

**Holistic and conceptual character of the mental in Donald
Davidson's work**

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, we will try to confront Quine's and Davidson's holistic position through Davidson's thesis of the mental as a non-ontological category. In this regard, since Davidson came to this position through the thesis of the mental as a decidedly conceptual category, we will try to show how this approach does not, nevertheless, rule out the possibility of its interpretation in ontological terms. However, in what follows we will draw attention to the fact that the mental can be interpreted so that it proves to be immune to ontologizing in Quine's sense. This would be the evidence of different ways, which are not necessarily compatible, to argue for Davidson's central thesis - the thesis about holistic character of the mental - as well as, which is closely related, a certain difference that exists between Davidson's view of the mental as a conceptual category on the one hand, and a holistic category on the other.

KEYWORDS: Thought, mental, holism, linguistic nihilism, ontological status, semantics, syntax

Introduction

The subject of this paper is a version of holism developed in the work of the American philosopher Donald Davidson, known as mental holism. As it is one of many holistic views that emerged in the 20th century philosophy, the question is, *inter alia*, what is the difference between this view and Quine's holistic approach known as semantic holism. The question is all the more relevant because Davidson was strongly influenced by Quine, so in order to give an answer to it we will try to contrast these two approaches, emphasizing the problem that concerns both of them in our opinion.

Namely, according to his own testimony, Quine believed that one of the main tasks of philosophy was an attempt to answer the question 'What there is?', or 'What kinds of things exist?', so it can be said that, at least for Quine, ontological questions were a matter of central interest. On the other hand, Davidson often readdressed in his later texts the problem of thought and the conditions necessary for it to be attributed as a property. It follows that, when it can be considered a property, or when it can justifiably be attributed to an object, it thus becomes part of the content of an ontology, specifically, ontology that would include in its inventory properties and predicates, *inter alia*. The problem is, however, that if thought were an ontological entity, then other contents of the mental would seem to be equally entitled to

this status; however, Davidson categorically and repeatedly points out that “the mental is not ontological but conceptual category” (Davidson 2004a: 114).

This alone might be sufficient to question whether we have anything to show for, and that all we should do in order to present the peculiarity of Davidson’s view compared to Quine’s holistic program, is apparently to present Davidson’s arguments for his view. In a word, it is likely that these arguments would be equally valid when it comes to thought, which is, no doubt, just one manifestation of the mental.

However, what hopefully makes our endeavor non-trivial is that although its existence is not denied, it remains uncertain what place thought has within Davidson’s conception of the mental, which is why the question of its (ontological) status remains open. On the other hand, that the entire problem has considerable weight is evidenced by the fact that although thought is not mental, strictly speaking, it actually shares the same extension with it, opening the possibility, as we shall see, of interpreting Davidson’s view from the perspective of Quine’s theoretical position, and thus of questioning his thesis of the mental as an essentially conceptual category. In short, the question is what it is that we would claim to exist that is neither ontological nor conceptual category; in order to give an answer to it, we will start with the way Davidson approaches the problem of thought in general, or, in his words, with what thought requires.

Conditions for thought according to Davidson

When it comes to conditions that should be met in order to justifiably speak of the existence of thought, it should be said straight away that Davidson’s starting point on this matter – as he himself points out – is ‘completely Cartesian’; that is, like Descartes, Davidson does not doubt at any point that thought exists: “I start with the fact that we cannot doubt the existence of thought, and ask what follows. We cannot doubt the existence of thought because even a doubt is a thought, and it is impossible to have a doubt without knowing that it is a doubt. A great deal follows from the fact that thought exists” (Davidson 2004c: 6). However, although he believes that we cannot reasonably doubt the existence of our own

thought, Davidson also believes that we must be extremely careful when trying to determine what would be the evidence against its existence in others.¹

In a word, Davidson does not rule out the possibility that, for example, animals can think, and in this regard he makes a number of observations that could support this thesis: “Animals show by their behavior that they are making fine distinctions, and many of the things they discriminate we do to. They recognize individual people and other animals, distinguish among various sorts of animals, find their way back to places they have been before, and can learn all sorts of tricks” (Davidson 2004e: 136). However, he also expresses a doubt that they thus have thought processes, primarily because they do not have any kind of concept.

Namely, in order not to be tempted to treat “simple tendencies to eat berries, or to seek warmth and avoid cold (...) as having the concept”, Davidson thinks that we have to assume that “to have a concept is to judge and believe that certain items fall under the concept. If we do not make this condition on having a concept (...) it would be to lose track of the fundamental distinction between a mindless disposition to respond differentially to the members of a class of stimuli, and disposition to respond to those items *as* members of that class” (Ibid. 137-138). It follows that, even though they can “see and hear and smell all sorts of things”, animals “do not perceive *that* anything is the case”, which is for Davidson a sufficient reason for our doubt about the existence of thought processes to be justified in their case: “Some non-human animals can learn a great deal, but they do not learn *that* something is true” (Ibid., 136).

