

## OBJECTS OF THOUGHT AND PERCEPTION

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Some philosophers have held that, when a person thinks, there are always two things: the thinking itself, and some other thing that the thinking is about. In this paper I argue that this is a mistake that is a result of linguistic confusion. Other philosophers have suspected that confusion is at work here, but not enough attention has been given to what it means to say that a person cannot think without thinking something. To say that a person cannot think without thinking something is not to say that, whenever a person thinks, there is always something other than his thinking that the thinking is about—the so-called object of thought. That thinking and thinking *p* are not two things but only one is what needs to be shown.

It is a fact of grammar that an accusative goes along with a transitive verb, but it is not a fact of grammar that the accusative must be the name or description of something that exists. In some cases the sentences containing the transitive verbs are such that the sentences cannot be true unless the accusatives are names or descriptions of something real. Whenever an individual hits, chews, catches, or touches, there is always something that is hit, chewed, caught, or touched. Thus, "He hit the ball" could not be true unless there was a ball to be hit. In other cases, sentences containing transitive verbs may be true even though the accusative is not the name or description of anything that exists. A person may fish for trout in a stream where there are no trout or hunt for deer in a pasture where there are no deer. Thus, "She is fishing for trout in the stream" could be true even though there are no trout in the stream to be caught.

Verbs such as "sees," "hears," and "knows" have been called cognitive verbs. Whenever an individual sees, hears, or knows, there is always something that is seen, heard, or known; there is a relation between the individual and the thing that is seen, heard, or known, and the verb is the name of the relation. Sentences containing cognitive verbs cannot be true

unless their accusatives name or describe something real. Thus, the sentence "He hears a robin" cannot be true unless there is a robin to be heard. Verbs such as "believes," "expects," and "hopes" have been called propositional verbs. Propositional verbs are similar to cognitive verbs in the respect that sentences containing them also have accusatives. Are propositional verbs similar to cognitive verbs in the other respects? Whenever a person is expecting, believing, or hoping, is there always a relation between the person and something else that she stands in relation to? And when a sentence containing one of these verbs is true, must it be the case that the accusative is the name or true description of something other than the subject? Plato and G. E. Moore, among others, have answered these questions in the affirmative, but I argue that it is the function of sentences containing propositional verbs to ascribe nonrelational attributes to individuals. If sentences containing propositional verbs are true, their accusatives correctly describe the subjects who think, expect, or hope; the accusatives do not have to be names or true descriptions of other objects. "John believes that there are mermaids," "John believes that Bush is taller than Reagan," and "John is redheaded" are all alike in predicating a monadic property of John. On the other hand, "John hears a robin" and "John is a father" are alike in predicating a relational property of John, a property that he has because he stands in a certain relation to something else.

One of the clearest examples of confusion based on misunderstanding the nature of propositional verbs is found in Plato's *Theaetetus*:

Socrates. And if he touch a thing, he touches something, and if something, then a thing that is.

Theaetetus. That is also true.

Socrates. And if he thinks, he thinks something, doesn't he?

Theaetetus. Necessarily.

Socrates. And when he thinks something, he thinks

a thing that is?

Theaetetus. Clearly.

Socrates. But surely to think nothing is not to think at all.

Theaetetus. That seems plain.<sup>1</sup>

Plato seems to be arguing that it is impossible to think of something fictitious, and perhaps he is also arguing that it is impossible to think something that is false. His argument, however, is unsound. "Touches" should be grouped with verbs like "hit" and with the cognitive verb "hear"; that is, P touching x entails x. Touching x is a relational property that is predicated of P. "Thinking that" and "thinking of" are radically different. Neither P thinking of x nor P thinking that x entail x. X is not the name of some other thing that P is related to. If Theaetetus touches a snake in his closet, there has to be a snake there; but, if Theaetetus merely thinks he has, it doesn't follow that there has to be a snake there. Substituting "knows" for "thinks," Plato's line of reasoning will support the trivial, but nonparadoxical, conclusion that to know nothing is not to know at all.

An epistemic difference is related to the grammatical difference between cognitive and propositional verbs. "Seeing" and "knowing that" are cognitive verbs; both seeing *p* and knowing that *p* entail *p*. Seeing *p* may be the reason for knowing that *p*, but seeing *p* does not entail knowing that *p*. *Seeing* is not a propositional attitude, though *seeing as* is. Seeing something as *p* does not entail *p*, but seeing *p* does; and, an individual may see something as *p* but not see *p*, or an individual may see *p* but not see it as *p*. What an individual sees something as is a psychological fact about him, but the thing an individual sees is not a psychological fact about him. Since to know something is to believe something, knowing, unlike seeing, is a propositional attitude, but it is more than a propositional attitude; a person's believing that *p* is a knowing that *p* only if *p*. Questions about seeing and knowing are not wholly questions of biology or psychology; if an investigator wants to know whether an individual sees something or knows

something, facts about the individual's eyesight and beliefs are relevant, but the investigator will need to know more facts than these. Purely propositional attitudes like believing and hoping for something are facts that could be determined without determining whether what that individual believes is true or what she hopes for comes to pass. In short, the truth of statements containing propositional verbs depends only on certain facts about the individual; whereas, this is not the case for statements containing cognitive verbs.

