I n t e r v i s t e

Conversation with François Recanati

by Delia Belleri and Michele Palmira

1. *Professor Recanati, you are one of the leading figures in the philosophies of mind and language. We assume that analytic philosophy was not so popular in France during your university experience. So, how did you become interested in analytic philosophy? Which philosophers or teachers guided you in making the choice of becoming a professional philosopher, and what made you become a philosopher in the first place?*

FR. What made me to become a philosopher was not the influence of any teacher – I actually skipped the terminal year of *lycée*, the year during which one is taught philosophy for the first time. To a large extent, I was self-taught. But I developed a taste

for the discipline, through readings, mostly on my own. I enjoyed abstract philosophical discussions, and my philosophical vocation started at an early age, though I would be unable to say exactly when.

As for analytic philosophy, indeed, it was not popular in France when I was a student. (It still isn't very popular now, I'm afraid.) Very naturally, I started my career as a continental philosopher – a continental philosopher of the most radical sort: the French sort. I was a follower of Lacan.

2. *What does that mean exactly?*

FR. At the time you had to choose your camp. You had to be a Deleuzian, or a Lyotardian, or a Foucaldian, or a Lacanian… A beginner would start by picking a *guru* on the philosophical market. (A bit like in Monthy Pyton's *Life of Brian*.) I thought Lacan was the greatest because he did what the others were doing (saying obscure and pretentious things) but in a more flamboyant and extreme manner which appealed to my philosophical youth.

Being a Lacanian means that you trust Lacan for being a truth-teller, you try (without much success) to understand what he says and writes, and you engage in some form of mimicry. I turned out to be rather clever at parroting Lacan and I became a noted disciple. Great were the social benefits – Lacan was immensely popular, his well-attended seminars were packed with celebrities, and I myself became instantaneously famous after he asked me to give a talk (actually a couple of talks) in that seminar.

3. *After such a start, how did you become an analytic philosopher?*

FR. Being a Lacanian was as frustrating intellectually as it was socially rewarding. I could not understand my own writings and had to depend on Lacan to tell me whether or not I was on the right track. Frustrating though it was, I did not have any alternative model. Then I discovered analytic philosophy, almost by chance.

I had noticed similarities between Lacan's approach to natural language and (what I knew of) ordinary language philosophy as practiced in Oxford in mid-twentieth century. Like Lacan, ordinary language philosophers criticized the attempt to understand natural language by studying the constructed languages of logic. So I bought a few books and started investigating ordinary language philosophy to see how much could be extracted from it in the service of a broadly Lacanian conception. It took me little time to realize that the analytic way of doing philosophy, with its characteristic clarity and simplicity, was more to my taste than the obscurity and pomposity which plagued continental philosophy in general, and Lacanian theorizing in particular. I understood what I was reading, a very unusual and exhilarating experience.

When expounding the views put forward by the analytic philosophers I was reading, my goal was the usual goal of establishing the truth of Lacanianism. I plunged into analytic philosophy as a Lacanian. But the experience transformed me. I could understand not only what I was reading but also what I was writing, and this made it possible for me to make progress. I realized what was going on and, within months, I had repudiated Lacanianism (and continental philosophy more generally) and become an analytic philosopher. That happened in 1975. In the following years I studied linguistics and started interacting with philosophers in the UK and the US, while doing my best, with a

few enlightened colleagues from various European countries, to develop analytic philosophy on the continent. In 1990 I became the President of the newly founded European Society for Analytic Philosophy.

4. *Your latest book,* Mental Files *(Oxford University Press, 2012) addresses the issue of how we manage to have thoughts about objects in a non-descriptive, purely relational way. What is the core idea of Mental Files? How does it help with some long-standing philosophical problems, like the cognitive significance of identity statements with co-referential terms (e.g. "Hesperus is Phosphorus")?*

FR. The core idea is that language and thought represent the world not through some mysterious and quasi-magical relation of fit, satisfaction or correspondence, but because language and thought are *in* the world — in the same world as the things they are about. It is in virtue of our relations to the things around us that we have the ability to represent them in speech and thought. The basic idea can be traced to Peirce, one of the first philosophers I studied in my early years: there is an irreducibly indexical component in our thought, without which representation would not be possible. We think about objects in virtue of standing in certain relations to them. That's the core idea of the book. I elaborate the idea by suggesting that the relevant relations are "epistemically rewarding relations" (ER relations): relations that are conducive to knowledge because they establish an information channel between the mind and the objects one is related to. Corresponding to these relations, there are mental files which serve as repository for the information one can gain from the object in virtue of standing in the right relation to it. By deploying such files, one mentally refers to the things one is related to. So-called

"Frege cases" are cases in which, unbeknown to the subject, two of his or her files refer to the same object. Learning an identity ("Hesperus is Phosphorus") is learning that that is the case.

