

Autonomy and the Net

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1. Language and Society

I move from the fact that language has a "constitutive" role in social practices (in John Searle's sense). For this reason, it is plausible to affirm that social changes happen through the use of language. A good example is the fundamental role Jürgen Habermas assigns to communicative agency for the evolution of society namely in ordinary social praxis as well as in institutional arenas. The problem by Habermas is that he considers language as a "medium" to achieve the rational consent under idealized speech conditions.

Searle offers rather an explanation of both the nature of language as what the spoken languages have in common and the role of language in society (Searle 2006). First he moves from the consideration that human language is an extension of prelinguistic capacities we have in common with many species of animals. This view differs from the Sellarsian one because Sellars establishes a difference between reliable dispositions differentially to respond to environmental stimuli we share with thermostats and parrots and conceptual capacities that are typical of human species and are expressed in material inferences (embedded in linguistic claims). The biological explanation is absent in Sellars' view. Searle aims to show that society is essentially linguistic not in the sense of the evolutionary Darwinian theory, but in a sense that specify what is characteristic of human language functions. For the sake of my discussion on autonomy what is crucial is that Searle introduces the fundamental dimension of deontology besides phonology, syntax and

semantics (intended in Fregean terms).

Compositionality and generativity are not sufficient to explain language and its complete nature and function. Language structures both sociality and society also because of its deontological dimension: when we make a statement we do not only express a belief but we commit ourselves to its truth. Many analytic philosophers maintain that meaning is public. The question is how to give an account of publicity. Language is the natural candidate for this task but the use of language entails important deontic attitudes and statuses. According to Searle we must look at the human phenomenon of the public assumption of commitments.

The radical thesis concerning deontology is that human beings possess capacity for judgment that in Kantian terms means to take responsibility for a certain claim. Reason implies not only synthesis as apperception but capacity to create new realities through the performances of speech acts in their different directions of fit. Linguistic creation is relevant for creating public reasons, which are independent from desires. In Searlean words: «Compositionality figures essentially in the creation of social and institutional reality. Given compositionality the animal can do much more than just representing states of affairs; it can represent states of affairs that do not exist but which can be brought into existence by getting a community to accept a certain class of speech act. So, for example, the man who says “this is my property” or the woman who says “This is my husband”, may be creating a state of affairs by declaration. A person who can get other people to accept this declaration will succeed in creating an institutional reality that did not exist prior to declaration”.

(Searle 2006, p. 28)

For the sake of my discussion about the constitutive role of language for social practices I think that the arguments Searle provides could be easily applied to the virtual realm because humans create new forms of communication, new ways of exchanging reasons through the performance of speech acts, new procedures and

new conventions. I think that virtual world does not break with physical and social worlds but it is a continuum of our social world, which evolves through the process of communication. Communication can be easily connected with a biological explanation that takes into consideration animal and human functional necessity to belong and then puts the desire for communication at the basis of the development of linguistic procedures (real or virtual), which are peculiar of human language.

2. Societies of Autonomy

Communication can be both real and virtual: what about our standard view of autonomy in philosophy, classically bound to individual rational reflection for achieving objective representations or authenticity? In the presence of a wide range of information, of reasons embedded in many different points of view, how is the process of decentralization thinkable?

Opinion polls tell us that people consider autonomy as the most precious good: autonomy in work, in free time, in relationships, in modes of thinking, in politics and also in the familiar context. Traditional structures such as patriarchal family, church, political parties, the ideas of country and local community have lost their capacity for integration. Our society of communication transforms traditional ways of thinking according to a multiplicity of messages on which people build their relationships. The proliferation of TV channels makes our common cultural references more uncertain. Internet and mobile communication deserve to construe a new form of individual autonomy. Communication is a process taking new shapes; the most visible phenomenon is the electronic interactive communication. According to the sociologist Manuel Castells (Castells 2007), it emerges a new form of sociality based on the capacity to build personal nets of relationships in Internet and outside Internet, by mobile telephone and by direct physical contact, apart from the moment

and the place in which we actually are. It is not a form of negative net-individualism but a personalized system of communication that William Mitchell defines Me++: all begins from me and the expansion of my ideas and desires. Because of the fact that we all do the same we are not isolated, rather we build nets in which each of us engage a relation with things or persons we choose for pleasure or need: work, clients, information, objects of consume or music, images for iPod and mobiles. In Castells' words " As computerized snails we carry the home of our imaginary and our relics, by constantly redefining the environment in which we move according to our mental programs emerging from the deep of ourselves".

