



## Prephilosophical Notions of Thinking

**Abstract:** This is a philosophical analysis of commonly held notions and concepts about thinking and mind. The empirically derived notions are inadequate and insufficient for a deeper understanding of thought itself, but this pre-philosophical understanding of thinking leads to a more refined and profound distinction of different forms of thought and their prominent common features of aspectuality and relativity. [German Version]

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What is the average person's notion of thinking? What is the answer of someone who is confronted with the practice of everyday life when asked what thinking is? Will she be able to answer that question?

The answer to the question what thinking means would be as diverse as the views and opinions of people. However, there are basic and common patterns in those answers.

Let's examine some of those possible answers:

1. Thinking means to consider, to think about, give thought to, ponder
2. When opening the mouth, i.e. when speaking, I'm thinking
3. When focussing on something, when being occupied intensely with something, I'm thinking
4. Thinking is the ability of the human being to order and structure her daily activities
5. Thinking distinguishes the human being from the animal
6. Thinking is sound common sense
7. All conscious activities of the human being appertain to thinking
8. Thinking is the product of neuro-chemical processes in the brain
9. Whenever the human being acts intentionally, thinking is presupposed
10. Thinking means having insight into and understanding of some subject matter

A host of different views are conceivable. Let us now examine those 10 statements more closely and attempt to reveal their particular principles and structures. What strikes us at first is that they are NOT definitions of thinking but instances of what thinking may represent. Socrates once blamed his pupils of committing this general fallacy, as they were asked to define a particular concept, but instead enumerated examples of it. This lack of abstraction is typical of the average person because we usually refer in thinking only to concrete objects of the world. Even when employing abstract concepts, such as generic or specific concepts, there is always a reference to the concrete material world. In the case of concepts such as love, happiness, joy etc. concrete ideas and associations to experiences always exist. As soon as asked to formulate those concepts generically, the average person rarely transcends the level of concrete reference. The habitual and linguistic patterns are usually interlocked too strongly with the particular events of our world and therefore hardly enables us to overcome them without effort. And if we still succeed, there is the great danger of getting entangled into speculations, contradictions and absurdities. Abstract thinking must be learned just as concrete thinking. Since, however, concrete, practical thinking seems closer to us because we use it every day, we hastily conclude that abstract thinking is vain and useless, because we think that it has no direct relationship to the objective world. However, this is only one of the many errors which the average person succumbs to.

Let us now examine the above statements more closely:

### 1. Thinking means to consider, to think about, give thought to, ponder

Thinking is understood as a conscious act of thought, i.e. only when using the ability of thinking with full awareness, I'm thinking, not however, when carrying out e.g. a routine activity or looking at a landscape. An act of will or a volitional incentive is necessary to activate thinking. Now, here's the problem with this view: will is assumed to be extraneous to thinking, i.e. I can will to do something without initiating an act of thought. That is very questionable as shown by our daily experience: for example, if we want to move from a lying position to a standing position, we need a motivating impulse for movement in addition to the will. Why do I want to get up? Because I've got to go to work. This is a thought process that precedes volition.

Feelings and emotions, too, are not included in thinking as understood in this view. When thinking, feeling is turned off. That assumption is again refuted by practice: emotion can sometimes become so dominating a force in our thinking that it affects our thought processes in such a way that we often behave irrationally and then later, when considering our actions from hindsight, we realize that we acted based on emotions rather than logical thinking.

I call this concept of thought, **eliminative concept of thinking**, because it excludes all other abilities of the human being and assumes as valid only the act of thinking as such. We will see that pure thinking is possible, however not in the sense as applied in this empirical view of thinking, but as used in philosophical thinking.

### 2. When opening the mouth, i.e. when speaking, I'm thinking

This is not only the general view of most people but seems to be a fundamental thesis of analytical philosophy and linguistics. Language determines thinking. The way we speak determines the way we employ concepts in our thinking. This thesis does not equate language with thinking but states that language precedes thinking. By learning the language in our childhood, we also learned thinking by acquiring the necessary concepts. Therefore, thinking is reduced here to concepts, grammar and syntax. The verbal act of speech is not only the medium of language (as in this statement). There is also what we call inner speech, i.e. when thinking in silence we use language and the concepts of language which we learned. Therefore, during the act of unpronounced thinking we stay within the structure of language which is also a social structure.

We will see that this modern analytic-linguistical theory of thought refers solely to the practical thinking of everyday life, but when expanded to thinking in general and to philosophical thinking in particular, it is no longer tenable.

I call this concept of thought, **linguistic-analytical concept of thinking**.

