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Embodied conventions

Some comments on their social dimension and intentionality

In these brief comments on Bruno Celano's "Pre-conventions. A Fragment of the Background", I propose further thoughts on what, following Celano's analysis, I call embodied conventions. I begin with a number of remarks on Celano's philosophical method. Then I claim, first, that the social dimension of conventionality remains obscure in his account of embodied conventions, and, second, that his account of pre-conventions (embodied conventions that are in the Background) is still imprecise due to the ambiguity of the notion of the Background.

Keywords: philosophical method, social dimension, Background

1 INTRODUCTION

I have been kindly invited by the editors of *Revus* to comment on Bruno Celano's article "Pre-conventions. A Fragment of the Background". As always, Celano's analysis is illuminating and encourages the reader to think further about the issue in hand. In this text, I only intend to indicate some paths that, to my mind, should be explored in order to complete or improve our understanding of the phenomena pointed to by Celano.

My comments are divided into three parts. First, I discuss briefly Celano's indirect remarks on the philosophical method (or, at least, on the method he uses to examine "pre-conventions"). Second, I introduce what I take to be Celano's key claims regarding embodied conventions. I then propose a number of observations on Celano's analysis, focusing only on two aspects. On the one hand, I argue that his explanation of embodied conventions needs to be further developed in order to account for the social dimension of conventionality. On the other hand, I argue that the relationship between the unintentionality of embodied conventions and the Background is still imprecise, and that this renders the notion of pre-conventions unstable.[1]

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1   Below, in section 3, I explain the use of the label "embodied conventions" instead of "pre-conventions".

2 ON METHOD

The method of analytic philosophy is an intricate matter. I had a difficult time trying to figure out how I should proceed while doing legal philosophy if I were to follow the analytical method. There are some commonplaces, such as the use of formal logic or the concern for the meaning of words and concepts, but it has not been easy to translate those commonplaces into everyday philosophical activity. In Celano's article there are some suggestions as to how this translation might be carried out. I would like to be clear here, though – nowhere in his article does Celano explicitly introduce what he thinks the method of philosophy is, be it analytic or not. Instead, he makes disseminated remarks about the endeavour he has undertaken. It is based on such remarks that I attribute a philosophical method to Celano.[2]

From this methodological perspective, Celano's proposal on embodied conventions is a mixture of an analysis of the meaning of the word "convention" and an analysis of the traits that characterise the particular phenomenon he is interested in.[3] The procedure, as I understand it, is organised into three main steps. First, we should explore the current meaning of the word ("its semantic field"). Second, we should unfold the logical possibilities of that meaning, even if they are not covered by word usage.[4] Third, we should analyse these logical possibilities in order to capture the key traits (initially identified extensionally, i.e., by way of examples) of the phenomenon. The result of this procedure is not a recommendation or guide to the correct usage of the word, nor is it a proposal on the necessary and sufficient properties that define the concept or the phenomenon. Instead, I would say that this procedure purports to provide philosophical insight into a phenomenon by pointing out some of its key traits and by associating it with a family of meanings that the word bears. This procedure seeks to illuminate or shed new light on a phenomenon, taking as a starting point the way in which our language captures it, even if only roughly.[5]

I take this method to be suggestive and promising, even if it is difficult to establish its success criteria. For instance, would the fact that the actual meaning of a word is not the one described by the philosopher count as an objection?

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2   If this is the case, you may wonder why use a word as heavy as "method" to describe his procedure. Well, in what follows, by "method" I understand just a procedure, a planned way of doing something.

3   Celano uses this same method for his analysis of another, closer phenomenon. See, for instance, Celano 2010 [1995]: 175 on "custom" (*consuetudine*).

4   In this step, "we are engaged in the search for an explanatory redefinition of the term – more precisely, a rational reconstruction of a plurality of different concepts of convention." Celano 2016: 11.

5   Celano's endeavour does not finish with a conceptual analysis of pre-conventions. Indeed, his insight into pre-conventions seeks to afford a new explanation of a philosophical puzzle: rule-following.

Or, would the fact that some traits of a phenomenon do not fit with the actual meaning of the word be an objection? Are the key traits necessary conditions or only typical properties of a phenomenon?[6] More generally, how can we determine which philosophical result is the correct one? Actually, it seems to me that, behind this method, there is indeed a challenge to the last question I have posed. There is no such thing as scorekeeping in philosophy. There are certainly some minimum standards, but once they are satisfied, there is no one and only correct result. Philosophical activity, in this view, is like a torch illuminating a diffused area rather than a laser pointing at one single spot. My aim here is just to dig into this diffused area.

