Communication, Language and Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

In my contribution I want to describe a notion of autonomy in social terms namely in discursive practices. I already presented autonomy as grounded on the Sellarsian "metaphor" of the game of giving and asking for reasons reinterpreted by Robert Brandom. The model was centered mostly on practices of justification starting from an inferentialist view of the propositional content. However, I think that together with speech acts in ordinary language we must provide a description of the role of prelinguistic practices for autonomy. This further step is implied by the fact that it is important to clarify the dimension of "readiness" to give or ask for reasons on which Swindler rightly insists in his Introduction to my book *Autonomy. A Matter of Content*. Autonomy develops in a language game that is connected with cooperation. The language game I want to point out is similar to the functional approach of Wittgenstein but starts from a Fregean perspective and takes into consideration neurobiological processes which bridge the gap between brain and world and represent the "motor" of our activity in the world.

0. *Introduction*

My proposal is to sketch a notion of autonomy in social terms starting from an analysis of communication and language. Autonomy requires the consideration of an "expressive rationality" that entails two levels: the perceptual and emotional level we share with animals and the level of ordinary language peculiar to humans. Deficiencies on those level obviously undermine full autonomy.

I refer to some issues on collective intentionality because in the researches of this group of very brilliant authors we find serious attempts to go in depth on our prelinguistic and linguistic practices. In my view, autonomy is bound to language even in the most basic fact of communication.

The perspectives I find more compatible with my personal view are the ones of John Searle, Margareth Gilbert and Jennifer Hudin. Indeed, they do not present a theory of autonomy nevertheless they consider important theoretical issues such as free will and motor cognition (Searle, Hudin) and conversation (Gilbert). Very interesting ideas come from the notion of "normative freedom" introduced by James Swindler.

I refer to these authors because they try to explain the process of cooperation and I think that autonomy develops in a language game that is connected with cooperation. To understand what is cooperation is a crucial point for the development of my view of autonomy. I want to underscore the most important idea of Searle's work: to bring Frege's notion of thoughts down to earth. Logical properties of objects are biological properties that can be grasped by animal and human beings; thoughts going through our mind are also neurobiological processes in the brain and these very processes have their logical properties. "Thinking is as natural as digesting".

I'll briefly refer to (1) intentionality which is our relationship to objects; (2) communication and language emerging from consciousness; (3) collective intentionality; (4) collective intentionality as located in the brain and (5) the relationship between conversation as a form of cooperation and autonomy.

1. *Intentionality*

"Intentionality" is a traditional term philosophers use for that capacity of the mind to be directed at objects or state of affairs in the world, that are independent of itself. Our cognition and action begin with a typical intentional activity. The term derives from the medieval Latin word *intentio*. Unconscious and conscious mental states are caused by and realized in brain structures. They possess intentionality. According to Searle we can explain the functioning of mental processes in neurobiological terms; for this reason I refer to some late arguments of Searle that enrich the perspective he described in the book *Intentionality* (Searle 1983). Searle starts from Frege's account of visual perception and uses neurobiological arguments. If for example, I am seeing a yellow ovoid lemon at point-blank range in broad daylight what are the element of my perceptual situation? First, there is the lemon itself. Second, there is unconscious visual experience that I have the lemon. The conscious experience has intrinsic intentionality implying that it could be satisfied or not satisfied depending on whether there really is a lemon there. Third, the lemon must cause the visual experience. This is standardly done by neurobiological processes. The processes begin with the reflection of light waves off the lemon, which attacks the photoreceptor cells of the retina, and sets up a sequence of experience in the brain that goes through until there is a conscious visual experience. We must underscore that a person could have a visual experience exactly like that which was not satisfied. So in case of visual experience we have "self-reflexivity" instead of "self-referentiality" which is used in case of conditions of satisfaction of speech acts. Self-reflexivity means that actual features of the vehicle of representation function in determining the conditions of satisfaction. The vehicle of representation is the conscious visual experience

that must be caused by the state of affairs constituting the rest of conditions of satisfaction. Otherwise the visual experience is simply not satisfied.

