

Can Any Sense be made of the Distinction between Form and Content?

I'm not sure why it's called the *fallacy* of saying anything, though. Have you claimed that it's a fallacy to think we can say anything? More that the empiricist position is a fallacy, I thought.

Whenever I've read Wittgenstein and Wittgenstein-derived philosophers on "propositions", I've always thought the discourse bizarre, and just over my head: so I'm grateful for your remarks there.

As I understand it (which is not well!), the later Wittgenstein's position, which seems to have overlaps with Leavis's, is different and close to what you sketch out in the later parts of your piece. I find "language games" as an account of what we do with language (both playfully and seriously) also a rather bizarre and unhelpful concept, but language does seem to *mean* in use, in exchanges, in conversations, which I'm encouraged to see you mention; and in the larger context of a language and culture and "form of life" (a term I *can* make something of).

The key Leavisian phrase here (not insignificantly, it's a suggestive metaphor), for where the "things" are, is surely "in the criss-cross of utterance between us".

Martin Hayden

The "fallacy" lies in supposing there is a thing waiting to be said.—*I. R.*

There's something I am not quite clear about in the publisher's piece on meaning. Am I right to think that what he wants is not an "explanation of how we come to mean" that is *better* than the content/form distinction but to do without explanations altogether? I fancy it is the latter but as soon as someone asks something like *How do we come to do such-and-such?* (and he does so several times) it's easy to suppose that what he wants is an answer in the form of an explanation (not, of course, *that* explanation but a better one).

But then the publisher's own answers to his question do imply that it is something other than explanations we should be looking for:

Nobody has ever discovered a way of describing the process [of meaning] except from within.

The best way of showing understanding of a conversation is to continue it. (Or, perhaps, we might add, not.)

To understand the word love . . . read the New Testament. Or Emma.

The only way to show understanding of a poem is to discuss it.

Literature and religion are important because they can show us what words mean.

Literary critics are better at it than philosophers and linguists.

We don't live in a world, then, in which there just happen to be meanings—as there happen to be cabbages and shoe-trees—but in a world made by and from meaning, a world, from which it is impossible to escape to see what meaning looks like from outside. We don't understand the process of meaning by trying to explain

it—as if we were explaining the process of combustion in the sun—but just by participating in it. We show one another what it is to mean not by explaining meaning but *by* meaning, by making new meaning, by giving new life to old. It's just unfortunate that the gift of meaning is also the gift of nothing-meaning. (Or perhaps not *just* unfortunate, for where would the one be without the other?)

The economist/politician/leader writer says, over and over again in different (but nevertheless identical) ways (for these are the voices that woke Prufrock and made him drown), "If the graph representing decline in the consumer confidence index continues to steepen, the recession will deepen and more people, especially members of the C1 and C2 demographic, will lose their jobs, stop paying taxes and become dependent on benefits, thus growing the deficit, adding to the national debt and making the recession deeper and more long-lasting still."

Modern Toss (proving itself one of those sea-girls who kept Prufrock dreaming and alive) says, "Buy more shit or we're all fucked!"

And there is "the same content in a different form" for you.

Duke Maskell

If we are not looking for explanation (or if we are) we should know why. If we don't think about all this we shall take for granted what everybody says, which may make us disbelieve in any sense we are lucky enough to make. This is why in this case J. L. Austin would lead us in the wrong direction, because if we rely on the wisdom of common speech we shall land in the fallacy I pointed to. Mr Maskell is here himself "thinking about all this".—*I. R.*

I am familiar with "Form and Content" in the same way that I am not familiar with "Content and Form". Let me explain the distinction I am making.

I learnt "Form and Content" in public school early on; the classes changed, the teachers changed, I changed, the order of those words was always just so.

Due to the nature of the institution of Public Education Forms were things out of my control and Content was something I could control. What started as elementary form-filling became secondary-school truism.

"Form and Content" was, for me, the easiest way to write down my answers to essay questions, which had to be done on the spot during these things called examinations. First Form, Second Content, Third The Conjunction. You start it with an Introduction and you end it with a Conclusion and Voilà, the five-paragraph essay. Even in University I could always count on this idiomatic expedient to "get my thoughts on paper". I did well and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Dean's List).

Of course the distinction between form and content was something presupposed. But I handled it well, I think, in the following way.

So: “form” is the thing we need to agree upon to start, for example that there are things and they can be measured and weighted and mangled and hated. Sometimes it’s easy, you say what’s this? and someone says, Oh, that’s this sort of thing. Or it’s more difficult and someone will query Is The Bible A Book? or is *Macbeth* A Satyr Play? And maybe you reverse the order or wonder whether But wouldn’t sound better than And but you get by. And if I am any indication you get high marks.

Content, on the other hand, has the delightful doubleness of meaning both “containment” and “contentment” and I prefer the latter to the former now as I approach 40. How is a thing contented in itself, i.e. what is it in itself, its nature etc. Is it contented? Is its form a thing against its nature? Etc.

“Content and Form” (in that order) has the irresistible ring of the pleasant. Be content and accept the form of it. To my ears it sounds wonderful. But to my knowledge this “Content and Form” has not become idiomatic English and thus the distinction is real, the fallacy is real too though, well, insofar as we shouldn’t just be content with *anything*.

Jesse Lepp

I think my question was where the thoughts were before they were on paper.—*I. R.*

Dear Contest Committee Members,

I have taught “Form and content” for so long now that I can’t remember why I began to in the first place. But I was just now reading Darwin (an old school-book) and couldn’t help thinking that there must be some sort of wonderful mold that nature is pressing into for all the

variations and distinctions between things. It is above my station to question the existence of such a mold and I write this simple reply to you primarily because, 1. Your contest has wrested such an epiphany from my dull mind and, 2. Because, after all, the prize is the thing.

Have you heard anything from Apple Nodham? Tell him about this contest if you can. It should do him good.

Yours Sincerely,

Dr. Palsy Angler
Director, Theory and Tradition
Kronk University

But the mold has both its own form and its own content, and what’s the difference?—*I. R.*

Dear Sirs,

I have no doubt that a plethony of peons will write you all about their epiphonies and irresistible impulses. But I for one know of the thing itself. I understand it as if abstracted from this world of crisis and conformity. Form and content are in fact the same thing. It’s this two-faced neither here nor there community of word-police that have made such a big deal of it. A hundred years ago if you went to a person and said space and time are the same thing you’d be laughed out of the building. But these days when everyone knows the equation $E = MC^2$ then how can you expect the laughter to continue? As to the further question of where is the thingyness of things, well as anyone who has read Heidegger will tell you it’s in the thing of the thingyness of those things. One more thing, I have to admit I was irritated—or, vexed, might be the better word—that you’ve even brought up the fallacy of form and content. In *Nietzsche* by Heidegger anyone would have concluded this topic an eon ago.

Germaine Spiney

Several other interesting replies were received which unfortunately were not in forms appropriate to this website.

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