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WORDS IN THOUGHT

by

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1. Man is a thinking being; more than anything else, this feature sets apart this species of hairless apes from the rest of the world’s inhabitants.

It may be argued, however, that we often use the verb to think in describing what some of the other higher animals do. “The dog thinks that I am his master”, “The cat thinks that the mouse is still in the hole”, etc. Since there is no reason to object that such locutions involve a misuse of the language, and since what we normally say determines the meaning of our words, the conclusion is inevitable: in some sense of the verb, at least, some animals too can think.

What is that sense and, on the other hand, what are the senses of the word which exclusively apply to humans, on the basis of which the definition of man as a thinking being still can be maintained?

The first suspicious feature that meets the eye in the examples just mentioned is the following: in these and similar cases what the animal is supposed to think involves an error, or the possibility of error, at least according to the speaker’s estimate: I am not the dog’s master, and the mouse might not be in the hole. Thus, it seems, this kind of thinking is contrasted with knowing, and, of course, animals can know many things.

We often apply the verb to think to people, too, in the same sense. Somebody is about to cross a rickety bridge unconcerned. “He thinks it won’t collapse” we say. And this may be true, even if the walker pays no attention to the bridge, has no conscious thoughts about it. Similarly, the prankster who has unscrewed the legs of my chair might say, as I am about to sit down: “He thinks it’ll support him”. The point here is precisely the lack of any suspicion or reflection on my part: since I have not noticed anything untoward, but go ahead unconcerned, I may be said to think that the chair will support me.

Now could it be said with equal ease in these situations that, for example, the cat concluded that the mouse was still in the hole or that the walker assumed that the bridge would support him, or that I hoped that the chair would not collapse? Certainly not, unless there is some reason to think that the cat, as it were, weighed the evidence, and that the walker and I noticed the weakness of those implements, but decided, on the basis of some considerations, to risk it anyway. Notice, however, that at this point the similarity between man and beast breaks down: cats, unlike people, cannot weigh evidence, consider reasons, make decisions, nurture hopes, and so forth. And the reason is simple: these actions and states imply mental events, of which their subject is conscious, in other words, they involve having thoughts. Indeed, whereas, as we saw, there is no difficulty in saying that the cat, for example, thought that the mouse was in the hole, one would not say, without raising some eyebrows, that the cat had the thought that the mouse was in the hole, or that such a thought has occurred to the cat.

What entitles us to say that cats and dogs know many things, or that they think this or that in the restricted sense just explained? The observation of what they do, is the obvious answer—of their behavior, in a more pompous parlance. For neither knowing, nor being mistaken, nor thinking in the corresponding sense, need to involve anything beyond that in either man or beast.
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But how do we know that man, but not the beast, also has thoughts, that is to say, that he is capable of a kind of activity which is not identical with overt behavior, and which need not even manifest itself in what he does? "Well, he can tell me what he thought, he can reveal in this way what went on in his mind." This, too, is an obvious answer, and the correct one at that. For, notice, what he says about his thoughts can be true or false, no less than what he says about other things. Thus the things which make what he says true or false in the first case are no less "real" than the things which make what he says true or false in the second. As one could not lie about dogs and cats if there were no dogs and cats, one could not lie about thoughts if thoughts did not exist. If Jim says, "I believe that Joe is innocent", then what he says can be wrong in two independent ways: either because Joe is guilty, or because Jim thinks he is. In the former case he is mistaken, in the second he is lying.

Thus there is a kind of thinking which is an exclusive prerogative of human beings. For if you say that, maybe, dogs, cats and chimpanzees also have conscious thoughts, my answer is that there is no reason to think so, and so long as they are unable to tell us what they think, there cannot be such a reason. And when I say "tell" I mean tell, i.e. convey to us, with set purpose and by the use of mutually comprehensible media, what they want us to come to believe about their thoughts as distinct from having those thoughts. And this is a tall order—even for Washoe and Co.2

Thus, to conclude with Descartes, "the word is the sole sign and the only certain mark of the presence of thought hidden and wrapped up in the body".3 We know that man is a thinking being because he can talk, and tell us what he thinks.