This fact is extremely important to us because it reveals the leading concept in Davidson’s approach to the problem of thought. Namely, it is the concept of truth, and Davidson concludes that thought could be attributed as a property to an object only if the given object had this concept, that is, if it could distinguish cases in which a certain belief is true from those in which it is not: “To know the truth conditions of a proposition, one must

¹ We should note that Davidson is referring here to an old problem concerning our knowledge of others’ mental states; however, it is important to say that Davidson does not at any time display skepticism about the conclusion that others, to whom we normally ascribe the ability to think, really have mental states similar to ours (and it is this doubt that would represent the original version of the skeptical paradox regarding others’ mental states); in fact, he believes that this assumption is necessary and that in retrospect, it is one of the preconditions of our own mental activities. Namely, what he wonders is what justifies us not to recognize that some objects have this ability?

have the concept of truth. There is no more central concept than that of truth, since having any concept requires that we know what it would be for that concept to apply to something” (Davidson 2004c: 10).²

However, before we continue, it should be said that Davidson’s skepticism, although consistent, is nevertheless limited in this regard, which is best evidenced by the fact that he does not doubt the possibility that any randomly chosen object can think, the ability that we would not otherwise be inclined to attribute to it.

Namely, for an object or a creature even to be considered as a candidate for having thoughts, the requirement that Davidson sets is that they act in the world, that is, they would have to show indication of having the so-called propositional attitudes such as desires, intentions and beliefs, regardless of whether they actually have them or not. If this is the case – as it undoubtedly is when it comes to higher animals – there remains the last obstacle to go from the candidate for having thought to the circle of its rightful holders, that they *really* have beliefs about their actions, which is nothing but having the belief that something is the case. As we have seen, animals do not fulfill this requirement because they do not have the concept of truth.³

However, as we shall soon see, there are objects that can demonstrate to have this concept but Davidson also denies them the ability to think, so we can say that his insistence on the concept of truth as the most important one is more regulatory in nature, that is, this concept could be understood as such only in terms of serving the harmonization of other concepts; for just as a belief cannot be a belief if it is ‘not understood what it means if it were

² Thus, the condition for thought – in the sense in which Davidson uses this term – is that a being or an object to which we would be willing to attribute this ability must have the concept of truth, and since its presence can only be assumed in cases in which it makes sense to speak of a mistake, but “mistake not only as seen from an intelligent observer’s point of view, but as seen from a creature’s point of view“ (Davidson 2004c: 8), hence the reason why animals cannot be considered even in principle as holders of this disposition.

³ Namely, although, based on the behavior in observable circumstances, it could be concluded that they have something akin to beliefs, desires or intentions, or *propositional attitudes*, animals do not have the concept of truth; since the content of a belief is primarily determined by the possibility of its truth or falsity, hence the conclusion that they do not have propositional attitudes either, and thus not even the rudiments of what we would call thought processes: “A creature that has a concept knows that the concept applies to things independently of what it believes. A creature that cannot entertain the thought that it may be wrong has no concepts, no thoughts” (Davidson 2004e: 141).

wrong', it is also not clear what would be the purpose of the concept of truth and what it would even mean that it is central if there were no propositional attitudes such as beliefs. Although Davidson might disagree with us on this point, there is an important thesis that we have taken from him after all, that the concept of truth and propositional attitudes are in fact closely intertwined, and that the lack of any of them would be a sufficient reason to doubt that the other is present. Generally speaking, this insight is the basis of Davidson's strategy for not recognizing the ability to think in objects that seemingly possess the concept of truth, viz. computers.

It should be said straight away that addressing the problem of thinking in machines, thanks to the ability to have language and the concept of truth, is completely in line with Davidson's skepticism and the standards he requires; just like he does not reject *a priori* the thesis that animals could think, in the same vein he does not doubt that it would be possible to make a thinking artifact: "There is no reason why an artificial object could not think, reason, make decisions, act, have beliefs, desires and intentions. But how much like us must an artifact be, and in what ways, to qualify as having thoughts?" (Davidson 2004b: 87). Davidson approaches this problem through something he calls the method of addition and detachment. Namely, the question he raises is "what must we add to the most thoughtful objects we know - computers - before we can say that they have thoughts"; on the other hand, the question is "what can we detach from a person and still count him or her as a thinking creature" (Ibid.).

As for the second matter, Davidson reaches the conclusion that might support the thesis that machines could think, or in any case, the conclusion that does not necessarily state that they could not; it is that the properties of an object such as its origin, the material of which it is made, and its size or shape are irrelevant when it comes to its mental abilities, that is, these are the things that we could ignore, or, as he says, detach from an object and still consider it a thinking one. However, the question of what should be added to it so that it can be said that it is capable of thought is, according to Davidson, much more difficult than the previous one, but by addressing the previous one, he already gives an indication of where we should look for an answer.

Specifically, what we could not detach from an object and still consider it a thinking one is primarily its history, in Davidson's view: "Thoughts require a history. Not only must an object capable of thought be capable of learning: it must have learned a great deal. A

creature or object cannot have a thought about stars, squid or sawdust unless that thought somehow traces back causally to appropriate samples” (Ibid, 88-89). Having this in mind, it seems that Davidson’s conclusion that a history is what machines lack can be used as a working one, that is, it is a history that should be added to them in order to consider them capable of thought: “A brain, or brain-like object, whatever its other powers, could not be said to have any ordinary thoughts about ordinary objects unless there was a history of causal interactions with objects of the same sorts. This does not show, of course, that such an object could not be an artifact. It does show that an artifact cannot have thoughts unless it can learn and has learned from causal interactions with the world” (Ibid.).

