocular vision. Perhaps not surprisingly, many linguistic phenomena that were of interest to philosophers of language that were very recalcitrant to model theoretic analyses, turned out to have very natural and powerful representations on the inferentialist side. Some things that are easy on the representational side are harder on the inferentialist side. Of course, I think somebody needs to see how to bring these frameworks together better than I have yet been able to do.

It's a very different way of thinking about meaning and language, and it has been of value to people who worry about discourses that don't much resemble the language of empirical natural science, like people who are worried about the language of fiction and interested in religious language. Also, people who are interested in political speech have found thinking about the concept not in terms of how it represents the world, but rather of the circumstances of appropriate application. For instance, if you're interested in the concept of property, the inferentialist analysis says the notion of property is really a bundle of rights and responsibilities, and we should look at the circumstances under which we say that someone owns something and what the consequences of saying that they own it are. One of the advantages of that is that we see there may be other equally natural bundles of rights and responsibilities. We needn't treat ownership of real property as coming with all the rights and responsibilities a piece of portable property would have. Maybe if the land that you own has wetlands on it, you don't have as many rights with respect to it. With that notion of ownership, you would have to unbundle some of the rights and responsibilities that went before, whereas if you just are thinking in representational terms, you don't get that insight. The meaning of property is a matter of inference from the circumstances to the consequences of application that's curled up in it.

If one thinks of a pejorative expression which joins descriptive circumstances of application to evaluative consequences of application, the World War I epithet, *Boche*, has circumstances of application that someone is of German nationality and consequences of application that they're barbarous and more prone to cruelty to other Europeans. From a representationalist point of view, what are you going to say? The circumstances of application apply to some people. But if you don't want to endorse the inference from the circumstances to the consequences of application, all you can do is refuse to use the word because you don't endorse the inference that's curled up in it. You can't say that there are no *Boche* or that the *Boche* are not so bad. That's denying that the circumstances of application apply. All you can do is not use the word because you don't endorse that inference.

What philosophers need to do, and have been doing since Socrates, is making explicit those inferences that are implicit in the concepts that we use. Socrates worried about the concept of piety and its consequences of

application, since the converse of piety is blasphemy. If you are concerned about piety, what inferences are you then committed to? When they're made explicit, do you really want to endorse them? Somebody who's worrying about inference is going to look at the concept *Boche* and say, "Well, the inference is from German nationality to barbarity and cruelty, but what about Goethe and Bach?" Having made that inference explicit, now you're in a position to be critical about it. Logic, and philosophical vocabulary more generally, is the organ of semantic self-consciousness. We can say and ask for reasons for or against something, to make explicit the inferential norms that are implicit in the concepts that we're reasoning with and that shape our thought.

One of the things I had in mind in developing this view was Habermas' picture of ideological language as systematically distorted communication that involves the people who are speaking it being subject to a power that operates behind their backs because it's sedimented in the concepts. He held out the possibility of emancipatory discourses. Psychoanalysis, at an individual level, and Marxist political theory, at a more general level, aim to make explicit what's implicit in concepts like "the will of the people." The idea was, if you can bring it out into the open as something we can discuss and give and ask for reasons for, then these implicit inferences that are curled up in our concepts don't have power over us anymore. They've come into the light of day where we have the power of reasoning about them.

That's the possibility for extending our formal models of meaning beyond the paradigm of saying that the coin in my pocket is made of copper—that is, empirically describing and representing how things are. There are many things we do with language, and on this inferentialist model, I give a set of formal tools for helping us to think about the different inferential roles that expressions can play. That's a vast, ambitious project, but perhaps you can see how it brings philosophy of language and formal semantics into contact with issues about language and human life that are of more traditional philosophical importance than the representational model lends itself.

Another aspect of inferentialism that's important to realize is that the dominant form of the representationalist semantic tradition has been atomistic. The 'Fido'-Fido relation between the name and the dog, the name-naming relation, the signifier-signified relation—those are thought of as basic semantic units. You establish them one by one, whereas if you're an inferentialist in your semantics, you've got to be a holist in your understanding of meaning. What it is to be a concept is to stand in inferential relations to other concepts. That's a thought that is near and dear to Hegel's heart: the difference between Hegelian *Vernunft* and Kantian *Verstand*, is, in no small part, the difference between a holistic and an atomistic picture. What I'm doing is filling in a fundamental semantic rationale for that holism. The inferentialist picture is much friendlier to the idea of conceptual contents as evolving historically, as the holistic network of inferential relations evolves.

