

Content of Thought

We take thought for granted, but after a little philosophical reflection there may be nothing more puzzling than thoughts having meaning, or content. Mars is not 'about' Venus, but parts of my brain think 'about' planets, and are said to exhibit 'intentionality'. Even a shadow of a tree is not 'about' the tree, so simply representing the world doesn't explain the content of thought. We are facing a mystery.

If you ask someone what they are thinking about, and they reply 'nothing!', we never believe them, because our own experience shows that to be impossible. Even free-wheeling daydreams are about something, and so all thought has 'content'. (Note that meaning and content differ, because 'he is speaking' and 'the Pope is speaking' have different meanings, but can have the same content, and meanings can be ambiguous, unlike thought). Talk of 'content' suggests the image of something in a **receptacle**, like tea in a cup. One response to this says that both the thought and its content are within the mind, and since for us the world consists of content, reality must all be in our minds, which is 'idealism'. If we reject idealism, we face the big puzzle: how can reality be located in the contents of a thought? The content has to somehow 'reach out' and embrace the world. When I think about 'tree', I think about big physical objects, not vague mental events.

We may reject the idea of a mysterious 'receptacle' for the content, but we say that the content of a thought can change (if my image of a politician moves from hero to villain), implying a fixed container. But even the receptacle has a content, because its label ('politician') is about something. One theory of content identifies it with the **role** played by the thought in some wider context. Thus the content of the concept 'elephant' is fixed by its place in a context of large animals, pinned down by the properties it shares with other things, and the way it is used in thoughts about wildlife. One variant says that the content is specified by the role of such a concept (or a whole proposition) in logical **inferences** (because that connects it to what is true). This theory has limited support, however, because it seems that something can only play a role if it has certain intrinsic qualities, with distinctive causal powers. The connection with truth seems important though, and **'truth conditions'** may be the best way to explain meaning (and even contents of thought). That is, the content of a whole thought is the worldly conditions in which it is true. But how do you evaluate truth if you haven't grasped the content? The mystery won't go away.

Thoughts about the world presumably come *from* the world. People see elephants, label them, think about the label, and add information to it. Thinking 'elephant' triggers thoughts about the animals, and seeing the animal triggers the 'elephant' thought, so maybe content is defined by this **causal link**. Maybe 'elephant' must track those animals in a changing world, in a 'covariance' relationship. Since 'elephant' could be used as a password or a metaphor, it has been suggested that this causal role is 'teleological' (that is, the content of 'elephant' is its normal *intended* causal link). However, if we see two elephants, we see the animals, but 'pair' can be added by us, so some content is caused by the mind, not by the world. The story is also complicated by **indexical** thoughts, where the content depends on the thinker or context. If I think 'I am hungry now', and you think (at some other time) 'I am hungry now', the thought seems identical, and should have identical content, but it doesn't, because it depends on a time and a person. The content of each indexical thought is partly fixed by facts exterior to the mind (such as the time of day).

Originally the word **'idea'** was used to cover all types of thought content, but we now see different modes of content, needing a larger vocabulary. Images have very different content from number concepts, or the word 'because', or qualities like 'dangerous'. Some content is simple, but other content is complex (like mixtures from primary colours). We now distinguish between the **'extension'** of a word (which is the set of items it refers to, such as the elephants), and the **'intension'** of a word (which is the content which decides whether the item is an elephant). There is one mysterious quality of 'aboutness', but different types of content may need different explanations.

Recent debate has been stimulated by a famous problem case. We use the word 'water' for the stuff in rain and rivers. Imagine a **'Twin Earth'**, where there is a substance playing exactly that role, but chemically it is not water. In ordinary life it seems identical, but chemists find it is quite different. If one of us visited Twin Earth, we would call this stuff 'water', but would the word have the same meaning as back home? It is normally understood that the visiting speaker will assume their word (or thought) retains the same meaning (or content), but they would be wrong. The meaning, it is claimed, resides (at least partly) in the actual stuff referred to, which is different on the two planets.

Hence, it is claimed, content of thoughts is **'broad'**, or 'wide', or 'external', because content is only partly inside the mind. A simpler example says if you don't really know what an elm tree is, you can still talk about 'elms', meaning whatever experts mean by it. It is also said that if I use the word 'arthritis' incorrectly, a doctor can infer the correct content, even though I don't know it. In the water case the thought content is in the substance, but in the elm and arthritis cases the content resides among other speakers. In either case, it is said, we should abandon **'narrow'** content inside the mind. Thought and language are much less individualistic than previously thought.

Not everyone agrees with this. We sometimes fail to understand our own words (if we accidentally insult someone), but to suggest that we don't fully understand our own thoughts is implausible. Crucially, all our actions derive from private thoughts, so narrow content is far more important in life than are broad cases where only experts know what we mean. There is also a puzzle about invented content, such as 'unicorn', or external content which has vanished, such as 'dinosaur'. If content must exist outside the mind, these thoughts have no content.

If content is narrow, and 'in the head', we can give a naturalistic account of it, as brain events, but if content is broad we struggle to say what it is. Where is it, and what is it made of? If we say it is 'abstract', that implies it is abstracted from something more tangible. A natural response to the conflict is to say that content may have two components, internal and external, and the example of indexicals encourages this line of thought (because they have both a fixed meaning and a contextual meaning). It is true that when talking of elms and arthritis we defer to what the experts mean, but having content is also the very essence of our private thoughts, desires and motivations.