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### **On Gennaro Auletta on representations**

Auletta's article<sup>1</sup> suffers from a defect that is all too common in philosophical discourse: the idea that there are essences to be discovered by conceptual analysis. Auletta sets out to supply the essence of intentionality in general, zeroing in on the idea that representations are "signs". On the authority of Tullio De Mauro and Saussure we are told there is a general semiotics which takes as its domain anything which counts as a sign (a street sign, my fingers, sentences in Croatian und so weiter). My own humble view is that this is highly misleading to say the least. It is very difficult to see why, say, the internal visual representation of a moving object should form a single genus with "Good afternoon" or with a one way sign on the street, bundled together with the gauge of a Geiger counter.

In fact it is a serious contention that language itself has, for reasons we do not understand well at all, a unique status. The point was made as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Cordemoy or by Descartes. To make a long story short, one has only to notice that any language has negations, or forms of passivization. It is highly unclear how any visual representation could "mean" that the dog is *not* in his doghouse (note that the empty doghouse is not enough, we need the visual representation of its emptiness together with a massive injection of reasoning). Thus, if language is a form of "representation", it is such a very special sort of representation that it casts doubt on the very idea of "representations in general". I can only point to the fact that natural languages have properties shared by no other real or alleged systems of representations. By way of example we may look at discrete infinity. Natural languages can process, produce, and interpret an infinity of sentences. Natural languages have no continuity at all: there are three and four sentences. Nothing is a 1.5 sentence.

My provisional conclusion is that general semiotics is a dead alley to be optimistic. A joke if one thinks of a real genus composed by "signs" emitted by fashions (does it mean something that kids have backwards baseball hats?) and meanings conveyed by visual, olfactory, or even linguistic representations.

The article suffers again from the traditional philosophical habit of playing with words. I shall consider but one example. We are told it is a deductive consequence of the view espoused that "Mont Blanc",

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<sup>1</sup> G. Auletta (2002). Is representation characterized by intrinsity and causality? *Intellectica*, 35, 83-113.

as name for the mountain and the mountain stand in a reversible, symmetrical relationship w.r.t. the intentional “nexus”. In English that means that I can use the mountain to mean “Mont Blanc” and vice versa. Interesting indeed since the explanation is that neither has the right “ontological status”. I have no idea of what ontological status is. If the question is what comes first there seems to very little doubt that the mountain was there well before “Mont Blanc” and indeed any human or animal language. If on the other hand the question is whether there is anything intrinsic to either the picture or Chirac to place them in the “nexus” the answer is no. This is a trivial consequence of the relational character of any representational link.

The main claim made by Auletta is his principle of “reversibility”, which is supposed to show that any causal account (e.g. by Ruth Millikan or Fred Dretske) is at fault. A few remarks are perhaps not amiss.

Causality is non symmetrical in essence, while “representations” are for Auletta reversible. In simple terms: if X is a representation of Y then Y is (can be?) a representation of X. Consider then a simple case, cooked up following Auletta’s recipes. I have a little gizmo that lets me watch videotapes in the streets. I own a tape of Mr. Jacques Chirac and am watching IT. By coincidence and cosmic random processes Chirac walks by and to recognize him I look again at my screen and come up with the “ah ha ha!” experience; namely I recognize Chirac by means of his representation on tape. A causal theorist claims that my tape is a representation of Chirac. Auletta wants to claim that Chirac is a representation of the tape. Something went awry over here. For one thing.... consider the issue of more or less lawful co-variation. If I taped Chirac now and watch a tape of Chirac while mayor of Paris, I shall notice that the recorded images do not change, the president’s face changed a lot. Where is the reversibility here? The representation is then dependent upon properties of the represented X (its referent) in ways in which the referent is not dependent upon properties of the representation. I stop here because I think the burden of the proof is on someone who claims that reversibility is an established property of the “representational” nexus. No amount of philosophical obfuscation will help, since context and culture, *e tutti quanti*, does not make a relation symmetrical when it is not.

To reiterate my main point. I am of the view that a general theory of intentionality is a mediaeval concern, filtered down to Brentano. It has no prospect in terms of cognitive science. The “solutions” are generally pieces of magic (not coincidentally they tend to invoke all the time “context”, “culture” etc.) The serious problem is that the very existence of cognitive science has debunked the universality of the notion of general intentionality. We just have no reason and no

evidence, pace Saussure and what not, that there is a natural kind to be investigated that bunches together the representations (computations?) in my mind/brain while watching an elephant or a cricket match with sentences, single lexical items, or a pain. In positive terms, I suggest Auletta to provide an argument or direct evidence for the existence of the natural kind "representation." If such is not forthcoming, my own view is to go on with research in all domains in which something may represent something else (a neural configuration may be a representation of a future epileptic seizure, another of a visual computation, etc.) without looking for a general definition of the properties of representation in general.