

# Thoughtful Brutes

Tomáš Hříbek

*The Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague*

**Abstract:** Donald Davidson and John Searle famously differ, among other things, on the issue of animal thoughts. Davidson seems to be a latter-day Cartesian, denying any propositional thought to subhuman animals, while Searle seems to follow Hume in claiming that if we have thoughts, then animals do, too. Davidson's argument centers on the idea that language is necessary for thought, which Searle rejects. The paper argues two things. Firstly, Searle eventually argues that much of a more complex thought does depend on language, which reduces a distance between himself and Davidson. Secondly, some of Davidson's suggestions are promising – in particular the idea that we may lack a vocabulary to capture the contents of animal thoughts. Based on this insight, one might, *pace* Davidson, grant thoughts to animals. However, this does not mean, *pace* Searle, that it should be possible to construe even the simplest of such thoughts as propositional. Perhaps we need to move beyond Davidson *and* Searle by developing a theory of non-propositional thought for animals.

**Keywords:** Donald Davidson, John Searle, animal minds, semantic holism, *de re/de dicto*, triangulation, non-propositional thought.

## 1

Do animals other than humans think? Major philosophers of the past, such as Descartes and Hume, expressed early contrasting views concerning this issue. As is well known, Descartes sharply denied any mentality – not just beliefs, but also consciousness – to animals, while Hume opined that “no truth appears to me more evident, than that beasts are endow'd with thought and reason as well as men” (Hume 1978, 176). Descartes' position was motivated by theological con-

cerns — if animals entertained thoughts, we would have to worry about the fate of their souls, as thinking is the activity of the immortal soul — but his main argument can be stated in abstraction from theology. In a nutshell, animals do not think, because they do not speak — where language was, for Descartes, evidence of the presence of thought. Hume argued for the opposite conclusion on the basis of a similarity between human and animal behavior: given that we know by introspection that human behavior is accompanied by “ideas”, the closely resembling behavior of brutes is likely to be accompanied by such inner episodes, too.

Two developments characterize the current debate on animal minds. First, unlike the early moderns for whom the issue of animal mentality remained peripheral, contemporary philosophers see it as central. Second, the current debate decidedly favors Hume’s position over Descartes’. Most contemporary thinkers feel that if *we* possess minds, then other animals are bound to possess at least rudiments of mentality as well. To be sure, Darwin rather than Hume is a direct influence on the contemporary philosophy of animal minds. Whereas Hume offered a mere argument by analogy between human and animal behavior, Darwin supplied a testable hypothesis about the continuity between humans and the rest of creation. From the Darwinian point of view, provided that other creatures are our evolutionary kin, it is absurd to believe that thought has not emerged gradually, like other traits, and that it does not exist in simpler forms. As Darwin put it in *The Descent of Man*:

If no organic being excepting man had possessed any mental power, or if his powers had been of a wholly different nature from those of the lower animals, then we should never have been able to convince ourselves that our high faculties had been gradually developed. But it can be shown that there is a much wider interval in mental power between one of the lowest fishes, as a lamprey or lancelet, and one of the higher apes, than between an ape and a man; yet this interval is filled up by numberless gradations. (Darwin 1871, 44)

It is the conviction that philosophical theorizing about the nature of thought must respect our best empirical knowledge about a common origin of species that motivates the moving of the topic of animal mentality to the forefront of current debate. Professor Searle contributed to this reorientation with his paper “Animal Minds” (see Searle 1994). Much of it is taken up by Searle’s critique of various arguments by Don-

ald Davidson, all of which assume that the possession of a language is somehow necessary for thought. Early on in the paper, Searle voices a deep mistrust of any arguments that ignore empirically attested similarities between humans and other animals. The late twentieth-century debate between Searle and Davidson thus seems to repeat the structure of the early modern disagreement between Hume and Descartes. To be sure, there are important differences. First, unlike Descartes, Davidson does not view language merely as a sure sign, but rather as constitutive, of thought. Second, unlike Hume, Searle does not search for relevant similarities between humans and animals that justify a belief in animal minds at the level of outward behavior, but rather in neurobiology. Third, unlike with Descartes and Hume, there is no fundamental disagreement between Davidson and Searle in metaphysics, as they both assume that the world is fundamentally composed of physical entities.<sup>1</sup> And yet I think we can say with a bit of license that Searle plays a latter-day Hume to Davidson's Descartes. Searle continues the naturalistic program in philosophy, of which Hume was a founder, which is opposed to any tendency to deny certain phenomena in the name of an a priori theory. This is what I see as the key critical insight of Professor Searle's in his debate with Professor Davidson: if a philosophical theory of thought is so demanding that it denies thought to nonhuman animals, of whom both common sense and science assumes otherwise, then so much the worse for the philosophical theory.

