

A Relativist Account of Simulation. (Or How to Become Someone Else Without Contradiction)

In this talk I will take into consideration an important problem for the simulation theory of mindreading proposed by Gordon (1986; 1995) and suggest a solution that make appeal to the kind of moderate relativism presented in Recanati (2007).

Gordon's simulation theory has never become very popular between philosophers and cognitive scientists because of the difficulties at explaining one of its central features: the *personal transformation* that the simulator would be required to accomplish in order to assume the target's point of view. Contrary to Goldman, according to whom, when I simulate, I have to imagine what *I* would think and how *I* would feel in a certain possible situation, and then I attribute my states to the target subject, Gordon thinks of the simulation process as an act of *personal transformation*, one by which I can literally become another subject, thus representing things from her – not from my – point of view.

This notion of 'personal transformation', however, is a very problematic one, since the idea of becoming another subject seems to necessarily imply a metaphysical impossibility. Still, I will claim, this problem can be overcome, and Gordon's theory maintained without contradiction, if we admit the existence of relativized thoughts *à la* Recanati.

In his book, *Perspectival thought*, Recanati has argued in favour of a moderate version of relativism, according to which our thoughts would express two distinct kinds of contents: the *lekton*, that represents the explicitly articulated content, possibly incomplete; and the *Austinian proposition*, which represents instead the complete, truth-conditional content, involving the *lekton* plus the circumstances of evaluation. According to Recanati's account, then, a thought like 'It is raining' would express: 1) an incomplete, place-relative content, e.g. 'It is raining on May 1, at 8am', and 2) a complete, truth-conditional content, e.g. 'It is raining on May 1, at 8am, in Rome'.

Now, I want to argue, it is precisely these incomplete thoughts that are involved in the kind of personal transformation envisaged by Gordon. When I simulate to be someone else, e.g. Napoleon, and so I imagine being Napoleon, Recanati says (2007: 203), what I imagine is not that '*I* am Napoleon' but I simply imagine '*being* Napoleon'. I can thus imagine 'being waiting for the battle in Waterloo', 'aiming at figuring out a winning strategy', 'fearing for my army', and so on. All these thoughts do not require that I depict myself as part of their content, but only that I *relativize* those thoughts not to myself, but to Napoleon, thus metarepresenting them as first-personal thoughts that behave not to myself, but to another subject.

Exactly as we can have *place-relative* thoughts – i.e. thoughts whose content must be relativized to a certain place, but which do not contain the place as part of their explicit content – we thus can have *subject-relative* thoughts – thoughts whose explicit content does not contain the subject to which the thought must be ascribed to – and it is precisely these thoughts that are involved in the kind of personal transformation described by Gordon. Transforming oneself in someone else, in this sense, would mean nothing but being able to reproduce certain incomplete thoughts – thoughts lacking the subject who entertains them – and to relativize them to another subject.

References

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Recanati F. (2007), *Perspectival Thought (A Plea for Moderate Relativism)*, Oxford, Oxford University Press