However, we have to note that all this is still very general, and after all, it is not clear why a machine could not simulate having a history in the way that Davidson assumes. In that case, it seems that the basis for denying it the ability to think would also disappear, and Davidson would probably be the last to try something like that (this is not quite true, as we shall see below). However, Davidson draws our attention to the fact that the behavior of machines, or more precisely, their output is still such that it shows strict determinism in its relation to the input, which is evidenced by the fact that they can usually be good only in one task, such as playing chess.⁴

Namely, if we take just the above ability of a machine to play chess, not only does Davidson doubt that if the machine demonstrates this ability we can conclude that it also has thought processes, he actually questions the justification of our belief that it is able to play chess at all: “It is not enough for a computer, or a robot under its direction, to be good in a single task, such as playing chess. An enormous supporting repertoire is necessary. (...) Think what it takes to play chess. In order to play chess, it is necessary to want to win, or at least to understand the concept of winning. To understand the concept of winning, it is not enough to know what it is to win at chess. It is necessary to have a general conception of what it means to win in any activity” (Ibid.).

⁴ This idea will come to the fore in Davidson’s dealing with the Turing test, which examines the ability of a machine to display behavior that would not differ from the behavior of a human being. However, one of the key weaknesses of this type of test, in Davidson’s view, is that it is set so that it “eliminates the possibility of telling *whether* a creature or machine thinks without determining *what* it thinks. (...) So in the test, any evidence that thinking is going on will have to be the evidence that particular thoughts are present” (Davidson 2004d: 80).

Therefore, Davidson believes that we cannot speak of any thought as long as the objects in question are not able to demonstrate, in addition to demonstrating certain actions – even if they were the most rational ones – that they also have an *understanding* of these actions. In other words, ‘before we say a creature believes the sun is now shining, we should ask for evidence that the creature *understands* what it is for the sun to be shining’; this would in our example mean that, before we assume that the computer believes that it plays chess (wins at it, makes the most rational of all moves, etc.), it would have to understand what it means to play chess, and there would be evidence for this only in the case it is “able to demonstrate that it can believe falsely” that it plays chess (Davidson 2004c: 12), and as long as it is not, we will not have any grounds to attribute the ability to think to it.

Thought and the mental

Thus, although the concept of truth may be the most significant – or, as Davidson would put it, central – it is only one in a series of concepts that a creature would need to have for it to be said that it is capable of thought. Other concepts, so to speak, would be so-called propositional attitudes, which primarily include desires, beliefs and intentions, and which, as we have seen, come into play in Davidson’s approach to the problem of thought in machines. However, apart from believing that thoughts, as well as beliefs and desires, “can exist only in the context of a very rich conceptual system” (Ibid.) which is absent both in animals and machines, Davidson will go a step further and argue that propositional attitudes “exist only if one resorts to mentalistic interpretation that has a holistic character, since given mental states can only be understood in correlation with other mental states of a person” (Govindarica 2006: 206).

In other words, “for the attribution of beliefs to be possible”, Davidson and his followers believe that “not only must we assume the overall rationality of cognizers, but also we must continually evaluate and re-evaluate the putative beliefs of a cognizer in their individual relationship to one another and other propositional attitudes” (Kim 1988: 393). This is the usual way to emphasize the non-ontological, or more precisely, conceptual character of the mental in Davidson’s work that we pointed out in the introduction; however, having in mind the discussion that we addressed in the previous section, there is a problem

here that, in our view, brings into question the above thesis, which is why we need to address it in more detail.

Namely, although Davidson's conclusion, that thought can justifiably be attributed only in cases implying very rich conceptual systems, seems plausible, and perhaps the only possible alternative to the counterintuitive thesis that what we would consider to be the evidence of having it could be reduced to the ability to make valid inferences; it would mean that the object to which we would attribute this ability is equipped with appropriate means of quantification logic or capable of operating with logical variables, and the positive side of this approach is that thought as a concept is relieved of the ballast of other mental contents such as desires, intentions, and beliefs. Generally speaking, this is something that would, in a sense, be desirable for Davidson, primarily because thought, as he presented it, is practically impossible to distinguish from the mental as a whole.

In other words, although he argues that the mental is the result of a mix of different concepts that typically *exist only if mentalistic interpretation is resorted to*, it seems that, since they share the same extension, this applies equally to thought, which is why it is not clear what is its specificity compared to the mental: "Domain in which thought can occur is fairly complex. It is a domain each of us inhabits, but one we have good reason to suppose is inhabited by no other animal on earth, and certainly by no machine" (Davidson 2004e: 140). On the other hand, not only is thought in Davidson's work not part of the mental in the way that beliefs, desires, intentions, etc. are, it also does not figure as another name for it (at least not explicitly), evidenced by the fact, *inter alia*, that he treats it mostly as a separate problem. Having this in mind, it seems that there are two possibilities.