However, I do not wish to simply conclude that Davidson was wrong to deny thought to animals, while Searle is right to grant it to them. For one thing, even though Searle does not take language as necessary for thought, he eventually argues that much of a more complex thought does depend on language, which reduces a distance between himself and Davidson. Secondly, I believe Professor Davidson's arguments can be mined for insights that can help us to get ahead in the philosophy of animal minds. I am thinking, in particular, of the suggestion that we may lack a vocabulary to capture the contents of animal thoughts. This is what I am going to argue, based on this insight: We must, *pace* Davidson, grant thoughts to animals. However, this does

---

<sup>1</sup> The doctrine that the world is ultimately physical is traditionally called "materialism". Davidson is one of many recent philosophers who adopted the doctrine and the label. Professor Searle eschews the label, but the discussion of his reasons for this terminological decision is beyond the scope of my paper.

not mean, *pace* Searle, that it should be possible to construe even the simplest of such thoughts as propositional. Perhaps we need a theory of non-propositional thought for animals, although I cannot hope to fully develop it here. But let me begin by reviewing Searle's critique of Davidson's arguments.

## 2

Professor Searle identifies two separate arguments against animal thought that he ascribes to Donald Davidson. I shall revisit them in turn, adding my own comments to Searle's critique.

The first of Davidson's arguments turns on the idea that in ascribing thoughts to each other, we make fine discriminations with respect to their contents that seem impossible in the absence of language. As animals don't have language, there seems to be no way to pin down what thought they might be having in mind. As Davidson puts it in his paper "Thought and Talk":

The dog, we say, knows that its master is home. But does it know that Mr. Smith (who is his master), or that the president of the bank (who is that same master), is home? We have no real idea how to settle, or make sense of, these questions. (Davidson 1984 [1974], 163)

In response, Professor Searle claims that the argument assumes a verificationist premise that unless it's possible to determine the propositional content of a thought ascribed to the dog in Davidson's example, it makes no sense to ascribe it in the first place. Searle rejects the premise and goes on:

Even if we assume that there is no fact of the matter as to which is the correct translation of the dog's mental representations into our vocabulary; that, by itself does not show that the dog does not have any mental representations, any beliefs and desires, that we are trying to translate. (Searle 2002 [1994], 66)

I think Professor Searle is right that Davidson's first argument is inconclusive. But I wish to add two points on Davidson's behalf. For one thing, he is not committed to verificationism. Indeed, he explicitly disowns it in a later paper, "Rational Animals" (see Davidson 1982). He says that he assumes that "an observer can under favorable circumstances tell what beliefs, desires and intentions an agent has" (Davidson 2001 [1982], 99). But, he adds, "[m]erely to claim that an observer can

under favorable conditions tell what someone else is thinking is not to embrace verificationism, even with respect to thought" (Davidson 2001 [1982], 99). More importantly, Davidson himself acknowledges, also in "Rational Animals," that his arguments does not establish the strong conclusion that there can be no thought in the absence of a language, but at best a weaker thesis that "there probably can't be much thought without language" (Davidson 2001 [1982], 101). This is how Davidson seems to make a room for primitive animal thought: Even though we cannot capture the exact way a speechless animal, such as a dog, thinks of some object, we can come up with some description of the object that the dog could pick out. To use a bit of jargon, the fact that we may not be justified in ascribing *de dicto* beliefs to nonlinguistic animals does not rule out the possibility that they lack beliefs *de re*. However, Davidson adds that ascribing any single belief presupposes ascribing indefinitely many more. And, as we have no way to tell whether a speechless animal has any of these additional beliefs, especially more complex ones, we are not on a very solid ground even with the ascription of the very simple beliefs. But, as said before, the first argument does not rule them out completely.