One further consequence of this holism is that, whereas the representational semantics of classical analytic philosophy worked in units of, at most, a sentence in thinking about meaning, the inferentialist picture lends itself to thinking about texts as well as single sentences. It lends itself to thinking about the contribution to the inferential role of a set or sequence of sentences, every bit as much as it does to the meaning of individual sentences.

JJW: I want to make sure to ask you more about your career and how you came to do what you do. You mentioned that you went to Yale. I also read that you grew up in New York. I'm curious what kind of background you had.

RB: I grew up in the New York suburbs. My dad was an electrical engineer and he changed jobs every three or four years, so we grew up lots of different places—Stamford, Connecticut, Glastonbury, Connecticut, and Ridgewood, New Jersey were the longest places.

JJW: Who did he work for?

RB: Different companies, but always in the New York area. My wife also grew up in the New York suburbs and we knew nothing about middle-sized cities, so it was a revelation to us to move to Pittsburgh, and we were quite taken with it.

JJW: I assume you were a good student because you went to Yale. And at Yale, if I recall, you majored in math? How did you come to develop your interest in philosophy?

RB: Math major, minor in philosophy. I went there thinking to do math and did finish the major, but I came to think that I would never be really first-rate as a mathematician. Yale had, and has, one of the world's best math departments. It's a high standard. And, particularly in my secondary courses and model theory courses, I came to be fascinated with the problem of representation, and this moved me philosophy-wards. I'd had philosophical interests anyway from reading Bertrand Russell in high school, and at Yale I got my first taste both of formal semantics (possible worlds semantics of the David Lewis kind was just in its first flourishing in the late sixties), and I also had a charismatic intellectual history teacher in the philosophy department, Bruce Kuklick, who taught American pragmatism. He had just written his Josiah Royce book and was writing his history of the Harvard philosophy department at the time.

JJW: *The Rise of American Philosophy*? That's a formidable book.

RB: Right. So I had, on the one hand, the mathematical interest, and on the other hand, the historical interest, and I came to think philosophy was the place to pursue that. The Yale philosophy department at that point, by and large, was not the place to do it, although Richmond Thomason, the wonderful philosophical logician who was later to become my colleague at Pittsburgh, was there, and he was the one who introduced me to possible worlds semantics and the mathematics of meaning. At this point, Princeton was the premiere graduate program in philosophy.

JJW: Mathematics makes sense, leading you to formal logic, but I wasn't aware that Kuklick was your teacher. Kuklick was very much an intellectual historian, so that accounts for *Tales of the Mighty Dead* in a way, and your interest in Rorty.

RB: My most recent book, *Perspectives on Pragmatism*, is dedicated to Kuklick. He was a very important influence on me, initiating me into real intellectual history, with the principle that no responsible intellectual historian would dare to pronounce on what Hegel meant by such and such without having (a) read every word the man had written, and (b) ideally read everything he had read. Indeed, this is a demanding set of standards and would basically preclude anyone ever writing about a figure like Hegel. But still, the ideal is important, and I've tried to hold it in my long gestating Hegel book, *A Spirit of Trust*.

Kuklick convinced me, by example, how important intellectual history is, and he was the first one who put Rorty's books in my hand. He showed me that one had to choose between being reactive to the historical literature in the way that my Princeton teacher Gilbert Harman epitomized—he refused to read anything that was published more than five years ago—or one could look at it and try to see the assumptions that were invisible to people at the time but that became visible in the distance. For instance, Kuklick looked at the debates around Royce, where one realizes just how parochial the assumptions that people are working with. The question was, without waiting eighty years, is it possible to do something like that in one's own time? One way to do it, first of all, is to have a lot of examples to get a good sense of perspective. Second, to get a running start on the questions we unpack the inferences that are curled up in the concepts that are common currency in contemporary debates, so as to make various assumptions visible and self-conscious.

JJW: During your Yale years, which were in the late 1960s and early '70s, it was a controversial time. Were you involved in any politics or protests?

RB: We weren't, but in the spring of 1970, which was the spring of the Kent State shootings, Bobby Seale and the Black Panthers were put on trial at the federal courthouse in New Haven. That was the center of Yale's political

activity at the time, and where the National Guard was called in. So we were fully involved in that.

JJW: You were?

RB: I was, only as part of the medical team. I was washing tear gas out of people's eyes. That was where I felt I could make a difference.

