

NOTAS E DISCUSSÕES
NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

**DAVIDSON ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF
THOUGHT WITHOUT LANGUAGE:
COMMENTS ON DIANA I. PÉREZ**

MARCELO FISCHBORN
Universidade Federal de Santa Maria

Abstract. Diana Pérez (2005) criticizes Davidson’s argument for the thesis that there is no thought without language, and offers an alternative defense of that thesis on the basis of empirical studies on developmental psychology. In this comment I argue that more recent studies do not seem to affect Davidson’s argument in the way Pérez suggests, and that her alternative defense of the thesis that there is no thought without language is insufficient. At the end, I offer a sketch of how a weaker and more tenable version of the argument could be articulated.

Keywords: Thought; language; concept of belief; Davidson.

Diana Pérez (2005) criticizes Davidson’s main argument for the thesis that thought requires language. She reconstructs the argument as follows:

- (i) Every propositional attitude (every thought) requires a background of beliefs. [...]
- (ii) In order to have a belief it is necessary to have the concept of belief. [...]
- (iii) In order to have the concept of belief one must have language. [...]
- (iv) (Conclusion) There are no thoughts without language. (p.178–9)

Pérez begins by highlighting two features of Davidson’s conception of thought: “its essential normative and holistic character” (p.177). On the basis of these features, she then makes the two main points of her paper. First, she argues that although Davidson’s conception of thought is adequate “to deal with epistemological problems” (p.178), it is inadequate for “solving the problem of the ‘emergence’ of thought” (p.178). Second, she argues that “there is no thought without language”

(p.178), but reaches this conclusion on empirical grounds, and not through conceptual analysis, as Davidson did. In what follows I argue that although the empirical studies Pérez describes do pose a problem for premise (ii) of Davidson's argument, more recent studies do not (Section 1). Then I explain why I think the studies she presents do not support her conclusion that thought requires language, and I suggest how a weaker and more tenable version of the argument could be articulated (Section 2).

1. A Flaw in Davidson's Argument?

In sections 3.2 and 4, respectively, Pérez argues that Davidson's conception of thought is inadequate to account for the emergence of thought, and offers an alternative defense of the thesis that propositional thought depends on language.

According to Pérez, developmental psychology provides "convergent evidence pointing to the fact that children do not acquire all mental concepts at the same time" (p.186). What we have is rather a gradual process: children understand 'pretend' and 'desire' by age 2, 'know' and 'think' by age 3, and only by age 4 they come to understand the concept of 'belief' (p.186). This, Pérez says, would pose two problems for Davidson. First, it would show that mental concepts do not come all together, which contradicts what she calls Davidson's "*Extreme Holism*" — the thesis that *mental concepts* (the concepts of belief, desire, thought, etc.) emerge all together (p.186). And second, there would also be a problem for premises (i) and (ii) in Davidson's above-mentioned argument:

If there are no beliefs without the concept of belief (ii) and if there are no desires (as a special case of propositional attitudes) without beliefs (i), it follows that there are no desires without the concept of belief; however, this is exactly what is the case for very young children, according to developmental psychology: between 2 and 4 kids have the concept of desire but do not have the concept of belief; one of the premises has to be given up. (p.186)

From premises (i) and (ii) it does follow that there is no desire without the concept of belief. But the psychological studies Pérez mentions do not contradict that. Pérez overlooks the distinction between having a desire and having the *concept* of a desire, and thus fails to appreciate that those studies merely show that children can have the *concept* of desire without the *concept* of belief. This alone poses no problem for premises (i) and (ii).¹ What does pose a problem for Davidson's argument is rather something that we might assume in conjunction with those studies: someone who has the *concept* of a desire certainly has *beliefs* — or at least Davidson would think so (see 1995, p.9).² But if someone can have beliefs without the concept of

belief, then premise (ii) of Davidson's argument is false. However, this poses no problem for premise (i), the thesis that other propositional attitudes require beliefs. Therefore, on the basis of the studies Pérez mentions we can construct an argument against premise (ii), but only against it — contrary to the suggestion, at the end of the quote, that we would have to choose between giving up (i) or (ii).