Even if some person can be dissuaded by these grammatical and epistemic considerations from believing that, when P thinks x, P is related in some way to x, a residual source of confusion is the feature that cognitive and propositional verbs have in common: both kinds of verb are accompanied by grammatical accusatives. The same feature could have been indicated by saying something like "Just as one cannot see or know without seeing or knowing something, one cannot believe or wish without believing or wishing for something." What the sentence says is correct but confusing. One philosopher who may have been misled by this way of putting the matter is G. E. Moore.<sup>2</sup>

Moore thinks that idealists are led to the conclusion that *esse* is *percipi* because they fail to see that experience and the object of experience are distinct. They mistakenly believe that the object of an experience is a part of the content of the experience. If the object of experience could exist only as a part of the content of experience, the object would owe its existence to the experience. Moore's example is the sensation of yellow. Idealists think that when a person sees something yellow, the yellow that he sees is one and the same thing as the sensation of yellow that he has. But it is perfectly clear to Moore that the yellow something that is seen is distinct from the sensation of yellow that is had. And the same for green and the sensation of green: green is one thing and the sensation of green something else. Further, the sensation of yellow and the sensation of green are qualitatively identical, and, in fact, every experience is qualitatively identical to every other experience. Moore seems to be saying that the contents of the

mind are entirely lacking in monadic properties; what might seem at first sight to be a monadic property turns out to be a property that the experience has by virtue of its relation to something external to the mind. Not surprisingly, Moore has little to say when he sets aside the object of experience. "When we try to introspect the sensation of blue, all we can see is the blue; the other element is as it were diaphanous."<sup>3</sup>

Moore is right to an extent, but only to an extent. In most cases, our experience of something and what we experience are two different things. I am not sure that this is the case with my backache. But certainly my seeing the mouse is one thing and the mouse itself another, and just as certainly the olfactory sensation that I have when I smell smoke is not the same thing as the smoke. Nor do I, when I think of the Taj Mahal, imagine that the Taj Mahal is one of the contents of my mind. But who is the Mr. Pickwick that a person is thinking about when she reads *The Pickwick Papers*? Perhaps in certain moods it is proper to speak of Mr. Pickwick as the name of certain sentences or thoughts of Dickens, so a literary critic in writing about *The Pickwick Papers* is thinking about the artistic creation of Charles Dickens. That sort of answer would not do for Dickens, nor would it do for the person reading Dickens for pleasure. For Dickens and for the person reading Dickens for pleasure, Mr. Pickwick has no existence at all. *That* Mr. Pickwick, if he had existed, would have been a portly, good-natured old gentleman living in nineteenth-century England, and he would have been made of flesh and bone. Then, what is a person thinking of Mr. Pickwick thinking of? Gilbert Ryle would say that when we are thinking of Mr. Pickwick we are not thinking of anything, and in one sense Ryle is right. Still, it is certainly true that it is impossible to think without thinking of something.

The notion of an object of thought or experience has not been very helpful in explaining either thought or experience. Moore, for example, says that the "of" in "sensation of yellow" denotes a "simple and unique relation"; and, except for that, Moore is at a loss to say anything about the relation. I will give a definition of "object" in which I do not try to describe

ordinary usage (for the word "object" does not appear in this context in ordinary usage) but which will enable me to make a distinction I want to make. In order to do that, I will bring forward two more classes of verbs. A more inclusive distinction of verbs than the distinction between propositional and cognitive verbs is the distinction I make between what I call activity and success verbs. I call a happening an activity if it is appropriate to ask *why* questions about the happening. If it is true to say of some X that X happened in order for Y to happen, X is an activity. Thus, the snowshoe rabbit turning white in winter is an activity because it turns white in order to be nearly invisible against the snow. The concept of an activity is not the same as the concept of an action. All actions are activities, but not all activities are actions. The rabbit's changing color is an activity but not an action; it does not intentionally turn white in order to avoid predators. Most activities, even if they are actions, are to be identified with certain overt performances occurring in certain circumstances. Although there are mental activities, or activities that go on in the mind, such as mental arithmetic, clarity can be achieved by looking at behavior first.

