

Representation, intentionality, and the epistemological problem of the other minds

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Representation

What is the nature of representation? What kinds of things can be representations and what is the nature of the objects of representation? Representation can be perceived simply as something that represents something else or itself. Thus, through the phrase “ x represents y ”, it becomes clear that representation constitutes a relation between two things. Here, we shall deal with cases of representation in human mind and language. How is it possible to use a number, a picture, a word or a sentence in order to represent a natural property, a natural object, a state of things, a particular person or any other mental condition? Besides, given that the non existence of an imaginary entity does not prevent us from representing it mentally, how is it possible to represent inexistent things, such as the maximum first number? In other words, how can we perceive and talk about something? Are thoughts somehow made up of mental representations? Are there any forms of representation that are more fundamental than others? For example, can we explain the way in which language represents something in terms of representational abilities of the mind, or is it necessary to explain mental representations in terms of language?

The way in which *pictures* represent seems to be intuitively more comprehensible than any other form of representation. In this case, the answer to the question of how a particular kind of representation succeeds in representing something is that the picture represents things through its resemblance with those things: x represents y because of the resemblance between them. However, what would the idea that pictorial representation depends from the resemblance between x and y , between the picture and what it represents, signify? It would mean that the relation of resemblance between x and y is an efficient and necessary condition for x to represent y . In this case, the *resemblance theory of pictorial rep-*

resentation as it has been termed, should be able to constitute the basis for the explanation of other forms of representation in terms of pictoriality.¹

The claim that resemblance is an efficient condition for pictorial representation would be equivalent to the following claim: “if *x* resembles *y*, then *x* represents *y* pictorially”. Nevertheless, there are significant problems with this claim that render it unacceptable. Firstly, due to the ambiguity that characterises the term “resemblance”, everything may resemble something else, simply on the basis of one common characteristic. Even if we limited this particular ambiguity through the following reformulation: “if *x* resembles *y* in one aspect, then *x* represents *y*”, the problem would not be resolved. It is obvious that the partial resemblance between two things is not sufficient for the possibility of representation of the one by the other. It would be a commonplace and a circular definition of the concept of representation to define resemblance as the relation in which “*x* resembles *y* from the standpoint of the characteristics that may potentially make *x* represent *y*”. The second problem that arises from the use of the concept of resemblance is linked to its characteristic as a symmetrical relation, i.e. that “if *x* resembles *y*, then *y* resembles *x*”. The symmetry of resemblance as an efficient condition for representation compels us to consider each thing as a representation of its representation.

The fact that resemblance is not an efficient condition for pictorial representation does not mean that it cannot be a necessary condition: “if *x* represents *y* pictorially, then *x* resembles *y*”. However, this does not seem to be valid, at least comparatively. The caricature of someone may resemble him/her much less than the photograph of someone else (Wittgenstein 1974: §V). Consequently, even when a picture truly resembles what it represents, other factors should converge in order to allow the respective resemblance to enable representation. The fact that resemblance may be a necessary condition of pictorial representation does not render true the idea that resemblance can explain sufficiently how pictures represent.

It would probably be useful to take into account the fact that pictures often do not speak for themselves and require interpretation. We see pictures in the light of certain assertions, in the context in which we interpret them. Pictures are not interpretations on their own. In this sense, the resemblance theory of pictorial representation does not explain the nature of the concept of representation.

Nevertheless, even if we had a satisfactory theory of pictorial representation, it would not be possible to explain all other forms of representation through it. The reason that points to such a claim is that if pictures require interpretation,

then it is not helpful to suggest that this interpretation has to be another picture, given that the latter would also require interpretation. Still, the awareness of the limits of pictorial representation provides us with useful evidence over the nature of representation in general. What pictorial representations can surely not do is to represent particular kinds of relations between linguistic expressions, such as if...then, either...or, and not. In other words, there are things that can only be represented through language.

How do *words* and *linguistic sentences* represent things? One explanation of linguistic representation utilises the concept of *convention*. When the speakers of a language sign up to a convention that stipulates that the words that they use signify the same things for all and agree on this, then they achieve communication.² In this case, we must clarify how convention is defined. If we define convention as the act of “using a word in order to represent something”, it is difficult to see how a convention explains representation, since the concept of convention is explained through the concept of representation.

Similar difficulties are faced by the signification of linguistic representation through the connection of words with *ideas*, which the speakers intend to express when they use words, the latter conceived as “sensible marks of ideas” (Locke 1975: B III, sec. 2, §1). In order to define the representationality of words, ideas are used, perceived as images in the mind, as mental images. Here, the explanation of linguistic representation through the *mental image theory of ideas* is attempted either on the condition that a convention of some kind is secured that enables the connection of a particular word to the idea that one has in his/her mind, or on the basis of a psychological interpretation of the association of words and ideas that the words represent. In accordance with the traditional problems that accompany the theory of ideas as mental images (Pournari 1994: 24-53) the following question arises: is mental image an image of a particular thing, or an image of the general category in which the latter belongs? In the second case, it is difficult to imagine what the image of a general concept would resemble.³ One way or another, there are linguistic expressions, such as the ones that were mentioned earlier, that do not associated with mental images. Thus, linguistic representation cannot be defined with the help of ideas as mental images. If we do not want to attempt the opposite, i.e. the explanation of the representational nature of ideas through words, then what we need and is missing is to learn how the world is represented through mental situations, i.e. to investigate the nature of mental representations.

