Michael **Luntley**

Contemporary Philosophy of Thought

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Preface

A new paradigm is emerging in the philosophy of thought. What it is to be a thinker is to be an embodied agent acting on, and being acted upon by, the world. Descartes thought mind was out of this world. Most contemporary thinkers still agree, despite their materialism; for they mostly think that if there are such things as thoughts, they are characterizable independently of the world that they represent. The new paradigm has thought constitutively in the world. In this book I put the case for this new paradigm. I put it in the context of the standard options that get taught in most philosophy courses on thought and language.

The embodiment of thought characteristic of this new paradigm has been around in empirical work for some time, in situated robotics, artificial life research and, of course, amongst connectionist groupies. The philosophical story that brings thought into our embodied actions is now catching up. The version of this story that I tell derives from Frege, but owes its distinctiveness to Evans's seminal *The Varieties of Reference*. That book is still massively misunderstood. It is not uncommon to meet people at conferences who have no idea what a singular sense is and, when told, always respond, 'But what about empty names?' The difficulty here arises from the absence of an appreciation of the metaphysical reorientation required for understanding neo-Fregean theory of content. This book is centred on getting clear what that metaphysical reorientation amounts to. The new paradigm is a way of understanding the metaphysics of thought and of our place in the world.

The paradigm is generalizable to areas beyond the immediate concerns of the philosophy of thought. I touch on such matters occasionally, but if the sort of embodied account of thought that I defend is anywhere near right, there are morals to be drawn for the nature of ethical reasoning and the nature of the self. Our paradigm of intelligence has for too long been the ability to manipulate formal languages, play chess, do maths, etc. In contrast, I think the paradigm of intelligence is being able to cross a room at a crowded party without spilling your drink

or bumping into anyone else. Now, that's smart. It involves a practical cognitive sense of embodiment, bearing and orientation that is not disengageable from being in the world. Getting an account of the concepts of embodiment, orientation, etc. straight offers the option of treating ethical reasoning in terms of a practical mastery of how we fit (or fail to fit), and how we live, in our world. There is exciting stuff that could be done on these fronts. I leave it out, for this book concentrates on the basics.

The book is intended for upper-level undergraduates and first-year graduate students of philosophy. It is, however, a basic book. Some books in the field provide a survey of advanced results in the philosophy of content. The trouble with them is that the results are only ever as advanced as the methodology employed. In addition, they rarely make transparent that the methodology might be optional, let alone how it stands with regard to competing methodologies. This book is basic, for I do not concentrate on providing advanced results in this theory or that. I concentrate on the basic metaphysical, epistemological and methodological issues that shape theorizing about content. I am as evangelical about my preferred methodology as the next guy, but the account I give is, I hope, fair, even if not balanced.

For a basic book it is pretty long, but I wanted to cover enough to give a fulsome overview of how the whole neo-Fregean story about content hangs together. That meant getting clear about a number of things that, although part of the familiar furniture of the philosophy of thought, had got a bit lost under the accumulated wisdom of several generations. So I get Russell out and dust off his theory of descriptions. I rub through the veneer of contemporary *angst* about how to do misrepresentation and reference to distal stimuli to get a picture of Quine grappling with the same problems. I plot Davidson's account of why we can't do meaning without truth, and why and how, in doing that, we gain the world and lose the conceptual relativists on the way. These things are necessary if we are to get a firm grip on how and why you cannot afford to do one bit of the philosophy of thought without having your metaphysical antennae finely tuned to what's going on everywhere else. I say I defend a neo-Fregean theory of content; but I don't really get to that until the second half of the book. But the account of reference I defend there is best understood against the backdrop of what goes before in the chapters on meaning, truth and logic and against the recurring theme of what constitutes a naturalized theory of content.

If there is one thing that I hope will be come clear in all this, it is that you can never reread the classics too often. The heart of Russell's theory of thought is, I think, right. The same applies to Frege. The trouble is, Russell buried his key insight in a Cartesian epistemology that is, frankly, rather quaint and embarrassing. Frege left us a methodology, but never applied it himself to those aspects of

language use that would reveal its great power. Everyone knows Kripke disproved description theories of names, but hardly anyone seems to know who the descriptivists are! Kripke's positive account of names is full of important insights, but whether it really makes sense to call it a causal *theory* is still contestable. 'New theories of reference' have been 'new' for about thirty years now, but people still characterize them with the metaphor of 'directness'. I argue in chapter 8 that there is an important sense (*the* important sense, I think) in which these theories provide an indirect account of reference! Here, then, is the other big lesson I hope becomes clear. It has taken us the best part of a hundred years to begin to see the scope available within a Fregean account of thought. And people are still arguing about Russell's theory of descriptions! If you are to understand how contemporary philosophy of thought is going, and if you are to be in a position to contribute to it, there is no substitute for an appreciation both of the broad view and of its contestability.