However, Professor Davidson attempts to prove the strong thesis that animals lack even *de re* thoughts in another argument. That is, he questions the possibility of identifying any objects of purported animal thoughts, not just our ability to capturing the ways animals might conceive of such objects. It is this argument that qualifies Davidson as a Cartesian, despite his materialist metaphysic. An early version of this argument can be found in the last few pages of his "Thought and Talk," and this is the version critically analyzed by Professor Searle. He summarizes the argument in three steps. At a first step, Davidson repeats the holistic assumption that we've already seen in the previous argument, namely that in order to be ascribable any particular thought, an animal must possess a whole set of beliefs. At a second step – which is crucial – Davidson claims that in order to have beliefs, an animal must have the concept of belief. Third, in order to have the concept of belief, one must have a language. Yet animals do not have any language; therefore, they do not think.

In his commentary, Professor Searle does not question the first premise, i.e. the holistic assumption that a thought can be ascribed only against the background of a whole lot of beliefs. After all, Searle argued for a similar kind of semantic holism in his own work – e.g., in chapter

8 of his book *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (1992), in which the idea of holism appears under the label "Network". To be sure, not everybody accepts holism. For example, Jerry Fodor questions the idea for a variety of reasons, one of which is that he thinks it is inhospitable to the possibility of simple animal minds. But I shall leave that route of criticism of Davidson's argument aside. Instead, Professor Searle concentrates on Davidson's second premise, which expresses the assumption that a minded creature must possess the concept of belief. Davidson's rationale for making this assumption was that the possession of belief presupposes an ability to distinguish between true and false beliefs, for which the possession of metalinguistic semantic predicates such as "belief" is mandatory. Searle questions this strong assumption. He says:

I agree [that] ... having an intentional state requires the capacity to discriminate conditions which satisfy from those that do not satisfy the intentional state ... [But]... I see no reason at all to suppose that this necessarily requires a language, and even the most casual observation of animals suggests that they typically discriminate the satisfaction from the frustration of their intentional states, and they do this without a language. (Searle 2002 [1994], 67)

Searle further argues that we may miss how this discrimination naturally works, if we forget that perception and action – not just belief – are also forms of intentionality. But perception fixes belief and belief determines action. A dog believes that a cat is up a tree because he saw and smelled the cat running up the tree, which leads him to chase the cat and bark up the tree. And so on.

Again, I agree with Professor Searle that Davidson's second, more radical argument against animal thought is also inconclusive. Yet I should like to leave his point about perception as a form of intentionality aside for a moment; I shall return to it at the end of this section. Instead, I wish to consider a bit more complex form of the same argument against *de re* animal belief which Davidson elaborated in "Rational Animals."

In this later version, Davidson attempts to gather more support for his controversial premises, in particular for his claim that the possession of a belief requires the concept of belief. Davidson tries to support this claim by an additional argument which goes roughly as follows (cf. Davidson 2001 [1982], 104): In order to have beliefs, one must be capable of being surprised. To be surprised means to realize that one,

or more, of one's beliefs were incorrect. However, that means that one possesses the concept of belief. Hence follows the conclusion that in order to have beliefs, one has to have the concept of belief. Obviously, the most questionable premise in this supporting argument is the first one. I surmise that Professor Searle, had he considered this suggestion, would have objected to it as a piece of speculative psychology. It seems preposterous to attempt to decide a priori whether or not a minded creature must be capable of surprise. Yet perhaps Davidson could have arrived at the conclusion that a creature with beliefs needs to possess the concept of belief by an alternative route. Let us say that someone is a thinking creature if she possesses lots of attitudes with respect to her present circumstances as well as the future. However, that seems to presuppose a capacity to realize that, for instance, one is carrying out one's plans and that they go well or badly. But this seems to presuppose the concept of belief. So we can get at Davidson's desired conclusion without a priori assumptions about the capacity for surprise. Yet a critic might object that the concept of a thinker that is presented here is too high-brow to be applicable to non-human animals, but I think this conclusion is premature and should await empirical testing. At any rate, Davidson's premise that having beliefs presupposes the concept of belief is not hopeless, and it is an open question whether or not it is applicable to non-human animals.<sup>2</sup>