Namely, the concept of thought in Davidson's work is either a redundant concept in which there is nothing that is not already included in the mental, or it has a certain value that should be discovered or determined more precisely. In this regard, our view is that Davidson's approach to thought is by no means redundant, primarily because equating it with the mental has a positive result that his approach to *the mental in general* makes it resistant to some kind of radical skepticism – which is, in our opinion, the main reason why he takes it into consideration.

In other words, we believe that Davidson intended to get his theory a certain epistemological integrity by addressing the problem of thought, which is evidenced by the fact that although he starts from the same hypothesis as the proponents of the traditional

approach in epistemology, that is, from the Cartesian *cogito*, the consequences are completely different.⁵ However, even though in this way he may succeed in providing his program with the character of *epistemological*, the negative consequence of this equating is that it brings into question the mental as an essentially conceptual (non-ontological) category.

Namely, since by determining what makes thought possible, we would necessarily postulate the existence of some entity *that is thought* which is in Davidson's work the result of a combination of several properties and concepts that although enable it, do not constitute its identity, but part of the identity of the mental, we believe that this makes room for interpreting Davidson's theoretical position from the perspective of Quine's conceptual framework. In a word, instead of a conceptual category, *the mental could prove to be an ontological category*, through the concept of thought with which it shares the same extension; the possibility of such an interpretation can be presented by reformulating Quine's famous slogan into a question that he could ask Davidson: "What kind of entity we could claim to exist that had no identity?"

Ontological status of the mental

Therefore, although thought is not '*mental*', strictly speaking, we have seen that it can be attributed only when we can speak of the presence of the mental, that is, these two concepts are practically coextensive. With this in mind, it seems that if Quine could show that the concept of thought could be covered by his usual way of approaching ontological problems, or his strategy for answering the question "What exists", he could argue that the mental is in fact an ontological category, given that it shares the same extension with it,

⁵ Although we cannot examine this thesis more thoroughly here, we can state arguments for it, including that the aim of Davidson's speculation regarding thought is not to prove wrong those who argue for the view that an animal or machine can think, despite evidence to the contrary, or that in principle, we will never know for sure whether they can think or not, as it ultimately follows from the traditional approach and other approaches in epistemology he leans towards. Namely, "point is that to have even one thought – one belief or desire – they would have to have a very great many other thoughts and desires" (Davidson 2004b: 89-90), hence it follows that Davidson does not at any point answer the question *what thought is*, but *what makes thought possible*, which is fundamentally different and the fact that not only refers to them, but also limits skepticism about (other's) mental states.

contrary to Davidson who argues that it is conceptual. Generally speaking, we believe that this is precisely the case, as we will try to show in what follows.

Quine's approach to ontological problems or his strategy for answering the question "What there is?" is closely related to his overall theoretical position known as semantic holism, and although Quine's holistic thesis is often referred to in literature as Duhem-Quine thesis, there is a certain difference between their views that is not negligible. This difference primarily concerns Quine's thesis of ontological relativity that is, as we shall see, nothing but the other side of holism that he argues for.

Namely, Duhem's holistic thesis primarily concerns the relationship of the whole physical theory to its individual statements and hypotheses, and the most important insight that Duhem has gained is that these individual statements are impossible to observe independently of each other, but only in the context of the whole theory: "To seek to separate each of the hypotheses of theoretical physics from the other assumptions upon which this science rests, in order to subject it in isolation to the control of observation, is to pursue a chimera; for the realization and interpretation of no matter what experiment in physics imply adherence to whole set of theoretical propositions" (Duhem 2006: 199-200). However, recognizing that there can be inconsistent or even contradictory physical theories that may be empirically adequate (i.e. *empirically equivalent*), Quine argues that they also depend on a broader, *already existing* set of references that will function as the final instance in determining which entities enter the "domain of variables over which we quantify", in short, which entities exist.

In other words, theories implied by Duhem's holism would be much narrower than those implied by Quine's, as evidenced by the fact that the reality of the entities they postulate are primarily due to *certain* broader frameworks of references. Since Quine will identify these frameworks primarily with (different) languages, he will also argue that "ontological controversy should tend into controversy over language" (Quine 1948: 35), because the language in which a theory is *formulated* already contains an ontology, although it may be "primitively adopted and ultimately inscrutable" (Quine 1968: 201). However, it should be noted that for Quine a language, in addition to presupposing an ontological framework, also presupposes a certain theoretical or conceptual framework, and since there is no way we can abandon the framework of a language to take some impartial position in answering a question such as "What there is?", Quine argues that "it makes no sense to say

what the objects of a theory are, absolutely speaking, but how one theory of objects is interpretable or reinterpretable in another” (Ibid.).

Therefore, although for Quine language is not physical science, strictly speaking, it certainly *is* a theory, that is, language itself is the background theory “within which we can show how some subordinate theory, whose universe is some portion of the background universe, can by reinterpretation be reduced to another subordinate theory whose universe is some lesser portion“ (Ibid., 202).⁶ If we go back to our main discussion, the question is what would be the implications of such a viewpoint on Davidson’s view, that is, how can Davidson’s approach be interpreted from the perspective of Quine’s conceptual framework?

