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## Commentary on Zarebski

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# Commentary on Tomasz Zarebski: “How is Dissensus Possible in Consensual Theories? Habermas and Brandom”

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It is trivial that not all agreement is rational. As we all know, or at least suspect, for almost every instance of an actual agreement among participants in discourse that is normatively binding beyond the constraints of positive law or socialized ethics there is always at least one example of a pathological compact that claims to be consensual when in fact it is not. But is there such a thing as rational dissensus? Can we speak of a principled disagreement between reasonable and self-transparent individuals who freely exchange validity claims against the practical-theoretical background formed by mutually verifiable epistemic facts and universalizable practical norms? Based on a comparative analysis of Habermas and Brandom, Zarebski sides with the latter in order to argue that the notion of rational dissensus is not a contradiction in terms. I disagree. Against Zarebski, and based on a different reading of the Habermas-Brandom exchange, I argue that Habermas is right and Brandom wrong, at least as far as the question of rational dissensus is concerned.

There seem to be two reasons for this. First, on Brandom’s theory dissensus, just like consensus, may be norm-based, but not necessarily rational, or at least not in the way in which the notion of practical (or moral) rationality is conceived of since Kant. (It would be useful to add here that Brandom also claims to subscribe to Kant’s conception of practical reason as autonomy, or self-legislation.) This is particularly important in the present context of discussion. For, as Habermas puts it, “Norms have to be established ‘rationally’ in accord with norms of reason, and this process therefore cannot itself provide the model for an explanation of normativity.” (Habermas 2003, p. 140) Moreover, since according to Habermas Brandom assimilates norms of rationality in the broadest sense to norms of action, he fails to take into account the fact that “being affected by reasons is... a different matter than being obliged by norms.” The latter “bind the will of agents,” whereas the former “direct their minds.” (Ibid.)

What Brandom can account for is the institution of social normativity through linguistic communication. Now, to the extent that normativity in this sense also happens to be externally compatible with practical rationality as self-legislation, the notion of rational consensus does not reveal any significant differences between Habermas and Brandom, as Zarebski correctly indicates in his paper. However, the notion of rational dissensus is more problematic for Habermas because unlike Brandom he cannot reduce the validity base of moral norms to what is epistemically justified and thus to social

normativity. There may well be room for dissensus in Habermas's theory, but dissensus for him cannot be rational in the required practical sense.

In his defense, Brandom claims that his social account of conceptual normativity, which Habermas does not challenge, makes it impossible for him to carve out a privileged position for the kind of moral rationality that Habermas identifies as foundational with respect to all practical norms. (Brandom 2000, p. 365) This is a fair observation. However, Brandom also points out that his explanation of social normativity does not exclude the emergence of moral normativity (or rationality) out of pre-existing normative contexts. (Brandom 2000, p. 366) As he puts it, the "road to ethics is paved by logic." (Brandom 2000, pp. 372) This may well be so. Nevertheless, it remains unclear just how this transition from logic to ethics is supposed to obtain without the guidance of some preliminary notion of practical rationality that is not reducible to the competent use of concepts. Which brings us back to Habermas' initial objection.

There is also a second reason why 'rational dissensus' seems to be such a misnomer. In Habermas's interpretation, Brandom's notion of consensus is nothing more than a descriptive label. It is what an external observer (the "scorekeeper") uses to confirm that the participants in communication appear to have reached an understanding of each other's position in the space of reasons. But this is not the same as determining that the speakers truly achieved consensus. Correct concept use adds no value to will formation. Brandom can meaningfully speak of rational dissensus only because its contradictory, or rational consensus is not fully captured by his theory to begin with. And if there is no real consensus, there can be no true dissensus, either.

Why is this so? Habermas claims that Brandom's understanding of linguistic communication (*Verständigung*) is based on a flawed model of information transmission from sender to addressee. In his words, "Brandom construes what he calls the 'I-thou relation' as the relation between a first person who raises validity claims and a third person who attributes validity claims to the first." (Habermas 2003, p. 162) The scorekeeper is the spectator who assesses the utterances exchanged by the two speakers, but not the "addressee who is expected to *reply to the speaker*." (Ibid.) This would directly account for the difference between what Habermas calls Brandom's "one-sided understanding of another" and Habermas' own position, or the "mutual understanding of each other." Whereas the former explains the kind of meaning understanding that is typical of action coordination (unsurprisingly, Brandom's examples of consensual activities refer to deeply strategic games like baseball, or to the kind of tacit adjustment to a partner's reactions as in ballroom dancing), the latter brings into the equation the dimension of intersubjective recognition that is characteristic of interpersonal cooperation and social integration. (Habermas 2003, p. 165) Action coordination, however, is not the same as unity of will (or consensus).

Now, Brandom is probably right that achieving consensus in Habermas' sense cannot be the whole point of linguistic practice. (Brandom 2000, p. 363) But achieving practical consensus cannot be reduced to the epistemic justification of assertions, either. I wonder if Zarebski's defense of rational dissensus along Brandomian lines can truly account for this difference.

To conclude, the notion of rational dissensus is available to Brandom but not to Habermas only because 'rational' for Brandom means much less than it does for Habermas. As well, the meaning of 'consensus' in Brandom is restricted to the correct

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use of rules of inference, which says nothing about the motivational component of interpersonal communication. If anything, the possibility of rational dissensus as Brandom conceives it provides additional confirmation of Habermas' claim that competent communication is the necessary, yet not sufficient condition of practical rationality.

[link to paper](#)

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