Our culture of autonomy brings visible consequences in several fields as in politics, in the world of communication, in work, in the educational field and this phenomenon entails the important question of how to implements "good" values to handle continuous and complex changes in our styles of life. A crucial question concerns the reconciliation of autonomy and cooperation among individuals belonging to the same species.

The capacity to create new forms of relationships involves reflection on a new concept of personal autonomy, which takes into consideration the necessity of cooperation. In this sense, autonomy becomes a social notion. Castells intends autonomy in the sense of satisfying individual needs, desires and preferences; I think however that if this starting point is fundamental to conceive individual freedom, autonomy must be thought as a capacity for critical reflection that develops in the use of language i.e. in a "social" space of reasons. This shift is implied by the simple observation that we often experience conflicts among competing desires or preferences or beliefs.

3. Bootstrapping Autonomy from Individual to Sociality

In his essay *Freedom and Determinism* Habermas shows how the classical metaphysic debate on free will is obsolete (Habermas 2005). The criticism of Habermas is directed against those reductionist strategies, which consider individual freedom as a kind of appearance because what is taken as “mental causality” would be a net of neuron conditions under the laws of nature. This idea is incompatible with the fact that normally we consider the others and ourselves as imputable because we are able to take responsibility for actions. It is also important to define a plausible concept of action. According to Habermas: «A Design that concentrates planning, decision and execution of a body movement in a restrict lapse of time by detaching it from each context of long term goals and motivate alternatives can grasp only artifact, which do not possess the intimate connection with what can transform actions into free actions: the intimate conception with reasons. It is a misunderstanding to see the freedom to act some way or other as embodied in the Buridan donkey. In the “nude” decision to stretch out the left or the right arm does not manifest itself freedom of action, as there is no contact with reasons as for instance the ones that motivate a cyclist to turn right or left» (Habermas, p. 57)

The concept of action involves the idea of a rationally motivated choice: the decision to act forms according to rules. The fact that reasons motivate actions entails the fundamental consequence that the process of judgment gives the agent the title to be considered as the author of a certain decision. In this sense, the constraint of the best argument that guides our choices is different from the causal constraint that forces us to act contrary to our will. Nevertheless, freedom ought to be thought as requiring constraints otherwise it is unthinkable.

According to Habermas, the rational motivation by reasons can be explained only from the point of view of the participant to the game of giving and asking for reasons. This is an important observation because this game is not based on the primacy of rational consent. In this sense, the possibility of an account of the agent's

autonomous point of view in the linguistic situation remains open.

The classical concepts of freedom are obsolete and autonomy requires the *bootstrapping* from individual to sociality (Swindler 2007). In this context, James Swindler argues for the bootstrapping from individual to sociality by presenting three shareable arguments: (1) we do not need to refer to laws of nature to define autonomy; (2) the norms governing autonomous agency are public, hence “social” and (3) despite the fact of the possibility to internalize coercive norms we are governed by cognitive norms which ground the possibility of autonomous choices.

The problem of normativity arises because we need to provide standards according to which our beliefs are true and our actions are good. Autonomy implies normativity as critical reflection does not fall in *vacuum*. Our judgments and our actions are correct or incorrect according to certain norms. These norms emerge from the fact that we can justify our claims, i.e. we can give reasons for them. A very good expression to clarify this possibility is the notion of “accountability” (Swindler 2008). Accountability can be considered as a deontic consequence of our basic “normative freedom”: «I suggest that the strongest evidence that we can have of anyone’s or anything’s freedom is its being subject to norms: moral norms, yes, but others as well. Speaking a language, as Wittgenstein’s private language argument shows, brings us under linguistic norms; arguing makes us subject to norms of rationality; citizenship makes us subject to legal norms, etc. There are modes of freedom properly associated with each of these and more. The old maxim should be amended a bit to read “Only ought implies can”».

