

Autonomy, Scorekeeping and the Net

The virtual world does not break with physical and social worlds but it is a continuum of our social world, which evolves through the process of communication. Communication can be easily connected with a biological explanation that takes into consideration animal and human functional necessity to belong and then puts the desire for communication at the basis of the development of linguistic procedures (real or virtual), which are peculiar of human language.

Communication can be both real and virtual: what about our standard view of autonomy in philosophy, classically bound to individual rational reflection for achieving objective representations or authenticity? In the presence of a wide range of information, of reasons embedded in many different points of view, how is the process of decentralization thinkable?

Opinion polls tell us that people consider autonomy as the most precious good: autonomy in work, in free time, in relationships, in modes of thinking, in politics and also in the familiar context. Traditional structures such as patriarchal family, church, political parties, the ideas of country and local community have lost their capacity for integration. Our society of communication transforms traditional ways of thinking according to a multiplicity of messages on which people build their relationships. The proliferation of TV channels makes our common cultural references more uncertain. Internet and mobile communication deserve to construe a new form of individual autonomy. Communication is a process taking new shapes; the most visible phenomenon is the electronic interactive communication. According to the sociologist Manuel Castells, it emerges a new form of sociality based on the capacity to build personal nets of relationships in Internet and outside Internet, by

mobile telephone and by direct physical contact, apart from the moment and the place in which we actually are. It is not a form of negative net-individualism but a personalized system of communication that William Mitchell defines Me++: all begins from me and from the expansion of my ideas and desires. Because of the fact that we all do the same we are not isolated, rather we build nets in which each of us engage a relation with things or persons we choose for pleasure or need: work, clients, information, objects of consume or music, images for iPod and mobiles. In Castells' words " As computerized snails we carry the home of our imaginary and our relics, by constantly redefining the environment in which we move according to our mental programs emerging from the deep of ourselves".

A crucial question concerns the reconciliation of autonomy and cooperation among individuals belonging to the same species. The capacity to create new forms of relationships involves reflection on a new concept of personal autonomy, which takes into consideration the necessity of cooperation. In this sense, autonomy becomes a social notion. Castells intends autonomy in the sense of satisfying individual needs, desires and preferences; I think however that if this starting point is fundamental to conceive individual freedom, autonomy must be thought as a capacity for critical reflection that develops in the use of language i.e. in a "social" space of reasons.

The most important result of this thought is that freedom is a social matter, because, as a phenomenon, it emerges only through social "attribution". During the process of socialization we do not only acquire concepts by using language, we also acquire a "dialogical competence", i.e. a net of discursive deontic attitudes which grounds the very possibility of autonomy For an agent to be autonomous she ought to internalize the normative structure of a "dialogical" rationality. The discursive process in which we acquire autonomy develops through a fruitful analysis of different linguistic uses

embedded in sentences with different forces. The model of “scorekeeping” is useful to isolate the fundamental speech acts involved in the process: “refusal”, “challenge” and “query”.

What forces us to avoid the collapse of autonomy into positive freedom is our concrete participation in the game of giving and asking for reasons, in which we master the communicative structure of justification by “default” and “challenge”. What is important for my personal idea of autonomy is how attitudes work in the reciprocal exchange of reasons. The deontic attitudes of the interlocutors represent a perspective on the deontic states of the entire community.

The accent on deontic attitudes is necessary to reformulate the notion of autonomy in relationship with real and virtual communication. My claim is that this pragmatic structure explains what we do in the game of giving and asking for reasons in terms of the deontic attitudes of the speakers. Once the agent has somehow interiorized the net of attitudes in the process of socialization she is able to play the social role of scorekeeper in dialogical situations; moreover, she can communicate in real or virtual discursive contexts such as the net. On the one side, the agent is exposed to different reasons and this is a fundamental condition to develop autonomy, on the other side she can take position for or against conflicting reasons and this is a fundamental condition for critical reflection. A plausible “relational” scoreboard is “perspectival” because agents have a set of different collateral commitments so that we are forced to realize that different reasons exist and are the source of intrasubjective and intersubjective conflicts necessary to develop autonomy. Conflicts express themselves in the communicative dimension of challenge which starts from the default case i.e. assertion. The speech act of assertion shows the agent playing the role of scorekeeper who undertakes a commitment (responsibility) and attributes the entitlement to that commitment (authority) to the interlocutor or to herself.

Refusal, query and challenge have the same propositional content (structured by material inferential commitments) but different force and deserve to foster critical reflection.

The more we have the possibility to communicate (to realize a reciprocal exchange of reasons) - and this situation is favored by virtual communication - the more we can develop autonomy in discursive situations.