Namely, we have seen that Davidson’s conclusion is that in certain cases thought undoubtedly exists, which would mean from the perspective of Quine’s theoretical position that it enters the domain of variables over which we quantify. Having this in mind, if Quine were to abandon the counterintuitive thesis that it could be reduced to the ability to make *valid* inferences, which machines could also have, as we have said, it seems that he could treat thought in the same way he treated all entities for which we do not have clear, behavioral identity criteria, such as beliefs: “In each particular case, knowing the circumstances, we may be able to say something in other terms that would be no less useful as an aid to transacting some business in hand; but we can hope for no verbal equivalent of '*a* believes that *p*' even for given '*a*' and '*p*', that is independent of the circumstances under which it may have been said that *a* believes that *p*'” (Quine 1969: 146).

In other words, it seems that Quine could have such an attitude concerning the ontological status of belief also regarding the ontological status of thought, or that thought could be treated in a similar way he treated propositional attitudes in general – i.e. as a primitive, common sense concept taken from language, or as he puts it, “halfentity”. On the other hand, since we have seen that thought can be attributed only when we can speak of the presence of the mental, it is not clear why what applies to thought would not equally apply to

⁶ Quine reached the conclusion that we cannot speak in an absolute sense of the objects that theories postulate primarily by realizing their underdetermination by empirical evidence in general. However, since the thesis of underdetermination will also imply cases in which interpretations that Quine speaks of are possible only provided that ontological assumptions of a theory are read one into another, it will equally apply, in addition to subordinate theories, to so-called background theories or languages, which supports the view that we have put forward and which is important to us here – that language implies not only ontology, but also a theory.

the mental, which would show, contrary to Davidson's view and his interpreters', that it is not necessarily a conceptual category.⁷

Therefore, since there is nothing about thought that is not already contained in the mental, it seems that the thesis that the mental is a conceptual (non-ontological) category is not guaranteed at all; because if we argue that it is ontological, we could easily reach, through the concept of thought with which it shares the same extension, other contents of the mental, such as beliefs, desires, intentions, etc. However, although in this way we might meet the conditions to treat the mental as an ontological category, it seems that Davidson and his followers could also argue that its true content would still elude us.

Namely, given the thesis that "the semantic contents of attitudes and beliefs determine their relations to one another and to the world in ways that meet at least rough standards of consistency and correctness", and that "unless such standards are met to an adequate degree, nothing can count as being a belief, a pro-attitude, or an intention" (Davidson 2004a: 114), Davidson's thesis of the conceptual character of the mental could be invoked here. According to this thesis, in order to individualize something *as a belief* at all, we would have to resort to mentalistic interpretation presupposing that "total system of subject's beliefs and other propositional attitudes is largely and essentially rational and coherent", that is, "we must construct an 'interpretive theory that simultaneously assigns meanings to his utterances and attributes to him beliefs and other propositional attitudes" (Kim 1988: 393). Although this is something we can do in principle, it is assumed that we will then treat the mental not as an ontological, but as a conceptual category, which entails that Quine's actual attitude about belief – that we transferred *to thought and the mental in general* – he could actually have about thought, while beliefs and other propositional contents that depend on mentalistic interpretation would still elude him.

Therefore, since entities such as beliefs, desires, and intentions are subject to a different logic than the one we are trying to impose here by interpreting them from Quine's theoretical perspective, if we were in a position to individualize the mental through thought, it seems that we would still not be able to individualize *its contents*, which ultimately brings into question

⁷ Although there is no doubt that we ascribe here a particular view to Quine he was wise enough not to advocate, having in mind all the above, it seems that there is no compelling reason why he could not put forward a view about thought that he normally held about all entities for which we do not have clear behavioral identity criteria, regardless of the fact that he did not do so in reality.

both the individuation of the mental and the possibility of its interpretation in ontological categories. In other words, it seems that, at best, it is Davidson's word against Quine's, with the advantage of Davidson's here because the criterion for the individuation of propositional attitudes that he offered takes into account the presumed specificity of the mental sphere that hardly anyone would deny today, which Davidson first gave a consistent form.⁸ However, the fact that would, nevertheless, enable the individuation of even propositional attitudes in Quine's manner is that we would not have to deny the thesis of the mental as a conceptual category; this is primarily because, through the concept of thought with which it shares the same extension, we would *de facto* be in a position to treat the contents that make it possible – which make up the mental – in the same way that Quine treated the contents of physical theories – as entities that postulate certain individual theories subordinated to a single background theory or language.