The most important result of this thought is that freedom is a social matter, because, as a phenomenon, it emerges only through social “attribution”. Normally, we attribute freedom by considering someone “accountable”; in this sense, the one to whom we attribute freedom is accountable for enacting or failing to enact norms. Such attribution is a social act and process as we can be accountable only because of a

normative background, i.e., a background of normative principles that gives us standards for choosing and acting. In this sense, Seumas Miller maintains that: «Given that individual human beings, (a) desire to live in communities, and need, therefore, to conform to some structure of moral principles, and (b) desire to live in communities, and need therefore, to conform to some structure of social norms, the only coherent notion of autonomy for human agents is one that takes an historically established framework of social norms as a background condition for their individual and interpersonal action. Such a framework of social norms is an enabling condition for the existence of an autonomous human moral agent seeking to engage in individual and interpersonal action; it is not necessarily a threat to it» (Miller 2002 p. 12).

The main task of a theory of autonomy is to investigate the possibility of critical reflection in case of conflicts in the subjective and social spheres. Socialization is a complex process and could convey false norms; nevertheless, we, as human beings, possess the capacity for recognizing and rejecting them. But, and this can be a contradiction, the same process of socialization allows us to criticize the contents of our beliefs and actions. In my opinion, this criticism is possible because we can introduce the distinction between socialization as internalization of social norms (content-dependence) and socialization as social process structured by a net of deontic attitudes characterizing intersubjectivity (attitude-dependence). A theory of autonomy ought to clarify how it is possible to make the two dependencies compatible.

4. Attitude- dependence vs. Content- dependence

My philosophical claim is to conceive the notion of personal autonomy in a “relational “ sense. The term relational could be intended in different senses

depending of what kind of social relationships one takes into account (Mackenzie & Stolyar, 2000).

I think that the term relational that is relevant for our concept of autonomy ought to be considered in linguistic terms. In my opinion, the concept of “readiness” to participate to group’s agency in Margaret Gilbert’s sense can be somewhat operationalized in discursive terms (Gilbert, 1989).

According to this starting point, autonomy develops in the game of giving and asking for reasons (Sellars, Brandom), which possesses a deontic structure. If we use the *scorekeeping* model in the version proposed by Brandom we can underscore the importance of the analysis of deontic attitudes (attribution and acknowledgment of commitments) for the criticism of the content of reasons. Contrary to Brandom, I’ll argue for the primacy of deontic attitudes over deontic statuses whereas they acquire normativity from the propositional content of assertions and become the only source for human autonomous agency.

As the paper *Autonomy, Community and Freedom* presented by Robert Brandom shows (Brandom 2007), there is a tension between attitude-dependence and content-dependence when we consider autonomy and freedom. Brandom tries to reconcile Kant and Hegel classical opposition. Following Kant, we are genuinely *normatively* constrained only by the rule we adopt and acknowledge as binding on us. He moves from this thesis the consequent idea that the capacity to *be* bound by norms and the capacity to *bind ourselves* by norms are one and the same. Authority and responsibility are symmetric and reciprocal because they are constitutive features of the normative subject who is at once authoritative and responsible. But this move is possible not in virtue of the Kantian notion of autonomy that applies in the moral field and refers to the substantive principle of the categorical imperative but in virtue of the tension Brandom establishes between attitude-dependence and content-dependence: «The Kant-Rousseau autonomy criterion of demarcation of the

normativity tells us something about normative *force* – about the nature of the bindingness or validity of the discursive commitments undertaken in judging or acting intentionally. That force, it tells us, is *attitude-dependent*. It is important to realize that such an approach can only work if it is paired with an account of the *contents* that normative force is invested in that it construes those contents as attitude-independent. The autonomy criterion says that it is in a certain sense up to us (it depends on our activities and attitudes) *whether* we are bound by (responsible to) a particular conceptual norm (though acknowledging *any* conceptual commitments may involve further implicit rationality – and intentionality-structural commitments). If not only the normative *force*, but also the *contents* of those commitments – *what* we are responsible for – were *also* up to us, then, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, “whatever seems right to us would be right”» (Brandom 2007, p. 6).

