

IEM, Nonconceptual Content, and Semantic Relativism

Immunity to Error through Misidentification (IEM) is a property of some kinds of judgments/thoughts, such that these judgments/thoughts are not liable to a specific sort of error. For a judgment of the predicative type, an error through misidentification is defined as occurring when one is wrong about the identity of the subject of the predication.

IEM was originally considered to be a property instantiated by certain self-ascriptions. Indeed, Wittgenstein observed that for a certain class of mental states, typically feelings and sensations expressible through first-person sentences, the possibility of an error of the kind previously mentioned, seems to be excluded.

In order to explain this IEM property, I claim that we have to focus on the evidence base from which self-ascriptions are derived. By “evidence base” I mean: (i) the occurrence of the mental/bodily state on which the self-ascription under consideration is based, (ii) the way(s) through which information conveyed by this state is gained and processed. If we accept this approach to IEM, then we can envisage enlarging the study of this epistemic property beyond the class of states that are structured as self-ascriptions. More precisely, we can envisage that some mental states with nonconceptual content are immune to error through misidentification.

However, it has been argued that the idea of immune nonconceptual contents is problematic. Indeed, we have defined IEM as an immunity to a specific kind of error, an error relative to the first person pronoun, or an error relative to a first person concept or representation. In other words, for a state to be representational and immune to error through misidentification, it must at least be possible for it to misrepresent the property without misrepresenting the subject. But, if we consider a nonconceptual state, a state whose content does not exhibit the kind of predicative structure mentioned above, it seems that for such a state it is not possible to misrepresent the property without misidentifying the subject, since what is about the subject cannot be distinguished from what is about the property. In the first part of my paper, I explain how an account inspired by Recanati’s (2007) Strong Moderate Relativism of IEM can easily solve this problem.

But the central aim of my paper is to answer an objection against the relativist account of IEM for nonconceptual contents. This objection is the following. A given mental content can be relativized if and only if what this content is relative to is invariant. So, for a content to be self-concerning requires that the subject this content is relative to, be itself invariant. The problem is that this invariance condition is *prima facie* incompatible with the existence of many representational states involving perception and action and presumably arising from evidence bases that one would expect are conducive to IEM. Indeed, “shared representations” violate the invariance condition since they are sensitive to more than one individual. Hence, it seems that we should give up the relativist framework as an alleged way to solve the problem of IEM for nonconceptual contents, and postulate instead a component in the content under consideration that designates the (or at least) one agent.

My claim is that this argument is based on the confusion of two distinct invariance conditions: a weak one and a strong one. The variability shared representations illustrate is undoubtedly a violation of the strong kind of invariance: the invariance of the value of the parameter the state under consideration is relative to. But there is no reason to think

that shared representation violates also the weak invariance principle: the invariance of the way the value of the parameter is determined (the role). In this paper, I show that the role of the parameter depends on the functional role of the representation in question. For episodic memories, or some perceptual states, it can be regarded as a function that takes the mental context in which a given representation occurs, and returns the value of the parameter. To postulate such a function is justified by external facts about the architecture of the cognitive system and its relation to the environment. Indeed, these facts can be seen as invariant features of the world that explain, in this situation, why the cognitive system does not have to burden itself with costly genuine identifications and explicit self-representations. I apply this idea, *mutatis mutandis*, to the case of motor shared representations. The result is a function inspired by a conceptual framework for agency developed by Synofzik and coll. (2008). The invariant role of the subject-parameter in the case of shared motor representation is thus understood as an integration and a weighting of several pieces of self-specifying information, which are already well studied in the empirical literature. This process is represented as an indexing function from the mental context in which the representation occurs to the situation of evaluation. The crucial point is that the variability shared motor representations exhibit is then explained by the variability of what constitutes the mental context rather than by a variable postulated in the content of the state. Whatever the state of the mental context, the procedure which determines the index the representation is relative to, remains invariant. Thus, the relativist framework does not conflict at all with our growing understanding of mirror mechanisms (underlying shared representations), and gives a plausible account of IEM instantiated by contents that do not exhibit subject-predicate structure.