2. It is important to reflect upon the nature of the inference expressed in the last sentence. The because there marks an epistemological link, not a causal one. We know that the barn is on fire because of the smoke coming out. This does not mean, however, that the smoke causes the fire. In a similar way, although our knowledge that man thinks depends upon his ability to talk, it does not follow at all that his ability to think presupposes, or is a function of, his ability to talk. In other words, even though it is impossible for us to discover that a certain species of living beings have thoughts if they cannot talk, it is perfectly conceivable that there may be beings that can think without being able to talk. Unless, of course, the very ability to think, in the sense of having thoughts presupposes the possession of a language.

This last relation is often taken for granted by many philosophers, psychologists and linguists. Some of them even go as far as to assert that thinking is actually nothing but talking, albeit to oneself, silently. The classic passage making this claim is Plato's in Theaetetus:

Socr. ...And do you accept my description of the process of thinking?

Theaet. How do you describe it?

Socr. As a discourse that the mind carries on with itself about any subject it is considering. You must take this explanation as coming from an ignoramus; but I have a notion that, when the mind is thinking, it is simply talking to itself, asking questions and answering them... So I should describe thinking as a discourse, and judgement as a statement pronounced, not aloud to someone else, but silently to oneself.4
Plato, incidentally, is less sanguine about this view (...ignoramus...) than some of its latter-day sponsors. Gilbert Ryle echoes Plato in saying that “much of our ordinary thinking is conducted in internal monologues or silent soliloquy, usually accompanied by an internal cinematograph-show of visual imagery,” and then goes on to explain the origin of such an activity as follows:

This trick of talking to oneself in silence is acquired neither quickly nor without effort; and it is a necessary condition of our acquiring it that we should have previously learned to talk intelligently aloud and have heard and understood other people doing so. Keeping our thoughts to ourselves is a sophisticated accomplishment.5

Speech, we used to think, is the expression of thought. Now Professor Ryle tells us that it is rather thought which is the suppression of speech... And he is by no means alone. Wittgenstein, too, wonders about the possibility of deaf-mutes’ think­ing,6 and he says explicitly: “When I think in language, there aren’t ‘meanings' going through my mind in addition to the verbal expression: the language is the vehi­cle of thought.”7 It would follow, then, that in this case we think in a natural lan­guage, English, German or Chinese... At which point one might wonder in what understanding something said in a foreign tongue must be: repeating it in that lan­guage, translating or paraphrasing it in our own or what?

The contrary tradition, according to which thought does not presuppose, but is expressed in speech, also originates in Greek philosophy. Here is a typical expres­sion of Aristotle’s opinion.

Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images.8

The Aristotelian tradition has prevailed in the Middle Ages, and the Rationalists, following Descartes, toe the same line. The very influential Port Royal Grammar (Grammaire General et Raisonnee) insists that there is no similarity between the de­vices of language and the thoughts they are used to express.9

Although there are some indications of reverting to the Platonic tradition in the Empiricists’ writings (in Hobbes and Berkeley, for instance), its real revival is due to the rise of behavioristic tendencies in the last hundred years. Although thought, in its very nature, is a private occurrence, by viewing it as “suppressed” speech, one does not appear at least to have trespassed too far into the forbidden preserve of the mental.

I shall argue below that the Platonic view, according to which thinking essen­tially or typically is talking to oneself silently, is mistaken. This conclusion does not exclude, however, some weaker claims, of which I mention here two. The first one maintains that although the process of thinking is not the same as talking to oneself silently, nevertheless it essentially or typically involves the use of words, phrases or sentences. The difference between the original Platonic theory and this watered down version can be made clear by considering such word-games as Scrabble, cross-word-puzzles, etc.: in playing them one uses words without saying any­thing. I shall claim that this version too is mistaken: although words may occur in thinking, their role is neither essential nor universal.
Finally, some contemporary philosophers maintain that the acquisition of a natural language is a necessary condition for having conceptual thoughts. This claim is based on the view that having a concept is nothing but knowing how to use a certain word. Again I disagree, but am willing to grant that the development and the refinement of our conceptual equipment is indeed greatly influenced by the language(s) we learn.

3. We have restricted the sense of thinking that concerns us here to conscious thought. Our thoughts are some of the things of which we are or can become conscious. We are also conscious of sensations, feelings, emotions, moods, and so forth, and, of course, the play of our imaginations. These things, pace Descartes, are not thoughts per se. Having a headache is not having a thought—and the man on the rack may be unable to think precisely because of the excruciating pain he suffers. Similarly, daydreaming is not thinking, but an escape from it, and the lascivious play of St. Anthony’s imagination did not add to, but rather interfered with, his holy meditations.