5. *You defend the idea that singular reference at the level of thought is regulated by an acquaintance norm. The notion of "acquaintance" was introduced by Russell in* The Problems of Philosophy *for two main reasons: on the one hand, being acquainted with an object guarantees certainty of reference, on the other it allows us to discriminate co-reference. What do you think of Russell's motivations? Moreover, acquaintance is a term which is very used in the literature but rarely clarified. Could you say something more on these issues?*

FR. Russell contrasted knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. Knowledge by acquaintance is more basic: you can't have knowledge by description of everything. If I think of Bob (whom I have never seen) as *Mary's brother*, I can only do that if I know who Mary is and what brotherhood is. Russell would say that I am acquainted with Mary and with brotherhood: when I have a thought about "Mary's brother", my thought is directly about Mary and brotherhood, and indirectly about Bob (the satisfier of the description). Of course, it may be that I know Mary herself only by description, say as John's wife, but the buckpassing process must end somewhere: however descriptive one's thought is, it must ultimately be grounded through a more basic and more direct relation to its immediate objects. That relation Russell calls "acquaintance".

Russell thought of acquaintance as a very intimate relation possessing, in particular, the

property of transparency: if you're acquainted with two objects, and these objects are distinct, you know that they are distinct; if they are the same, you know that they are the same. Frege cases cannot arise: it cannot be that you're acquainted with the same object twice without knowing it. I don't follow Russell here. Even if the object is given directly, through ER relations, rather than indirectly through descriptions, still Frege cases are always possible. ER relations and the mental files based on them give us a way of thinking of the object (a mode of presentation). Now, for all the subject knows, two modes of presentation may or may not determine the same reference. There is no transparency at the level of reference. So the sort of acquaintance involved in so-called "acquaintance relations" (ER relations) is very different from Russell's notion of acquaintance.

For Russell, because of the transparency constraint, one can only be acquainted with one own's sense data, and not with ordinary objects. The sort of acquaintance I talk about is much more liberal. Even testimony counts as an acquaintance relation, insofar as it is epistemically rewarding.

6. *It seems that there are things with which we can only be very remotely acquainted, like objects and persons existed in the past; or things with which we are not acquainted at all, like objects and persons that do not exist yet, fictional objects or even abstract objects. Arguably our epistemically rewarding relations with them are extremely feeble or even nonexistent, and yet we manage to refer to these entities through a mental file. How do you explain this?*

FR. My strategy is to account for the basic cases first – thoughts about ordinary objects

in the environment, including objects which existed in the past and to which we are presently related through memory or testimony. I do so by positing mental files based on ER relations. Once the apparatus is in place, we can account for empty singular thought, by saying that the subject tokens a singular vehicle (a mental file) which fails to refer to anything because the relatum does not exist. Then come the more complex examples: cases in which a thought seems truth-evaluable even though its object does not exist, or we bear no ER relation to it. What makes such thoughts possible, I assume, is an extension of the referential apparatus (the system of files governed by acquaintance norms), which we now apply outside its original domain and without caring for the norms. One important type of case is that in which we attempt to refer to something that is given only in imagination. In that case there is no ER relation to the referent, but we do as if there were. This greatly extends the expressive power of thought.

7. *In recent times many authors (e.g. Jody Azzouni (2011), Tim Crane (2011), John Hawthorne and David Manley (2012)) have defended semantic instrumentalism, namely the view that there are no constraints on singular thoughts. Apparently, the picture of singular thinking that emerges from your book is incompatible with semantic instrumentalism, yet in the 2013 symposium on* Mental Files *for* Disputatio *you claim that the two views are in the end compatible. Could you clarify this point?*

FR. For me, semantic instrumentalism is the claim that the possession of language "broadens the horizons of thought", as Kaplan [1989: 603] puts it. Because I have the name "Aristotle", I can think of Aristotle. I accept that, and what I said above is a case

in point: when we use names or demonstratives to refer to objects given only in imagination, new types of thought are made possible. But that does not mean that there are no constraints on singular thought. The core referential apparatus is governed by acquaintance norms, but that does not prevent us from applying the apparatus outside its proprietary domain to think and talk about things we are not (and could not be) acquainted with.