### 3. When focusing on something, when being occupied intensely with something, I'm thinking.

The conscious focus of thought on an inner or external object is designated as thinking in this statement. This concept is similarly eliminative as the one used in concept 1), yet this concept can be taken further because will and emotion are also integrated. The concentration on a thing can be of purely objective nature, e.g. when learning or acquiring knowledge, or it can be of

psychological nature, e.g. when loving somebody. In spite of this extended concept, thinking is still constrained to the salient quality of concentration. Only when being in a state of attentiveness, I'm thinking. Although focusing is a crucial element of thinking, we will see that it is not the sine qua non of thought.

I call this concept of thought, **ergonomical concept of thinking**, because it relates to the environment of work ("ergos") and the activities of the human being. Work requires concentration and attention. Other activities, too, require a focusing of thinking on the processes of this activity.

#### 4. Thinking is the ability of the human being to order and structure her daily activities

Thinking is meant to be understanding in the Kantian sense, which arranges and structures the perceptions of the senses according to inherent rational categories. A logical capacity is assigned to thinking. The logic of thinking consists in associating given events with each other according to laws of logic, and therefore in avoiding inconsistencies ("tertium non datur"). However, logical thinking is regarded as especially trained or especially enabled thinking that is not available to everyone. Most people are not capable of thinking in terms of ordered and rational structures, even for a short period of time. Therefore, this characterization of thinking is certainly not a general feature of thinking but much more a specification of thinking. Logic is positively a very important aspect of thinking, however not absolutely. We will also see that the modern concept of logic is taken very narrowly and although adequate and useful in practice and science, it is hardly able to account for the complex structure of reality.

Therefore, I call this concept of thought, **logical concept of thinking**.

#### 5. Thinking distinguishes the human being from the animal

This statement attempts to reduce the characteristics of a human being to thinking. Animals cannot think although they may be generally granted to have consciousness. Thinking is something in addition to consciousness, an extended ability of consciousness, which is accounted for by referring to the complexity of the brain. The more complex an organism is, the more complex and the higher evolved are its capacities. The brain as the most complex organ in nature seems to be predestined for thinking. Aristotle was one of the first philosopher who designated the human being an "animal rationale". This view was maintained throughout the Middle Ages up to the Renaissance. The body and the functions of the body, including perception, are the same or similar in both the human and the animal species ("animal"). In addition, the human being possesses the "ratio", i.e. intelligence, spirit, reason, mind, etc. In this view lies the danger of modern theories of thinking and consciousness, which attempt to reduce consciousness to neurological brain processes (identity theory, parallelism, epiphenomenalism etc.). We will examine these theories closely and establish their elementary fallacies.

Since this definition tries to specify thinking as the difference of species, I call this concept of thought, **generic concept of thinking**.

#### 6. Thinking is sound common sense

This definition begs the question, because it presupposes a concept that needs to be defined itself. What is sound common sense? The definition of sound common sense may yield scores of divergent definientia. Generally, it means ordinary thinking that conforms to social and cultural standards that are instilled since childhood. Common sense consists of general conventions and tacit commandments which are supposed to be kept if you want to be a "normal" citizen of this

society. If thinking is restricted to sound common sense, a deliberate abuse of common sense (such as in smoking, since deleterious to one's health, and although one knows that smoking is harmful) can no longer be called thinking. Every "abnormal" behavior that is outside of the "sound common sense" standard cannot be assigned to thinking. The so-called sound common sense often turned out to be rather "unsound" throughout the history of mankind, when common sense desperately stuck to norms that obtained to be invalid or harmful, e.g. although nutrition science condemned excessive meat consumption and declared it to be unhealthy, meat consumption still increases every year, simultaneously with an increase in heart diseases which occur as a result of excessive fat content in meat products.

I call this concept of thought, **normative concept of thinking**.

## 7. All conscious activities of the human being appertain to thinking

This concept is the most comprehensive so far among the ones examined above, because it embraces all phenomena of consciousness, such as thinking, feeling, volition, etc. Since it is not explanatory but only descriptive, it is rather vague and open to interpretation. Everybody can approve of this statement because it seems to be intuitively true. Since our subconscious is not directly amenable to us in the conscious state and since thinking is always combined with an activity, thinking must be associated with or is even identical to our consciousness. We will see, however, during the process of our investigation, that consciousness and thinking are not the same. It suffices to state that the above statement is so far the most adequate definition of thinking, because it represents the direct everyday experience of the human being without defining thinking subjectively or interpretively.

Therefore, I call this concept of thought, **phenomenological concept of thinking**.