3 DISTINGUISHING CONVENTIONS

According to Celano, the word "convention", even if ambiguous, has a typical meaning characterised by two elements – agreement and arbitrariness.[7] Agreement, widely understood as "going together", can be either "amenable to a rational explanation" or not.[8] Besides, agreements can be explicit or tacit.[9] These elements delimit the semantic field of "convention". Subjecting these varieties of agreement to logical analysis, we find four possible combinations, all of which may adequately be called conventions. Celano is interested in the phenomenon that instantiates one of these possibilities, namely cases of tacit agreement not subject to rationalisation. Using a widely known jargon of the philosophy of mind, we may call those tacit agreements that are amenable to rationalisation – *cognitive conventions*, and those that are not – *embodied conventions*.[10] Lewisian coordination conventions are examples of cognitive conventions. Celano claims that activities such as swimming the front crawl, identifying salient solutions to coordination problems or recognising instances of a concept are examples of embodied conventions. Embodied conventions are characterised by the fact that certain correct ways of doing things have been wired in the bodies of

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6   This introduces a further source of complexity: How shall we distinguish between a descriptive and a theoretical claim about a phenomenon?

7   Incidentally, I am not certain that the way in which Celano defines arbitrariness captures its typical meaning when associated with conventions. There are conventions whose content is not immaterial, such as colours and subject matters represented in religious art. It seems to me that the arbitrariness of conventions is a closer relative to another meaning, namely "the result of an act of will of a human being". I have argued so in Arena 2011.

8   To be "amenable to a rational explanation" means that the agreement is the result of "reasoned pursuit, by each of the parties involved, of their own goal". Celano 2016: 11.

9   See Celano 2016: 13–14 for a discussion of the distinction between tacit and explicit.

10 "Cognitive" and "embodied" are usually used to distinguish between two different theories of mind. See Shapiro 2011.

the people involved. They are instances of convergent automatic, unreflective, spontaneous behaviour which is not a biological regularity (such as breathing).

To quote Celano, "those who know how to swim the crawl, or march, have these forms in their body. *The correct stroke* of front crawl or the way of walking we call 'marching' are tacit bodily schemes. /…/ Human biology sets the limits, a frame. But within these limits we then indulge our whims; and the limits themselves can, sometimes, be manipulated. What front crawl is, is – in part – an arbitrary agreement (in the generic sense introduced above, sect. 2). Because of this conventional component, these wired-in forms (forms in the body, that is) are, inseparably, both natural (a 'second nature') and cultural."[11] Some of these non-rationalisable tacit agreements are the conditions of some rationalisable activities, which are otherwise impossible to carry out. In such cases, embodied conventions are part ("a fragment") of what John Searle calls the "Background".[12]

Embodied conventions, thus, have a distinctive structure: they are embodied norms, which means that they are normative facts. Facts, because they are in the body. Normative, because they fix the distinction between correct and incorrect behaviour.

The argument about how some embodied regularities may become normative facts is, of course, one of the more challenging proposals of the article. Nonetheless, here I focus on Celano's claims about the existence of conventional phenomena that are not captured by the notion of cognitive conventions. Even though I agree in general with his insight, I believe that there are some aspects of embodied conventions that do remain obscure and others that lack precision. In the following two sections, I propose moving the philosophical torch in order to cast light on some areas of the phenomenon.

Before moving ahead, a terminological clarification is in order. Irrespective of the fact that Celano, at one point, defines pre-conventions as "conventions that are mostly in the Background of our activities and thoughts, and that, passing usually unnoticed, delimit their spaces",[13] it seems to me that, from the examples put forward, it follows that not all embodied conventions are a fragment of the Background. The examples given, such as conventions that establish how to swim the crawl or how to march, are, to my mind, on the surface.[14] Indeed, near the end, Celano offers a definition by specification: "embodied conventions that have become 'second nature'".[15] This is why I use "embodied convention" to refer to the general phenomenon pointed to by Celano, and save

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11 Celano 2016: 14–15.

12 See Searle 1995: 127–147.

13 Celano 2016: 19.

14 On the distinction between background and surface activities more follows below.

15 Celano 2016: 30.

"pre-convention" for those embodied conventions, if any, that are a fragment of the Background. I do have something more to say about embodied conventions and the Background in section five of this paper.

4 THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF CONVENTIONS

Let us start with the meaning of words. There seems to be a further ambiguity in the semantic field of "conventional". We have the disposition to call certain activities "conventional" even if we would not say that there is a "convention" which imposes them; "conventional" does not always mean "of or pertaining to a convention".