There is a fundamental distinction to make between experience and perception. Experience belongs to that level in which the mind state could be or not satisfied. In perception there is the same intentional content but it is in fact satisfied. Experience gives us a direct awareness of the object namely using a Fregean word provides a "presentation" and not just a "representation" of the object. In *Intentionality* this account was called by Searle "naïve realism" (Giovagnoli 2000). Naïve realism entails that conscious visual experience does not represent the object in the sense of being an entity that intervenes between the subject and the object rather it is the means by which the subject perceive the object. Visual experience is by definition a constitutive part of the visual perception but the object is not a constituent of the visual experience considered independently of whether or not it is in fact veridical or satisfied.

Searle's account of experience gives rise to the well-known problem of "particularism" namely how we can account for the knowledge of a particular thing (Bach 2007). He rejects any view on which the contents are "object-dependent" (Evans, McDowell, Burge). Kent Bach notices that Searle explains awareness of the object only "under a description" and a description is no substitute for awareness: one is aware of the object as just the cause of the experience. The result of Bach's discussion is that we must give up the supposition that the content of perceptual experience determines its condition of satisfaction and he proposes an indexical view of experience. In his view an experience is "token-reflexive":«not because it refers to itself but because, being perceptual, its content is context-sensitive. The condition of satisfaction is experience-relative. To experience a certain event or state of affairs is to experience it from a certain point of view. That is, you experience it in a spatio-temporal relation to your point of view. But though you experience it in an experience-relative way, you do not experience it under an experience-relative description. It is by having the experience at a certain time and place, with a certain orientation that the time and the place of the event or state of affairs experienced can be represented as being when and where it is» (Bach 2007 p. 75).

I would underscore that Searle distinguish between unconscious visual experience which provides awareness of the object and genuine perception that is conscious but not indexical. Rather, using a phenomenological point of view, it is a reflex of the position of our body in the world.

According to the intentionalistic account advanced by Searle, one of the Background features of the system of perception is that typical objects we perceive exist independently of the perception. In perception it is part of the intentional content that the object exists independently of the perception;

consequently if we discover that the object we were looking at does not exist when we were perceiving it then it was not the "real" object and the intentional content was not in fact satisfied. Using a geometrical jargon, according to the results of background and network capacities, we say that the very conditions of satisfaction of the perception of three dimensional, solid material objects like the lemon require that they exist independently of the experience of the lemon.

By continuing to use a geometrical or spatial jargon we can now give a brief description of the relationship between perception and indexicality. Clearly there are linguistic expressions that are indexicals namely indicate relations in which the objects stand to the very utterance of the expression itself. For instance, "yesterday" refers to the day before utterance or "I" refers to the person making the utterance. Searle isolates four types of lexicalized indexical relations: spatial, temporal, utterance-directional (I or We and you) and discoursal (like latter of former). I would underscore an important and agreeable critical observation to Kaplan: it seems to me that the way in which indexicals are conceivable rules out the possibility of indexicalizing worlds (for example with the world "actual"). On the contrary, it is easy to grasp the self-referentiality or self-reflexivity of the indexical "I" or of visual experience. "I" in virtue of its meaning refers to the person who uttered it and if I see an object in front of me then the visual experience of the object itself figures in the conditions of satisfaction. Namely, my visual perception is successful only if the features and presence of the object caused that very visual experience. According to Searle, the main difference between the two sorts of cases is that the perceptual cases are "causally" self-referential and the "indexical" cases are not. Why is there a formal similarity between perception and language? It is fundamental for the conceptual apparatus we have evolved that we take our physical situation, the situation of our bodies in space and time and the causal relations between our bodies and the rest of the world as a fundamental starting point to conceptualize our relations with the world. Therefore, expressions like "I", "you", "here" and "now" as well as demonstratives like "this" and "that" reflect the centrality of our bodily position in space and time and the causation in the conceptual apparatus we have evolved. Intentionality shows the development of what the subject "takes to be".

2. *Language*

We can use language in a "we" form that is not a "we" in Sellars' or Wittgenstein's sense but a "we" in a more fundamental sense. My claim is that the way in which Searle explains the nature and the function of language could give us categories sufficient to explain collective intentionality and

autonomy even though with a subtle modification. Let's introduce some ideas relevant for a possible and plausible notion of autonomy.

