

Modes of Thought

For an overall picture of reality we need to understand minds, and their relations to persons and bodies, but for the other interests of philosophy it is more important to understand thought – however it is implemented. Earlier philosophy largely looked outwards, questioning the world, but modern philosophers are equally interested in our own role in the story, and especially the powers and limitations of thought and of language.

A preliminary question is ‘what is thought for?’. On the whole living things have brains if they move freely, and are not anchored like plants, which suggests that **navigation** is a central purpose. This implies a need for spatial and temporal awareness, and a need to recognise features and objects, and assess their benefits and dangers. In addition to navigation, thought must also co-ordinate and focus bodily movement. In co-operative animals like humans there is a further need to communicate and interpret thoughts. We can also think about thoughts (‘higher-order’ thinking), which offers the benefits of self-criticism and complex decisions, when interacting with the world. It is vital to think accurately about the world, so **truth** is an inescapable objective.

It would be rash to settle on a neat map of human thinking, but **four modes** of thought are of particular interest: images, propositions, propositional attitudes, and emotions. ‘Images’ are single unified non-verbal thoughts, including sounds, and spatio-temporal awareness. ‘Propositions’ are complete thoughts, typically expressed by a sentence, which are capable of being true or false. ‘Propositional attitudes’ are such mental states as belief, hope, fear, curiosity and denial, each focused on one or more propositions. ‘Emotions’ are the familiar feelings we have, some focused on propositions or images, and others (such as depression) having almost no content.

We assume that animal thought is mainly imagistic, but the role of **images** in human thought is hard to pin down. Even if we discuss the colour red we may not be forming an image of it, but in some minds an abstract concept like ‘success’ may exist in image form. When we talk swiftly there is little time for images, even of highly visual topics, but slower thought is more imagistic. Introspection is a limited guide here, because people clearly differ a lot.

Propositional thought seems to range from an inarticulate possibility (which part of lunch to eat first), to more fully formed thoughts, to actual sentences formed in the mind. Because we think this way, it encourages us to see the world as a set of facts (one for each true atomic proposition). **Propositions** are routinely contemplated, affirmed or denied, and seem to be the basic units for practical thinking, though they have a structure which can be analysed, and they combine into theories and stories. The simplest **propositional attitudes**, expressing our responses to the propositions that float into thought, assert their truth or falsehood. Beyond that there is a huge range of attitudes and feelings which can focus on a proposition, such as doubt, bewilderment, love, contempt, suspicion, certainty, and so on. The main drama of our inner lives concerns this flow of attitudes to possible facts. We can distinguish the attitudes from one another quite clearly, but how we do this seems beyond explanation.

It has been traditional in philosophy to sharply divide **emotions** from reason, often seeing the former as the enemy of wisdom, but modern research shows emotions to be deeply entangled in even the most rational thought, so this division is no longer clear. Reason may seem unemotional, but it would be impossible without an emotional love of truth. Writers on emotion have tried to map the emotions, with a few basic ones, from which the others are built, then a range of more complex emotions, and some possible second-order emotions (such as feeling ashamed of your fears). Candidates for basic emotions are pleasure, pain and desire, or simply appetite and aversion. Another list suggests wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy and sadness. But some emotions, such as the feeling of curiosity, may be neither pleasant nor painful, so a simple account seems impossible. Ethicists are particularly interested in controlling or training the emotions, which partly depends on how their content is understood. The response of anger, for example, is not a pure feeling, but depends partly on how the facts are perceived.

Ordinary talk contains a huge vocabulary to label aspects of thought, mainly focused on the emotions and the propositional attitudes. This part of language is known as ‘**folk psychology**’, and has been much discussed. The key question is whether it gives an accurate picture of thought, and whether scientific researchers should begin their investigations of thought with folk psychology, or whether they need a clean slate. In ordinary life it offers the only picture of thought available, and ignorance of it could be disastrous (when, say, driving a car). It is a fairly old and static vocabulary, but it also absorbs modern terms like ‘paranoid’ and ‘neurotic’, and it seems to predict behaviour well, but it is notoriously weak in unusual cases, such as dealing with mental illness, or anti-social attitudes, or people from alien cultures. The terminology is implicitly dualist, despite the unpopularity of that view in modern philosophy.

Rationality has often been considered the distinguishing mark of human thought. A capacity for basic logic is central to rationality, but it has other ingredients. It certainly depends on a capacity for generalisation, and the use of universal words and concepts. The ‘laws of thought’ pick out principles such as avoiding contradictions, keeping it simple, and expecting a reason for everything, but it is also rational to learn from experience (‘induction’), which is much less precise. A good rational mind favours the criteria of knowledge cited in epistemology, such as coherence, good foundations and consistency. Adherence to principles also distinguishes rational minds, but the concept of rule-following turns out to be obscure, without clear foundations. Modern research shows that we are less rational than we think (notably when assessing probability), and humans have far more absurd beliefs than any other animal, so dreams of a wholly rational mode of human life seem over-confident.

A further much-discussed puzzle concerns **indexical** thought. When words like ‘I’ and ‘now’ and ‘here’ are used, they involve facts about the speaker, in a way that more objective terms (like ‘Jill’ or ‘Monday’ or ‘London’) do not. It is claimed that this indicates a distinct mode of thought, which is also subtly present in any reports of perception or opinions, and is crucial for action. Critics respond that indexical language can always be translated into more objective terminology, mentioning who ‘I’ is, and when ‘now’ is. If you and I can report identical experiences, the indexical ingredient doesn’t look so important.