Christian Barth
Objectivity and the Language-Dependence of Thought; A Transcendental Defence of Universal Lingualism.
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Following Kant, philosophy's central question, according to Barth, is an anthropological one: what is special about humankind? Following Aristotle, the answer is 'reason'. But reason is discursive, entailing propositional as well as non-propositional thought. Does thought depend on language? If so, then language must be added to the demarcation features.

Relying on a transcendental form of conceptual analysis, Christian Barth defends a strong form of lingualism—the claim of the general dependence of thought on language—against the prevalent mentalist position. The mentalist position, defended by such philosophers as Chomsky, Fodor, and Pinker, is characterized by the view that language capacity depends on an innate language module, which is independent of central cognitive processing. Identifying the rise of mentalism with the decline of behaviorism and the increasing prominence of empirical methods in the study of cognitive psychology of non-linguistic animals and preverbal infants, Barth suggests that mentalism is underpinned by the view that the attribution of thought to non-linguistic creatures is the best explanation of empirical data.

Rather than questioning the empirical data, Barth argues that the best way to defend lingualism is on conceptual, a priori grounds. Turning the tables, one can argue that if the mentalist explanations of empirical data do not fit conceptual truths, then they are conceptually incoherent and invalid inferences to the best explanation. If, unlike mentalism, the lingualism position can be shown to be coherent and in-line with these conceptual truths, then this would furnish a prima facie justification of lingualism, shifting the burden of proof onto its opponent. In carrying out this program, Barth relies on Peter Strawson's notion of transcendental analysis to determine the conceptual truths that a satisfactory account of thought must satisfy, and to provide a conceivable language-based account of thought he relies both on arguments by Donald Davidson and on Robert Brandom's normative-inferential account of thinking-speaking.

Barth launches his conceptual investigation with preliminary clarifications of the concepts of thought, language, and dependency. Intentional thoughts are characterized by (a) referential purport, i.e., they are about something, (b) aspectual shape, i.e., they characterize something under some aspect, and (c) possible non-existence, i.e., the intentional object might not exist. Thought-contents have representational and inferential dimensions: representing objects as being so-and-so, representational facts can serve as premises in inferences. Distinguishing natural and abstract languages, Barth points out that the dependency question asks whether natural language is a prerequisite of thought. Barth argues for ontological rather than epistemological or methodological dependency—

natural language is a conceptually necessary (i.e. in all possible worlds) condition for thought because we cannot conceive of subjects possessing thought without them mastering a language.

In arguing for lingualism, Barth distinguishes conceptual analysis, which is concerned with analyzing concepts into constituent parts, from transcendental analysis, which concerns the a priori investigation of the conditions of the possibility of intentional thought. Unlike transcendental analysis, which results in synthetic a priori judgments, conceptual analysis of the application of concepts and linguistic intuitions is unenlightening and leads to a dialectical impasse. While we do often attribute thought to higher animals and pre-verbal infants, we might do it either analogically or on the presumption that non-linguistic thought is possible. Since we do have introspective access to thought and its core features such as intentionality and inferential significance, the solution is to engage in a transcendental analysis by asking if it is conceivable that a non-linguistic being can have mental states with such properties. Exploring the limits of conceivability is not exploring the limits of imagination or logical coherence; it is exploring the intelligibility of a given account of the acquisition and possession of the capacity for thought.

Barth begins his transcendental investigation with a presentation of Davidson's arguments, focusing specifically on the 'Belief-Argument'. Davidson reasons that the capacity to be surprised is a necessary and sufficient condition of thought because it requires recognition of a contrast between the falsity of what one believed and the truth of what one came to believe. The concept of truth, however, requires the notion of a mind-independent world—a notion that can arise through communication of subjects about the shared objects in their environment. The space for error emerges in the context of triangulation, requiring two subjects and an object. Charging Davidson with empirical speculation, critics argue that communication is only a sufficient but not a necessary condition for acquiring the concept of truth, that it can be acquired through noting similarities and differences in the environment, and that possession of belief requires only an implicit, non-reflective grasp of the distinction between truth and falsity. Conceding some weaknesses, Barth proposes modifications, supporting each premise with independent arguments.