The first important thesis is that intentional states possess propositional content bound to a certain psychological mode. For instance, we can believe that it is raining, fear that it is raining or hope that it is raining. In each of these cases we have the same propositional content "that it is raining" but different psychological modes. On the level of language this option corresponds to the distinction between propositional content of the speech act and mode or force of it (command, question etc). Searle's notation is the following: "S (p)" represents the psychological state and (p) represents the propositional content. "F (p)" is the illocutive act where "F" represents the propositional content. Statements like beliefs have the downward direction of fit; orders and promises like desires and intentions have the upward direction of fit.

To understand why language is constitutive of human social practices we must investigate the differences between prelinguistic and linguistic forms of intentionality. Prelinguistic intentionality lacks crucial features such as *meaning convention and sentences* with an internal syntactical structure. What seems to be common is communication because lots of prelinguistic animals have the capacity to communicate with other animals by way of signaling. But we need to distinguish between making the signal as a physical act and giving the signal as a vehicle of communicating meaning.

According to Searle, expressions that have a meaning are those the speaker intentionally performs; this means that speakers impose conditions of satisfaction on condition of satisfaction. One of the most essential features of language is its capacity to be used to perform speech acts to represent states of affairs according to different directions of fit and we do this by imposing conditions of satisfaction on conditions of satisfaction. For instance some expressions that maybe emerged as a first form of human communication such as "fire", "food", "ranger" had a big relevance for intersubjective practices because conventions create expectations for speakers and interlocutors as regard a possible common identification of something and the comprehension of expressions. In this sense, the normative character of linguistic procedures provides the speakers justifiable expectations; it exists a correct way to use words.

The minimum unit of communication in linguistic practices is the speech act i.e. the full sentence. Consequently we have the possibility of expressing a full intentional state. We must thus understand how different parts of the sentences compose, namely how the "principle of compositionality" introduced by Frege works. We ought to be able to individuate repeatable devices each of them could function as communicative unit (sentence) and these must be compound of elements (words) such that the communicative

content of the entire is determined by elements and principles of their combination in the sentence. As animals have capacities for identifying and re-identifying objects so we can introduce *names* of objects and because they have the capacity to recognize different *tokens* of the same type then we can introduce *general names* such "dog", "cat", "man" and, because objects have features, we could introduce something corresponding to *adjectives* and *verbs*. At this point, we must underscore the crucial restrictions on these devices; we can namely assume that reference and predication of the speech acts that correspond to substantive sentences and predicative sentences are independent units. Following Frege and the principle of context, we must move from the total speech act i.e. from the entire sentence and to abstract from it nominal sentences and predicative sentences. Animals do not have reference and predication correspondent to nominative and predicative sentences.

The sentence, as we have seen, is compound of elements that have a sense and these elements together with the rules of their combinations allow us to generate new sentences and to represent meanings of sentences and expressions we have never heard before. Together with compositionality there is "generativity". According to Searle, we obtain generativity by adding to compositionality some recursive rules that are valid forever. Examples of these rules are expressions like "it is possible that", "Sally believes that" or rules to form relative clauses like "Sally saw the man that…". Connectives like "and", "or" "if…then" and "not" have the same function.

A further essential level entails the introduction of commitments namely the deontic character of linguistic uses, which is not present in prelinguistic forms of intentionality. Commitments are called by Searle "deontologies" and recognized deontologies make possible to constitute society. There is a deontology that possesses a peculiar logical propriety and is essential for comprehending the creation of social and institutional reality: the creation of a deontology of commitments as well as rights, duties, obligations etc. creates desires independent reasons for actions. When I perform a statement, for instance, I have a desire independent reason for saying the truth because my expression commits me to tell the truth. The speech act goes beyond the simple expression of an intention or belief because it is first a *public action*. If, for instance, I am saying someone something I am not saying that I have a belief or intention but I am saying something about the word represented by that belief or intention. When I assert something I'm saying how the world is and in making a promise I am saying what I am going to do. In this sense I do not agree with the claim that one is only to assert what one knows (Williamson) or that one must be sincere in making an assertion (Green). I also criticized the primacy of "assertion" in Robert Brandom's sense as it presupposes a strong form of conceptual knowledge (Giovagnoli 2008a, 2008b). Self-referentiality obtains because, as in the case of promising, when we

promise we not only promise to do something but we promise to do it *because we promised to do it* namely we gave our word.