Intentionality

How do mental states represent something? (Field 1978: 9-61, Fodor, 1981, Silvers 1989). Mental states, such as perceptions, beliefs, desires, hopes, wishes, fears, expectations and intentions, represent the world and, in this sense, they are considered as thoughts for the world, when they are directed towards something. The most interesting thoughts philosophically are those that represent *situations in space and time* or *possible facts*, as well as the different *attitudes* that are adopted towards these states. These thoughts have been termed by B. Russell as *propositional attitudes* (Russell 1921: sec. 12), defined as mental states that can be described schematically as “Ay that S”, where “A” symbolises someone who is into a mental state, “y” his/her attitude towards this situation and “S” the situation that is represented mentally. For a better understanding of the term “propositional attitude”, it is necessary to note that the adjective “propositional” is linked to the situation and not to the sentence as a linguistic entity. Therefore, a mental state has a representational content when it can be described as a propositional attitude in the form of, for example, “A’ believes that it is raining outside”. The representational content of this belief, that “it is raining outside”, is the situation for which the mental state of the subject of representation stands.⁴

The representational nature of mental states has been philosophically described with the technical term *intentionality*.⁵ According to Brentano, what distinguishes mental from natural phenomena is the fact that mental phenomena expose this direction, are for something, refer to something; on the contrary, natural phenomena do not have intentionality.

The claim that only mental phenomena expose intentionality can be divided into two specific claims: first, that all mental states expose intentionality, i.e. that mentality is an efficient condition for intentionality; and second, that only mental states expose intentionality, i.e. that mentality is a necessary condition for intentionality. As far as the efficient condition is concerned, we can observe that the mental character of the feelings, such as pain, does not seem, at least in principle, to constitute an efficient condition for pain to have intentionality.⁶ However, if we consider the meaning of the concept of intentionality as “a direction on something”, then it is not true that pain has no intentionality, although it does not constitute a propositional attitude in the meaning of Russell.⁷ Even if pain is not the appropriate counter-example for the contestation of the thesis that mentality is an efficient condition for intentionality, this thesis is not valid given that there are mental situations without representational content.

Are minds the only things in the world that have intentionality? A positive response to this question seems plausible, provided that we distinguish between the internal, *genuine* intentionality of the mind and the *derivative* intentionality of e.g. a book. While the sentences of a book have meaning, represent things, and consequently have *in a sense* intentionality, the book as such does not have intelligence. However, in this case we cannot accept that mentality is a necessary condition for intentionality. If, of course, we accept that both the sentences of the author in a book and the interpretation of a reader of this book have intentionality, but that the latter is not of the same kind, then the issue becomes one of terminology, whose further clarification involves the ways through which we perceive our mentality.

No matter how we perceive representation, as pictorial, linguistic or mental, its interpretation can only be attributed to the mind that provides it. Therefore, if interpretation is a product of mental representation or intentionality, then in order to understand representation we have to understand the representational situations of the mind and the nature of our intelligence *per se*. In other words, the problem of representation and mental representation depends on the question of what it means to be intelligent.

What is then the nature of human intelligence? This question is examined in the context of the philosophy of mind, while its relevant answer is included in a way in every single scientific explanation of the states and activities of the human mind. The thesis according to which mental states do not constitute a kind of natural situations is supported by the intuitive perception of common sense. A more elaborate standpoint supports the same thesis: Some mental states have the property to refer to situations of external reality; they have intentionality. On the contrary, a natural situation cannot refer to or represent something. In other words, a natural situation does not have intentional characteristics. Since intentionality is a distinctive feature of mental state, and since no natural situation can have this characteristic, we can conclude that mental states cannot be reduced to natural situations – and that something similar is valid for mental representations.

The counter-argument could be succinctly articulated as follows: Mental states can only be natural. Otherwise, it would be extremely difficult to explain the interaction between mental states and bodily, natural activities. There would be no describable mechanisms capable of describing the causal connections between natural and non-natural activities, thus leading to the so-called problem of mental causation. In addition, it would be impossible to explain the emergence of intellect in the evolutionary development of life. Consequently, there is no scien-

tific explanation of mental states and activities unless they are considered as of a natural kind; mental representations must be reduced to natural situations of some kind.

The up until today unanswered questions concerning the nature of human intelligence and, more precisely, the interaction between the mind and the body, do not seem to solve the problem of the mental representation. *What* we know about the mind can only be associated with *how* we know our mind or the mind of others. However, the introspective way of the partial but direct access to our mental states and activities is not symmetrical to the way in which we know the thoughts of others. Therefore, the understanding of human intelligence comes up against *the sceptical problem of other minds*.

