



Notions of 'Mind' and 'Thinking'

Abstract: A linguistic analysis of various connotations relating to concepts of 'mind' and 'thinking'. The way we use these expressions and phrases points to some primal and innate idiosyncrasies of mind and thought. This essay only presents some basic ideas about language usage and is meant as a propaedeutic and pre-philosophical inquiry into the nature of mind and thought. The major semantic terms are: mind, thinking, and thought. These basic words are used in a host of idiomatic expressions in English and other languages as well. Following first is an incomplete rundown of English and a few German expressions that are mostly the subject of the succeeding analysis.

English expressions (mind, think, thought)

- out of mind
- make up one's mind
- have in mind
- bear in mind, keep in mind
- call to mind, bring to mind
- mind one's own business
- (do not) mind something
- mind-blowing, mind-boggling, mind-bending
- remind
- minder
- mindful
- mindless, unmindful
- mind-set
- absentminded
- broad-minded, open-minded, narrow-minded
- evil-minded
- fair-minded
- single-minded
- feeble-minded, weak-minded
- high-minded
- mind-expanding
- mastermind
- mind's eye
- mind reading
- mind over matter
- think about, of, over, up, back, out
- think = believe
- doublethink
- outthink
- thinking
- thinkable
- unthinkable, unthinking
- unthought(ful)
- thoughtful, thoughtless
- thought process
- think tank
- bethink
- freethink
- rethink
- aforethought
- afterthought
- train of thought
- thought way
- thought-out

German Expressions (*Denken, Gedanke, Geist*)

- | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------|
| - in Gedanken versunken sein | - be-denken, er-denken |
| - undenkbar | - gedankenlos |
| - geistreich, geistlos | - Gedankenfluss |
| - umdenken | - Andenken |
| - Gedenken | - gedankenlos |
| - gedankenreich | - Gedankenprozess |
| - Andacht | |
-

A linguistic analysis of how we use language regarding the concepts of mind and thinking may help us understand the way we think. This investigation, however, only provides us with common-sense notions that have become speech-habits, fixed phrases or idioms. They may still give us an indicator of how language was used in the early dawn of humankind, in the conceptive and incipient phase of human speech. In any case, we should never linger too long in the domain of common-sense or everyday mind, because this was shown to be a pitfall of deception and mendaciousness. Ordinary mind often adumbrates the true nature of the mind with a slew of superficialities and inaccuracies. Whereas scientific mind has developed at an incredibly fast pace, ordinary mind was subject to a gradual, almost imperceptible decadence. Although intellectual powers and knowledge have indubitably increased, higher faculties lost their influence almost completely, such as reason, wisdom, intuition. The overweening supremacy of the intellect in the 20th century led to a deterioration of the overall structure of our mind by imbuing people with an emphasized insouciance toward all spirituality. By **spirituality** I do not mean the current shallow trend of esoterics or New Age cult, but I refer to the meaning of the Hegelian 'Spirit', the supreme Consciousness of humankind. We lost contact with our roots, with the essence of humanity. To regain something of this eternal 'Spirit' we have to find the true meaning of expressions such as 'mind' or 'thinking' that might lead us back to the higher faculties of our mind and thus enable us to broaden the horizon, the view and the knowledge of our mind to a hitherto unknown degree.

I begin with the analysis of the English expression 'mind': 'mind' has a variety of meanings, although they always point to something immaterial within us, be it the soul, our consciousness, the thinking process, or even our feelings. Some of the dictionary meanings are:

- a. memory, recollection
- b. the element or complex of elements in an individual that feels, perceives, thinks, wills, and esp. reasons
- c. the conscious mental events and capabilities in an organism
- d. the organized conscious and unconscious adaptive mental activity of an organism
- e. intention, desire
- f. the normal or healthy condition of the mental faculties
- g. opinion, view
- h. disposition, mood
- i. way of thinking or feeling
- j. mental qualities of a person or group
- k. intellectual ability
- l. Christian Science: God
- m. a conscious substratum or factor in the universe

Mind is the complex whole of our experience and conscious life, the whole spectrum of emotions and thoughts and their pertinent faculties. Modern philosophy of mind would speak of "qualia" of consciousness to denote the nature of our mind. By adding the suffix '-ful', we get 'mindful', meaning, to be full of the mind, full of attention and consideration for something. The opposite, 'mindless', just negates the meaning of 'mindful'.