This result entails that freedom and autonomy have the same meaning: agents are autonomous or free because they necessarily bind themselves to shareable commitments i.e. the commitments accepted by their community.

5. Autonomous Agency vs. Autonomous Discursive Practice

Let’s introduce three fundamental points of Brandom’s argument in the *Locke Lectures* (Brandom 2008), on which he grounds self-consciousness. Brandom does not refer to the notion of autonomy but to the one of “autonomous discursive practice” with the result of collapsing autonomy into positive freedom (this is an idealistic wrong move).

(1) Autonomy is derived from capacities that are not algorithmic decomposable as also non-discursive creatures could possess them as basic capacities, as sub-practices PP-sufficient to deploy an autonomous discursive practice (ADP). However,

there are practices PV-necessary to deploy a vocabulary (or PP-necessary to every ADP) related to productivity of ordinary language. This productivity is limited by the fact that the speakers practically distinguish relational capacities that are relevant to perform claims and inferences, through the counterfactual robustness expressed by modal vocabulary.

(2) ADP is intended in modal and normative senses; relations between meaning and use are analyzed in their completeness. The dialogical competence that could characterize the autonomous agent could again be defined in modal and normative sense. The main thesis we derive from Brandom is that the ones who engage in every discursive practice must distinguish between materially right or wrong inferences, where the adjective material indicates that the presence of some non-logical vocabulary is essential to the classification (*bootstrapping*). Consequently, a subject's belief can be justified only if it is a conclusion of material inferences. Moreover, there is the problem of the phenomenon of the rectification of beliefs. Every change of belief is potentially relevant for the justification of every previous belief. To acquire a new belief means that for each material inference the agent accepts and refers for justification, it can possibly become a *defeasor*. To abandon a belief means to abandon a premise of previous accepted inferences and even a potential *counter-defeasor*. The problem of belief rectification of the set of speaker's beliefs is therefore thinkable only if the ones who practically deploy a vocabulary discriminate ranges of counterfactual robustness for the material inferences they accept. From this normative point of view, autonomy requires the ability to do anything necessary to introduce a normative vocabulary. The participation in the game of giving and asking for reasons is possible by virtue of the fact that the participants master the normative vocabulary in terms of "commitments" and "entitlements" together with the relations among them (committive-inferences, permissive-inferences and material incompatibility).

(3) The role of the autonomous agent indicates that when she is committed to some assertible content she takes responsibility to integrate it in a full set of commitments. At the same time, she draws the suitable consequences and put it under a rational criticism according to the criterion of material incompatibility. Again this point shows a misleading interpretation of the intersubjective linguistic practice. Autonomy cannot be reduced to freedom as spontaneity in Kantian term. We must take into account the dimension of responsibility in a social context where the deontic attitudes of the agents play a fundamental role. On the one side, it is important to consider the contents of the reasons we advance in the game of giving and asking for reasons, on the other side, we must understand “how” an agent can take part in this game and give her contribution by undertaking and attributing responsibility and authority to her (and others’) validity claims. Furthermore, if we relate only to the dimension of counterfactual robustness, it becomes difficult to explain the phenomenon of rational rectification when we meet reasons that do not belong to our community, moreover reasons existing in real and virtual communities.

6. *Scoreboard, Autonomy and the Net*

During the process of socialization we do not only acquire concepts by using language, we also acquire a “dialogical competence”, i.e. a net of discursive deontic attitudes which grounds the very possibility of autonomy (even in those cases in which agents do not have a clear representation of the content of their reasons for acting or do not exactly know the inferential commitments implied by their validity claims or inherit commitments from others).