Namely, given the requirement that we cannot speak in an absolute sense of what would be objects of a theory, but how a theory of objects can be interpreted or reinterpreted within another theory, we should bear in mind that the interpretation of Davidson's view from the perspective of Quine's theoretical position would not be enabled by the fact that the mental, if it is ontological, cannot be a conceptual category, but that although it is not physical, through the concept of thought with which it shares the same extension, Davidson's theory can still be treated in the way that Quine treated these theories – that is, *as theories that are primarily subordinated* to a broader, already existing set of references, a language.⁹

⁸ In this respect, apart from the fact that mental entities can only be spoken of as half-entities, it should be said that Quine largely denied any specificity of the mental sphere, which he explained by the fact that, just like physical objects, entities such as beliefs, desires, and intentions are 'out in the open', which is why they are ultimately 'accessible to the intersubjective techniques of study' (Gibson 1988: 54). Although this objectivity, or more precisely, intersubjectivity of the mental is by no means something that Davidson would question, due to the above specificity of the sphere to which they belong, he thought, as we have seen, that access to mental entities is not and cannot be as direct and immediate as Quine thought.

⁹ In this way, it seems that Davidson's theory is on the same level as other theories that use mentalistic conceptual framework (such as, above all, various psychological theories), and since they quantify over half-entities, it is well below the level of physical theories. However, what is important here is not a relatively low status that Davidson's theory would have if viewed from the perspective of Quine's, but above all the fact that it would prove to be a theory that could be treated *as subordinated*, which is why it is possible, ultimately, to speak of its entities in ontological categories.

However, although it seems that we have successfully interpreted Davidson's view from the perspective of Quine's theoretical position – and thus subordinated it in a sense – we shall see below how it is still possible to conceptualize the mental in the way that would prove it to be immune to ontologizing in Quine's sense. However, not only we will need, as we shall see, a different interpretation of holism that it implies, but primarily the introduction of certain additional assumptions, the most significant one being Davidson's thesis of the non-existence of thing that has such a decisive role in Quine's approach: "I conclude that there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with" (Davidson 2008: 595).

Linguistic nihilism and attributive dualism

Therefore, like most Davidson's interpreters, we ultimately believe that Quine's semantic holism and Davidson's holism of the mental are mostly incommensurable views, although the reason is not, as it is commonly believed, that there is a gap between physicalism and mentalism – because we have seen that, when relevant conditions are met, Quine's approach is equally successful in dealing with both of them¹⁰ – but between fundamentally different *holistic* programs: the first that acknowledges the existence of language and in which it represents the final instance for determining what exists, and the second that denies its existence, which was inaugurated by Davidson himself. This thesis, which we will call hereafter the thesis of linguistic nihilism, is closely related to the idea of the context of linguistic communication that is extremely important to Davidson, and is part of his general theory of meaning and action.

Namely, having in mind the variable character of that context as one of its most important features, Davidson points out that in practice, for the sake of successful communication, we are constantly forced to formulate so-called passing theories: "We may

¹⁰ Since Quine thought that there is ultimately continuity between science, philosophy, and common sense, even though he undoubtedly put forward views that would support it, here we do not accept the objection that for him Davidson's theory would not even be a theory, and especially not a pseudo-theory, because we do not see what the determinant 'pseudo' would refer to in that case, given the above.

say that linguistic ability is the ability to converge on a passing theory from time to time (...). But if we do say this, than we should realize that we have abandoned not only the ordinary notion of a language, but we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally” (Ibid.). On the other hand, Davidson also believes that this insight, generally speaking, can be used to build arguments that would question the existence of language in general: “Perhaps we can give content to the idea of two people 'having the same language' by saying that they tend to converge on passing theories; degree or relative frequency of convergence would then be a measure of similarity of language. What use can we find, however, for the concept of language? What could hold that any theory on which a speaker and interpreter converge is a language; but then there would be a new language for every unexpected turn in the conversation, and languages could not be learned and no one would want to master most of them” (Ibid., 594).

Therefore, Davidson’s main argument for the thesis of the non-existence of language is that the boundaries of language are impossible to determine, as evidenced by our formulation of so-called passing theories, which we use to constantly create ‘new’ languages as a precondition for even being in a position to successfully interpret others’ statements and actions. However, just as Davidson, by drawing attention to the variability of the context of linguistic communication may have good reasons for the claim that language does not exist, referring primarily to his ontological argument, we should note that Quine has no weaker reasons for the thesis that language actually exists.

In other words, just as the thesis that the mental is a conceptual category is non-guaranteed, it seems that this also applies to the thesis of linguistic nihilism, which means that it is once again Quine’s word against Davidson’s; however, the advantage of Quine’s view would now be that, if we were to assume that language exists, through the concept of thought with which it shares the same extension, we would *de facto* be in a position to claim that the mental it is not necessarily a conceptual (non-ontological) category. With this in mind, in order to present Davidson’s position as independent of Quine’s, it seems that we would have to show how the thesis of linguistic nihilism, which would ultimately take away the legitimacy from Quine’s demands, and mental holism support each other. However, the problem is that this will not be possible as long as we see the mental as Davidson and his interpreters see it, not only because referring to a network of propositional attitudes and the concept of truth leaves open the possibility of interpreting it in ontological categories, but primarily because it is not clear how Davidson can claim that language does not exist and at

the same time argue for mentalistic (radical) interpretation, which has as its precondition the very assumption about the existence of (different) languages.¹¹

In short, not only do we have to show how the ideas of linguistic nihilism and mental holism support each other, but it is quite certain that we will have to offer such an interpretation of Davidson's holism that will not imply referring to propositional attitudes. We believe that the problem that initiated our discussion, primarily the problem of thought in machines, could help us in this.