Acting without attention or consideration is 'mindless' and regarded as improper or instinctual behavior. Mind seems to be the component in our personality that determines whether our actions are good or bad, whether we behave according to the status and dignity of human beings, that 'have mind'.

By adding the prefix 're-' we get 're-mind', meaning to return or redirect our attention and consideration back to something already experienced or known (the Latin 're' means 'again' or 'back').

To express how overwhelmed we are by a certain impression or experience, we use the words 'mind-blowing' and 'mind-boggling'. Blowing the mind means surpassing our understanding or capacity of comprehension. We cross the boundaries of our mind, we are stunned, left speechless, unable to find any appropriate words to express our experience. This may indicate that we believe, although subconsciously, the fact, that certain experiences may expand our mind to the extent that we leave our ordinary state of consciousness and are faced with a completely new and unknown realm. As soon as we encounter something that exceeds our understanding or shakes the ground on which our world view is anchored, our mind is literally 'blown' or 'boggled'. It is left in a confused state, lacks orientation and stumbles around as if blinded.

Various idioms also apply 'mind' in a similar fashion: 'call to mind' or 'bring to mind' refers to the activity of retrieving information from somewhere and bring it to our immediate attention. This implies that this information is stored somewhere in our mind and remains there latent until 'called to mind'. We think of our mind as a vast repository, containing all the experiences and knowledge concerning our life. But all this information is not present all the time. Our mind is selective and only deals with information that is of immediate interest or relevance. But by means of psychological laws such as association we are able to 'bring to mind' certain information and data that are somehow existent in the background of our mind, also sometimes called the Unconscious or Memory.

Both expressions 'mind one's own business' and 'I don't mind' as well relate to mind as giving attention to something, either to one's own matter or the matter in question. The English language has the inherent feature of using certain words both as verb and noun (and sometimes as adjective or adverb, too). So mind is not only a characteristic or state of the human being, but also an activity. Mind is action, we are the mind acting as mind. Mind is not thought of as a mere attributive function of the personality, but moreover as a basic idiosyncrasy of being human. Mind is what is always involved in all our actions, the mind itself is this action. Without mind we could not act. Action or Will to action is part of our mind. The term 'out of mind', therefore, means that without mind we are disconnected from our very nature. We are crazy, mindless, irrational, etc. It signifies an unhealthy state of the mind, we are not 'in the mind', but out of balance.

Qualitative attributions to the term 'mind' characterize the subject, e.g. 'broad-minded' for a person who is willing to tolerate a wide range of ideas and behavior. The opposite is 'narrow-minded'. Similar expressions are 'evil-minded', 'weak-minded', 'fair-minded', 'open-minded', 'high-minded', etc. A 'single-minded' person is someone who directs all his attention to one purpose or goal. Mind is conceived as a substance that is qualitatively modified by character dispositions. All characteristics of a person, virtues and vices as well, are connected with mind as the basic essence of a person. Another interesting term is "mind's eye" which denotes the creative faculty of imagination or fantasy. It is an analogy of our visual sense. As we can see with our physical eyes, so we have an inner eye, an inner vision that could be sometimes as vivid and clear as our external perception (see also dreams). This notion characterizes the mind as more than a mere intellectual faculty. Especially the faculty of reproducing images in recollection is a unique subjective experience.

A 'mind reader' is someone who has telepathic skills and can read the thoughts of another person. The expression is probably derived from our normal reading capacity. We read letters with our eyes and interpret them with our intellectual faculty. Thoughts are identified with words.

Therefore, it is believed, that we could read thoughts as if printed somewhere in our head. This is of course a naive and erroneous notion, but since we usually think in terms of words, we inadvertently come to the conclusion that thoughts are unexpressed or unvoiced words.

There are certainly more expressions, but I think these should suffice to prove the point in question, namely that we regard mind as the most important part of our personality and that mind is concomitant to all our acts and thoughts. To use the mind properly means to be essentially human in our conduct and attitude. Mind is central to all our actions, expressions, desires, goals, intentions, etc. Doing something without mind as the crucial and decisive part may

lead us into an imbalanced, pathological or unnatural state. Mind, as used in these expressions, means mostly attention or consideration. We equal mind with our conscious state of awareness, a conscious activity, not something passive.

In academic speech we often hear the expression 'mind over matter' that is the summary of more than two thousand years of thought that tried to tackle the problem of mind and matter, of the empirical dualism that we experience everyday. But philosophers of all ages always knew that our experience of the world and the experience of ourselves as spiritual beings is not a factual dualism of reality but a result of the way we perceive and think. Some thinkers may have even succeeded in solving this problem, but since it is difficult to come up with convincing evidence or cogent arguments, especially in an age dominated by science, we are still searching for answers to that fundamental problem.