What, then, are thoughts, and what is thinking? The word thought is normally used to denote the object of somebody’s mental acts (e.g., what one realizes, concludes, decides, etc.), or mental states (e.g., what one believes, suspects, intends, etc.). These two groups differ in an important respect: a mental act occurs in a given moment, but a mental state lasts for a period of time. “When did you realize that p?” and “For how long did you believe that q?” we ask, and not the other way around. Similarly, it makes sense to say of a person that he still intends to do something, but not that he still decides to do it. In a mental act a thought is formed or conceived, in a mental state it is held and entertained. Indeed, we speak of beliefs, for instance, as if they were children: we conceive, nurture and embrace them, hold them for a while, and if found misbegotten, abandon them or give them up. Moreover, whereas we are normally conscious of our mental acts, this is not true of our mental states. Their objects are ordinarily not in the foreground of our consciousness, yet they remain, as it were, at our beck and call: one can become conscious of them at will. Normally, again, people are able to say, when asked, what they believe, whom they suspect, and what they intend to do. We use the word thought in these senses when we offer “a penny for your thoughts” or when we say that, e.g., the Little Red Book contains Chairman Mao’s thoughts.

What one thinks, the thought, is conceived or entertained by the thinker: “Joe thinks (i.e. believes, suspects, etc.) that p.” “Then I thought (i.e. assumed, realized, concluded, etc.) that p.” The verb-object of think in these contexts is a nominalized sentence, in most cases a that-clause, which denotes the thought in question. Since there is a nearly perfect correspondence between the objects of mental acts and states on the one hand, and of speech acts on the other, i.e. between what one can think and what one can say, philosophers commonly refer to these common objects, usually expressed in that-clauses, as propositions. Thoughts, therefore, that can be expressed in speech are aptly called propositional thoughts.

The verb to think used to attribute such thoughts to a person hardly admits progressive tenses: I am thinking that p or He was thinking that p are at best substandard sentences. There is, however, another context in which that verb is used progressively: What are you thinking about? and Last night I was thinking about your theory for more than an hour, and so forth. In these cases the thinking involved constitutes an activity that goes on in time, and can be pursued at will. Notice, the question What are you doing? may be answered by I am thinking about Angola but not by I think that we should not get involved in Angola. Similarly, whereas one might say of a man sound asleep that he thinks that Angola is not worth the effort,
one could not say of him, while still asleep, that he is thinking about that place.

Nevertheless the notion of thinking about involves the notion of thinking that. In order to show this relation, I propose to consider a related couple of concepts, namely talking about something and saying something. Quite obviously, talking about something is a process that goes on in time, an activity in which a person may be engaged for a while. Now what does a person do when he is talking about a certain topic? Well, he says a few things about it. I cannot be talking about Angola, or anything else, without performing such speech acts as stating and suggesting, arguing and concluding, guessing and predicting, accusing, blaming, condemning, and so forth. And what about thinking about Angola? The situation is analogous. I cannot be engaged in thinking about it without entertaining some thoughts (mainly of the propositional sort) about Angola and related matters. I may recall the facts, look for implications, realize connections, consider some possibilities, wonder about the consequences, decide to read more about the background, and so on. It would be rather peculiar indeed, if I were to assert that I was just thinking about Angola, and yet, when asked what I thought about it, could not answer a thing. Plato was right part of the way: thinking is like talking, reasoning is like arguing; they show a similarity of structure. This, however, does not require identity. A word expressed in Morse code retains some of its structure; yet saying a word does not consist in uttering dots and dashes. What we think is normally expressed in words and sentences; but it does not follow that we think in words and sentences.

I do not claim that all thought is propositional. The painter may think intensely while staring at his canvas, the composer while running his fingers over the keyboard, the chess-player while imagining the board two moves ahead. They “see” lines, “hear” music, envisage a new setup, without being able to articulate in words, even if they wanted to, what exactly they thought. But this kind of thinking seems to be the exception rather than the rule. For otherwise the Platonic temptation to view thought in general as an inner monologue would not have the lure it generally has.