Namely, we have seen that Davidson came to the conclusion that a history is what machines lack to be considered capable of thought; on the other hand, we have also seen that this is closely related to the existence of propositional attitudes in general, because just as machines do not have propositional attitudes or precisely because of it (as evidenced by the example we have given, in which a computer is not able to adopt the concept of winning for the simple reason that it does not have a certain propositional attitude, *viz.*, a desire to win), they do not have a history as Davidson interprets it. However, since we have said that they could simulate both having a history and having propositional attitudes, Davidson is eventually forced to reformulate the problem. Namely, "why wouldn't knowledge of the design and program of this computer tell us what it is thinking and explain its actions?" (Davidson 2004b: 93). Davidson's answer to this question is that it would not, and the reason he gives is the fact that a program is fully characterized by its formal, i.e. syntactic properties: "Knowing the program is enough to explain why the device produces the marks or sounds or pictures it does given an input described in similarly abstract terms. This knowing does not touch on questions of meaning, of reference to the outside world, of truth conditions, for these are semantics concepts" (Ibid.).

¹¹ Namely, what Davidson calls mentalistic interpretation is actually a generalization of his idea of radical interpretation, according to which in order to gain a "foothold in our subject's realm of meanings and intentional states", we would have to assume that its entire "cognitive output is regulated and constrained by norms of rationality" (Kim 1988: 392). However, while this is true in cases in which radical interpretation applies, which involve the interaction between subjects who speak *different* languages, transition from it to universally valid mentalistic interpretation does not seem as smooth as Davidson and his interpreters suggest, which is one of the ways to present the problem we are dealing with in this paper. For more detailed information on radical interpretation, see Davidson's papers: 'Truth and Meaning', 'Radical Interpretation', 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme'.

This Davidson's observation is extremely important to us, which is why we will return to it later. However, it would be good to observe beforehand that, in rejecting the thesis that machines could think even if they would largely show the abilities that do not differ from the abilities of human beings, Davidson now refers to two new concepts rather than propositional attitudes.

These are semantics and syntax that traditionally denote different types of research programs, where semantics primarily denotes a discipline that deals with certain relations between linguistic expressions and objects (or 'states of affairs') to which these expressions 'refer', while syntax is the study of the rules we use to construct statements, in short, their structure. However, in Davidson's case there is a possibility of a new approach to these concepts, where semantics would no longer be "that portion of a grammar which attempts to classify all words of a language into parts of speech, according to what the words mean or designate" (Tarski 2008: 100), or the research program name, but *the property of an object that will figure as a precondition for its ability to interpret and reinterpret both its own actions and statements and those of other (thinking) beings with whom it interacts.*

Therefore, it seems that Davidson nevertheless gave certain indications that the argument against the possibility of thought processes in machines could be based on the difference that exists between semantics and syntax, even if he did not attempt to ultimately base it on it, which would in this case imply that these concepts are treated as properties. However, while semantics would primarily be the property that would allow an object to 'connect words with the world', or to formulate what Davidson calls *passing theories*, we argue for an approach that would equate having it with having the mental in general.¹² The reason is that we believe that, in rejecting the possibility of interpreting Davidson's view from the perspective of Quine's conceptual framework, it would be an interpretation that

¹² Although this equating might seem to be a considerable impoverishment and simplification of the idea of the mental, it should be said that the so-called properties dualism on which it would be based has been recognized long ago in Davidson's work. Thus, some theorists think that it "partly jeopardizes his monistic conception, because the traditional dualism of material and spiritual substance is replaced with a new and inexplicable dualism of mental and physical properties" (Lazović 1995: 32). Other have seen it as "the possibility that in discussing the ontological status of mental phenomena, postulating some mysterious properties is avoided, assuming the existence of some spiritual substance that would play the causal role that mental states play in human behavior" (Grahek 1990: 195). Although these issues are undoubtedly important, they go beyond our current interests, so we will not dwell on them. It is important to point out that we interpret the above dualism using the concepts of semantics and syntax.

would finally provide us with what is necessary – i.e. demonstrate that the ideas of mental holism on the one hand, and linguistic nihilism on the other are not only closely related, but also imply each other. However, in order to do all that, it is necessary to add another Davidson's concept to our argument.

Namely, seeing a thinking object as *an object that is primarily able to understand that something is the case*, in addition to having the ability to formulate the so-called *passing theories*, Davidson treats this object primarily as one that in the context of linguistic competence and communication should also have prior preparedness to interpret what the speaker utters (Davidson 2008: 592), which he calls *prior theory*. If we take a machine as an example of the object that could have indeed this prior preparedness for an output that Davidson calls prior theory, the question is what would it really have, given that it has no possibility of formulating passing theories or in any case a very limited one?

Namely, since it has no possibility of formulating so-called passing theories, it seems that what a machine would have as a prior theory would be just a property of no importance in the context of coping skills and linguistic communication in general, which we would thus call syntax. However, Davidson argues that it should not be inferred that the ability to formulate passing theories is all that is necessary to justifiably claim to have the mental; this is primarily because, even in the case of a machine that would fully imitate man, there would be a categorical difference between what we would call a prior theory, and what would seem to be its passing theories.