However, Davidson further needs to support the third premise of his second argument, namely the claim that one can have the concept of belief only if one has a language. Davidson's argument here is dense in the extreme, involving such fundamental concepts as truth, objectivity and communication. Perhaps it can be reconstructed as follows (cf. Davidson 2001 [1982], 104-105): In order to have the concept of belief, one must have the concept of truth – i.e., one must be capable of contrasting between what is believed and what is the case. One could come to possess the concept of truth only if one were involved in communication with another creature, since the concept of truth, finding out how things are objectively, would play a crucial role in interpreting the other creature. Hence in order to have the concept of belief, one must be in communication with another. Now, as communication is conducted

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Allen – Bekoff (1997) for evidence that members of various species other than human are capable of feats such as deception and self-recognition that presuppose second- if not higher-order beliefs.

in a language, in order to have the concept of belief, one must communicate with others by means of a language.

This seems to complete Davidson's defense of steps two and three of his second argument against animal thought. However, at the very end of "Rational Animals" he describes a model context in which the concepts of truth and objectivity arise. It involves an early occurrence of the idea of triangulation that Davidson went on developing in his last papers. The passage reads:

If I were bolted to the earth, I would have no way of determining the distance from me of many objects. I would only know they were on some line drawn from me toward them. I might interact successfully with objects, but I could have no way of giving content to the question where they were. Not being bolted down, I am free to triangulate. Our sense of objectivity is the consequence of another sort of triangulation, one that requires two creatures. Each interacts with an object, but what gives each the concept of the way things are objectively is the base line formed between the creatures by language. The fact that they share a concept of truth alone makes sense of the claim that they have beliefs, that they are able to assign objects a place in the public world. (Davidson 2001 [1982], 105)

The idea seems to be that two individuals respond to the same object and to each other, thus forming a triangle, where the base line is their communication, and this is the only way how the creatures could come to possess the concept of objective truth. However, in some of his later papers it seems that Davidson puts the idea of triangulation to a somewhat different use; it serves to provide an alternative route to the conclusion that language is necessary for thought. Davidson seems to argue that in the absence of actually communicating with another creature, one could not come by a determinate object of thought:

It takes two points of view to give a location to the cause of a thought, and thus to define its content. We may think of it as a form of triangulation: each of two people is reacting differentially to sensory stimuli streaming in from a certain direction. Projecting the incoming lines outward, the common cause is at their intersection. If the two people now note each others' reactions (in the case of language, verbal reactions), each can correlate these observed reactions with his or her stimuli from the world. A common cause has been determined. The triangle which gives content to thought and speech



is complete. But it takes two to triangulate. (Davidson 2001 [1991], 212-13)

What we seem to be getting in this last passage is a fantastically strong claim: there is no thought, no cognitive content, outside of an *actual* communication with another speaker. By comparison, the previous arguments involving the concepts of truth and objectivity seemed to be supporting a weaker thesis that such concepts only arise in the context of a communication.

Davidson's arguments against *de re* animal thought are bound to be unsound, since they end up ruling out not just the possibility of animal thought, but also of solitary human thought. On the latter point, one wonders why it should be impossible to triangulate with oneself, so to speak – say, by noticing gradual changes in the world and checking on the external objects from different points of view. It is pretty clear that Davidson's absurd view is a consequence of an impossibly demanding theory of thought which sees thought and belief as constitutively dependent on language. However, such a high-minded conception of thought seems especially hopeless especially in view of the situation in behavioral sciences of the last few decades. These disciplines have witnessed a "cognitive turn," which means that it has become customary to ascribe rather sophisticated cognitive capacities to languageless creatures. Thus, in the thriving field of cognitive ethology, we find research programs that start from the assumption that animals have beliefs and desires and act on them. However, a similar approach is taken by contemporary developmental psychologists who ascribe to prelinguistic infants a "theory of the mind." And the important fact is that these disciplines get integrated in a single, broadly Darwinian, naturalistic-cognitivist paradigm. A philosophical theory that contravenes these developments looks like a relic from a prescientific era.