It was definitely a memorable time. When I went to Princeton in the fall of 1972, my teacher and later on, colleague, Clark Glymour, who had a sign at the door that said, "Let none ignorant of differential geometry enter these halls," not infrequently taught wearing a full set of buckskins, with footlong fringes coming off of them and an eighteen inch dagger strapped to his boot. And Saul Kripke, the most eminent philosophical genius of his generation, preferred to crawl rather than walk in the seminar room, and had other, similar foibles. It was a very colorful bunch of people, that only at the tail end of the seventies would one have found.

Harvard had, for the whole history of American philosophy, been the center of American philosophy and still had the giants Quine and Goodman and Rawls, but it had ossified through its inability to hire junior people because of its system, where there was almost no promotion to tenure from assistant professors. So Princeton had wisely hired the very best graduate students from a ten-year period coming out of Harvard, which helped make the department the very best.

JJW: That can get sort of ingrown, too, though.

RB: It could. At the time I joined them in '72, there was something like a school philosophy, certainly a consensus about what philosophy was and how it was properly done, and more than a little consensus about how things worked. Rorty and I stood outside that consensus in the things we were interested in and the ways we were interested in them. Mostly, students had to decide whether to be in or out, but I was in the privileged position that people like Kripke and David Lewis appreciated my formal work and semantics sufficiently that they were willing to forgive the idiosyncrasy of my caring about pragmatism and Rorty. And Rorty didn't have any problem with me having these other interests. He himself didn't share them, because he thought nothing of any philosophical significance to him had ever happened within three feet in any direction of a quantifier symbol, whereas I came into philosophy because of formal semantics.

So I had a foot in each camp and an ear, as it were, for each mouth, and thought that I was in a position that C. I. Lewis was with respect to James and Royce, and Quine was with respect to Carnap and Lewis. And I think this has stood me in good stead. I think analytic philosophy has happily evolved from that and certainly Princeton has. It's not a thuggish analytic department now. Nor is Harvard.

JJW: It seems clear now that it was a different era in the university. You were at Princeton for four years, from 1972 to '76?

RB: I only had money for four years. Barb [his wife] was in medical school. She was going to be moving for her internship somewhere, so we knew going in that I was going to do it in four years. It was already a ferocious job market. When I went to Princeton, Hartry Field, now at NYU, which is probably the premiere contemporary philosophy department, had just been hired from Harvard. He was a Hilary Putnam student, and the year he was on the job market, departments had started experimenting with gang interviewing, for instance, interviewing five people at once, and saying, "Number 2, what do you think about what Number 4 just said?" And Hartry, who was the premiere candidate his year, simply refused to participate in this. As a result, the American Philosophical Association moved to prevent the practice, so he single-handedly ended it.

I only applied to two places when I came out, to Harvard and to Pittsburgh, because Barbara needed to go through the medical school match, and those were places she could go. We picked them because, well, Harvard was Harvard, and Wilfrid Sellars was at Pittsburgh and he was my hero, as he was Rorty's. My Princeton classmate got the Harvard job and I got the Pittsburgh job, and that was wonderful. But my view was, if it didn't work out, I was going to write this stuff anyway. Academia was the perfect place to do it, but it wasn't the only way to do it, and if, after a couple of years, I didn't get an academic job, I could do something with formal chops. I could do computers, which would have been fine, but it would be my job, and my work would still be writing philosophy. Of course, the ideal thing is if your job is doing your work, and I have been very fortunate that they coincide.

So Princeton was wonderful for me. Their view was that, as they charmingly put it, philosophy was a contact sport. It's by and large done *viva voce* and face to face, so all of the big milestones were some kind of oral presentation or exam. In the first semester, the first big hurdle was being examined by five faculty members on a philosopher of one's choice, and any question about that philosopher was fair game. So you knew you had to work somebody up.

JJW: Who did you choose?

RB: Spinoza. The result was a paper that I then published as a graduate student and reprinted in *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, which diagnosed Spinoza as having a theory of meaning in terms of the relations of ideas instead of what they represented. So it was the first stirrings of an inferentialist picture. Then each year that one was a PhD candidate, one needed to present one's work to the department and be questioned about it by this very demanding, smart, and vocal set of faculty members, and final public orals were indeed public.

All of the graduate students and a bunch of the faculty would come to them. So you were always thinking on your feet. I spent eighteen years writing *Making It Explicit* because working things out in the cool twilight hour and being able to spend a year thinking about a point that seemed important mattered so much to me. But I was also happy enough to do the real-time debate format. Many people were not, and it was a sieve they put everybody through. For many years, they didn't understand that there were different ways that people could be. There still is a gunslinger aspect to the ethos of analytic philosophy. I would say NYU today has got that.

