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## Celano: ontological commitment and normative bite

In his article on pre-conventions, Celano presents, what the author calls, the *Ontological Commitment Thesis* and the *Normative Bite Thesis*. In this short comment, the author argues that the two theses are together both incompatible with the idea that pre-conventions are facts which have causal powers in human behaviour; also, if the ontological thesis is abandoned, normative determination could not be obtained. In other terms, the author argues that either pre-conventions (as part of the Background) are part of our causal explanation of human behaviour or pre-conventions are abstract entities able to determine human behaviour normatively. In the first case, pre-conventions lack normative meaning, while in the second pre-conventions cannot integrate our causal explanation of human actions. *Tertium non datur*.

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“Les jambes, les bras sont pleines de  
souvenirs engourdis.”  
(Proust 1989: 5)

(I) At the very beginning, Celano presents the core of his suggestive thesis on so-called ‘pre-conventions’:

I will argue that there are entities that can be plausibly called ‘conventions’, which are neither mere *de facto* regularities, nor rules (norms), but that – in a sense to be specified – have both the character of *de facto* regularities, as well as a normative character: they are, literally, ‘normative facts’.

Pre-conventions are facts, but facts with a *normative bite*. They are things such as riding a bike or skiing. Celano reminds us of this opportune way of presenting Searle’s idea:<sup>1</sup>

As the skier gets better he does not internalize the rules better, but rather the rules become progressively irrelevant. The rules do not become ‘wired in’ as unconscious Intentional contents, but the repeated experiences create physical capacities, presumably realized as neural pathways, that make the rules simply irrelevant. ‘Practice makes perfect’ not because practice results in a perfect memorization of the rules, but because repeated practice enables the body to take over and the rules to recede into

1 Searle 1983: 150–151. Celano’s italics.

the Background /.../ On my view, *the body takes over* and the skier's Intentionality is concentrated on winning the race.

Therefore, pre-conventions have a normative dimension, they allow us to assess whether certain human actions are right practices of skiing or riding a bike. We can call this thesis the *Normative Bite Thesis* on pre-conventions.

However, Celano intends to add another thesis, which we can call the *Ontological Commitment Thesis*, according to which:<sup>2</sup>

The essential point is that these things are abstract entities (not an actual behavior, but its form); but they are *in the body*: 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, which are intermediate between an image (e.g., a mental picture of somebody swimming, or marching) and rule: embodied diagrams that establish what to do, what is the *correct*, the right or proper way to proceed. And in these diagrams, or at least in many of them, there is a more or less conspicuous conventional component. 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 (I return below, in sect. 8, to the antithesis 'nature v. culture').

(II) In this short comment, I shall argue that the *Ontological Commitment Thesis* and the *Normative Bite Thesis* are together both incompatible with the idea that pre-conventions are facts which have causal powers in human behaviour. And if we abandoned the ontological thesis, we could not obtain normative determination. That is to say, either pre-conventions (as part of the Background) are part of our causal explanation of human behaviour or pre-conventions are abstract entities able to determine human behaviour normatively.<sup>3</sup> In the first case, pre-conventions lack normative meaning, while in the second pre-conventions cannot integrate our causal explanation of human actions. *Tertium non datur*.

(III) This is not the place to introduce the *vexata quaestio* of Platonism in philosophy. It is sufficient to accept that if there are abstract entities in a certain sphere (e.g., numbers, possible worlds, reasons for action, and so on), then these entities are "independent of intelligent agents and their language, thought, and practices".<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, they lack causal powers.<sup>5</sup> Given that, for Celano, pre-

2 Notes omitted.

3 I think that this is also a problem for Searle's account. However, for several refinements, see Searle 1992 & 1995. See, for instance, Ross (2005) who puts this problem to Searle's account convincingly.

4 As it is put for mathematical objects by Linnebo 2013.

5 For an acceptance of this kind of abstract entities without ontological commitment (although acknowledging that they have no causal powers), see Parfit 2011: 467–487.

conventions are abstract entities, these things cannot figure in our explanations of human actions and practices. Neural pathways can provide this explanation, but not abstract entities.

(IV) Nonetheless, if pre-conventions have causal powers and can integrate our explanation of human behaviour, then they cannot normatively determine the value of human actions. To determine if a human action is right or not, in accordance with certain patterns of behaviour, we need something more fine-grained than facts as neural pathways. We need something more articulated and structured, something such as reasons for action. Of course, reasons for action can be implicit, but making them explicit should be possible. They should be representable as structured sets of abstract entities.

There are times when Searle seems to realise this problem (Searle 1995: 140) and he presents it as a dilemma – for Searl, not impossible to wade through –:

If we think of the Background intentionalistically, then we have abandoned the thesis of the Background. We arrived at that thesis in the first place only because we found that intentionality goes only so far. The intentionality is not self-interpreting. But if, on the other hand, we say that the rules play no causal role at all in the behavior, then we must say that the Background is such that this is just what the person does, he just behaves that way. For example, he produces these kinds of sentences and not other kinds. He simply acts the way he does, and that is the end of the story.

I am unable to see a way out to this dilemma.

(V) It is rather odd that Celano does not refer in his illuminating contribution to a human practice which displays all the traits of pre-conventions. The practice that I am thinking about is linguistic practice. Languages are communicative practices, a clear case of the possibility of *knowing how* without *knowing that*. More specifically, human beings master their native language implicitly, they are able to distinguish between right and wrong uses of their language and they are not conscious of the rules that underlie their practice. However, the sets of rules of our languages are codifiable in sets of explicit rules.

In fact, in his latest book, very much in the spirit of Celano's idea, dedicated to human language (see, for example, the sympathy with the Bourdieu's idea of *habitus*),<sup>6</sup> Taylor (2016) develops a Heideggerian idea similar to Celano's pre-conventions. The idea is that of *protodwelling* (from Heidegger's reflections on *Wohnen*, Taylor 1992: 95–100), acknowledging that these background linguistic notions are articulable (Taylor 2016: 334):

Our being a linguistic animal makes another kind of difference here, beyond that we enact, define, or communicate. Our linguistically formed experience of the world is

6 Bourdieu (1980) elaborates the idea of *habitus* in a way which is similar to Celano's idea of pre-conventions and, on p. 88, brings a quotation by Proust (in the heading of this contribution), in which he replaces 'souvenirs' with 'imperatives'.

full of liminal meanings, which invite articulation, but can easily be ignored, while we are intent in our pursuit of other ends. This is what I called, building on Heidegger's terms, our 'protodwelling'.

Obviously, my considerations leave the problem of intentionality untouched: how are we, thinking bodies, moved by numbers, meanings, possible states of affairs, reasons for action? This is crucial, but the idea of pre-conventions (and Searle's idea of the Background) seems not to be able to provide us with a reliable path to a solution.

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