Having made the necessary distinctions and qualifications, my first task is to show that thinking in the propositional sense cannot consist in saying something internally, and consequently that thinking about something cannot be conceived of in terms of talking to oneself silently.

4. Saying something is a specifically human act (actus humanus, not merely actus hominis), and as such, is subject to the will. This philosophical claim means that the agent performing a speech act must be aware of what he is doing and must intend to do it. This is not the case with all the actions a man can do. We are not aware of our digesting of food, and we do not intend our heartbeat. Such actions, in fact, are never subject to the will. Some others, such as kicking somebody or breaking the window may or may not be. That they often are shown by the fact that, first, they can be performed intentionally, deliberately, on purpose, and so forth; second, that the agent can have reasons for performing them; and third, that he may be held responsible for having performed them. There are, finally, kinds of actions that by their very nature must be voluntary, i.e. subject to the will: e.g. robbing the bank, murdering the guard, and so forth. One can break the window, but not rob the bank accidentally; one can kill, but not murder somebody, unintentionally. Then it is clear that saying something belongs to this last category: one cannot state, promise or order something, warn, accuse or condemn somebody unintentionally either: the speaker must know what he is saying and must intend to say it.

This claim is not refuted by the fact that often the speaker does not “fully” know what he is saying, or intend all the implications. Granted, one may betray a
secret unwittingly, or identify somebody unintentionally (say, by addressing him, using his true name, in front of the detective), but even in these cases the speaker does intend to perform some speech-act or other: the “traitor” may just want to make an innocent remark, and the “identifier” just offer a friendly greeting. Such “double effects” are by no means peculiar to speech-situations. The child, by eating the candy, may poison himself, and the soldier, by opening the door, may set off the booby-trap. They intend the one thing, not the other.

If, therefore, thinking were talking to oneself, albeit silently, then it would follow that all thoughts were intentional, i.e. subject to the will, since, according to the theory, conceiving a thought is saying something, albeit to oneself. And this is clearly false. It is false not only because of the obvious fact that thoughts often emerge (“crop up”, “strike us” or “dawn upon us”) unasked for, and often keep bothering us to the point of obsession, but because of a deeper and more general reason.

In saying that a certain act (e.g. smashing the window) was done intentionally, we do not merely mean that the agent knew what he was doing, but also that he could have done otherwise (if he wanted to). Now, whereas it is certainly true that in thinking what I think I am aware of what I think, more often than not it is nonsensical to say that I could do otherwise (if I wanted to). Granted, there are certain forms of thought, such as decisions, assumptions and the like, that are indeed subject to the will, i.e. the agent is free to assume, or decide to do, something or other. There are, however, other forms of thought which by their very nature preclude such freedom. Think of noticing a similarity, realizing a connection, understanding a problem, discovering a solution, seeing an implication, recognizing a friend, and so forth. In what sense can these acts be intentional, free, or subject to the will? Does it make sense to say: “I suddenly saw the solution of the puzzle, but I could have done otherwise” or “Then I decided to realize the connection between the two aspects”? How unlike it is with saying: there is nothing wrong with such assertions as “I told him the solution but I could have done otherwise” and “Then I decided to state the connection between the two aspects”.

Consequently, if the Platonic theory were true, then it would follow that in thinking we “say” things to ourselves involuntarily, unintentionally, in such a way that is, that we could not do otherwise. Moreover, as the previous argument about “unwelcome” thoughts shows, very often, as it were, we could not shut up to ourselves... We know, of course, that some people are “compulsive” talkers, cannot indeed shut up. But this is a pathological condition, compulsive behavior, or simply lack of self-control. No such explanation is applicable to normal thinkers.

To sum up: talking, saying things, are voluntary actions. Having certain common types of thoughts cannot be voluntary. Consequently thinking in general cannot be talking to oneself silently or aloud.

5. I just said that the speaker must intend what he is doing, must “mean” what he says. What does such an intention actually consist of? Well, it depends on the type of speech act he performs. In stating for instance that he was born in Ashtabula, Ohio, the speaker normally intends his audience to believe, through the recognition of his intention in saying those words, that he was born in Ashtabula, Ohio; in ordering someone to leave the room, he normally intends (via the same kind of recognition) the hearer to leave the room; in promising something he intends (in the same way) to put himself under a specific obligation; and so forth. In other words, he intends to be understood, not merely as to the content of his utterance, but also as to its illocutionary force.