8. *In "Perspectival Thought" (OUP 2007), the notion of mode plays a central role. For example, it allows us to distinguish between different psychological states such as perception and memory. Has this affected your account of how mental files are entertained, stored and modified as one's mental life flows?*

FR. The notion of mode is closely tied to that of ER relations. When I perceive something, I stand in a certain relation to the state of affairs my perceptual state represents; when I remember a state of affairs, I stand in a distinct relation to it. Those relations are ER relations. Now mental files themselves are based on ER relations. Thus, demonstrative files are based on the sort of relation that holds in perception. Because of this link, the mode of a state may determine directly which file will host the information delivered by the state. I use this fact to account for certain phenomena like immunity to error through misidentification.

9. *Can you clarify a little bit more this? First of all, can you tell us what immunity to error through misidentification is and why it is so important?*

FR. Suppose I remember walking along a lake in Italy with Mary. I may be mistaken in all sorts of ways: it may not have been a lake, but the sea; it may not have been Italy, but Croatia; it may not have been Mary, but Susan. But one mistake which cannot happen is this: it was not me, but somebody else. If I remember the event (from inside – we're talking of episodic memory here) it must have been me. That's because memory works by delivering information (or misinformation) about one's own past. Similarly, proprioception is a state that delivers information about the condition of one's own body. So if proprioception tells me that my legs are crossed, it can't be that I am mistaken and that the person whose legs are crossed is someone else. No mistake through misidentification is possible because proprioception can only deliver information about ourselves. This gives us a form of transparency which is important to ground self-knowledge and make it suitably direct.

10. *You defend the idea that a first-person thought can be immune to error through misidentification to the extent that the subject is not represented in the content of the experiential states on which the thought is based. To put it differently, it is the mode of the experience that guarantees that such an experience concerns only the subject who undergoes the experience. However, authors such as Coliva (2006) and Wright (2012) contend that it is possible to envisage cases in which a first-person mode of experience does not deliver the self as the one object of that experience. How do you respond to these authors?*

FR. Indeed it is the mode of the experience (in the examples: the proprioceptive mode or the episodic-memory mode) which guarantees that the content of the experience

concerns the subject and not someone else. The self does not have to be represented in the content of the state, since it is already secured by the mode of the state.

The authors you mention put forward an alleged counterexample to the theory: while a first person thought necessarily refers to the owner of the thought, the subject might be hooked up to someone else's body, in such a way that the information delivered to her by proprioception derives from the condition of someone else. In such a case, the objectors point out, the mode determines the wrong object as the reference of the first person thought based on the proprioceptive experience. But I deny that that is the case. The reference of the self concept, or the self file, is not the object from which information that has been gained from inside derives, but the object to which the subject stands in the appropriate ER relation. In the first person case, the appropriate ER relation is the relation between the subject and an object which makes it possible for the subject (in normal conditions) to gain information about that object from inside. That relation is identity. So even when the normal conditions don't hold, as when the subject is hooked up to someone else's body, first person thoughts refer to the subject of the thought.

11. *In your philosophy of language books, especially* Literal Meaning *and* Truth-Conditional Pragmatics*, you defend a brand of Contextualism that gives us an account of how the semantic content of sentences is enriched. Yet, in* Perspectival Thought*, you seem to abandon this framework and opt for a Moderate Relativism in which contents are simply true relative to more or less complex indexes of the circumstances of evaluation. As a result, the truth-conditions of an utterance of – for instance – "It's*

raining", change from one project to the other: in the former project, the sentence expresses a non-propositional meaning that needs to be enriched; in the latter project it expresses a meaning that is propositional, even though its truth-value is relative to places. These two accounts seem rather different. Would you say that they are related after all?

FR. I don't see them as alternatives. In my relativistic framework the complete content of an utterance is an *Austinian proposition* which consists of a situation and a content relativized to that situation. The relativized content I call the *lekton*. The *lekton* itself results from saturating *and* modulating (e.g. enriching) the meaning of the sentence. Relativization to circumstances is a contextual process alongside saturation and modulation, but it does not affect the *lekton*: it affects the Austinian proposition. The need for two levels of content, *lekton* and Austinian proposition, is one of the central themes of *Perspectival Thought* (anticipated in *Literal Meaning* – see chapter 8). As for "It is raining", I think the analysis in terms of relativization to a place is a pragmatic analysis quite in the spirit of *Literal Meaning* and *Truth-Conditional Pragmatics*. It is, indeed, distinct from the free enrichment account I tentatively offer in *Truth-Conditional Pragmatics,* but I do mention it as an "alternative pragmatic account" and I say of it that «deep down, that is the account I favour» (*Truth-Conditional Pragmatics*, p. 112). So no conflict at all between my philosophy of language books and *Perspectival Thought.*

12. *You have worked much on the context-sensitivity of language, arguing that mechanisms of free enrichment, or of modulation, are ubiquitous. You also have argued*

that the modulation of meaning is compatible with compositionality. What reverberations does this have for a theory of meaning?