I take it that Professor Searle sees Davidson's failure to grant cognitive lives to animals other than humans as a *reductio ad absurdum* of his whole philosophical project. Searle's easy accommodation of non-human thinkers should then be seen as evidence of a superiority of the reverse methodology, which he systematically developed in an earlier book, *Intentionality* (1983). According to this methodology, the mind has a priority over language:

From an evolutionary point of view, just as there is an order of priority in the development of other biological processes, so there is an order of priority in the development of Intentional phenomena.

In this development, language and meaning, at least in the sense in which humans have language and meaning, comes very late. Many species other than humans have sensory perception and intentional action, and several species, certainly the primates, have beliefs, desires, and intentions, but very few species, perhaps only humans, have the peculiar but also biologically based form of Intentionality we associate with language and meaning. (Searle 1983, 160)

I think that Searle's developmental approach to intentionality can be exploited in response to Davidson's thesis discussed above that outside of triangulation, there is no way to fix the contents of thoughts. For this purpose, we should revisit Searle's idea that perception is a form of intentionality, and that animals are naturally attributed perceptual beliefs. Even granted, for the sake of an argument, that there are linguistically mediated forms of thought such that an interpreter needs to be involved in them, it is a natural consequence of Searle's evolutionary approach that perceptual representation is older in the order of phylogeny, so that its content must be determined independently of an interpreter. This sort of content gets determined in terms of what an animal can discriminate and how it is capable of using these discriminations in the ways it navigates through its environment.

Furthermore, Searle's developmental methodology makes it possible to preserve the rational core of Davidson's denial of animal thought, namely the idea that crucial kinds of thought entertained by humans are indeed unavailable to beasts that lack a language. For example, Searle argues that, without a language, animals cannot entertain metalinguistic thoughts (such as that "eat" is a transitive verb); they cannot think of institutional facts of which language is constitutive (such as that this piece of paper is a legal bill); they cannot represent to themselves facts so remote in space and time that they are unavailable without language (such as the facts that obtained in the past); and they cannot think logically complex facts, such as subjunctive facts; etc. And in a recent book, *Rationality in Action* (2001), Professor Searle draws further consequences from the fact that speechless animals cannot perform certain important speech acts, such as asserting. Due to this inability, they cannot have desire-independent reasons for action. Consequently, non-linguistic animals act only in order to satisfy some non-rational desire or other. If such acts as courage or loyalty involve desire-independent reasons, it follows that a non-linguistic animal cannot ever be courageous or loyal.

### 3

And yet I am going to conclude by suggesting that what we might need to do in the philosophy of animal minds is to move beyond both Davidson *and* Searle. Let me explain. I have been critiquing Davidson for his anti-naturalistic tendencies. Yet he was as most other recent philosophers indebted to Quine and wished that philosophy was respectful of, if not reducible to, sciences. We might be helped to understand better Davidson's point of view, if we turn to one of his late papers, "The Emergence of Thought" (1999). In it, he clearly accepts a developmental or evolutionary point of view, but he argues that there is a conceptual difficulty in describing transitions from one level of development to the next, if each of these levels is characterized in terms of different concepts:

In both the evolution of thought in the history of mankind, and the evolution of thought in an individual, there is a stage at which there is no thought followed by a subsequent stage at which there is thought. To describe the emergence of thought would be to describe the process which leads from the first to the second of these stages. What we lack is a satisfactory vocabulary for describing the intermediate steps. (Davidson 2001 [1999], 127)

What this passage seems to suggest is that Davidson does not wish to deny what today must be obvious to every scientifically educated person, namely that the world has developed from dead matter through mere sensation to thought and language. Rather, Davidson cautions that we do not have a conceptual wherewithal to describe the emergence of new levels. We can interpret this as a new version of his earlier argument against *de dicto* animal thought. It is compatible with what Davidson is saying that our hominid ancestors had cognitive lives in some sense, even prior to the emergence language. It is possible that prelinguistic infants think. And it is possible that members of other species think. It is just that we have no means of identifying the contents of thoughts other than sentences of some natural language or other. As with the earlier argument, this does not mean that non-linguistic creatures have no minds; it's just that we are not justified in granting thoughts under these circumstances.

