

Topic #3

Thought and its general nature have been a matter of great concern for contemporary philosophy. Ever since philosophers/mathematicians like Bolzano and Frege rejected Kant's arguments that mathematics is a synthetic a priori truth, philosophy experienced a paradigm shift. The negation of the a priori and the claim that mathematics had a strictly logical grounding led to a large group of questions regarding nature, thought and concepts.

Thoughts have an elusive quality to themselves; every human knows he has them, however their nature is quite unfamiliar to us. The aim of this essay will be to explore the notion of thought and self-consciousness (which is always connected with thought) through some thought experiments and argumentation in order to find out if indeed thought is neither a thing of the external world nor a representation.

1. Thoughts are representations

This is a claim that would be most at home with naïve realism and psychologism which are both easily refuted. Naïve realism states that everything we see is real and that our thoughts are merely pure representations of what we see. To see why this is wrong we will have to try a thought experiment. Imagine a man who hallucinates a fruit. The thoughts he has will still be "representations" of a fruit, but the fruit will not be located anywhere in his immediate vicinity. Simply put, he will be seeing things that aren't really there, thereby ruining the theory that thoughts are pure representations of what we see. In other words, the subject will be representing an unreal object.

Psychologism on the other hand was what Frege revolted most strongly against and with good reason. It states that truths are only true if there is a subject to acknowledge them. While this may sound correct, again it is easy to see that it is wrong. In Fregean terms, the "sense" of things may be dependent on the subject, however the "meaning" is rooted in reality and remains the same regardless if there is a subject to experience it. For example, let's take mathematical truths. We know that $7+5=12$ and it would be ridiculous to presume that in the case of a lack of an experiencing subject $7+5$ would give a different result. The laws of nature and numbers (or as Frege calls them, the laws of the laws of nature) were the same even before the first experiencing subject.

Another glaring problem with psychologism which philosophers tried to solve was: If psychologism was true and thoughts were private and only contained in ourselves, then how could two subjects have a conversation about the same thing? It is obvious that they can, since life as we know it wouldn't be possible without subjects conversing about things that they see and experience.

The answer to the possibility of having shared experiences is intentionality. After Husserl was convinced by Frege to abandon psychologism he conceived of phenomenology and as one of its main notions it had intentionality which really does solve many of the problems about thought, concepts, subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

Simply put, intentionality is an ability of sorts of thought to relate itself to things outside itself. To think of something is for thought to intend a transcendent object, it doesn't matter if the object is

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real or not. To return to the previous case of the hallucinating man; when he thinks that he is seeing a fruit, he is really intending a fruit – the subject is referring itself to a transcendent object, it's just that the object does not exist.

While this may sound like Platonism it is really anything but. There is no outside world of ideas, everything is contained in reality, however it is in the nature of thought itself to intend.

Thoughts themselves perceive and intend, however they cannot be perceived themselves.

I hope to have shown in this part that thoughts cannot be contained representations as psychologism and naïve realism claim, but are things capable of transcending and relating to things outside themselves and in themselves even though they do have in common with representations the fact that they are both inaccessible and private in some way.

2. Thoughts are things of the external world

After rejecting the claim that thoughts are contained internal things, it is normal to think the opposite, that thoughts are things of the external world. It is also natural to think that thoughts have a part in our self-consciousness. This can be called a scientific view, namely that thoughts are things of the external world in that they are biological phenomena occurring in our body. I will try to show that this is not true.

It may be logical to think that indeed it is thought which gives us self-consciousness. After all, to be conscious is to be “conscious of”. Conscious of ourselves for ourselves and conscious of ourselves for the Other.

So if we think of thought as a thing of the external world, as a result of mere neurological reactions and firing of synapses, it would follow that it would be possible to create a supercomputer which is capable of emulating all of the neurons found in a human brain and if it could do that, then it would be conscious. However, to think of a computer achieving consciousness doesn't make any sense because a computer can be anything. A huge pile of ordered rocks can constitute a computer. Do rocks have consciousness? I do not think so. In fact, the only difference between the computer we are using and a pile of ordered rocks is the electricity and assigning to electricity a consciousness giving power is pseudoscience at best.

Thus, if thought is not biological and not contained (at least not fully) in the neurological functions of humans it is not something of the outside world. It is something transcendent. Contrary to the previous argument, however, we can see that even though thoughts are not representations, i.e. they are not entirely internal, thoughts cannot be called external things because they are not entirely external either.

It must be mentioned, however, that thoughts do have in common with external things their independence of a subject. As I mentioned before, mathematical truths stay the same regardless of the experiencing subject. The subject uncovers the truths, but he does not produce them.

3. What are thoughts, then?

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Thoughts have in common things with both representations and external things however thoughts cannot be referred to as representations or external things as that leads to some inconsistencies as we have seen. The solution Frege offers, the third domain to which thought belongs, is the only logical solution to this problem. The intentional quality of thought is also the only way to explain a subject's relation to the outside world. Thought is a condition on the possibility of experience. Thought is a kind of intellectual intuition, it shows us the world, not because we subjectively make up or constitute the real world but because it is the only way we can actually get insight into the way the world actually is.

When looking at a tree, we see it only from an angle and from a distance. However, when we look at it from other angles and from other distances we still know we are looking at the same tree and further, that we are the same person that is looking at the same tree. The transcendent relation we have to the tree and to our Self remains through time and that is how multiple subjects can talk about the same thing and how through our life we know that we are the same consciousness that is experiencing its surroundings.

To say that thoughts have no connection whatsoever to sense data or to biology would have to be shortsighted, since it is very clear how thoughts can be only thought by a living being which senses. Even though intentionality may be the most important aspect of thinking, it is certainly not the only one; intentionality without a subject to intend would be meaningless.

So, thoughts are what make us and the world what we are. There is a unity between the subject and the world because the world wouldn't exist as such without a conscious subject to intend it.

4. Conclusion

Frege was correct in his constitution of a third domain which neither contains external things nor representations and as is often the case in philosophy, the answer is not in the extremes but more in the middle.

Thought can be said to be what gives us consciousness and if, like we saw, consciousness is not located external to us, nor is it found within us, we can extrapolate and claim that the same is valid for thought. The thought is transcendental as it transcends both subject and the object.

Thought's intention can be identified with Frege's meaning. When we intend the Morning Star and when we intend Venus, we actually intend the same thing. The sense is different, but the meaning is the same. Here, the thought's transcendence is also obvious since it transcends the sense of the object or concept and instead ascends directly to its meaning.

In conclusion, throughout this essay I supported Frege's and Husserl's opinions on thought and due to their similarity I combined parts of both of their theories on consciousness, concepts and thought. We have seen how thought cannot be really called something of the external world but cannot be called a representation as well, but is something necessarily different and also how the main characteristic of thought, intention, leads to meaning and is not at all something internal or external, but transcendental.