For an agent to be autonomous she ought to internalize the normative structure of a “dialogical” rationality. A consideration of both the semantic and the pragmatic levels of communication seems necessary. In *Sinn und Bedeutung* Frege presupposes the

mastering of linguistic uses to grasp the very content of an assertion and considers truth as a goal of communication: to judge could be considered as the advancing from thought to its truth value. This is a fundamental ground not to see Frege as a Platonist. Another fundamental distinction introduced by Frege is between assertion and judgment. Autonomy is essentially bound to assertional practice in Frege's sense. The discursive process in which we acquire autonomy develops through a fruitful analysis of different linguistic uses embedded in sentences with different forces (in scorekeeping terms refusal, challenge and query).

What forces us to avoid the collapse of autonomy into positive freedom is our concrete participation in the game of giving and asking for reasons, in which we master the communicative structure of justification by "default" and "challenge" (Brandom 1994, chap. 3). Autonomy is relational in two senses: (1) the "semantic" sense that shows the inferential commitments (governed by material incompatibility) the agents must acknowledge and (2) the "pragmatic" sense that reveals the normative structure of that acknowledgment as a social net of deontic attitudes.

What is important for my personal idea of autonomy is how attitudes work in the reciprocal exchange of reasons. The deontic attitudes of the interlocutors represent a perspective on the deontic states of the entire community.

The accent on deontic attitudes is necessary to reformulate the notion of autonomy in relationship with real and virtual communication. This entails a peculiar change of agent's single scoreboard (Lewis) namely score the agent keeps in the game of giving and asking for reasons because, as Castells remember us, the common reference cannot more be found only in shared perceptual categories. Autonomy cannot correspond to spontaneity because of the fact that autonomy develops in communication that again can be real or virtual. Autonomy cannot either correspond to the monological test of universalization because we acquire a lot of information whose contents we have to make explicit.

My claim is that this pragmatic structure explains what we do in the game of giving and asking for reasons in terms of the deontic attitudes of the speakers. Once the agent has somehow interiorized the net of attitudes in the process of socialization she is able to play the social role of scorekeeper in dialogical situations; moreover, she can communicate in real or virtual discursive contexts such as the net. On the one side, the agent is exposed to different reasons and this is a fundamental condition to develop autonomy, on the other side she can take position for or against conflicting reasons and this is a fundamental condition for critical reflection. A plausible “relational” scoreboard is “perspectival” because agents have a set of different collateral commitments so that we are forced to realize that different reasons exist and are the source of intrasubjective and intersubjective conflicts necessary to develop autonomy. Conflicts express themselves in the communicative dimension of challenge which starts from the default case i.e. assertion. The speech act of assertion shows the agent playing the role of scorekeeper who undertakes a commitment (responsibility) and attributes the entitlement to that commitment (authority) to the interlocutor or to herself. Refusal, query and challenge have the same propositional content (structured by material inferential commitments) but different force and deserve to foster critical reflection. The more we have the possibility to communicate (to realize a reciprocal exchange of reasons) - and this situation is favored by virtual communication - the more we can develop autonomy in discursive situations.

APPENDIX

SK = Scorekeeper

c = commitment

e = entitlement

\perp = incompatibility

\rightarrow = entailment

& = conjunction

\sim = negation

... = dots

ASSERTION:

c ("This is Rapha Nadal", Bob)

JUDGMENT:

c ("This is Rapha Nadal", SK)

c ("This is the 'number two' of the international tennis ranking", SK)

c ("This is Roger Federer") \perp **e** ("This is Rapha Nadal"), SK

INHERITANCE:

c ("This is Rapha Nadal", Bob) \rightarrow **e** ("This is Rapha Nadal", John), SK

DEFERRAL:

e ("This is Rapha Nadal", Bob) **&** **e** ("This is Rapha Nadal", John), SK

REFUSAL:

\sim **e** ("This is Rapha Nadal", Bob) **&** **e** ("This is Roger Federer", Bob), SK

QUERY:

? c (“This is rapha Nadal”, Bob), SK

CHALLENGE:

~ e (“This is Rapha Nadal”, Bob) & ...e (“This is Rapha Nadal”, Bob), SK

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