In other words, since knowledge of the program or prior theory is always syntactic, Davidson believes that machines cannot have the mental, even if their abilities would not differ from the abilities of human beings. While there is no doubt that various, very convincing objections can be easily made to this conclusion, we will try to show that Davidson is nevertheless on the right track by giving the example of a machine that would display a limited ability to deliver output – which is, in our opinion, the only relevant scenario here – except that we will not claim that it does not have the mental, but that it does not have any prior theory. In short, although in both cases it makes sense to speak in terms of input and output, we believe that only in the case of beings that have *prior theory*, it makes sense to speak both of the ability to deliver passing theories, and of having the mental in general.

Namely, although input and output are concepts that are always correlated, we believe that this relation would be fundamentally different in the above two cases, primarily because the output of machines would indicate the existence of a certain specificity in their prior theory that would manifest itself as a defect in the context of linguistic competence and communication. However, we should keep in mind that this defect would not consist in its limitations, or better yet in this case, definiteness for which we would never have to get evidence based on its behavior, but in *the impossibility of switching from delivering a simple output to formulating so-called passing theories*. Hence, prior theory that it would have would be instrumental in this, and the reason would be the fact that, in the context of linguistic competence and communication, this theory would already have to imply not preparedness to deliver some sort of output as such, but an *interpretation*.

Therefore, we believe that the very possibility of formulating passing theories implies if not the thesis of non-existence of the so-called prior theories, then certainly of their indeterminacy; this entails that not only the concept of passing theory, but also the concept of prior theory is a distinctly semantic concept that can only be attributed to a being that has the mental. However, apart from supporting the thesis of its *holistic* character, it is important to us that this interpretation equally convincingly supports the thesis that would ultimately take away the legitimacy from Quine's demands – i.e. the thesis of the non-existence of language in general.

Namely, although they do not refer to the same thing, strictly speaking, it seems that in order to show that language exists, Quine would have to show that his idea of the background theory and Davidson's of the prior theory can be equated. However, that it cannot be the case is evidenced by the fact that, even though semantics is inherent to a being, this theory will in practice prove to be something so *indeterminately* more than what a machine can have, so to speak of it as a language becomes meaningless. On the other hand, this indeterminacy of the prior theory or language on which Davidson bases his arguments for its non-existence is something that also concerns thinking beings, but they are able to overcome it, since semantics is inherent to them, or at least to constantly strive for it which they do, by formulating so-called passing theories.

Conclusion

Therefore, if we were to abandon the assumption that language does not exist, but keep the idea of the variability of the context of linguistic communication that no one would seriously question, justification for the thesis of its non-existence would no longer be found in the fact that it is impossible to determine the boundaries of language, but above all in the fact that the opposite view would be in conflict with the thesis of the holistic character of the mental. However, we should keep in mind that this thesis, like the previous one, need not be presupposed in advance, for it proved to be a necessary consequence of the interpretation we have offered, which entails the most important conclusion that we reached in this paper.

Namely, although the thesis about the holistic character of the mental is no doubt the most significant in Davidson's work, we have seen that it can be reached in a number of different and not necessarily compatible ways. This is evidenced by the fact that the mental can be interpreted, using Davidson's means, in such a way that it proves to be immune to ontologizing in Quine's sense, but this also requires an approach that will not imply referring to a network of the concept of truth and propositional attitudes, in short, which will not imply the thesis of the mental as a conceptual category. The primary reason for this is that, unlike the interpretation that we argued for, in which the mental was seen through the concept of semantics as a property, this interpretation does not imply, but *a priori* presupposes the thesis of its holistic character: "Norms of rationality holistically constrain our propositional attitudes in virtue of their contents", and these propositional attitudes have the content they have "because of its location in a network of other beliefs and propositional attitudes"(Kim 1988: 393).

In other words, by comparing Davidson's and Quine's holistic positions, we reached the conclusion that there is a difference between Davidson's approach to the mental as a conceptual category on the one hand, and the holistic one on the other, because while the first thesis requires the other, we have seen that this is not true the other way around. Moreover, since it seems that the very idea of its holistic character would have to imply the idea of the mental as an autonomous whole phenomenologically speaking, we believe that to approach it as a conceptual category reveals a certain weakness in Davidson's thesis of the mental as a

holistic category, as evidenced by the fact that it leaves open the possibility of interpreting it *in ontological terms*. This, however, does not mean that our view is that Davidson and his followers should abandon this thesis completely, only that – since they cannot use it against its ontologizing – they would have to limit the domain of its application.¹³

¹³ Davidson's thesis of the mental as a conceptual category is in our opinion the most convincing when he uses it to show that, since they have different sources of evidence, the mental cannot be reduced to the physical (see: Davidson, Donald, 'Mental Events'). However, we believe that this Davidson's anti-reductionism should by no means be understood as a form of anti-ontologism, for although Quine no doubt saw physical science as an ontological ideal – or perhaps better, as the 'ultimate ontological parameter' – it is also clear that his criterion for determining what exists is not and cannot be limited to it.

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