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From Fodorian to Aristotelian Representations

1 Language and thought

Though the original developer of the language of thought hypothesis is Jerry Fodor (Fodor, 1975), many factors before him helped put it in place. One of them, falling outside philosophy, is the theory of computation developed by Turing and realized in digital computers. This gives us a general picture of processing symbols according to algorithms, a picture that morphs easily into one of mental processes as computations over semantically contentful representations. And that provides a major piece of Fodor’s language of thought hypothesis.

Other factors have helped. Among them are Davidson’s work on action and belief explanation, and Chisholm’s interpretation of Brentano. Davidson’s work legitimized causal accounts of beliefs and action more solidly than had been done before. Chisholm’s interpretation introduced a conception of intentionality that allows intentional objects that may be mind-independent, which is widely invoked today. One unfortunate consequence of the interpretation is that a model of the mind under development since Aristotle effectively was denied entry into contemporary philosophical thought. In our terms, Brentano’s ‘Aristotelian Representations’ became understood as ‘Fodorian representations.’ (We see in Chapter 4 that Brentano’s own understanding may have been more mixed than is relevant here.) The resulting conception of the mind’s cognitive relation to its environment is very different from that developed from Aristotle through Aquinas to Brentano. However, because of the misreading, Brentano’s Thomistic use of the term ‘intentional’ is now understood in a sense that makes it apt for defining Fodorian representations, even by those supposedly in his much older tradition, such as Gilbert and Lennon (2005). That is, for Aquinas, outer
features realized inwardly have as such an ‘intentional’ presence. The sense of ‘intentional’ in use today is typically explained in terms of the semantical ideas of reference or extension, or what a term refers to.

2 Varieties of representations

A sign of the influence of Fodor’s theories is that many philosophers today appear to think that representations by definition possess content or aboutness. One consequence is that Aristotelian representations can seem to be impossible by definition, because they do not possess content or aboutness. Given this problem, why call them ‘representations’ at all? In fact, there are a number of reasons for doing so. First of all, that is what they are called in cognitive neuroscience. There are clear cases where the Fodorian account fails to fit the use of ‘representation’ in work in cognitive neuroscience. Second, the Aristotelian sense of representation is historically prior; for example, the Latin ‘representatio’ in Aquinas is Aristotelian and not Fodorian. Finally, there are plenty of clear uses of ‘represent’ and ‘representation’ in twenty-first century English that are Aristotelian. While in recent philosophy ‘represent’ as a somewhat technical term is understood in terms of content and satisfaction conditions, there is another use of ‘represent’ with a quite different meaning.

For example, we might ask whether certain medical procedures represent good value for money; if they do, then they are good value for money (Mihalopoulos, Vos, Pirkis, Smit & Carter, 2011). Morphologic and molecular data may suggest members of an investigated group represent a new family within a particular subclass (Liu, Yi, Lin & Al-Rasheid, 2011). Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR) may represent a biomarker for a certain disease (Cronin et al., 2011). In the latter two cases, the members are members of a new family and EGFR is a biomarker. Representing here is not to be understood in terms of intentional content and aboutness. And a philosopher may remark, ‘Hands and souls are parts of substances, although they represent different sorts of parts. A hand is an integral part...’ (Stump, 2003, 42). That is, the hand is an example of a different sort of part; the hand is not about parts of the body, nor is it true or false.

3 Why multiply kinds of representations?

As we have seen, a key element of the classical computational theory of the mind is the claim that a thought is a simple or complex mental representation possessing intentional content or aboutness, along with