

Thinking – an anthropological difference?

Against Davidson on thought and language

Some people, especially philosophers, think that one of the most important anthropological differences is the capacity to think. Thinking, they claim, is a property that distinguishes human beings from all other creatures.

However, in order to argue for this anthropological difference it is not sufficient to simply say so. For this would be circular. What is needed, then, is the recourse to a second property, one that fulfils at least two conditions: on the one hand only human beings should have it, and on the other hand this property must be necessary for cognitive capacities. Many, and not only philosophers, think that speaking a language would be such a property. One of them is Donald Davidson. He provided one of the strongest arguments for the thesis that only linguistic creatures think. It contains of two steps: the first argues that in order to have a belief a creature needs to possess the concept of belief, the second aims at showing that the possession of this concept requires a language.

Yet, if it were possible to challenge this argument one would regain evidence for two assumptions: first, also creatures unable to speak a language can think, second, the capacity to think does not constitute an anthropological difference.

There are mainly three objections against Davidson's argument: a first objection holds that it amounts to a vicious circle, according to a second Davidson engages in empirical speculations which provide too weak a basis for his modal claim, a third objection aims at offering an empirical counterargument. In my talk I want to show that two of these objections, namely the second and the third, succeed. Accordingly, Davidson cannot convince. Thus, it seems possible that creatures unable to speak a language can think and that the capacity to think does not constitute an anthropological difference.