3. *Collective Intentionality*

Humans but also a lot of other animals have collective intentionality. Are there differences between the two forms of collective intentionality? Are we entitled to investigate our own practices because for instance we are responsible for a lot of interventions destroying the environment we share with animals? I think yes we must investigate the dimension of commitment implied by our linguistic practices. At this point I would refer to collective intentionality that realizes in the form of cooperation. My thesis about the linguistic game of autonomy is that we need to consider a prelinguistic dimension we share with animals and a linguistic dimension we share with other people. In order to develop the capacity for autonomy we must participate to a peculiar form of cooperation namely conversation, which implies both prelinguistic and linguistic competencies. According to Searle, cooperation is a matter of human collective intentionality and conversation is based on this form of collective intentionality. Searle wants to override the notion of conversation as cooperation in Gilbert's sense because he thinks that we do not need a sort of coordination with the attitudes of the others in the sense of expectations given by the fact of mutual knowledge. Nevertheless his account is not sufficient to explain full autonomy because it presents a kind of dichotomy between prelinguistic and linguistic intentionality that seems to rule out an important dimension of autonomy namely emotions.

We intentionality presents the same account of free will as in the case of individual intentionality (Searle 2008 forthcoming chap. 3). The first step is to distinguish this full-blown free will based on genuine collective intentionality from other cases of collective intentionality such as those implied by beliefs and desires as to be a member of a religious faith and believe something only as part of our faith or because of the fact that I belong to a political movement desire something as a part of our desiring it. This is the Searlean conception of heteronomy. Let's now see how he understands the relationship between free will and collective intentionality. First, we can not substitute personal pronouns namely use "We' instead of "I" when we consider collective intentionality. The most fundamental reason for this is the fact that we can share common goals but not common content because if we have to realize a common enterprise we must play different roles implying different actions with different propositional contents. Otherwise we are doing the same and this has no sense for the constitution of a common linguistic game (to use Wittgenstein's vocabulary). We must be able to perform different moves of a

game in which we share the goal. However, the presupposition of a shared goal is not sufficient to explain full-blown cooperation, which is present in humans and other animals. Another insufficient approach is to assume that collective intentionality arises among language using adults. If we presuppose language in this sense we presuppose society as it is already constituted and we rule out collective intentionality in its constitutive role for society. As the analysis of speech acts shows, promises derive from more fundamental levels and what is very important to me is that the very conversation in which the promise is made and is accepted or rejected is already a form of collective intentionality.

4. *Cooperation and the "Collective Intentionality Operator"*

But, before to present some conclusive observations on a possible way to develop autonomy in discursive terms, I want to point on a very interesting paper of Hudin. I find illuminating to understand the importance of the prelinguistic dimension for collective intentionality and cooperation (Hudin 2009). Hudin plausibly raises doubts about the possibility of explaining motivation for believing and acting in a deliberative sense. I find this criticism correct and I argued for in my book (Giovagnoli 2007, 2008a). Hudin shows the natural reasons we have to cooperate or to act in a we mode and moreover the fact that we share this possibility with a lot of animals. It seems an important philosophical point to find some natural locus for demonstrating the fact that we "can" act in an altruistic way because of an emotional bond. Unfortunately I cannot introduce the full discussion, so I refer to some examples Hudin presents, which show the work of a collective intentionality operator and the fact that subjects entailed in the examples supporting the argumentation are not zombies. I quote three examples:

Two people are engaged in a conversation while they are walking down the street. They come to a stoplight at the corner of the street and without interrupting their conversation, they stop. When the light turns green, they proceed across the street with no lapse in their conversation.

George Bailey decides to commit suicide one snowy evening by jumping off a bride into a river when he sees a man who fallen into the river. George jumps into the river and saves the drowning man.

