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REPRESENTATION AND REALITY

Thesis submitted for the degree of
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This thesis is all my own original work

Brenda Judge
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INTRODUCTION
(and ABSTRACT)

The entire weight of Locke's philosophy of mind hangs on a theory of representation. What is at issue here is not just the representative theory of perception, with all its familiar problems. The failure of Locke's theory of knowledge to do the job it is supposed to do can be traced back to an inadequate account of what it is for the mind to grasp the reference, or the sense of a sign, i.e. to represent something. It is all the more strange, therefore, that Locke never discusses the question of what it is for something to represent something else. Although the Essay presupposes an implicit theory of representation over and over again, that theory is never made explicit.

But this remarkable omission is not confined to Locke. A concept of representation has played a part in almost all the classic theories of knowledge, for example, in Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Husserl etc. In Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus we come much closer to an articulated account of representation in the 'picture' theory of propositions and states of affairs. But nowhere in these classic accounts do we find any explicit articulation of a theory of representation as such.

In more recent times there has been some opening up of the topic of representation as, for example, in Foucault's account of representation and signification in different 'epistemes' (Foucault, 1970); and in a recent colloquium on representation (Freed, Marras, Maynard, 1975). But discussion of representation are usually concerned with a particular form, e.g. political representation (Pitkin, 1967 and 1969), or representation in art (Scruton, 1974, chapter 13), rather than with the general question of what it is to use one item to represent another. There are, however, two areas of discussion which have raised some general questions about representation. One is semiotic theory, which deals with the topic of signification, and this as we shall see is closely related to representation; the other is cognitive psychology, in particular Piaget's account of thinking. For this reason a detailed examination of these two areas occupies a large part of what follows, even though they may not normally be regarded as areas of central interest in philosophy.
Perhaps the general lack of engagement with the topic of representation as such, especially by philosophers who have been preoccupied by the theory of knowledge and who might therefore be expected to face squarely the question of what it is for one thing to represent another, can be explained by the fact that the general concept is thought to be intuitively clear and does not need explanation. Thus, it might perhaps be thought that though there are special problems about particular kinds of representation, e.g. political representation or representation in art, and perhaps even more in the question of how it is that language manages to represent the world, these arise out of the special nature of the particular subject matter rather than from general difficulties about the relation of representation itself. In fact, however, these special problems which arise in special contexts - e.g. as questions about meaning and truth conditions in the philosophy of language - are often simply special aspects of a general problem about the nature of representation as such. For in the very basic conception of representation, as making one thing stand for another, all is not as straightforward as it may seem.

As we shall see in our study of Locke, it is precisely because representation seems to be so unproblematic, but is not, that problems arise unnoticed by Locke. These problems arise out of apparently uncontroversial situations which we may take for granted at a common-sense level. A photograph resembles its subject, but is it true to say that resemblance is a 'natural' relation which creates a link of representation? Does an icon simply point to some other item, in virtue of its resemblance? Peirce and others have thought so - mistakenly, as we shall see. Can non-language-using animals represent things, or understand representations? We might have good reason for thinking so. After all, cats and dogs respond to the rattle of plates (nowadays even to the sound of an electric can opener) as a sign of forthcoming food; we talk about 'sentinel' cockatoos which give 'warning' cries of 'danger'. In this sense, then, our intuitions, expressed in our ordinary language, are that animals do use representation. But there are differences. Dumb animals do not (as far as we know) intend to represent, and this fact has an important bearing on our understanding of representation. Are mental images representations? We almost always talk about them as if they were. For example, "I have an image of the circular window in Chartres Cathedral, but I'm not sure if I have all the right colours in it". Does this mean, then, that images are mental pictures which
resemble their originals, though imperfectly? How does the image come to represent the external item, how do I know what it represents?

These are some of the questions that we shall have to consider in the course of developing an account of the nature of representation. That is the major task of the first two parts of this thesis. In Parts I and II I shall develop an account which has as its central claim that representation is a three-term relation between representative item, represented item and some agent or individual who makes or understands the representational relation. The unpacking of this representational relation is another important question. No adequate account of the relation can be derived from a passive theory of mind (such as Locke's); active thought is essential to the establishment of the representational relation. Representation, as we shall see, is an intentional act—that is to say, an act of thought directed towards some object(s).

With a provisional account of representation worked out in the first two Parts, we shall turn in Part III to some of the broader implications of this account. What, for example, is the relationship between representation and thought, and between representation and reality? Piaget has claimed that representation is identical with (conceptual) thought. My claim is the more limited one that all conceptual thought involves an act of representation. The capacity for representation is, in fact, an important differentia between human thought and the thought of other animals. Representation gives us the means to summon up in thought what is spatio-temporally absent or non-existent. We may be tempted to think of the content of this thought (about some absent item) as detachable from the act of thought itself. Having done this, it is easy to succumb to the further temptation to think of this 'detached content' as some inner mental entity. When we analyse representational thought correctly, however, we shall see that it is an act of thought having as its ultimate object or reference some item of reality.

This, then, is a major theme of the thesis: that no signifier yields information by itself; it must be referred by some agent to some feature or features of the real world. But the dependence between representation and reality goes both ways. Our notion of 'reality' is in turn dependent on our capacity for representation. This is not the idealist thesis that the objects of the world have no existence outside the perceiving mind, but rather the phenomenological thesis that in apprehending what we think of as 'things in themselves' we bring to this
Representation is required for this synthesis. We grasp 'reality' through a network of concepts and past experiences. Were it not for the application of representation in this form to reality, not only could it not be recognised as reality, we should have no cognitive grasp of it at all. We should be in the same position as non-human animals which only respond to present items by means of simple stimulus-response mechanisms.

**ABSTRACT**

Part I raises the problems that will shape our investigation of representation. Locke's account is inadequate because of its failure to allow any role to an agent who creates or understands the representational relation. Representation occurs mysteriously by means of mediating entities. This inadequacy becomes even more evident in contrast with Aquinas' account of the activity of mind: representation for Aquinas is an act (not an object) of mind. A reading of Aquinas also illuminates the reasons for the extreme passivity of Locke's account, since its origins are clearly to be seen in the Thomist account, but Locke's version has lost the most important feature of the Thomist account. Descartes' conception of 'ideas' is ambivalent between act and object; and, in examining some of the problems of his account, we shall see the importance of an intentional interpretation of representation: that it is an act of thought about some object.

Part II develops the issues raised earlier within the particular context of signification and semiotic theory. The semiotic theories of Saussure, Peirce and Piaget are examined, with occasional reference to Frege. The theme of Chapters 4 to 6 is that a signifier is only as good as the intelligence which uses it. It is not because humans have a sign system that they can achieve 'disengagement' from any particular 'here-and-now' context: other animals also use representative items, but not in the same way as humans do. Something more is required than just the availability of some physical item which can stand in for something else. There are various kinds of signifiers - broadly speaking, those which are used wittingly and those which are unwittingly used - and what gives a signifier its particular structure is the manner of its use. Part II, then, deals with questions about
Part III focuses on the activity of representation. What kind of act is it, and how is it possible? In Chapter 7 a distinction is made between active and passive senses of representation, and arising out of this distinction we study the particular case of images, considered as a form of representation. Chapter 8 presents a contrast between non-representational (animal) thought and representational thought, and this leads to a final discussion of the relationship between representation, thought and reality.