My concept of the object of an activity is the answer to the question, "If the activity is successful, what will it be a success in doing?" The question is posed by using an activity verb and answered by using a success verb. Consider these examples: A doodlebug traps insects by digging a small hole in sand or soft dirt, and a spider traps insects by spinning a web. In both cases, the object of the activity is trapping insects and should be understood as follows: if the doodlebug's activity of digging a hole with sloping sides succeeds in trapping an insect, the activity of digging the hole with sloping sides is the same activity as the activity of trapping the insect; and, if the spider's activity of spinning a web succeeds in trapping an insect, the activity of spinning the web is the same activity as the activity of trapping the insect. The doodlebug does nothing but dig the hole, and the spider does nothing but spin the web. The object of an activity—in the sense in which I am using "object"—is a relational property of the organism engaging in

the activity, but it would also be reasonable to think of the object as something external to the organism. Since the doodlebug and the spider are trying to trap insects, an insect falling in the hole or being caught in the web could be thought of as the object of the activity. According to either of these definitions, the object of an unsuccessful activity has no more existence than Mr. Pickwick. However, instead of asking the question in the form that I asked, one might be inclined to ask the question, "What is it trying to do?" and regard the answer to that question as the object of the activity. Question: "What are you trying to do?" Answer: "I am trying to catch a werewolf." According to this definition, every activity has an object, but the object is a monadic property of the organism entailing nothing about anything else.

Thinking—when it is problem-solving or minding what you are doing—is a fairly well-defined activity, the goal of which can often be specified with some degree of particularity. If a person is thinking about a problem in mathematics, the object is finding the solution to the problem; and, if a person is listening to a speaker, one of the objects is knowing what the speaker is saying. Things such as thinking that, thinking as the having of thoughts, and the perception of physical objects are not activities in the usual sense, but all of them (except perhaps some cases of having thoughts) are activities in my very broad sense.

It is a mistake to suppose that two things or events are implied by every conceptual distinction. A traffic light may change its color by changing from green to red. The concept of changing color is not the same concept as the concept of something changing from green to red; but, when something changes from green to red, there is only one change. A second example might help: John thinks that the cat is on the mat. These are not three states of John—John's thinking that something, John's thinking that something about the cat, and John's thinking that the cat is on the mat. Just as one cannot run without running a determinate distance in a determinate time, one cannot have a thought without having a particular thought. This is at least part of what should go into the solution

of the question posed by Socrates, "And if he thinks, he thinks something, doesn't he?"

"Thinking that something" usually refers to a state or disposition. Since an activity is an occurrence or a process, thinking that something is not, strictly speaking, an activity; but, since dispositions are cashed in terms of occurrences, that does not matter for my purpose. What is important is that thinking that something is a success or failure. Thinking that something is a success if someone thinks truly that something is the case, and thinking that something is a failure if someone thinks falsely that something is the case. The object of thinking that something is thinking truly that something is the case. In that sense, the object of my thinking that the stock market will go higher is my thinking truly that the stock market will go higher. My thinking that the stock market will go higher and my thinking truly that the stock market will go higher are two descriptions of the same activity. The latter, which implies a relation between me and the outside world, is the more complete description. If I think falsely that the stock market will go higher, my thought does not have an object in my sense of "object." For Plato and for Moore, my thought would have had an object even if it were false, but that is because for them the object of my thought is the answer to some such question as "What does he think the stock market will do?" The object in that sense, being a monadic property of me, is independent of what happens.

The object of perception is the perception of things the way they are. If my perception of the animal is that it is a pussycat, and it really is a pussycat, my perception is a success. The object of my perception is my knowing, or thinking truly, that it is a pussycat. My seeing the animal and thinking that it is a pussycat is the same activity as my seeing the animal and knowing that it is a pussycat, except that the latter description, which implies the existence of the pussycat, is more complete. If the animal is a skunk and I perceive it as a pussycat, the perception that it is a pussycat does not have an object. (Of course, my perception that the thing is an animal has an object.) In Moore's sense of "object," the object of

perception would apparently be pussycat even if the animal is a skunk. But there is no room in the universe for that kind of "pussycat."

Thinking, in the sense of having thoughts, is often not a mental action, as when thoughts pop in and out of our heads with little control by us. Although an activity does not have to be intentional in order to be an activity, the mere having of thoughts is not a very good example of an activity, and it would be extremely difficult in most cases to say what the functions of the thoughts are. Appearances to the contrary, "thinking of" is neither the name of a relation nor a relational property. Thinking of the Taj Mahal no more implies the existence of the Taj Mahal than thinking of a mermaid implies the existence of mermaids. Each thought is a monadic property of the person who has the thought. However, a thought of something should be contrasted with a thought that something is so. If I think that the Taj Mahal exists, I will have the relational property of thinking truly that the Taj Mahal exists just because there is a building by that name in India.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937), 2: 192.

<sup>2</sup>G. E. Moore, "The Refutation of Idealism," in *Twentieth Century Philosophy: The Analytic Tradition*, ed. Morris Weitz (New York: Free Press, 1966) 15-34.

<sup>3</sup>Moore 31.