FR. I think it is clear that the content of what we say involves not only grammatical meaning but also speaker's meaning. Once speaker's meaning is in the place, it need not be restricted to mechanisms of saturation. But that does not impugn the basic compositionality of meaning.

13. *In your books and articles you have described a position – you call it Meaning Eliminativism – which seems to exclude the possibility of assigning a standing, determinate meaning to the expressions of a natural language. Could you say something more on this view? Do you actually endorse Meaning Eliminativism, or do you simply discuss it to show that such a radical view can be put on the table as a real option?*

FR. I think Meaning Eliminativism is a serious contender because we still don't have a theory of word meaning, and it may well be that the meaning of a word is a complex data structure, from which the contribution of the word to content has to be extracted or constructed. In the standard conception, meanings are *prepackaged bits of content*, or functions from contextual parameters to bits of content. It is meanings in that sense which may well not exist.

14. *You have claimed that the truth-conditions of an utterance that are intuitively available to an interpreter should be considered part of the semantic content of that utterance. This, known as the Availability Principle, has been criticised by more than*

one author on the account that what is available to the intuitions of a speaker may have nothing to do with the semantic content of an utterance proper. How do you react to such criticism?

FR. It depends on the detail of the criticism. In any case, as I point out in *Literal Meaning*, the intuitions which matter are the intuitions of an *idealized* language user. I am not saying that one cannot make mistakes with respect to what is said. But I'm saying that it would make no sense to suppose that we are systematically mistaken regarding what is said, since there is a constitutive link between what is said and people's understanding of what is said.

15. *Some authors, among which David Chalmers, have judged the debate on the semantics/pragmatics interface simply a verbal dispute. Indeed, it does seem that those that defend Contextualism call "semantics" everything that pertains to either literal meaning or a pragmatic enrichment of it (see your notion of "what is said", the notion of explicature and that of impliciture), while those who oppose Contextualism call semantics only what pertains to literal meaning compositionally obtained plus a minimal amount of context-sensitivity. The dispute is supposedly merely verbal to the extent that the two parties mean different things by "semantics" (and "pragmatics"). How do you feel about this criticism?*

FR. I agree that much of the debate over the semantics/pragmatics interface is verbal (I have said so myself). But I don't take that as a piece of criticism, as far as I am concerned, for my contribution has been to clarify the issues and to distinguish those

that are verbal from those that are substantive. One substantive issue is: is grammatical meaning sufficient to give us truth-evaluable content, or is speaker's meaning necessary to complement grammatical meaning? Does linguistic meaning *determine* content, or does it merely *constrain* it?

16. *You are a leading figure in the philosophies of language and mind. One of the big philosophical questions is whether it is possible to offer a unified account of thought and language. Do you think that the constraints we impose on mental reference should be imposed also at the level of linguistic reference, or such a unificationist project is hopeless?*

FR. I think there are strong connections between thought and language. To understand language, we need to understand thought. For example, the theory of reference in language can't get off the ground if we don't have a theory of reference at the mental level. Second, language "broadens the horizons of thought", as Kaplan says. A lot of thought is made possible only by language. The relation between thought and language is one of the most interesting topics in the field!

17. *Let us close the interview with a couple of more general questions. Recent years have witnessed a burgeoning interest in empirically-oriented approaches to philosophical research. You are the director of the Institut Jean Nicod, where a lot of empirical research is carried out on many topics. However, in your works you do not rely so much on this kind of "evidence". What is your methodological approach to philosophical problems?*

FR. I am a writer. I use my pen and my brain. Of course, if I can find the time and the collaborators, I'll be happy to conduct experiments to test some of the hypotheses I have been led to put forward.

18. *Finally: what are your current projects?*

FR. I have a book project on descriptive reference, i.e. singular reference to "objects" that are only given in imagination. There will be chapters on issues such as the rigidity of descriptive names, arbitrary reference, donkey anaphora, pretense-semantics, etc. I am also working on extensions of (and modifications to) the theory of mental files, with new emphasis on "dynamic files".

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