A long book takes a long time. Thanks to Steve Smith for originally suggesting I write it and for bearing with me while I did. And thanks to Mary Riso, who managed to sound enthusiastic everytime I came up with a new submission date. Thanks to the many colleagues who have heard me out on various aspects of this work and related material. I have been fortunate that everytime I say, 'Let's do a reading group' on such-and-such new book in the philosophy of thought, I have found a critical mass of colleagues, not to mention a clutch of graduates eager to work together. For keeping me educated, thanks to Naomi Eilan, Christoph Hoerl, Ian Lyne, David Miller, Peter Poellner, Johannes Roessler, Tim Thornton, Martin Warner, and Chris Woodard. Numerous graduate students have taught me much, but special thanks to John Collins and Simon Prosser.

On a broader front, the influences on what follows are obvious. I should, however, mention one. For the last two years, Warwick has been host to an interdisciplinary inter-institutional research project on Consciousness and Self-Consciousness that is redefining the cutting edge of issues about content and doing it in a conversation constituted as much by pyschologists as philosophers. My ideas about how a naturalized theory of content should go derive from what I have learnt at the project's seminars and workshops. So a second special thanks to Naomi, Christoph and Johannes for getting the show on the road.

Neo-Fregean theory of content is sometimes thought to be a rather local speciality with its roots in the work that Evans and McDowell did in Oxford in the late seventies. I first learnt philosophy of thought in Oxford from Michael Dummett. His work still powerfully shapes my thinking. The source for inspiration is, however, spreading across a locale of like-mindedness from Barcelona to Paris, Geneva to Utrecht, California to Massachussetts.

Doing the philosophy of thought helps us understand how we fit in the world. The place where I fit, with Dee, Chris, Sam and Nicky, has helped make it all possible.

Michael Luntley
Warwick

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Methodologies

1.1 Introduction

Like other animals, we get wet if left out in the rain. We get crushed if trapped under falling rocks. We become ill if we ingest toxins and various kinds of micro-organisms. There is a natural pattern to the way these things impinge upon us and affect our behaviour. The patterns connecting these stimuli and our responses are continuous with the patterns that apply to other species. What makes a difference in our case is that in addition to being creatures with a capacity for getting wet, being crushed and poisoned, we have a capacity for thought and talk. Other species may have some capacity for thought and language, but with us this capacity makes a profound difference to everything we do. We have the capacity to represent in thought and talk what has happened and what could happen. We can recall the past and make plans for the future. We can think about what would happen if we went out without an umbrella.

The capacity for thought and talk gives us a history and enables us to shape the future. Other species respond to the immediate environment in regular natural patterns. We respond in patterns shaped by the content of our thought and talk. We are possessors of content. Our possession of content interrupts the otherwise regular flow of stimuli and responses and gives us the ability to shape our behaviour. It gives us intentionality. This book is about our capacity to possess content.

The central task of the philosophy of thought is to give an account of what it is to possess content. What are the relations between thought, language and the world? How does thought connect with the world? How is it that the set of ink marks 'Dog' directs our attention to dogs? Why does the sound sequence produced when someone says 'Bill Clinton' get everyone thinking about just one individual? Indeed, what is it to think of an individual? How well does the public language in which we communicate capture the content of our thoughts? And, hardest of all:

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How can it be that creatures made of the same physical stuff as the rest of the world possess psychological states with content?

The last problem is a difficult one. The distinguishing mark of possession of content is that our capacity for thought and talk *interrupts* the otherwise straightforward causal flow of stimuli and responses. This interruption need not be thought of as an exception to our causal physical encounters with the world, for perhaps the way that content interrupts our engagement with the world could be modelled in terms of distinctive patterns of causal engagements that are available only to creatures with a sufficiently complex brain. What is problematic, however, with giving a physical account of content and the way it shapes our behaviour is that we can have false thoughts as well as true ones. Our contents can misrepresent. On the face of it, it is unclear how to give an account of false thoughts in terms of causal relations between psychological states and the world. A simple example illustrates the problem.