Let us turn now to Professor Searle's theory to see whether it fares better when it comes to the problem of emergence of thought. We saw that, for Searle, there is a prelinguistic level of intentionality which

confers content onto language. The prelinguistic level of intentionality is supposed to be a natural feature of certain complex biological systems. This might be difficult to make sense of, but I shall leave this issue aside. The problem that I wish to point out is rather the opposite of the one we saw earlier in Davidson. Recall that Davidson had a trouble to make sense of thought *sans* language. This seems easily solved for Searle, for whom thought has a genealogical as well as logical priority over language. According to the theory proposed in *Intentionality*, utterances in a natural language get their meaning from prelinguistic intentions. The more complex the utterances, however, the more difficult it seems to accept that prelinguistic intentions could have complex propositional structures of sentences of a natural language. So while on Searle's account we can speak with no qualification of animals' thoughts, it seems puzzling that there could be prelinguistic intentions of the required complexity in adult humans to confer the required contents onto their speech. Interestingly, Professor Searle seems to concede that most forms of intentionality in mature humans are linguistic, which would seem like a concession to Davidson (cf. Searle 1991, 94). But he still insists that the meanings of language can be explained in terms of the intentionality of the mind. Where does the complexity of the latter come from?<sup>3</sup>

I announced in the beginning that I was going to suggest a way out, an alternative to both Davidson and Searle on animal thought. I can be only brief now. Davidson turned out to be a sort of eliminativist with respect to animal thought, while Searle is a realist. Both theories, however, seem to share the assumption that thought is inherently propositional. Davidson argued that thoughts inherit their propositional structure from a language. Searle maintains that this structure is conferred by prelinguistic intentions. I shall leave aside which of the two theories makes better sense of the adult human thought. However, what we see in current cognitive ethology and related disciplines is perhaps evidence of forms of thought that are not necessarily propositional in character. While there is a broad consensus as to the notion that nonhuman

---

<sup>3</sup> One suggestion, popularized by Jerry Fodor, is that the underlying structure is indeed propositional; but it does not come from a natural language. Instead, it comes from the so-called language of thought. Searle, however, emphatically rejects this proposal, as it is connected with the whole computational approach to intelligence that he demolished in his famous critique of artificial intelligence (cf. Searle 1980).

animals are thinkers, their thinking is perhaps better characterizable as an exercise in imagination; or in terms of achieving a certain goal, even though the process leading up to that goal cannot be expressed in terms of any explicit propositions.

*Institute of Philosophy*  
*The Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, v. v. i.*  
*Jilská 1*  
*110 00 Praha 1*  
*Czech Republic*  
*tomas\_hribek@hotmail.com*

## References

- ALLEN, C. – Bekoff, M. (1997): *Species of Mind*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- DARWIN, C. (1874). *The Descent of Man*. London: J. Murray.
- DAVIDSON, D. (1974): Thought and Talk. In: Davidson, D. (1984): *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 155-170.
- DAVIDSON, D. (1984): *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.
- DAVIDSON, D. (1985): Rational Animals. In: Davidson, D. (2001): *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 95-105.
- DAVIDSON, D. (1991): Three Varieties of Knowledge. In: Davidson, D. (2001): *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 205-220.
- DAVIDSON, D. (1999): The Emergence of Thought. In: Davidson, D. (2001): *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 123-134.
- DAVIDSON, D. (2001): *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SEARLE, J. (1980): Minds, Brains, and Programs. *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, vol. 3.
- SEARLE, J. (1983): *Intentionality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- SEARLE, J. (1992): *The Rediscovery of the Mind*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- SEARLE, J. (1991): Responses to Critics. In: Lepore, E. – Van Gulick, R. (eds.): *John Searle and His Critics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- SEARLE, J. (1994): Animal Minds. In: Searle, J. (2002): *Consciousness and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 61-76.
- SEARLE, J. (2002): *Consciousness and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- SEARLE, J. (2004): *Rationality in Action*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.