REPRESENTATION OF IDENTITIES AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN COGNITION

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- ABSTRACT: In this paper, I make a plea for viewing representation as first and foremost a political matter. I argue that by so doing we may avoid the many of pitfalls of contemporary theories of cognition as they attempt to tackle the issue of representation. Most of these problems have to do with the fact that representation is treated exclusively as a mimetic or theatrical question. The fact of the matter is however that representation also has a political dimension. Indeed it has always had this political dimension which, counterintuitive though it may seem at first glimpse, manifests itself even in very the attempt to aestheticise the whole issue of representation (as in some versions of postmodernism) or to deny its role altogether as a *tertium quid* between the external world and the cognising mind (as in contemporary neo-pragmatism). I also contend that, by recognising the political nature of representation, we also pave the way for endorsing the thesis that the mind is a social construct, thereby taking some steam out of the thesis of "mind-brain identity" (so-called "identity theory of mind".

- KEYWORDS: Cognition; representation; politics; realism; idealism; ideology; anti-representationalism.

Objectives

In this paper, I shall make a case for the politics of representation as an essential preliminary step towards a theory as to how human agents

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come to cognise the external world. My starting assumption is best summed up in the following words of Ian Hacking (1983, p.132): "Human beings are representers. Not *homo faber*, I say, but *homo depictor*. People make representations". There is, however, an important proviso that I would suggest. It is that depiction is one form of doing; so that the apparent stand-off between *homo faber* and *homo depictor* is more a matter of focus than of mutual exclusion. If I am right in my claim, it will have the consequence that the individual's comprehension of the world "out there" is always already moulded by the collective, societally constructed 'world-view" which is itself the product of the multiplicity of political and ideological interests that inform the process of representation.

Succinctly put, my thesis is the following. Representation is a process shot through with political connotations. And, like politics, representation is a public, not private, affair. Evidently, my thesis flies in the face of a number of deeply entrenched dogmas about representation. For instance, it defies the assumption tacitly still held by many researchers in cognitive science and artificial intelligence that man is essentially an automaton, a sophisticated computer and that the human mind is nothing but a complex software (or a "wetware", as some describe it, to highlight its physiological moorings). The reason why the analogy breaks down is that computers are a-political, but man, by his very nature, isn't. Another dogma that my claim calls into question is the view that the community or the social set-up of which the individual is a part plays little or no role in the way she forms her mental representations of the world. This is so because, being public, what determines the content of representations is not the individual mind that is supposedly free to filter the input it receives in either idiosyncratic (relativism) or predetermined (transcendentalism) ways, but the community at large that creates perceptual moulds such as myths, mores, cultural stereotypes, role models, taboos, prejudices etc. (What guarantees community membership is, to a considerable extent, the individual's success in assimilating the publicly available representations that together constitute the community's world-view.) Finally, the thesis about the political nature of representation will put a damper on the time-honoured dispute between the upholders of epistemological realism and the advocates of idealism. Naïve realism will be shown to be inadequate to the extent political considerations are claimed to decisively affect our perception of mind-external reality and idealism's insistence on the independence of the individual mind – what the English philosopher Ryle (1949) pooh-poohed as the "ghost in the machine" –

will be countered by the claim of public availability as the hallmark of all representations.

Cognition and the nature of representation

Researchers working in the field of cognition – and this includes those who follow the mainstream computational approach as well as the advocates of the contending connectionist programme – have long advanced their theoretical claims on the strength of the assumption that cognition is fundamentally a matter of operating mental entities that in turn represent real world entities. Differences of opinion mostly have to do with the exact nature of representation – for instance, whether it is resemblance (similarity) that explains it or some sort of covariance. Of course one should be wary about making sweeping generalisations here. "Cognitivism, like life and pasta, comes in a bewildering variety of forms", as Andy Clark reminded us not very long ago (Clark, 1989, p.9). I shall, however, assume that, by and large, cognitivists agree that our knowledge of the external world is somehow mediated by the representations we make of it – a view rejected downright by pragmatists (more on this below).

Representing an object involves, among other things, distinguishing it from the other objects in the perceptual/cognitive field and delineating its contours. While this may turn out to be a relatively easy matter when one is thinking in terms of primary, concrete objects, problems of all sorts crop up as attention is turned to abstract, second-order objects that figure prominently as we start theorising about the universe. As a matter of fact, it is arguably the case that the vast majority of the objects that we represent to ourselves are abstract entities. What makes them abstract is the fact that they have already been through successive cognitive operations in the past. None of them is, in other words, "raw" or "cognitively innocent". So pervasive (and, at the same time, ever so elusive!) is this phenomenon that one may even begin to wonder if the so-called "concrete" objects that the cognising mind apprehends are not, after all, the products of a steady process of naturalisation which is itself an ideologically mediated form of representation. And, as far as the cognising mind is concerned, there is no principled way of making a distinction between an (highly) abstract object such as, say, a theory of cognition itself and, say, any of the humdrum material objects within the immediate visual range.

