CHAPTER TWO

FROM CONTENT TO REPRESENTATIONAL CONTENT

Part One is an account of the range of contents which human thoughts can have. This is not the only way to focus a theory of content, and it is not unproblematic. It is not unproblematic even if our human form is relevant to what we can think. Even if there is some single paradigm of normal adult human neurophysiology, still other humans differ from that paradigm in relevant ways. At best, we can hope only to provide an account of content for "normal" adult humans. And even "normal" adult humans may relevantly differ, so that some idealization unavoidably infects our account. Also, any biological constraints we humans now suffer may one day be broken by technological advance, which will allow us to alter our form. Despite the legitimacy of these worries, the account which follows will show that normal adult human capacities are, at least for now, at least enough alike to make a focus on "human" content reasonable.

Some may deny that there are interesting limits to what humans even with our current form can think. Certainly human cognitive life has included an enormous range of thoughts, spanning a huge variation across individuals, places, and times. And human thought does seem capable of development without obvious limit, as the histories of math and physics and even philosophy show. Indeed, if there are limits to what particular individuals can think, such limits seem set precisely by the contingent historical and cultural position of those individuals and by the accidents of their education and development, not by their humanity, not for instance by some transculturally and (so far) transtemporally invariant human biology.

This is a serious objection, and it requires that our theory of content take a certain form. That theory holds that there are a number of operations by which contents can be generated or constructed or derived from other contents. It also holds that the full range of human contents can be derived, in some cases only by a series of operations, from a certain concrete core of underived content, which I call "basic content". These generation operations are semantic operations, not psychological processes; they exhibit dependencies in the contents of thought, not the history of the development of thought in individuals or cultures. Nevertheless, they are helpful in dissolving the objection we face.

While there is a limited range of basic content, and a limited number of different operations which can generate other contents from that basic content, still iterations and combinations of those operations may generate new contents in a way which is potentially endless. This makes the range of human thought limitless in just the particular way the history of our intellectual endeavor and
cognitive variation suggests. But it does not make the range of our thoughts limitless in every sense. It does not, for instance, ensure that humans can think everything which is true, since there may be no route from basic content through the operations allowed to some truths. Also, while at least something reasonably akin to the full range of basic contents and content generation operations is required if we are to deliver the contents of the thoughts of each normal adult human, still it is very unlikely that without training the thought of any given human would duplicate on its own the historical developments required to come to a thought with some particular highly-derived content. Training, enculturation, and accidents of individual development are crucial to which particular contents from the full human range will in fact be exhibited in the thought of any particular individual, and it is in this way that culture and contingency limits thought.

Basic content is content from which the full range of human thought can be derived, by a specific series of operations to be characterized in the next chapter. It is basic in that sense, basic in what I will call "generation", above all.

But basic content is basic in another sense; it is also basic in truth. Barring a few complications to which I have already alluded and to which we will return, its truth or falsity serves to fix the truth or falsity of all human thoughts, whether their content is merely basic or not. Because of the way in which it does this, basic content will turn out to be the coherent content which we seek. It is from basic content that a conception of human agency must be constructed if we are to make proper sense of ourselves, if we are to coherently articulate what would need to be true for there to be such agents as we take ourselves to be. Let me elaborate these two claims, though for now just a bit and without argument:

There is a specific set of basic contents. Depending on the way the world happens to be, each particular basic content either "matches" the world, or it doesn't. What is match? One intuitive understanding of the vague but intuitive notion of truth by correspondence. The content expressed by "there are at least three red spheres" matches any world where there really are three such red, spherical things, and fails to match any world where there aren't. If a basic content matches the world, it is true. If it doesn't, it is false.

There are various complex ways in which contents are dependent for their truth on other contents, and hence ultimately on basic contents. But, as we will see, the truth or falsity of any thought is fixed by i) the content it has, ii) the truth dependencies among contents, and iii) which basic contents are true and which false. More exactly, I should say that it is fixed by no more than these. If there are any analogues of traditional analytic truths, then truth dependencies alone will serve to fix their truth. To make "coherent" sense of something in my sense, to show that it can be coherently conceived, is to exhibit some basic contents, each of which would make it true that there is such a thing.

Basic content is basic in generation and truth. Barring some qualifications which will become evident as we proceed, it is also basic in yet a third sense,