The epistemological problem of other minds

In our attempt to respond to the ontological problem of the nature of mental representations, we confront the following epistemological problem:⁸ How do we justify our belief in the existence of other minds? The way in which each subject of knowledge knows the mental states of his/her mind is different from the way in which the subject knows the mental states of other minds. The introspective access to our mental situations is unmediated. The directness of access to our mental contents allows us to understand them in a way that differs from the way in which we know the mental contents of other minds. Often, we seem to be sure of what they think; nevertheless, our knowledge of their mental states is never direct, let alone irrefutable or exhaustive. What we conclude about whatever others understand is indirect knowledge, mediated by the behavioural expressions and their actions. Therefore, the epistemological problem of the asymmetry of our mind and the mind of others consists of the following two conclusions: First, we have direct knowledge of a part of the mental states of our own mind only. Second, we do not have a direct knowledge of the mental states of other minds.

The asymmetry between our own mental states and the mental states of others is characterised by the difference between the direct and the indirect character of their knowledge respectively. The fact that we are capable of indirectly “observing” the mental situations of other minds through linguistic or other behaviour, does not exempt us from the necessity to justify why we construct the belief over the existence of other minds. When we observe the bodily behav-

iours, speech-acts and actions of somebody else, then we draw connections between his/her behaviour that is observable, and his/her mental contents that are non-observable. Nevertheless, these are coincidental correlations, which constitute reductions of the mental states into externally describable behaviours. If there were symmetry between the two standpoints, then we would have the ability – which we lack – to directly observe the mental states of others, as if we were they.

Two of the characteristic responses to the epistemological problem of other minds could be articulated as follows: First, the traditional response to the problem of asymmetry utilises the proportional inference of the belief in other minds from the similarities that these minds have with our own mind: Under similar circumstances, other people behave like we do, and their brain has a physical-chemical composition that is similar to our brain. We know directly that we have beliefs, desires and feelings. Based on the hypothesis of similarity, they, like us, have similar beliefs, desires and feelings.

Nevertheless, the invocation of the relation of similarity between our mind and the mind of others remains crucial. The challenge originates from the classic objection against proportional inference: The transition from one particular case to its generalisation does not constitute a good inference.

In order to rule out other alternative considerations, the argument can incorporate proportional inference in a scientific hypothetical inference in the form of *inference to the best explanation*. We can accept the thesis according to which other minds have similar experiences to ours, as a hypothesis from which the best possible explanation of human behaviour can be inferred.

For this vexed justification, however, hypothetical-proportional inference invokes only one case: ours, and its similarities with the others. Therefore, this solution does not deal sufficiently with the objection that it is not a good inference. Generalisation is inferred by a partial case. Every attempt to provide an answer to the objection against proportional inference remains unsuccessful. The conclusion of this hypothesis is not controllable, either *a posteriori* or *a priori*.

The quest for the appropriate justification invokes causality: Wherever it is possible to know solely from one case that there is causal connection, the knowledge of that sole case will be sufficient. What is at stake in each case is the necessary character of the causal connection between the events. It is believed that there is a causal link between mental situations and behaviour, or action. However, no indication can be drawn from *internalism*, from our own standpoint, in order to support the hypothesis of the mind of others. In order to make the hy-

pothetical-proportional inference of the belief in other minds defensible, the causal link can be sought elsewhere: between the mental and the cerebral situations. This hypothesis is set to be confirmed by the advancing research of neurosciences. Until then, it will constitute a logically possible –and extremely probable for many– hypothesis, but currently it can only be considered as a partially substantiated one.

The objection against proportional thinking can be evaded through a second solution for the justification of the thesis at issue: the purely hypothetical inference from *externalism*. In order to avoid dependence from the special and partial case, the thesis that no theory of the mind can have an advantage over other hypotheses will be invoked. *Functionalism* will accept the existence of other minds as a theoretical entity. From this standpoint, the bypassing of the ontological problem of the nature of mental states and, consequently, of the definition of the nature of mental representations, will be attempted.

Notes

1 For the identification of the problems of the representation see Cummins 1989: 1-20. For a further analysis see Cummins 1996.

2 See Lewis 1969. For an opposing view, see Davidson 1984.

3 For the critique on Locke by G. Berkeley in *Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), see Berkeley 1975. For the problem of abstract ideas, see Pournari 1996: 261-271, esp. 262-264.

4 However, even if all propositional attitudes are thoughts, not all thoughts are propositional attitudes; i.e. not all representational mental states can be characterised in terms of propositional attitudes. Furthermore, representational states are not always conscious.

5 For the introduction of the term “intentionality”, see Brentano 1973. For an analysis of this concept, see Crane 2001: 8-17.

6 For the opposing view, see Armstrong 1968: ch. 14.

7 According to Crane, the distinction between intentional mental states, such as thoughts, and non-intentional mental states, such as feelings, requires an additional specification: when the essence of mental states exhausts itself in their intentionality as an attitude and content, then it refers to thoughts; when it does not exhaust itself in their intentionality, then it refers to feelings. See Crane 1994: 31-38.

8 The related but distinct *conceptual* problem of other minds *is about* how we succeed in comprehending the mental states of others, given that these are distinct from ours and are perceived from a different standpoint, the *standpoint of the third person*. For an introductory analysis of the epistemological problem, see Bilgrami 1992: 317-323.

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