We would say that the fact that in Argentina we lie on a bed while sleeping is conventional, but there is no convention concerning this fact. It is conventional because we can see that in other places people lie on the ground, so it is not something imposed by nature, but something chosen by people. It is in this sense that it is conventional. But it is not a convention in the sense that it is something that we do together.

Maybe this ambiguity is obscured by the fact that the distinction between nature and convention is not a distinction between two complementary sets. To be non-natural, it is sufficient for a fact to be the result of an act of a human being. For instance, imagine a shipwreck survivor on an isolated island wanting to cultivate some grain. Once she has finished ploughing the field, we say that the arrangement is non-natural because the length of plough lines and the distance between them have been decided and carried out by her and not nature. This is the only meaning ("non-natural") that we would appeal to if we were to say that her activity is conventional. Yet, we would not say that her actions either followed or were imposed by a convention. When conventional is tied to a convention, the activities of an isolated human being cannot be conventional. These considerations also apply to embodied activities. For instance, our survivor could walk through the forest always following a path that she herself has formed and that particular path could be wired in her body, but we would not call that a convention. The same goes for swimming. An isolated swimmer who has embodied a certain kind of stroke does not follow a convention, regardless of the fact that we could say that the way in which he slides over water is conventional (non-natural).

Moreover, labelling as conventional the activity both of an isolated human being and of many people, even if convergent, when there is no relationship between them would remain outside the semantic field of convention.

There are many cases in which some activity has been wired-in, embodied, in a number of people, but we would not say that the activity is conventional

(at least in more than the "non-natural" sense). For instance, imagine a person who, driving to work, takes the same route every day. This activity seems to be wired in her body to the point that, at some other times, when she wants to go to other places, she automatically takes that same route even if it is not the right one. In Argentina, we use the expression "man is an animal of habit" to describe this kind of error. It is a non-natural activity because the choice of route is not imposed by nature; there is more than one route available, but it only happens that she takes exactly that one. Now imagine that some colleagues of hers live in the same housing block and that all of them take the same route every day while driving to work, and also imagine that all of them have this activity embodied, wired-in. Nonetheless, we would not call their activity of taking the same route to work a convention, because each of them does the activity individually. There must be something else besides embodiment and convergence for a convention to exist.

The realm of conventions is the realm of social activities. Conventions bridge individuals who are otherwise isolated. Even if the idea of embodiment may throw light on some conventional phenomena, it leaves unexplained the way in which conventions glue the activities of people onto each other. This aspect is certainly captured by the notion of cognitive conventions. In the effort made by proponents of cognitive conventions to explain agreement as a train of reasoning we may find the effort of finding an explanation of how individuals get tied to conventions. This is, it seems to me, one of the main roles that common knowledge or the condition of dependence is designed to play in Lewisian conventions.

This social dimension of convention has most certainly been acknowledged by Celano in his previous works where he deals with what here I have called cognitive conventions.[16] However, to my mind, this aspect remains obscure in his presentation of embodied conventions, and more has to be said in order to rule out cases of isolated or merely convergent embodied activities.

5 EMBODIMENT, INTENTIONALITY AND THE BACKGROUND

Let us grant that there are embodied conventions, i.e., regularities of behaviour that are, irrespective of the fact that they are the result of learning, spontaneous or unreflective ("they are not backed by a train of reasoning") and that glue, in some way, individuals to social activities. I have saved the term "pre-convention" to name embodied conventions that, according to Celano, "come before", in the sense that they mostly lie behind our activities and thoughts.

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16 See, for instance, Celano 2010 [1995]: 183–187.

Celano claims that pre-conventions are a fragment of what, following Searle's thesis, he calls the Background.

This is not the place to discuss Searle's thesis on the Background. However, it seems to me that some of its flaws translate into Celano's explanation of pre-conventions. According to Searle, as Celano reminds us, intentional states, such as beliefs or desires, "function the way they do only given a presupposed set of Background capacities that are not just intentional states".[17] We need the help of some unintentional capacities so as to be able to have intentional states.[18]

Even if this idea seems plausible, Searle's examples are confusing. On the one hand, he proposes the example of language: "If you consider the sentence 'Cut the grass!' you know that this is to be interpreted differently from 'Cut the cake!' If somebody tells me to cut the cake and I run over it with a lawn mower or they tell me to cut the grass and I rush and stab it with a knife, there is a very ordinary sense in which I did not do what I was told to do. Yet nothing in the literal meaning of those sentences blocks wrong interpretations. In each case we understand the verb differently, even though its literal meaning is constant, because in each case our interpretation depends on our Background abilities".[19]

On the other hand, as quoted by Celano, Searle proposes the example of cultural practices: "We all walk upright and eat by putting food in our mouths. Such universal phenomena I call the 'deep Background,' but many other Background presuppositions vary from culture to culture. For example, in my culture we eat pigs and cows but not worms and grasshoppers, and we eat at certain times of day and not others."[20]

It seems to me that these examples render the idea of the Background ambiguous and therefore the expression "comes before" may mean different things. On the one hand, the embodiment of an activity may free some cognitive capacity and, in doing so, allows us to perform that and other activities at the same time. For instance, it is very difficult for a learner driver to operate the car radio while driving. But once the driving activity has been wired-in, he can do both activities easily. The driver now possesses a set of intentional states, such as the desire to listen to a certain radio station and the belief that by tuning in the

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17 Searle 1999: 109.