The next term of our investigation is "to think". First again the different meanings according to the dictionary:

- a. to form or have in mind
- b. to have as an intention
- c. to have as an opinion: believe
- d. to reflect on: ponder, think out, think over
- e. to call to mind: remember
- f. to center one's thoughts on
- g. to form a mental picture of: imagine
- h. to devise by thinking, think up
- i. to have as an expectation: anticipate
- j. to subject to the processes of logical thought
- k. to exercise the powers of judgment, conception, or inference : reason
- l. to have the mind engaged in reflection : meditate
- m. to consider the suitability
- n. to have concern, think of
- o. to consider something likely : suspect

Thinking as conceived by common-sense comprises all the operations of our mind which we apply in our everyday life: believing, remembering, thinking of something, imagining, thinking up, etc. Although these mental activities do not cover the whole gamut of our mind's potential, they nevertheless represent the most important functions of ordinary mind. Some of these functions are more developed and acute in professional thinkers. Artists sometimes have an enhanced faculty of imagination.

In the English language, various thinking activities are expressed in connection with prepositions which are put after the verb "think", such as "think about", "think up", "think of", "think over", etc. Other meanings are created by adding a prefix: "bethink" (consider, recall), "outthink" (surpass in thinking), "rethink", "unthinkable", "freethink", "doublethink"(simultaneously believe in two contradictory ideas), etc. We use different existing concepts of language ("free", "double", "out") to qualify the way we think. Since our language is affected by the way we experience the world, by our perception of space and time structures, we apply similar concepts to our mind and submit it therefore to a process of reification or naturalization. Spatial concepts such as "over" symbolize the activity of thinking as going or viewing over something, as we would do it by an actually performed bodily action. Thinking also means believing, having an opinion of something. Thinking is not only a precise and logical operation, but also a vague, error-prone process that most of the people use most of the time (Plato's doxa). In our age thinking and believing has come to be identified. The vague, erratic and whimsical mode of believing and opining is accepted as the standard of thinking. What has become of the noble, sublime and superior mode of thought, thinking per se? Is it only the prerogative and gift of philosophers?

The participle construction of "think" is "thought", which is also a noun with different meanings:

- a. the action or process of thinking: cogitation
- b. serious consideration: regard
- c. reasoning power
- d. the power to imagine: conception
- e. something that is thought
- f. an individual act or product of thinking
- g. a developed intention or plan
- h. something (as an opinion or belief) in the mind
- i. the intellectual product or the organized views and principles of a period, place, group, or individual
- j. idea, notion
- k. opinion, belief

Thought can be the whole process of the thinking power or a single idea or belief. This intriguing diversity of meaning suggests that the thinking process and the thought as part of the thinking process may not be two different things but one and the same entity or process. There is not thinking and that which is thought, but only thinking-thought. The division into thinking and thought is purely logical and may be useful in understanding concepts. As I mentioned in another essay, this division is due to the projection of our dualistic experience of the world upon the thinking process.

Connected with the spacial prefixes of "afore" and "after" we have "aforethought", meaning premeditated, and "afterthought", meaning something thought of later. The expressions "thoughtful" and "thoughtless" are synonymous with "mindful" and "mindless", respectively.

A "train of thought" is a series of thoughts linked together through association or logical laws. In pre-railway times, a train is thought of as a moving file of persons or animals. Again, we borrowed an empirical concept from our language and applied it to the way we think, although the psychological laws are completely different from the natural laws of our world.

One final expression is "thought process". If we start with the original Latin term "pro-cedo", meaning "coming or going to the front", we understand by a process a "natural phenomenon marked by gradual changes that lead toward a particular result (the process of growth)" or "a series of actions or operations directed toward a particular result (a manufacturing process)". A process is a movement toward a certain goal. So, a "thought process", too, is conceived of as a movement within our mind to attain a particular result. This concept also includes the "stream of consciousness" (s. William James), the perpetual motion of coming and going of thoughts. As we will see, the concept of process is too narrow for an adequate explanation of the nature of our mind.

Source: Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition.

See also online dictionaries: Merriam-Webster, Unabridged Webster.

© 1999 by Tom Arnold. All rights reserved. Send comments and questions to me.

URL: <http://www.hyponoesis.org/>
Updated: 5/27/2006