The 'Argument from Truth' claims that the grasp of propositional thought requires the grasp that the contents can be (objectively) true or false. The 'Argument from Comparison' states that we can conceive of a phylogenetic acquisition of such a grasp only in terms of a subject who compares his (pre-conceptual) proto-thoughts with their referents, recognizing concordances and divergences. The problem is that since the subject lacks perceptually unmediated access to the world he must compare his proto-thoughts with his other 'truth–defining or privileged' proto-thoughts, but this means that an isolated subject can't grasp the mind-independent truth on the pain of contradiction. Therefore, the 'Argument from the Second Subject' claims that the grasp of mind-independent truth requires the comparison of subject's proto-thoughts with the behaviorally manifested privileged proto-thought of another subject, eventually leading to the recognition that all proto-thoughts can be false and that their truth is attitude-

independent.

Barth argues that even the modified version of Davidson's argument is open to serious objections. The 'Objection from Thought' suggests that the argument requires that subjects acquire thoughts as items attributable from a third-person point of view in the absence of prior conceptual capacity. But this is impossible: attributing thoughts to others will either require conceptual capacity to theorize about the unobservable inner states of the other subjects, presupposing capacity for thought, or involve implicit attribution, which is hard to reconcile with the fact that such attribution involves a grasp of an unobservable, inner state. The 'Objection from Objectivity' doubts that the communal setting promoted by the 'Argument from the Second Subject' can lead to the grasp of objective rather than simply intersubjective truth.

Barth dedicates the second half of his book to expounding, defending, and eventually using Brandom's pragmatic-normative-inferential account of speaking-thinking to respond to these objections and reinforce the account of the language-based acquisition of thought. Arguing that the first objection is based on the mistaken standard assumption that the bearers of thought content are inner natural states, Barth employs Brandom's account of belief as a scorekeeping practice to argue that the bearers of thought content should be viewed as instituted and observationally available normative statuses, which can be implicitly grasped. Relying on the same scorekeeping account, he responds to the second criticism by outlining a three-step process in which subjects first attribute truth-defining authority to each other but not themselves; then, recognizing this fact, attribute conditional truth-defining authority to themselves and each other; and, finally, recognizing that both can be wrong, attribute the truth-defining authority to objective, attitude-independent contents.

Stylistically, this book can be verbose and repetitive—reading it feels sometimes like talking with a mouth full of marbles. But it has more serious problems. First, Barth starts with the ambitious aim of defending lingualism by putting in doubt the conceptual coherence of mentalism, but he never even outlines the mentalist position, let alone demonstrates its inability to fit conceptual truths. Paradoxically, although he does not view his work as a knock-down argument against mentalism, he suggests that this is the only possible way of conceiving the acquisition of thought. This approach, resembling the Paley's 'Watch Argument' for the existence of God, falls prey to the 'One Game in Town' fallacy. Second, in his attempt to improve on Davidson's 'Belief-Argument', Barth helps himself to the mysterious proto-thoughts that seem to 'proto-refer' and have aspectual shape but are neither conceptual nor objective—he never explains their genealogy or relation to language or mental states.

Finally, Barth's reading of Davidson raises doubts: he argues that an isolated subject lacks objective thought because, lacking perceptually unmediated access to the world, he must compare his proto-thoughts to his other privileged-proto thoughts. Clearly, however, the introduction of another individual will make little difference, since the subject's perception of the other's responses will remain equally mediated. Davidson's problem was normative, i.e., an isolated individual cannot have objective

rules because any way of acting can be made to accord with a rule and be considered correct. Still, the problem remains: it is unclear why in the context of triangulation the frustrations caused by the 'independent will' of the second subject are any more resilient to ad hoc interpretations than the ones caused by the natural environment of an isolated subject. Ultimately, given the assumption of proto-thoughts, even if the argument were correct, it seems unclear why this would make thought depend on language rather than make both depend on social interaction.

Nevertheless, although falling short of its goals, this book makes an insightful use of Strawson's transcendental analysis to address an important issue, presenting a novel application of Brandom's scorekeeping practice to the lingualism/mentalism debate.

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