So, in short, studies in developmental psychology suggest that children acquire the concept of belief later than other mental concepts, and certainly later than other ordinary concepts. But is this enough to refute premise (ii)? A reason to be reluctant here is the fact that more recent studies in developmental psychology have questioned the standard interpretation of the false-belief task, used to determine if children have the concept of belief.

The relevant question is whether passing the false-belief task is a necessary condition for having the concept of belief. A first reason for doubt is the fact that the task concerns explicitly a child's capacity to *attribute* a false belief (see Perner et al. 1987, p.125; and Gopnik and Astington 1988, p.35). It is not evident how this connects with the capacity for *understanding* false beliefs, nor, in particular, with understanding one's *own* false beliefs (which apparently would imply an understanding that beliefs can be false). Indeed, the common interpretation of the false-belief task has been disputed. Bloom and German (2000), for instance, suggest that the false-belief task has intrinsic difficulties, and that succeeding in it demands more than just understanding that beliefs can be false. As they argue, "even for a child who clearly understands that beliefs can be false, getting the right answer places non-trivial processing demands" (2000, p.27), and "there is evidence that standard false belief tasks are difficult for children even independent of the requirement to reason about false belief" (p.28). Indeed, some researchers claim that 15-month-old children can already understand false beliefs (see Onishi and Baillargeon 2005). This casts doubts on whether Davidson's premise (ii) has actually been refuted by the studies mentioned by Pérez.

2. No Propositional Thought without Language?

In the conclusion of her paper, Pérez presents what she thinks is the relation between thought and language:

There are lots of discussions among psychologists on the role of language in the development of a theory of mind. But there are no doubts about the fact that both capacities develop, at least, together: deficits in the acquisition of a theory of mind appear together with deficits in the pragmatic understanding of language, in the understanding of conditional and counterfactual sentences, and of course in the semantics of mental terms. So, according to my view, Davidson was right: there is no propositional thought

without language, but this fact is [. . .] an empirical consequence of the way in which our interpretative or “mind reading” capacities develop. (p.188)

The problem with this statement, I think, is that the psychological research Pérez describes do not support her claim that there is no propositional thought without language. What that psychological research does suggest is that a child’s theory of mind and linguistic abilities develop simultaneously, which is not the same as claiming that *propositional thought* and language develop simultaneously.

How could the fact that a theory of mind and language develop together support the claim that propositional thought and language develop together? An already known alternative is Davidson’s premise (ii), discussed above. What that premise does is precisely to tie propositional thought (exemplified by beliefs) with second-order thoughts or mental concepts (such as the concept of belief). According to that premise people only have propositional attitudes if they also have mental concepts, and this entails that if mental concepts develop together with language, then propositional attitudes also do. But, although the results from the false-belief task do not decisively refute premise (ii), I do think that it needs also a positive support in order to be acceptable.

Davidson’s reasons for holding premise (ii) — which Pérez regards as “the most disputable premise of the argument” (p.178) — come, as she notes throughout her paper, from his understanding of “thought” (or “propositional thought”). Indeed, in some of Davidson’s later papers, he admits his peculiar use of mental terms (see 1995, p.8; 2001, p.141).³ An immediate consequence of acknowledging this terminological aspect of premise (ii) is that Davidson’s argument loses much of what might be its initial interest: even if we could grant the soundness of the argument, its conclusion would say no more than “Therefore, there are no thoughts (in Davidson’s peculiar sense of the word) without language”. A proposition like this can have no impact on people who simply decide to make a looser use of the word “thought” and other mental terms. Davidson’s argument escapes from triviality, however, because the truth of premise (iii) remains a legitimate open question. That is, the question whether thought, in Davidson’s sense — i.e. in a sense that requires thinkers to have the concept of belief — requires language is a genuine empirical question, and not merely a claim based on a terminological assumption. The studies mentioned above suggest that 15-month-old children have an understanding of beliefs. The question that seems to remain open is whether they already have mastered a language. So as to assess the truth of Davidson’s claim we need to know precisely at what age the development of language abilities is on its way.