In the light of this, consider mental acts against the background of the Platonic
hypothesis, namely, that thinking is talking to oneself silently, and having a thought is saying something to oneself. Quite obviously the result is absurd, and in this case, absurd with respect to any kind of mental act. For, to begin with the first aspect, how can I intend to be understood by myself in saying something to myself, when the very act of saying something presupposes that I understand what I am saying? Or, if I do not understand what I am saying, then what is the point of saying it to myself?

The second aspect leads to an equal absurdity. Consider such mental acts as coming to suspect, or coming to realize, something or other. If, for instance, my realization that I am the case consisted in my saying to myself that I am, then I could not possibly intend myself to come to believe that I am a result of saying to myself that I am, since in saying that I would already have realized that I am. To put it simply: what is the point of telling myself something which I know to be the case in the very act of telling? Or, to make it worse, what is the point of telling myself something which I have to know (if I am sincere) to be able to tell at all?

Then consider a mental act of another kind, a decision for instance. I just decided to go to Paris next summer. What did I say to myself? “I’ll go to Paris”? But then, what makes this inner speech-act into the carrier of a decision rather than of a simple forecast, guess, or—to make it worse again—rather than its being just a sentence mentally rehearsed? “Well, you must intend it as a decision”. But how can I accomplish that in talking to myself? By saying, perhaps, “I decide to go to Paris”... This won’t do, however, since this sentence is ungrammatical: except for the context of reporting a habit (e.g. “I usually decide to...”), the verb-phrase decide to cannot be used in the first person singular/present tense. I can tell you what I decided to do, but the very grammar of the verb prevents me from making a decision by its use. For the same reason, such verbs as realize, find out, discover, and so forth, which are used to report the occurrence of some mental acts, cannot be employed in the very performance of those acts. It appears, therefore, that one cannot specify the form of one’s thoughts by using verbal means. On the contrary, the principal means of marking the form of one’s speech-acts is the use of the appropriate “performative” verbs (e.g. state, predict, promise, order, apologize, etc.). This asymmetry alone is sufficient to show that thinking cannot be conceived of as talking to oneself silently.

Thus far we have considered the Platonic hypothesis in its full-blooded version, according to which having a thought consists in saying something to oneself in the strong sense of the word, i.e., in performing a speech-act. The following arguments will demonstrate that even the watered-down version of the theory, which claims that at least the use of words is essential to propositional thought, is also untenable.

The freedom we enjoy in speech is not restricted to the mere option of talk versus silence. Even if we have decided to say something, further choices await us before we open our mouths: we have to decide, consciously or by mere routine, how to say what we have to say, i.e., in what language, style, manner, etc. We talk differently to adults and children, in the classroom, court of law, pub, or one’s own home. In all of these cases one takes into consideration the audience’s knowledge, standing, circumstances, presuppositions, and what not. For these reasons people often are not satisfied by merely being told what somebody has said, but they also want to know the exact words the speaker used. Accordingly, we have two distinct devices to reproduce what people said, namely the indirect and the direct quotation. I might say, for instance “All right, you told me that he had asked you to leave the premises, but I want to know what exactly did he say word by word.” And such a request makes sense with respect to any kind of speech-act.
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Now compare this situation with such mental acts as realizations, recognitions, decisions and regrets. Suppose I tell you that last night I suddenly realized that it must have been Jones, the janitor, who opened my letters in the office. Would it make sense for you to ask for the exact words of my realizing this? And would it be possible for me to answer? Which of the following sentences “crossed my mind” in the act: “He must have done it”, “It was done by Jones”, “The janitor did it”, or what? Well, suppose I indeed “said to myself” (perhaps even aloud) “It was him”. What makes this into a realization, and the realization of that particular thing? Surely it is not enough if that sentence merely crossed my mind. “No, you must have meant it” you say. But this would make it into an intentional act, which a realization is not. Then, perhaps, it was as if I heard somebody telling me “It was him”. We indeed say things like “a little voice told me...”. But this would be the description of a hunch rather than of a realization. For one thing, did I believe the “little voice?” We feel that we are, once more, in the domain of the absurd—or the metaphorical.

