THINKING WITHOUT LANGUAGE.
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR ITS POSSIBILITY AND EXISTENCE

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Summary
The view is defended that the mere lack of language in a creature does not justify doubts about its capacity for genuine and complex thinking. Thinking is understood as a mental occurring activity that belongs to phenomenal consciousness. Specific kinds of thinking are characterized by active or passive attending to the contents present to the subject, by the thinking being goal-directed, guided by standards of rationality or other standards of adequacy, and finally by being a case of critical reflection upon one’s own thinking. It is argued that none of these properties of thinking introduce the necessity that the thinking subject has a language except for, probably, the last one. There is reason to believe that the capacity to critically reflect upon one’s own thought requires internal verbalization of the thoughts being criticized. The view that emerges is that we might share larger parts of our cognitive phenomenally conscious life with non-linguistic creatures than is commonly assumed.

1. Introduction

Is it possible to think without language? The question is ambiguous. It might be read like this:

(Q1) Is it possible for a creature without a language to think? (Can non-linguistic creatures think?)

While lying awake on the floor, a dog’s changing facial expression and its eye movements may make it appear obvious that something is going on

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‘in its mind’. The dog seems to think. But does it think and if so, in what sense? Or imagine a small child not yet capable of using a language. The child runs towards an object, suddenly encounters an obstacle, and stops. She looks around as if searching for alternative approaches. She hesitates, then runs around the table avoiding the obstacle, and finally reaches the desired object. Does the child think? In both cases the answer is, in my view, quite clearly positive. Non-linguistic creatures (small children and higher animals) are capable of thinking. In what follows, I will motivate this view. I will use ‘thinking’ in that context to designate occurrent mental processes. In thinking, certain contents are phenomenally present to the thinking subject. I take phenomenal presence of contents as a substantial common feature of all cases of occurrent thinking. I presuppose in what follows that there is something it is like to think, and that in thinking, certain contents are present to the thinking subject.

The question of whether or not it is possible to think without language has a second, quite different reading:

(Q2) Is it possible to think without thereby using a language?

In many cases we use language in our thinking even though we do not speak aloud. We then internally verbalize our thoughts. In verbalized thinking, thoughts are developed using specific sentences. One might wonder what exactly internal verbalization consists in and how its specific phenomenology may be adequately described. One might suspect that internal verbalization has something to do with auditory imagination. According to a simple proposal, internal verbalization is nothing but imagining hearing sentences with understanding. But a little reflection shows that this is not right. One may imagine hearing a sentence with understanding and yet not thereby use the sentence to internally express one’s thought. Internal use of language in thought is different from imagining someone talking, and it is different from imagining hearing a voice where the author is underdetermined in imagination.

Also, internal verbalization is not non-verbal thinking plus auditory imagination of an utterance of sentences. Rather, the thought is developed in verbalized thinking by ‘internally producing sentences’. Maybe thinking is just like speaking without making noises. But what is it to speak without making noises? One might be tempted at this point to come back to the idea that thinking has something to do with auditory imagination, and one might propose that thinking in a verbalized way is imagining oneself