JJW: It's very boy-oriented, like rough sport. I doubt there were many women there. Were there any?

RB: Indeed. There were some women who have gone on to eminence. Janet Broughton, recently Dean of Arts and Sciences at Berkeley, was the one who got the Harvard job that year. Also in our relatively small class was Rebecca Goldstein, who had her career at Barnard, but she's gone on to a distinguished career as a novelist, using her philosophical background but by no means restricting her audience there. And a year behind us but who had been my classmate at Yale, is Susan Wolf, who is one of the handful of philosophers, along with John McDowell and me, who won the Mellon Distinguished Achievement in the Humanities awards. So we had very talented women, but it is true that only somewhere between 20 and 25 percent of philosophy graduate students in the U.S. are women. That's many fewer than in the humanities and I think the culture of it has something to do with that.

JJW: When you moved to Pitt, what it was like to adjust to the department, particularly with a strong figure like Sellars? You've spoken well of it, but I can see disadvantages of that.

RB: This is the only job I've ever held or wanted. I was thrilled, but it has to be said that Sellars was a very solitary thinker, and even though I worked on his stuff, he didn't really want to talk about it much. I came in 1976 and he died in '89, and he was not at the top of his form by the time I came. Every once in a while, I could make an appointment, sit down in his office and put questions to him, but mostly he didn't want to chat. Once, in my second year, a student came in and asked me about an article that I'd published as a graduate student from my dissertation, "Truth and Assertibility." He had some questions about it and we talked about it. I was gratified, and at the end I said, "How did you run across it?" He said, "Oh, Wilfrid Sellars had us read it in his seminar." I was, "Oh!" Next time I saw Wilfrid, I said, "I heard from a graduate student that you had been reading some of my stuff in seminar." He said, "Yup." I said, "Oh, you didn't say anything to me. You

must know how thrilled I would be at your doing this." He said, "It's none of your damn business what I teach in my seminar."

JJW: That's a good story.

RB: But this department, partly through Sellar's influence, was always tremendously welcoming of people who did things that were not particularly mainstream. They had their standards for doing philosophy well, but they didn't care what or who it was.

JJW: Sellars himself was anomalous and had his own path, too.

RB: He definitely was. He was almost alone of the major figures of his time in analytic philosophy in being both a historically rooted and systemati- cally oriented philosopher. Both of those were very congenial to me. And the department has in common with the very top departments—we've never been ranked below fifth nationally—that they made up their own minds.

JJW: I can see that. You wrote *Making It Explicit* over a long period of time, and it was your first book. Usually the pressure is to write one's first book quickly. So I assume they understood what you were doing and let you have time.

RB: That took as long as it took because it was only going to be as strong as its weakest part, so it took a lot of tinkering to work out the possibilities of inferentialism to the point where it was plausible that it was as rich a vein of thought as representationalism had been, which was worked out over many years by many people, and to do the synthetic integration of it with other figures in the philosophy of language of the preceding thirty years. That took me eighteen years. I've now been at the Hegel book for thirty years.

JJW: Have you been working on it all along?

RB: I started it in 1980. I didn't actually read Hegel as a graduate student. My picture of this peculiar genre of inferentially articulated creative nonfiction that I write in is symphonic, or something like that. It is a great big, intricate, complicated, systematic work. As a result, *Making It Explicit* takes a stand on issues in just about every subfield of philosophy, and there aren't many books that try to do that. So it was an experiment, and I did not anticipate that the profession would respond as positively to it as they have. I was perfectly prepared for it to go out there and be unreviewed and have no influence at all. I had the example of Peirce. The important thing was to get it said. I also had a Hegelian faith that nothing is for nothing and somebody someday will appreciate this. It was a funny fact that it was well received and has continued to be. There aren't many philosophy books that,

twenty years later, people are still writing about. I'm pleased that there's enough substance to it that people are going to keep finding things that are interesting to write about.

JJW: I wanted to ask you about "the Pittsburgh School." Obviously you were influenced by Sellars, but as you said, you didn't necessarily have long conversations with him. Do you have a lot interchange with your colleagues? In talks, as at Princeton? Or is it just a cluster of people circulating around issues in analytic philosophy, but also not afraid to look elsewhere?

RB: I want to distinguish the culture of the philosophy department here, which is and has always been fabulous. In the graduate program, for instance, we've never had differential funding for graduate students, whereas the Princeton program was pyramidal and competitive. And it has been very welcoming of people who want to work on non-mainstream stuff and set the standards for how well you do it. It's entirely up to you what you work on. That's what I think is the greatest strength of the Pitt philosophy department.