I do not deny, of course, that that sentence, or some other, may have cropped up in my imagination, or may even have been (subvocally or vocally) articulated by me, in making that realization. I may have said to myself “But of course!” or “How stupid of me not to have thought of that!” or what have you. Most of us, indeed, “think aloud” in unguarded moments, or even gesticulate and make faces. We must not forget that words are the natural means of expressing thoughts, so it is no wonder that thoughts and words are so closely associated that the occurrence of the former tends to evoke the latter. Some people cannot hum without beating the rhythm with hand or foot. So, maybe, some people cannot think without words crossing their minds. Nevertheless humming is not thinking, and thinking is not imagining, or producing words, gestures and the like.

The same thing applies, incidentally, to imagination in general, to Ryle’s “cinematograph-show”: images, too, may accompany thinking. In thinking about the law, one may visualize dusty tomes, or a court-room; in thinking about a mathematical problem one may see beads, or numerals on the blackboard. This does not mean, however, that such imaginings are essential to thinking about these things.

Suppose that my realization that it was the janitor who had opened my letters, was indeed couched in the words “He must have done it”. Then the problem arises, how come that the word he (mentally pronounced or heard) meant the janitor. In normal speech we select referring devices (names, pronouns, definite descriptions, together with accompanying gestures, etc.) which, given the physical setup of the situation and the course of the preceding conversation, enable the audience to understand whom we have in mind. In doing so, moreover, the speaker has to keep the particular audience in mind: one would not rely on pointing, for instance, in talking to a blind man, or the use of a nickname in front of an audience which is not supposed to be familiar with it. The encoding of the reference, therefore, is suitable or not given those circumstances and that audience. And this, of course, is the source of possible mistakes: the speaker may misjudge the situation, the hearer’s position, knowledge, condition, etc. Correspondingly, even an objectively adequate reference may misfire due to inattention, mishearing, or mistaken assumptions on the part of the audience; that is to say, mistakes can occur on the “decoding” end too. This feature, i.e. the possibility of mistakes on both ends, are characteristic and essential to any use of a communicating device.

Yet no such mistakes are possible in thought, in the alleged “silent conversation with myself”. Who is the audience I have to consider in picking the suitable medium? Myself, of course. Is there, then, any possibility of selecting a word, a phrase,
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an image, or what have you, which might be opaque, incomprehensible or misleading to me? Or, on the receiving end, can I fail to gather the identity of the thing or person I am thinking about from the media thus provided? Of course not. But then there are no media and no reference. What on earth, indeed, would be the point of encoding a message to myself, to be decoded—instantly and infallibly, mind you—by myself again?

Thus whereas in talking about the janitor I may have to use such phrases as he, that man, Jones or the janitor in order to make you understand whom I have in mind, in thinking about him I do not need any (subvocal) words, (imagined) gestures or what not, to determine, for myself, whom I have in mind. For, let it be the case that in making that realization I indeed said to myself “He must have done it”, silently, or even aloud. Then, if you like, the he referred to that man. But why? Because I had him in mind in saying that and for no other reason. But then my having him in mind cannot possibly consist in using he or any other phrase. It makes sense to say that I talked about that man in terms of his being the janitor, also that I referred to him by the words the janitor; it also makes sense to say that I thought about him in terms of his being the janitor—but it is nonsense to say that in my thought I referred to him by the words the janitor.15

8. A similar contrast between speech and thought arises in connection with ambiguous sentences, whether or not the ambiguity is due to semantic or syntactic factors. If I tell you that I am going to the bank, you will understand what I said this way ( ... money ... ) or that ( ... river ... ) from the circumstances—if you can decide at all. As to myself, I may “mean” it one way or the other. Now what does it mean to “mean” it, or understand it, in one particular way? Well, as to the first, it depends on what I intend you to come to believe, and—if I am honest—on what I really intend to do: going to the First National or going to the riverbank. As to the second, it depends upon what you take my words to mean, and—if you think I am telling the truth—on what you come to think about my intentions. Now is it in the least believable that these mental acts (i.e. my decision to go to the river, my intention to tell you the truth, or to lie, your understanding of what I said, or your doubts about its truth, and so forth) are all cast in unambiguous sentences? In sentences that is, in which the work bank is replaced, or is accompanied by, an unambiguous paraphrase?