Toward a preliminary characterisation
of the politics of representation

Politics, like ethics to which it is subordinated, involves the exercise of choice. And choice in turn implies the existence of a hierarchy of values. The wide-spread perception that Nature knows no ethics is predicated on the belief that in nature there are only facts, no values. To claim, therefore, that representation is a political process is to claim that representation is culturally mediated and that it involves choices that attend to specific interests. It is also a claim to the effect that our apprehension of the world of reality is never a matter of simply forming mental images (or whatever) of entities that exist independently of us, but positing entities that serve some ulterior interests, often unbeknownst to ourselves. That is to say, ideology plays an important part in the way we construe our material world. Furthermore, many – perhaps most, if not all – of these interests are fabricated by the society in which we live, so that what they attend to is more appropriately characterised as a set of "wants" rather than "needs". Where ideology steps in is in the all-too-familiar process of putting a veneer of immediacy and spontaneity over these wants so that they appear to be deeply embedded needs. In our post-modern times, the omnipresence of marketing has made a complete mockery of the distinction between wants and needs which much of the economic thinking of the 19th and early 20th Centuries took for granted.

Politics of representation is also meant to underscore the impossibility of approaching the very issue of representation except from a political perspective. In other words, the political dimension is inalienable. And this has consequences even for the thesis of anti-representationalism. Anti-representationalism, it turns out, is one way in which the politics of representation can be carried to fruition. Anti-representationalism portrays (or, equivalently, *represents*) the time-honoured thesis of representationalism (along with the entire metaphysics that traditional philosophy has bequeathed to us) as politically uncongenial to our interests. To say this is not to engage in a purely verbal quibble. Note that, when contemporary pragmatists reject representationalism, they are not doing so on what would be a self-defeating claim to the effect that anti-representationalism is a *better* or *more accurate* account of how we interact with the external world. Their claim of the superiority of anti-representationalism over, say, orthodox truth-condi-

tional theories of meaning is that it is more conducive to our well-being, thanks to its capacity to rid us of a number of insoluble problems of our own making *viz*, those that stem from the assumption that language presents the truth about the world by representing it faithfully or corresponding to it. The ultimate appeal of anti-representationalism lies in its exhortation to *choose* what is to our best interest. It represents our relation to the world we live in as one of what we make of it rather than what it happens to be independently of our volition. *Anti-representationalism is thus representationalism understood in its inalienable political dimension.*

A *prima facie* case for the politics of representation

Perhaps the most pressing argument for the political nature of representation is that it provides a neat framework for explaining the phenomenon of *misrepresentation* - long recognised as a persistent problem for theories of representation. Cummins (1989) argues that both similarity theories and covariance theories of representation are hard put to it to account for radical misrepresentation. On the other hand, Apperly & Robinson (1998) point out that, by denying a concrete, causal link between the external world and the mind, representationalism explains how the mind is endowed with the faculty of imagination – misrepresentation being the price-tag that comes with it.

What makes misrepresentation intractable and ultimately unaccountable for in many theoretical orientations is that it is tacitly assumed that in representation the default case is realistic representation. A case in point is Searle's thesis (1979) that the key to fictionality is "pretending" which in effect denies that fiction can represent anything at all, except through some devious manoeuvres. According to Searle, then, fiction is one form of misrepresentation. Prevarication is another (Searle explicitly rejects the "common misinterpretation" of Plato, according to which Plato thought fiction consisted of lies). Searle does not go into the specific question as to why people care for fictional discourse at all – except for the rather evasive remark that "there is no simple or even single answer to that question" (Searle, 1979, p.74). Searle does mention, *en passant*, that an important work of fiction conveys a "message" or "messages" which are conveyed *by* the text but are not *in* the text (ibidem).

The claim that representation "normally" works realistically is far from clear. For one thing, there is the obvious issue as to whether such a representation of how representation works is to be itself taken as true to an independently existing reality "out there". Hacking (1983, p.139) gives the following argument against assuming that representation is normatively ties to reality.

> If reality were just an attribute of representation, and we had not evolved alternative styles of representation, then realism would be a problem neither for philosophers nor for aesthetes. The problem arises because we have alternative systems of representation.

It is precisely because there are alternative forms of representation – which in turn implies the permanent need to *choose* between them (together with all its political and ethical implications) – that representation is an eminently political process.

At this stage, it may be useful to recall that politics itself appeared for the first time as a question of representation. As Zizek (1998) reminds us politics began when in ancient Greece members of the *demos* – people who had no fixed place in the prevailing social hierarchy – presented themselves as the representatives, i.e., those who could speak on behalf of the whole society. In other words, there is nothing natural or transparent about representation. The right to represent has to be fought for and earned. Nor is representation necessarily fair or just – as the model Athenian democracy with its notorious exclusion of women and slaves demonstrated, and, indeed, as the ongoing debate over the true representative status of each of the member states in world bodies such as the UN attests to.