18 I take Celano to be adhering to Searle's definition of Intentionality as "that property of many mental states and events by which they are directed at or about or of objects and states of affairs in the world." Searle 1983: 1. Accordingly, my understanding is that he also distinguishes intentionality from consciousness and intention. Let us recall Searle's cautionary remark: "The obvious pun on 'Intentionality' and 'intention' suggests that intentions in the ordinary sense have some special role in the theory of Intentionality; but on my account intending to do something is just one form of Intentionality along with beliefs, hope, fear, desire and lots of other." Searle 1983: 3.

19 Searle 1995: 130–131.

20 Searle 1999: 109.

radio he will be able to do so. And he also has the unintentional ability to drive the car. One explanation of the whole situation is that some cognitive capacity has been freed by the embodiment of the activity. However, here the relationship between a "Background" and surface activity is not one of dependence. We can indeed operate the radio without driving (more importantly, that would be safer!). In other words, driving the car "comes before" operating the radio just in a temporal sense.[21] This also seems to be the case in Searle's examples about how, what and when we eat.

On the other hand, there are activities that could not be performed if we were not equipped with certain unintentional capacities. In order to be able to communicate with each other using language, we need certain background presumptions to be in place, as in the example of literal meaning. In such cases, the relationship between Background and surface activity is one of dependence in the sense that the activity could not be performed without the Background. In such cases, the activity "comes before" when it is an unintentional condition of possibility.[22]

Therefore, an activity can be embodied and, as a consequence, may free some cognitive capacity without, at the same time, it being the condition of possibility of another activity. Furthermore, while it seems easier to see how an embodied convention can be in the Background in the first sense, it is more difficult to see how it can be in the Background in the second sense. Take, for instance, the supposed pre-convention of identifying salient options within co-ordination conventions and think of the coordination problem regarding the question of who should call back first when telephone lines have been unexpectedly cut off. In what sense is this embodied? Once a convention has been in place for a while, we could say that people have the activity that solves the problem wired-in, e.g., redialling if you are the one who initially made the call, waiting otherwise. It has become an automatic, irreflexive, spontaneous activity. At the beginning, it might have been a cognitive convention, but now it is an embodied one. However, it is only the surface coordination convention itself that has been embodied and not the background convention regarding the way in which salient options are to be identified. The bodily movements that we see are only those of someone redialling (or waiting).

There does, however, remain a sense in which we could still say that a pre-convention has been embodied and that it is different from the embodiment of a surface activity. Given that the brain is part of the body, we could say that the

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21 Here, I am not saying that the only way of doing two things at the same time is if one is embodied.

22 Besides "being first" and "coming before", Celano also uses a spatial metaphor: pre-conventions "delimit the space" of some activities. There is a sense in which driving delimits the space of radio operation while driving (e.g., we can usually use only one hand). I am not sure whether this sense supports Celano's conceptual claims.

activity has been embodied in the neuronal circuits of the brain. The brain has learned how to identify salient options and it does so in an irreflexive spontaneous way. I do not know if Celano would accept this brain version of embodiment, but it seems to me that this sense eliminates the difference between cognitive and embodied conventions. Furthermore, cognitive conventions would all be embodied conventions, at least if the train of reasoning were to be thought of as a neuronal state of our brain.

To sum up, either we understand being in the Background as the freeing of cognitive capacity and so embodied conventions can, in this case, be, contingently, in the Background facilitating some activities; or we understand being in the Background as being a condition of possibility of some activities, but then cognitive conventions are also embodied conventions.

6 CLOSING REMARKS

In these comments, I have focused mainly on the way in which Celano expands the concept of convention by unveiling the possibility of a new kind. Celano's article has, thus, thrown new light on a phenomenon that has so far remained poorly illuminated, namely the existence of some conventions that are embodied, wired in people's bodies. These conventions are constituted by agreements not amenable to a train of reasoning. I find these claims convincing regardless of them being in need of further development. There are many other arguments and philosophical proposals in Celano's article that I have not considered here.

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