The pollen-sensitive cells in our nasal passages interact with the environment causally. If the right-shape particles are in the atmosphere, the cells react, and we get swollen eyes and runny noses. Short of a malfunction, these cells do not misrepresent the presence of pollen and other irritants in the environment. Short of a malfunction, the cells in our noses cannot lie. Unlike our noses, we can. So the puzzle is: How can properly functioning causal processes produce false thoughts? Of course, the most plausible view we have of ourselves is that we are physical entities located in and interacting physically with the physical world. If that is right, then finding room for the phenomenon of meaning, of misrepresentation and false belief looks to be about as hard a philosophical problem as you could wish for.[1]

The problem of misrepresentation is an instance of an even more general problem. Our everyday notion of content is a normative concept. The content of a thought, or the content expressed by a sentence, is characterized in terms of the circumstances under which it is correct and incorrect to assent to it. It is expression of content that makes our sentences subject to evaluation for truth or falsity. The terms of semantic evaluation (truth and falsity) are normative concepts. If a sentence is false, then, other things being equal, you ought not to utter it; it would be incorrect to hold to the thought it expresses. The problem about the normativity of content is then: How are we to capture these normative semantic ideas in terms of our physical interactions with the world? Our physical interactions are causal, but causal patterns are not normative patterns. Causal patterns trace the structure of what is the case, not what ought to be the case. A physicalistic theory of content is a theory that attempts to account for our possession of content in terms employed by the natural sciences – causal patterns of physical relations with the world. The normativity of content threatens to block any physicalistic theory of content.

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Perhaps it will just take a lot of hard work to define the normativity of content causally, but already these simple reflections risk prompting familiar metaphysical extravagances. Suppose you thought that the normativity of semantic concepts could not be defined causally. You might be tempted to think that the normativity of content consisted not in the way in which we were causally related to the physical world, but in the way in which we were rationally related to a non-physical realm – a realm of ideas or Platonic Forms. You might be tempted to think that fundamentally we are only properly at home in this special realm of ideas, not in the physical world. In short, you might be tempted into Cartesianism, or even a Platonic model of content. Speculative metaphysics has few defenders in contemporary work, but the problem about the normativity of content reveals how our deepest metaphysical views about ourselves and the nature of mind are never far from the surface once we begin to raise the question: What is it to be a possessor of content?

In the remainder of this chapter I consider the different methodologies that shape investigations of this question, and I sketch the methodology that I adopt throughout most of this book. I also want to explain how and why the philosophy of thought is central to contemporary philosophy, for it is now almost inconceivable to think that basic issues in metaphysics and epistemology could be tackled without engagement with the philosophy of thought.

1.2 Intentional Realism, Representationalism and the Standard Model

Our central question is

(1)   What is it to be a possessor of content?

Regardless of the metaphysical oddity of the Platonist and Cartesian answers to (1), they illustrate a pair of theses that characterize most theories of content. The theses are intentional realism and representationalism. Together they characterize the standard model.

By 'intentional realism' I mean the thesis that there is such a thing as content, that there are such things as thoughts. There are thoughts, for any theory that failed to acknowledge them would be inadequate for explaining behaviour. Intentional realism commits us to no particular theory about what kind of thing content is or what kind of things thoughts are. It commits us only to the reality of the propositional attitudes: When we believe, hope, wish, etc., then the concept of our believing that . . . , hoping that . . . , wishing that . . . , etc. is ineliminable from any satisfactory explanation of behaviour. I use 'intentional realism' in a way that is

weaker than most writers. I use it only to signal that there is such a thing as belief – the concept of belief content is ineliminable from any adequate account of ourselves and our actions. It does not follow from this that belief contents are to be reified and theorized as entities characterizable independently of the environment they are about. On my understanding, you could be an intentional realist and treat belief contents relationally and so not capable of individuation independently of the environment. How you treat belief contents will depend on the principles you settle on for the individuation of content. This is separate from the minimal acceptance that there are beliefs – intentional realism. Keeping our options open on what count as adequate principles of individuation for belief contents is the motivation for distinguishing between intentional realism and representationalism.[2]

Intentional realism also picks out the basic constraint on how we individuate the content of beliefs, hopes, wishes, etc. We are realists about belief, hope, etc., because they are necessary for explaining behaviour. We need a theory of content in order to get a theory of behaviour, for it is our possession of content that explains the rationality of our behaviour.[3] Prima facie, the explanation of behaviour obtained by appeal to belief is a rationalizing one. If a physicalist theory of content is possible, rationalizing explanations will be reducible to causal ones. For the moment I remain agnostic about whether this can be done, and I take the ordinary rationalizing explanations of behaviour as data to be accommodated.

Intentional realism has two components. First, there is the acknowledgement of the idea that there is such a thing as the way our possession of concepts shapes our experience of the world. We face the world with beliefs and thoughts, not just with stimuli receptors – there is something distinct about possessing content. The way our encounters with the world are thus organized constitutes our intentionality. Second, we individuate content to whatever degree of discrimination is required in order to make sense of the rational structure of behaviour. I call the first component of intentional realism the phenomenology component, for there is such a thing as the way we intentionally confront the world, and it can be described. The second component I call the individuation constraint. In summary:

> **Intentional realism:** There is such a thing as the way we experience the world where that way is shaped by our possession of content (phenomenology component) and content is individuated in response to the need to make rational sense of behaviour shaped by our possession of content (individuation constraint).

