

On Containers and Content, with a Cautionary Note to Philosophers of Mind

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ABSTRACT

Nine features of the container-content relationship are described. It is suggested that, given these features, non-Fodorian philosophers of mind should be wary of talk about “content.”

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The prototypical container relation is a relation between a single item or group of countable items, and some distinct item with the approximate shape of a cylinder, box, or bag, open on no more than one side, such that the volume of the container substantially exceeds and has as a subset the volume of the items contained. (However, see below for a couple of variations.) For concreteness, we may consider the prototypical container to be a bucket and its contents to be balls.

Consider some potentially interesting features of this system:

(1.) A bucket contains a ball just in case the ball is physically inside the bucket. It does not matter how things stand outside of the bucket.

(2.) In the normal (upright, gravitational) case, it takes a certain amount of effort to get a ball into a bucket and a certain amount of effort to get it back out again.

(3.) Balls take up space. A finite bucket can only contain a limited number of non-infinitesimal balls.

(4.) Balls are clearly individuated, countable entities.

(5.) It is rarely a vague matter whether a bucket contains a ball or not.

(6.) There is typically no reason why any two balls can't go in the same bucket or why a ball can't be removed from one bucket and put into another without changing any of the other contents.

(7.) A bucket can contain many balls, or only one ball, or no balls.

(8.) The ball and the bucket are distinct. The ball is not, for example, a state or configuration of the bucket.

(9.) A ball in a bucket is observable only from a privileged position inside or above the bucket.

Some modifications, particularly to (4) and (5), are required if we take as prototypical the relation between such a container and a certain amount of stuff, such as water or sand, characterized non-countably by means of a mass noun. If only one kind of stuff is to fill the bucket, there will be no multiple, discrete contents, but one content in varying amounts. Alternatively, if one fills the bucket with wholly distinct kinds of stuff, (4) may be preserved; if we consider semi-distinct fluids, such as orange juice and apple juice, (4) must be discarded.

If one takes the relationship between a packaging box and the packaged item as prototypical, the volume of the item contained will approach the volume of the container, requiring the modification of (6) and (7).

Cautionary note to philosophers of mind: Often it is said that beliefs, desires, etc. (for brevity, I'll yield to the current custom of calling them "propositional attitudes"), are "contents" of minds. Also, and quite differently, propositional attitudes are said to have contents, propositional, conceptual, or otherwise. It is infelicitous to invoke the container metaphor in this way (or, alternatively, to extend literal usage of 'content' to cover these cases), if there are divergences between the features described above and features of the mind-propositional attitude relation or the propositional attitude-proposition relation, and if incautious use of the metaphor might draw the reader (or the writer) mistakenly to attribute to the latter relations features of the former.

I will leave the explicit comparisons to the reader; they should be obvious enough (e.g., (1) makes "content externalism" an oxymoron; (4) - (7) are atomistic). If we give

ourselves completely over to the container metaphor, we end up with a position that looks something like a caricature (not an exact portrait) of Jerry Fodor's views. The metaphor thus pulls in Fodor's direction, and Fodor, perhaps recognizing this, delightedly embellishes it with his talk of "belief boxes" (e.g., Fodor 1987). Conversely, those among us who wish to resist the approach to the mind that the container metaphor suggests may do well to be wary the word 'content' in its current philosophical uses. Would we lapse so easily into atomistic habits if instead of saying that someone has (in her mind) a particular belief with the content P, we said that she matches (to some extent) the profile for believing that P?

Admittedly, avoiding the word 'content' would make some things harder to say – but maybe those things should be harder to say.¹

¹ I would like to thank Lisa Lloyd, Tori McGeer, and Bill Wilkerson for useful discussion. Critiques of related metaphors for memory and language can be found in Roediger 1980 and Reddy 1979 respectively. See also Johnson 1987, chapter 2.

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