The reason why the political dimension of representation frequently goes unnoticed is that researchers all too often work on the tacit assumption that cognition (and hence, *a fortiori*, categorisation) begins where perception ends. Or, alternatively, it is often claimed that there can no more to perception than what is what is in some sense anticipated by conception – percepts without concepts are blind, as Kant famously put it. Radical innatists, who take the cue from Kant, insist that perception begins where cognition (and, hence categorisation) ends. What radical empiricists and radical rationalists share is the common belief that perception and conception never interact the idea that the two may in fact turn out to be intertwined has been suggested in the literature but so far the view has not carried the day. The claim has re-

cently been reiterated by Schyns & Oliva (1999). Likewise, claims for hybrid models – where perception and conception work hand in hand – have also been made also by Goldstone & Barsalou (1998), Sloman & Rips (1998). These claims were of course foreshadowed by Piaget and his constructivist approach to cognition.

It is fairly easy to see that constructivist approach to cognitive development in general and the more recent connectionist programme of cognition that lends it some further credibility (cf. Elman et al., 1996 – but also Marcus, 1998, for a contrary view) have a direct bearing on the claim of the political nature of representation. Because what is being claimed is that categorisation is based on both perceived similarities and rule-like semantic representations and that, furthermore, this process is continuous and cumulative – which is the hall-mark of all political activity. Being a political activity, the process of representation cannot but be dynamic It has also been suggested in the literature that categorisation may not be, when all is said and done, reducible to a single process – uniform across the board, and that there may in fact be several distinct categorisation strategies at work in human cognition (cf. Smith et al., 1988). Once again, we have here a claim which sits perfectly well with a political view of the problem of representation.

Politics of representation and its implications for the metalanguage of cognitive science

Like all other sciences, the science of cognition too appeals to a metalanguage in order to talk about its object of investigation: mind and its workings. Investigators often nourish the hope that the metalanguage they employ will, ideally, represent the different objects in their field of enquiry in a value-neutral manner. Many cognitive scientists simply take it for granted that there is a discretely identifiable object called the human mind (*res cogitans*); most of them also proceed on the tacit assumption that the mind is located in the brain. The so-called identity-theory of mind further stipulates that a statement about the mind is referentially identical to a statement about a certain neurophysical state. If representation is a politically mediated matter, then it would follow that it cannot be the product of isolated grey matter located in the individual's brain. Politically mediated representation is only possible in a publicly accessible space. The individual's mind is, by

contrast, a black-box inaccessible to public inspection and, for all we know, even to private introspection most of the time.

Politics of representation thus defies a major postulate of most of the contemporary approaches to cognition *viz.*, that cognition is largely the work of the individual mind in isolation and either located in or indistinguishable from corresponding brain-states. Among the most renowned advocates of such radically alternative conceptualisations of the human mind is the Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana (*passim*, but especially, Maturana & Varela, 1988). Maturana has over the years forcefully made a case for thinking of the mind as a collective endowment of the humankind, or, at the very least, as something that is jointly nurtured by humans through contact with one another, rather than individual isles, isolated from one another except for the presence of universally available (and, by implication, ethically neutral) faculty of language.

Finally, the thesis of representation also has important consequences for the way we think of scientific theories. After all, what else are new theories if not new representations of reality? And, as philosophers of science have long told us, new representations are proposed in order to better satisfy felt needs and alleviate anxieties generated by the particular socio-historical set of circumstances we find ourselves in. Theories are in this sense are our best answer to the world of (often) harsh reality around us; they are also the best political solution we can come up with in order to cope with the anxieties and riddles we encounter in our work-a-day world.

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■ *RESUMO: Neste artigo, defendo a idéia de que a representação é principalmente uma questão política. Estabeleço uma argumentação de que, assumindo tal posição, podemos evitar muitas das armadilhas das teorias contemporâneas de cognição em sua tentativa de atacar a questão da representação. Muitos desses problemas estão relacionados ao fato de que a representação é tratada exclusivamente como uma questão mimética ou teatral. A questão é que a representação também tem uma dimensão política. De fato, ela sempre teve essa dimensão política que, por mais contraintuitiva que possa parecer à primeira vista, manifesta-se até mesmo na própria de conferir um caráter estético a toda a questão da representação (como em algumas versões do pós-modernismo) ou de negar seu papel completamente como um* tertium quid *entre o mundo exterior e a mente cognitiva (como no neopragmatismo contemporâneo). Além disso, também discuto que, ao reconhecer a natureza política da representação, preparo o caminho para apoiar a tese de que a mente é um construto social, sofrendo daí uma certa influência da tese da "identidade da mente e do cérebro" (conhecida como "teoria da identidade da mente").*

■ *PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Cognição; representação; política; idealismo; ideologia; anti-representacionalismo.*

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