Syntactical ambiguities raise the same problems. Think, for instance, of the mental flip-flop involved in the understanding of Mary had a little lamb—and Jane a little pork. Now how come that my thought that Mary had (i.e. ate) a little lamb is not ambiguous? Or can one say “I thought ‘Mary had a little lamb’ and I meant it in the sense of eating?”

Then there are metaphors, allusions, ironic remarks, and so forth. “It was a very nice thing to do” I tell you, meaning that it was an awful thing to do. Is it possible to think that it was an awful thing to do in saying to oneself “It was a very nice thing to do”? “He must have hit the ceiling, I think.” Can I ever be in doubt about what I just thought in this case? Yet the sentence He must have hit the ceiling is ambiguous.

To sum up. The use of language involves all sorts of ambiguities. It is up to the speaker, therefore, to prevent, and up to the listener, to avoid, misunderstandings due to this source. In doing this both participants have to rely on the circumstances. Now if thought consisted in the use of language, then, first, there could be, and often would be, ambiguous thoughts (in the relevant sense of ambiguity), second, the thinker would frequently face the task of disambiguating (i.e. finding the correct “reading” for) his thoughts and, third, he would have to rely on circumstantial clues
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in doing so. I submit that all these consequences are absurd.

9. People are not infallible, commit errors in many things they do, and speech is no exception. They make mistakes of grammar, use the wrong word, commit malapropisms and various slips of the tongue. Thus it often happens that they do not in fact say what they wanted to say, or even what they think they are saying. Of course both the audience and the speaker may detect such errors, and then the speaker may come to correct himself. The audience, too, is liable to errors of its own. One may mishear the speaker, misunderstand him, and so forth. Errors can occur on both ends of the speaker-hearer relation.

This possibility casts a new pall on the Platonic theory, whether it be conceived actively, as talking to oneself, or passively, as hearing “voices” in the imagination. For, to take the first alternative, it would allow situations in which the speaker could be mistaken about what he actually thought. He might say things like “I thought I thought that $p$, but then I realized that in fact I thought that $q$, so I corrected myself” or “I wanted to think that $p$, but in fact I thought that $q$” and so forth. I forego the pleasure of pointing out the absurdities in such reports.

The second alternative, the passive one, fares no better. It leads to the possibility of misunderstanding, or failing to understand, one’s own thoughts. “I am not sure what I thought—the thinker could report—it may be understood as $p$ or as $q$—as if trying to interpret an oracle.

10. Finally, having given the main arguments showing the implausibility, and the falsity, of the Platonic view, I sketch a few additional considerations to reinforce this conclusion.

Although we often ask the foreigner “In what language do you think?” we do not take this question so seriously as to countenance such answers as “I think in English now, but in bad English. I misuse words in my thoughts, I commit grammatical errors, and so forth. Moreover, owing to this handicap, I think rather slowly and in primitive sentences”. I suppose “thinking in English” means nothing more than having the facility of expressing oneself in English directly without first formulating what one wants to say in another language, and then translating by means of some set procedure.

Very often we hear “I do not find the exact word for what I want to say”. The most natural assumption is that the speaker does know what he wants to say. For after a while he might exclaim “I have it! It is...”. The word fits. Fits what? Fits into the sentence(s) the thinker entertains? Hardly, since many words could do that. But that word alone expresses his thought.

Similarly, in giving paraphrases or translations for a given sentence one does not normally operate on a word-to-word basis. One gets the “sense” of the sentence, and then looks for another sentence (in the same language or another) that expresses the same sense. Now this sense is surely not grasped in terms of another sentence, since that is exactly what one hopes to find. Nor does one, like the foreigner who does not “think” in English yet, follow any set of rules—connecting words to words—in performing the task. Translating is not like projecting another picture from a given picture by some rote; it is rather like drawing another picture, in another medium, of the thing the first picture depicts.

11. Let us recall the kind of thinking chess-players, painters, composers, and for that matter, plumbers, repairmen, and so forth, are likely to be doing in performing their respective tasks. Their thinking, no doubt, is accompanied by a great deal of imagination representing colors, shapes, sounds, and various objects in a variety of configurations. Now compare these activities with the performance of such “verbal” tasks as writing a poem or a speech, playing Scrabble, solving cross-word puz-
des, translating, doing research in linguistics, and so on. Each of these activities involves thinking, often on a very high level. Yet, obviously, no less than in the previous cases, the help of the imagination is needed in the thinking process. The difference is that in these situations the imagination is enlisted to evoke not colors and sounds, chess-pieces or pipes, but words, phrases and sentences.