That's a distinct thing from talk about the Pittsburgh School as a substantive philosophical view. There's two contingently coincident traditions there. One of them is downstream from Sellars. It was Rorty's reading of Sellars that turned me onto him and, although I never got to talk to Wilfrid as much as I talked to Rorty, nonetheless it was thrilling. To the graduate students who worked on his stuff, that is a common language. One of the reasons we were able to recruit John McDowell form Oxford was because he was interested in Sellars.

In the recent book, called *The Pittsburgh School*, which talks about Sellars, McDowell, and RB, Chauncey Maher focuses on what we draw from and how we think with Sellars' ideas. Sellars thought of himself of a reader of Kant. When asked what he hoped his contribution to philosophy would be, he said he hoped to usher analytic philosophy from its Humean phase into its Kantian phase—that is, from its atomistic, empiricist, positivist phase into a Kantian normative phase. Rorty described my aspiration as moving analytic philosophy from its incipient Kantian phase into its eventual Hegelian phase, which is about right.

The other thing is that, while John McDowell already had an interest in Kant but not published anything on Kant, after he came here and sat in on my seminar on Hegel's *Phenomenology*, he could see Hegel as a reader of Kant. So German idealism became something like a workbench for working out our agreements and disagreements. This coincidence of interest, in Sellars and in German idealism, were and are both oddball, non-mainstream interests, if you quantify over Anglophone philosophy generally. Besides talking about the Pittsburgh School, people also talk about the Pittsburgh neo-Hegelians, which describes John and me. John and I have had very fruitful interactions and written about each other's stuff a lot, and to many in the mainstream, we look very close. There's a lot that we agree with each other about and

disagree with almost everyone else about. But what we find fascinating is that we go along together 90 percent of the way and then the 10 percent is in diametrically opposed directions and neither of us can quite see how the other can be so right-headed about all of these things which hardly anybody agrees with us about, and then, unaccountably, go off the rails in this way. So it's very stimulating for both of us.

I think not a few people look at the direction John and I have gone, from perfectly respectable analytic backgrounds and having done perfectly respectable analytic work, and see it as indicative of an opening up of analytic philosophy and taking it in a good direction. I won't say that's a majority view, but a significant minority are happy about it.

JJW: Rorty has two essays in the third volume of his *Collected Papers* about you and McDowell. I imagine it would be gratifying to have your teacher write on your work and take it seriously. But he does have one hard criticism and he slips it in at the end of the McDowell essay, where he talks about your work as only speaking to a few people inside philosophy. He of course thought philosophy should aspire to a greater public calling, which he thinks was lost when it became professionalized. He does say that you exercise professional rigor, but he criticizes this dimension of your work. It does seem to be true that your work is legible primarily within philosophy, and maybe only a small corner of it. How would you answer that?

RB: Well, it's a fair cop. I do have the view that the ultimate endpoint of the philosophy of language should be a political theory. For Habermasian reasons, I think that political norms, even more than moral norms (but them as well), end up being a matter of making explicit things that are implicit in living a life of giving and asking for reasons and acknowledging inferential norms. This is Habermas' vision of political theory that's founded on a theory of communications, on philosophy of language. Habermas is interested in *Making It Explicit* because he sees it as potentially a foundation in the philosophy of language of the sort he had aspired to for, ultimately, a liberal political theory. He realized that he'd had very little to say justifying the connection between meaning and what he calls validity claims, and my normative pragmatics and inferential semantics gave a justification for connecting just these things. So he was interested to see if you put *Making It Explicit* into his machinery, what political theory would you get at the other end.

But unlike Rorty and Habermas, I don't aspire to be a public intellectual in the mode of James and Dewey, or Rorty and Habermas. Rorty made a distinction between researchers working in some disciplinary matrix, and intellectuals who were concerned with how the culture hangs together in the larger sense. I have intellectual interests but I am, in the end, a professional philosopher and a professionalized philosopher. I don't think that the place I have to stand in thinking about highly theoretical or abstract issues and about discursive practice and the nature of meaning puts me in any better

position to pronounce on the political issues of the day than a retired neuro-physiologist has.