This is how I shall use 'intentional realism' throughout this book. Both components are clear in the work of a number of contemporary writers.[4] Whatever else is included in a theory of content, and for some writers it could be a good deal more,

endorsing intentional realism requires that a theory of content offer a description of the way content shapes our encounters with the world where that description is constrained by the demand that it make rational sense of behaviour.

Intentional realism commits us to no particular theory of what kind of thing content is. The most common version of intentional realism is representationalism. A representationalist theory reifies content. This means that the propositional attitudes of believing that . . . , hoping that . . . , etc., are attitudes to entities of some kind. The simplest version of this is the Cartesian model: the propositional attitudes are conceived as relations to Ideas, and Ideas are non-physical entities uncovered by introspection. The Platonist version treats Ideas as abstract entities uncovered by a mysterious act of intellect. Representationalist theories of content need not involve such problematic metaphysics. Most contemporary representationalists are physicalists. The key idea is that there are states, characterizable independently of the world, and that our possession of content is defined in terms of the properties of these states.

The reification of content that produces representationalism captures the intuitive idea offered in the previous section, that what is distinctive of the way we engage the world is the way that content interrupts the otherwise regular flow of causal stimuli and responses. A representationalist theory of content treats this interruption literally as the result of the configuration of intermediary states – beliefs mostly, but also desires, hopes, wishes, etc. For the representationalist, our rationality and our cognition in general are defined over the arrangements of and operations performed upon these states. A representationalist theory of content is analogous to a representative theory of perception that theorizes perceptual experience in terms of our possession of sense-data. For the representationalist, our possession of content is a possession of a configuration of states the structure of which explains the rationality of our behaviour.

The idea that possession of representations explains our rationality entails the thesis that representations are, in principle, characterizable independently of that which they represent. The idea that in thought we deal with representational entities (Ideas, Platonic Forms, sentences in an internal language of thought, states defined by their causal role in the production of behaviour) is the idea that we deal with these states rather than with the world directly. The whole point to a representationalist theory of content is that the rationality of our dealings with the world is explained by our dealings with, or operations upon, representations. It is because, as it were, we first think (manipulate representations) that our consequent dealings with the world have a rational structure to them. The rationality of our behaviour is a consequence of our engagement with representations.

The best argument for representationalism, and this independence of representations from that for which they stand, turns on the claim that representations

figure in causal explanations.[5] Suppose we hold that representations causally explain behaviour, and suppose that the semantic power of representations is explained by their causal connections with the world. If two things are causally connected, then, given that causal relations are external relations, it must be possible to characterize them independently of one another. The causal properties of a thing are local, they are properties of it; they are not relational properties.[6] The causal properties of a thing are capable of a context-free characterization – independently of the causal relations the thing happens to stand in. The representation's causal powers will explain what it happens to be related to, but a specification of the causal powers must be possible independently of the representation actually standing in such relations.[7] If we think of representations as quasi-linguistic items, things that can be characterized syntactically, then we are guaranteed that their causal properties will be characterizable in this context-free way. They will be characterizable independently of that which they represent. Accordingly, the simplest way of conceiving of representations, other than the Cartesian way, is to think of them as linguistic entities capable of syntactic individuation. It is not necessary to think of representations this way, as involving a linguistic individuation of belief states, but this is the easiest way to understand it. A physicalist theory of content that defined contentful states functionally in terms of the states' causal powers would still count as representationalist by my lights, for it would capture the idea that the state and that which gave it content (its causal powers) were capable of individuation independently of the environment. The characterizability of the state independently of the world is guaranteed by the causal individuation of the state on such a theory. The functionalist does not treat contentful states as quasi-linguistic entities connected to one another as combinable elements of a language. The connectedness of states on the functionalist account will be causal. Nevertheless, the functionalist has content-bearing states characterizable independently of the environment, and that is the key point for me. Fodor's version of representationalism treats contentful states as components within a language, the Language of Thought, and therefore subject to a linguistic combinatorial structure. I use Fodor's version as the paradigm of the standard model, because it is the simplest version of an idea that is common to many theories regardless of whether they endorse his linguistic model of psychological states with content.[8]

Representations are blueprints for the world. This provides a simple model for error. Misrepresentation occurs when you have the blueprint in your mind, but the world does not oblige with what it is standardly causally hooked up to. For the representationalist, error can, in principle, occur with representations of any category: thoughts can be false, thought components that stand for objects can be empty, and, although this point is rarely acknowledged, it should also be possible for thought components that stand for properties to be empty.

To summarize:

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