

On the Processuality of Thought

I shall argue for a view defended by Peter Geach (1958; 1969) half a century ago and recently reworked by Matthew Soteriou (2013): the process in which a subject comes to think or judge that such and such a thing is the case, or that something follows from something else, cannot but be composed of *discrete* thoughts, judgments, or inferences *that have no genuine duration*. This view opposes the idea that thinking consists in a process that guides or determines the inferences that we state in, or with, words or diagrams, but that is distinct from, or parallel to, these inferences because they are discontinuous—and which, being so, cannot but fail to represent this process as it really is. The view that to think or judge that p , or that p follows from q , is not in itself processual in nature and has no genuine duration—even though these thoughts, judgments, or inferences may result from, or take place in a process that is temporally extended—opposes the idea that, in contrast with having the intuition that p , for example, thinking that p , or inferring that p from q , necessarily has some temporal extension.

I shall indicate the *raison d'être* of Geach's claim that a thought or a judgment can be characterized as a 'non-successive unity' (Geach 1969:35). From their being 'no succession within any one thought'—contrary to William James's view that 'in the thought (say) that the pack of cards is on the table there are successive phases, in which elements corresponding to the separate words of this *that* clause are severally and successively prominent' (*ibid.*)—it follows, according to Geach, that there can be no gradual transition from one thought to another (*ibid.*). Indeed, if the parts of the content of a judgment do not occur separately and successively, and hence 'are not temporally ordered, it would be a mistake to think that when the propositional contents of two judgements have a part in common it is thereby possible for them to have a temporal part in common' (Soteriou 2013:33). As a consequence, there can be no gradual transition from one thought or judgment to the next—one thought or judgment cannot unfold into the next; thoughts are, on the contrary, 'discrete' and 'discontinuous' and 'occur not in a Jamesian stream but [...] successively': '[t]hinking consists in having a series of thoughts which can be counted off discretely' (Geach 1969:35–36). I shall clarify these claims and explain why it follows from them that not only are the parts of the content of a judgment that p not temporally ordered, but judging that p has, correlatively, no temporal extension.

However, while thinking such and such a thought, in the sense of judging such and such a thing, does not have temporal extension and cannot be in the process of being done or of taking place, contrary to an activity, one can, however, be in the process of thinking *about* something—e.g., of thinking about the claim that p and of trying to draw its consequences (by first having diagrammatically represented it in one's mind, for instance) with the aim of determining whether

it is acceptable as an answer to a given problem or question. *This* is an activity; *this* is something in which one can be engaged for a period or interval of time—and hence that can be interrupted and later resumed. But none of the judgments one can make during this activity—for instance, none of the inferences one may draw during the ‘clockable’ activity of (mentally) manipulating and experimenting upon the diagram one imagines—is a temporally extended activity. (To put it another way: while ‘having inferred what follows from the claim that *p*’ can designate the ‘clockable’ process in which one has inferred a series of consequences of this claim—that is, has judged that such and such a thing follows from it—this expression can also designate something radically different: the inferences one has made during this process, which are not themselves temporally extended at all.)

According to Geach, it follows from the foregoing—that is, from the fact that judging that *p* is a discrete, durationless ‘non-successive unity’—that ‘we cannot—cannot in principle, not for lack of information or technique—assign positions in time to acts of judgment’ (Geach 1958:9); ‘it is impossible to assign to individual acts of thinking a position in the physical time-scale’ (Geach 1969:37). Hence, ‘we cannot assign to judgment more than a loose connexion with physical time’ (1958:105)—which means, in particular, that ‘some questions about the time-relations of thinking to physical events are in principle unanswerable’ (Geach 1969:37): “One may say that during half an hour by the clock such-and-such a series of thoughts occurred to a man; but I think it is impossible to find a stretch of physical events that would be just simultaneous, or even simultaneous to a good approximation, with one of the thoughts in the series (ibid.:36).”

This looks mysterious: while it is possible that the thought that the proposition that *p* follows from the propositions *q* and *r* occurred to me this morning while I was having breakfast (which led me to eat it quickly in order to write this thought down on my computer before I lost track of it), there is no precise moment when this happened. I shall indicate, on the basis of apparently puzzling remarks from Peirce and Wittgenstein, why there is in fact no mystery here (contrary to what Mouton (1969) and Soteriou hold), and why Geach’s strangely neglected view goes against the possibility of any phenomenology of thought.

References

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