3. Conclusion

To sum up my points on Pérez's paper: I think that current empirical studies in developmental psychology do not decisively refute the premise that beliefs require the concept of belief. Indeed, without that premise her final claim that there is no thought without language rests unsupported. Once we acknowledge the terminological aspect of Davidson's defense of that premise, however, we have a more plausible, albeit weaker, ground for saying that thought — in the sense of propositional thought *plus* the concept of belief — requires language. But this, in turn, is in need of support from studies that can tell us whether the emergence of mental concepts actually correlate with the emergence of language.⁴

References

- Bloom, P.; German, T. 2000. Two reasons to abandon the false belief task as a test of theory of mind. *Cognition* 77: B25–B31.
- Davidson, D. 1995. The problem of objectivity. In: Davidson 2004. *Problems of Rationality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- . 2001. What thought requires. In: Davidson 2004. *Problems of Rationality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gopnik, A.; Astington, J. W. 1988. Children's understanding of representational change and its relation to the understanding of false belief and the appearance–reality distinction. *Child Development* 59: 26–37.
- Lepore, E.; Ludwig, K. 2005. *Davidson: Meaning, Truth, Language, and Reality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Onishi, K. and Baillargeon, R. 2005. Do 15-month-old infants understand false beliefs?. *Science* 8: 255–8.
- Pérez, D. 2005. Is thought without language possible? *Principia* 9(1–2): 177–91.
- Perner, J.; Leekam, S. R.; Wimmer, H. 1987. Three-year-olds' difficulty with false belief: the Case for conceptual deficit. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 5: 125–37.

MARCELO FISCHBORN
 Universidade Federal de Santa Maria
 Programa de Pós-Graduação em Filosofia
 sala 2308, prédio 74-A, Cidade Universitária
 97.105-900 Santa Maria, RS
 BRASIL
 marcelo_fischborn@yahoo.com.br

Resumo. Diana Pérez (2005) critica o argumento de Davidson em favor da tese de que não há pensamento sem linguagem e oferece uma defesa alternativa dessa mesma tese com base em estudos de psicologia do desenvolvimento. Neste comentário argumento que estudos mais recentes não parecem afetar o argumento de Davidson da maneira sugerida por Pérez e

que sua defesa alternativa da tese de que não há pensamento sem linguagem é insuficiente. Ao final, ofereço um esboço de como uma versão mais fraca e defensável do argumento poderia ser articulada.

Palavras-chave: Pensamento; linguagem; conceito de crença; Davidson.

Notes

¹ By the same token, premise (i) is not equivalent to the thesis of Extreme Holism. Of course premise (i) expresses a kind of holism — an ‘inter-attitudinal holism’ as Davidson (1995, p.13) dubs it — according to which other kinds of attitudes depend on a background of beliefs. The thesis of Extreme Holism is different. We could name it a ‘second-order holism’, since it says that the concepts of belief, desire, etc. are mutually dependent. Therefore, one could hold inter-attitudinal holism without holding second-order holism.

² See Lepore and Ludwig (2005, p.395) for a similar objection against Davidson’s premise (ii).

³ Davidson (1995, p.8) says that “There are many people, including philosophers, psychologists [...] who identify the ability to discriminate items having a certain property with having a concept — with having a concept of being such an item. But I shall not use the word ‘concept’ in this way”. In the sequence he explains his own use: “I should [...] like to reserve the word ‘concept’ for cases where it makes clear sense to speak of a mistake, a mistake not only as seen from an intelligent observer point of view, but as seen from the creature’s point of view” (p.8; see also Davidson 2001, p.141).

⁴ For comments or helpful discussion, the author would like to thank Rogério Passos Severo, Fred Adams, Gilson Olegario da Silva, and Jonatan Willian Daniel. Thanks also to CAPES for financial support.