Then consider people who are natively blind, or deaf. Quite obviously their handicap will restrict the power of their imagination: the blind man will be unable to imagine colors, the deaf sounds. Moreover, unless specially trained, the deaf man will remain mute, consequently no words at all will occur in the play of his imagination. There is no reason to think, however, that such people cannot think about matters that do not require the kind of imagination they happen to lack. The blind person will not be able to think about color-harmonies, and the deaf-mute will not be able to compose music or write poetry, at least not until their handicap is compensated for in one way or another.

The deaf-mute, of course, unlike the blind, also suffers the disadvantage of being unable to express the thoughts he has by the normal means, i.e., by the use of language. But here, again, the break between him and normal people is not so sharp as some philosophers want us to believe. There are many thoughts we are unable to express, either because the language itself fails to provide the facilities, or because our own command of the language is insufficient. As to the first point, I remind you, once more, of the kind of thinking done by composers, painters, and, often enough it seems, even by mathematicians and physicists; not to speak of the experiences and insights mystics claim to have. As to the second, think of inarticulate people (who may be very smart otherwise) or yourself in a foreign country. You want to say something very badly, and cannot. They you try to say it in your native tongue—and fail again, because of disuse and confusion.

At the beginning we remarked that there are certain forms of thought which we are unwilling to attribute to dumb beasts because these forms presuppose having conscious thoughts in the agent. Since, moreover, thinking about something consists of having a series of such thoughts, we are equally reluctant to say that a certain dog or cat is at present engaged in thinking about something or other.

Now what about the deaf-mute? Are we equally unwilling to say that often he wonders and guesses, assumes and concludes, deliberates and decides, pretends and hopes? Is it impossible for him to form beliefs, nurture suspicions, find out that he was wrong, change his mind about the matter, and so forth? And, accordingly, should we say that he is inherently incapable of thinking about something or other for a while? I do not see any reason to think so, since although such a person cannot talk, we can communicate with him to some extent at least, via gestures, facial expressions, and pantomime, no less than with a person whose language is utterly unknown to us. I do not think that I would find a difference in kind between the difficulty of communicating with a monolingual Tibetan and the difficulty of communicating with a deaf-mute. One can even mistake a weird-sounding language for the mutterings of a deaf-mute, and vice-versa, at least for a while. Yet, given the hypothesis that the Tibetan can think (since he can talk) and the deaf-mute cannot (since he cannot talk), the difference should be categorical. For one cannot really communicate with an unthinking being: communication with somebody consists in getting him to understand what I think and what I want, and in coming to understand what he thinks and wants, quite apart from appropriate overt performance, if any. Thus, as I said at the beginning, one cannot communicate with a beast, but one can with a foreigner and with a deaf-mute equally. For they, both have, as St. Augustine puts it, “the natural language of all peoples” at their disposal, to wit, “the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of
other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of
mind...16 It is easy to imagine flattering or embarrassing a senorita wordlessly—and
whether or not she is a deaf-mute makes no difference. Then think of flattering
(or embarrassing) a dog... Thought, real conscious thought, is required to the uptake
of flattery or to embarrassment.

If so, then the Platonic account must be wrong. Language is the means of ex-
pressing thoughts, not of having them.
Footnotes

1. This distinction has been made clear to me by Professor Norman Malcolm. See his Presidential Address entitled “Thoughtless Brutes,” American Philosophical Association, 1972, pp. 5-20.


4. 189e-190a. It is repeated with some changes in Sophist 263e-264a. I shall call the view expressed in these passages “the Platonic theory” without making any historical claims about Plato’s “real” theory of thinking.

5. The Concept of Mind, Barnes and Noble, 1949, p. 27. Again I do not claim that these passages represent Professor Ryle’s final word on thinking.


7. Ibid., no. 329

8. De Interpretatione 16a.

9. P. 27

10. See my Res Cogitans, Cornell U.P., 1972, Chapter VI.

11. Ibid., Chapters II-IV.

12. For the original idea behind this argument I am indebted to Mr. Tom Dimas.