Lassie (a dog) sees Timmy fall into the lake. Lassie jumps into the lake and pulls Timmy to shore, saving his life.

At first glance these actions seem irrational if we reason according to the laws of self-interest. Thus the conditions for social acts we must underscore to

overcome the constrains of this approach are the following: 1) They require another person to be the act that they are and 2) They require a certain degree of self sacrifice even if this means minimally censoring our behavior as regard our self interest in order to consider the benefit of another.

The interesting point of Hudin's argumentation is the functioning of social intentionality as entailed by the Cognitive Operator Principle (COP). In Hudin's words:"First of all, intentional states divide upon into two types of directions: as mental states which either match the world as in the case of a belief, or the world as it might be, as in the case of imaging the future fulfillment of a desire. Searle characterizes these two types of directedness of mental states in terms of direction of fit. Beliefs have the mind-to-world direction of fit and desires have the world to mind direction of fit. Secondly these directions of fit only make sense in so far that they are a feature of mental states that belong to someone. Further more the sole possessor of any mental state is always in the first person singular, the self" (Hudin 2009). Hudin's challenge to Searle is to demonstrate that COP is responsible for collective intentionality by showing how neural mechanism could operate to transform the indexicality of mental state from I to We, from the Self into a Collective Self. It is clear to me that Hudin criticizes the phenomenological notion of empathy in Husserl's sense and she does not believe that neuron's mirror could do the job of COP. I also agree that there must be some other explanation of collective intentionality because Husserl met a lot of problems when he presented his notion of intersubjectivity (Giovagnoli 2000) and furthermore the contemporary works on neuron mirrors are limited, I suppose, to some basic functions (but I am not a neuroscientist to draw conclusions on this point and I would refer to Rizzolatti, Sinigaglia, Anderson 2007). I find very interesting Hudin's analysis of "social bonding" that is a common denominator for animals and humans.

5. *Conversation, Autonomy and Scoreboard*

Let's now present some possible arguments about the possibility to develop autonomy in conversation as a form of cooperation using the idea that we are active in this process because we constitute the discursive situation by using speech acts.

My proposal is to extend the model of Searle in two senses: (1) by finding a treatment of the force as common to animal and humans and (2) by introducing a conception of autonomy related to the "emergency" of what we take to be the true and right contents moving from the attitudes of the speakers in conversation. Autonomy is the capacity we have to engage in conversation that is the locus where we master use speech acts in the two

fundamental dimensions of communication and language. As I told in the first section, Searle account lacks an explanation of the role of the emotional content we express when we engage in conversation. For example he describes the functioning of signals in animal and human cases but only from a "rational" point of view i.e. from the point of view of the animal rationality according to which an animal knows how to behave in case of danger and from the point of view of human rationality according to which we know how to behave in case of danger and we can also explain the reasons for our behavior by using language.

Autonomy implies the expression of the individual point of view in linguistic situation hence conversation that is a form of "human natural cooperation". I mean that there is an "expressive rationality" that emerges in the game of giving and asking for reason, a game we play with others, to which personal autonomy is essentially related. Personal autonomy develops in a social context that favors "pluralism" because pluralism increases the possibility of choice namely freedom (Giorello 2005). The game possesses an important emotional side that can clearly be described starting from personal experience and perception. On the linguistic level the emotional side is expressed in some fundamental speech acts: assertion, question and negation.

I think that this theoretical option could be further elaborated starting from some Fregean ideas. In some late works Frege considers the role of linguistic uses to grasp the very content of the assertion and plausibly considers truth as a "goal" of communication. We must concentrate on a fundamental distinction — indeed not very easy to individuate — Frege presents between assertion (intended as simple affirmation or expression of a thought including a content that can be judged) and judgment, because judgment could be intended as an "advancing" from thought to its truth-value. In my opinion, this distinction supports contemporary attempts to distinguish between truth and justification (Marconi 2007). The metaphor of the game of giving and asking for reasons shows conditions relevant for autonomy. I would underscore the relevance of the agent's full linguistic competence for performing not only "correct", but even simple moves namely to express her "thoughts" so that the contents of beliefs can be recognized as true in discursive situations through correct grammatical-substitutional rules.

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