Of course, I have my own views, and I do care about what's going on. But I don't think I have any particular expertise that equips me to contribute to that conversation, whereas Rorty thought that that was what was distinctive about philosophy. He was desperately disappointed by it—that's the conviction that had gotten him into philosophy, like Catholicism and Marxism, which promised the same sort of thing and also desperately disappointed him. But that didn't mean he didn't feel the tug, and I think in his case, as in Habermas' case, they were the rare individuals who could turn their philosophical expertise, in terms of professionalized philosophy, or their philosophical talents to the task of being public intellectuals. I have, relative to most philosophers and certainly to most people as professionalized as I am, more aspirations to talk about other corners of the high culture than most philosophers do. I do want new perspectives on language that I'm developing to be available to people who are thinking about us as talking, rational creatures, which is certainly anybody in the humanities, and cognitive scientists as well. But that's the result of my professional researches. So, as I say, in the end it's a fair cop.

JJW: That seems fair enough, but you do use a language of commitment and obligation, in how inferential statements work in relation to each other and have a normative goal. It's not purely linguistic and seems to beg the question of social relevance, but not quite going there.

RB: I am, with Hegel, aiming at providing conceptual tools for improving our self-consciousness. That's what consciousness means: our self-control over becoming who we are. I often talk about my aspiration to do formal semantics with an edifying intent. That is, I'm elaborating a picture of what kind of creature we are from this way of thinking about the normative articulation of our discursive being, and that is the essential defining feature of us. I'm somewhere between modest and skeptical about my capacity to apply those in a way that draws practical conclusions for people or for communities. In some sense, that's what they're for. But developing the tools is one thing, and applying them in concrete circumstances to move us not within traditional philosophy but in our public deliberations about what we're to do and who we're to be—that's something I don't think of as a topic that admits expertise. Again, that's to see it through the lenses of professionalization.

For my own view, I think it's a good thing that philosophy became professionalized. It's done better what it does. But that does not mean that somebody acting in their capacity not as researchers but as intellectuals cannot use these tools in the wider culture.

JJW: It strikes me, as I mentioned before, that the general leaning of your work is about the relation of things, which has some resonance with

contemporary literary theory. For instance, people in literary studies use Saussure, particularly to underscore the point that meaning is created relationally. Do you see any bridges or have any interchange with criticism and theory?

RB: From the outside, I believe that theory desperately needs a better way of thinking about language than it has had. De Saussure and the poststructuralists' use of him is a prime example because de Saussure did not ever make a Kantian transition from thinking about signs and signifieds to thinking about sentences. He's pre-Kantian in that way. And Derrida, in his early poststructuralist life in particular, often reasons in a way constrained by that de Saussurian picture: "If the way to think about these signifiers is not because of the relation to signifieds, then it must be just a relation of signifiers to signifiers." Well, no. The right level to think about that semantic holism has got to be sentences, not signifiers. And the very worst way you could apply that apparatus is to say that what signifiers signify is other signifiers. There's a serious technical job of making sense of semantic holism that I don't think the literary critics are properly equipped to bring off, but that they desperately need the results of.

There are critiques of semantic holism by Jerry Fodor, for instance, that need to be engaged with and thought about. And this comes up in Hegel, who was the first one who tried to think these things through. But it can't just be relations all the way down. That actually is unintelligible. There's a criteria of adequacy that traditional analytic philosophy of language was very good at laying down for getting fundamental linguistic phenomena right. Now, I'm not sufficiently interested or long-lived to want to take on the task of trying to see how things that matter to the literary theory people would look like if one transposed them into an inferentialist key or into a post-Kantian key. But I think that's a job for someone to do.

JJW: For a closing question, I'd like to ask about how you reflect on your career, perhaps about things that you're gratified with, or lessons you've learned.

RB: "Baseball has been very, very good to me." I went into philosophy for the only reason that anybody should, which was I just couldn't help it. And my intent was to get the very best professional education one could get, which I did at Princeton. But I wanted to think about other things that my teachers weren't thinking about, by and large, and so my expectation was that I would be writing in the wilderness and never particularly recognized within the profession, so I was astonished and gratified that that was not true. In fact, my big book was taken not only to be ambitious but to be sufficiently successful that people had to worry about it.

I do think I've been in a fortunate place, as far as rising tides of interest are concerned, so that I can write with some confidence that at least some people

will pay attention to it and be thinking about connections between what I'm doing now and what I've done before. I have had different impulses than mainstream analytic philosophy has had, and while that has not made me mainstream, or moved the mainstream very much, people have been remarkably open to it. So the sense that I have a contemporary audience of people who care about this stuff, enough to care about it and write on it—that's not only all I ever wanted, but it is so much more than I ever thought one could get.