## 8. Thinking is the product of neuro-chemical processes in the brain

When the average person is asked where thinking occurs, she points to her head. Hardly anybody still adheres to a kind of Cartesian dualism that claims that thinking and consciousness are a completely different and independent substance from physical matter. The psychological fact that the "I" is felt as being localized in the head, behind our eyes supports this folk-psychological view. This identity of brain and thinking, however, is hardly tenable as reflected in the contemporary consciousness debate. Science, in particular neuroscience, is not able to account for the subjective aspect of consciousness in terms of purely physical properties. The qualities of thinking seem to possess no physical properties at all and are completely different from physical properties of material objects of our world. The view of epiphenomenalism is not tenable, either, because thinking is not just a product of physical processes. So far, science has not yet found an explanation for the transition from physical to mental structures ("explanatory gap").

This concept of thought is called, **reductionistic concept of thinking** because it endeavors to reduce mental aspects to physical aspects.

## 9. Whenever the human being acts intentionally, thinking is presupposed

The element of intention seems to be the decisive feature of thinking in this view. A moral dimension is implied here, too, because thinking is manifested in action. Thinking and action are associated through the intentionality of thinking. When acting intentionally, I'm thinking. However, the conclusion would then be: when not acting intentionally, I'm not thinking. A

definition of "intention" is required now. This concept has definitely something to do with volition. I do not want something subconsciously but I think about the object of my willing and acting before performing the action. Therefore, intentional thinking precedes action. Such action can be called moral action because it considers the ramifications of action. However this can be doubted: when a thief steals another's property, she does it intentionally to enrich herself, but her action cannot be called moral since she has not considered the consequences of her action. We have now reached an extremely complex field, ethics that is. Ethics deals with the various kinds of action and how a person initiates the succeeding action in her mind.

I call this concept of thought, **intentional concept of thinking**.

## 10. Thinking means having insight into and understanding of some subject matter

This concept is rather narrow, but it points to a very important element of higher thinking, i.e. philosophical and scientific thinking. When thinking about something and thereby reaching a new understanding or insight, this is actual thinking. The object of cognitional thinking is not determined here more closely and therefore could be an empirical or philosophical one. The above definition is valid in such cases as when in the act of learning we suddenly understand the nature of something or when a philosopher gains insight into the reality or the essence of the human being. Although in both cases cognitions have been reached, they differ fundamentally. The nature of these cognitions must be considered for an accurate definition of thinking. The extent of an insight or cognition is very relevant and determines whether our thinking is only superficial or profound.

Since we deal here with questions of knowledge, I call this concept of thought, **epistemological concept of thinking**.

## Conclusion

We have examined these 10 notions of thinking briefly and have shown the featuring aspect of each statement. As a conclusion, we want to look at those 10 aspects at large and try to reveal possible agreements or shared structures.

The most significant quality which is common to all of them is the **aspectuality** of the concept. That means that every notion of thinking expresses only one aspect of the whole and is not complete in itself. It is one of many viewpoints with respect to what thinking is. It appertains to the nature of the human being that she usually thinks in terms of perspectives (cf. Nietzsche) and this is determined by the incompleteness of our knowledge. We will see in our further investigation that perspectivity is not absolute.

Closely linked to the aspectuality of the concept is the **relativity** of the concept. Concepts are human constructs which are the product of history and which are attached to the limitations and possibilities of language. Concepts also have a semantic dimension which is determined by the subjectivity and interpretation of the subject. In juxtaposition to aspectuality, every concept requires a reference, a relation to a determinable object in order to obtain as meaningful and intelligible at all. Not one of the 10 concepts of thinking is absolute, i.e. none can subsist without a frame of reference. The frame of reference is the delimitation of one concept from another, and it demonstrates that a concept is only restrictedly applicable and is valid only within a particular context. Concepts are furthermore social and cultural constructs, which are relevant within the mindset of a particular culture and which need to be interpreted within this context. Finally, the meaning of a concept is affected by the understanding and knowledge of the individual. The farther the understanding reaches the more a concept gets extended in its meaning. Open-mindedness and critical thinking are prerequisites for an adequate philosophical thinking.

Some of the above concepts **converge** in certain areas, such as the eliminative concept and the ergonomical concept of thinking, because both include focus. The concepts are not separated sharply from each other but overlap marginally, because definitions are often vague and not entirely lucid. There are mutual dependencies, too, such as in concept 9 and 10. When wanting to act intentionally, a certain understanding of the subject matter at hand is presumed.

There are also concepts which **diverge** from each other, which differ considerably in meaning, even contradict each other or are altogether incompatible, such as concept 7 and 8. The general understanding of consciousness does not reduce it to neurochemical processes in the brain. Consciousness and subjective experience are always more than just the product of physical processes. Although academic scientists endeavor to describe these areas as constituting an identity, common sense and one's own experience defy such a simplifying hypothesis. If consciousness is something else than a physical event, our scientific view of life will be incomplete. Many academic scientists are afraid of this. The hubris to believe that we know all there is to know about our world is definitely more questionable and more dubious than the possibility, that consciousness could be a new and fundamental dimension of the universe.

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