

*THE PARADOX OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS*

By José Luis Bermúdez.

Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998.

Pp. xv, 338.

What José Luis Bermúdez calls the paradox of self-consciousness is essentially the conflict between two claims:

(1) The capacity to use first-person referential devices like “I” must be explained in terms of the capacity to think first-person thoughts.

(2) The only way to explain the capacity for having a certain kind of thought is by explaining the capacity for the *canonical linguistic expression* of thoughts of that kind. (Bermúdez calls this the “Thought-Language Principle”.)

The conflict between (1) and (2) is obvious enough. However, if a paradox is an unacceptable conclusion drawn from apparently valid reasoning from apparently true premises, then Bermúdez’s conflict is no paradox. It is rather a conflict between the view that thought must be explained in terms of language, and the view that first-person linguistic reference must be explained in terms of first-person thought. Neither view is immediately obvious, and nor is it obvious that the arguments for either are equally compelling. What we have here is a difference of philosophical opinion, not a paradox.

In itself, this may not be particularly important; perhaps Bermúdez could have called his book *The Puzzle of Self-Consciousness* and this would have described his main interest better. But in fact, it turns out that even the non-paradoxical conflict between (1) and (2) is not Bermúdez’s theme. He is interested in the nature of self-conscious thoughts about oneself: the kind of “I”-thoughts which Shoemaker famously called “immune to error through misidentification”. But the problems these thoughts raise are arguably independent of the relationship between (1) and (2). One could raise the problem of the relationship between thought and language without considering self-conscious “I”-thoughts: one could ask whether the use of (say) color terms should be explained in terms of the capacity to have certain kinds of experience, or vice versa. And one could raise questions about immunity to error

without taking any view on the relationship between thought and language, or on the special nature of “I” and other first-person pronouns. Consider a speaker, rather like an Indian in an old Wild West movie, who refers to himself only as “Dances With Wolves”. Would all his utterances of the form “Dances With Wolves is *F*” be subject to error through misidentification, simply because his idiolect has no first-person pronoun? Surely not. There will be many contexts in which it makes little sense for him to raise a question of the form “Someone is *F*; but is Dances With Wolves *F*?” for exactly the same sorts of reasons that we cannot sensibly raise parallel questions framed using “I”.

One might say here that the existence of a pronoun with variable reference is not the relevant point; the point is rather that *some* form of words is being used to express thoughts having this immunity property. This seems right; but it illustrates again that Bermúdez has somewhat mis-stated his theme: insofar as there are philosophical problems arising from this kind of immunity to error, their source is not the existence of personal pronouns. I would conjecture that this is Bermúdez’s underlying view too, since he declares his hand early on by rejecting (surely correctly) the Thought-Language Principle (25). And the rest of the book pays little attention to the way thought is expressed in language.

The book’s real aim is to give a general explanation of how thinkers can come to have self-conscious thoughts, given the rejection of the Thought-Language principle. Bermúdez requires that such an explanation is non-circular, since he wants to explain how it is possible that actual human infants acquire the concept of the first person (the Acquisition Constraint). Bermúdez’s account is based on the idea that pre-linguistic thinkers can satisfy the Acquisition Constraint because they can be in states with *nonconceptual content*. An intentional state *S* has nonconceptual content *P* when a thinker does not have to possess the concepts which are definitive of *P* in order to be in *S*. An example: I do not have to possess concepts of all the colors in my present experience in order to have an experience whose content presents all these distinct and varied colors.

The notion of nonconceptual content, originating with Gareth Evans, has come to play a role in a number of theories of mind in the last fifteen years. Bermúdez's distinctive contribution to this debate is to hold, against Christopher Peacocke, that non-conceptual states are "autonomous": that a creature could be in states with non-conceptual content without possessing any concepts at all (the Autonomy Principle). Bermúdez argues for this by marshalling a wide range of data from developmental psychology and phenomenology in defense of the attribution of states with nonconceptual content to pre-linguistic infants. He makes a good case for the thesis that this content is *perspectival* in a way that is closely related to the perspectival character of genuinely conceptual "I"-thoughts.

Bermúdez does not need to defend the Autonomy Principle as he actually states it, but only a weaker claim: that thinkers can be in states with nonconceptual contents without possessing any concepts at the time when they are in those states. For he is only concerned to show how self-conscious thought could develop in the psychological life of a human thinker—the evidence he cites from developmental psychology supports only the weaker thesis, since infants become conceptual thinkers eventually. The stronger Autonomy Principle would have to be defended by an examination of the evidence from animal psychology; an interesting project, but not one which Bermúdez (understandably enough) undertakes in this book.

Bermúdez may respond that if it is correct to attribute intentional states to animals at all, then such states will automatically be nonconceptual, since on his view, having concepts entails being a language-user. Given the existence of nonconceptual content, this is a weaker claim than the Thought-Language Principle. In keeping with his enthusiasm for named Principles, Bermúdez calls it "the Priority Principle" (42). The Principle is somewhat under-defended; this is a shame because it brings to the surface a problem with the notion of nonconceptual content. The notion is sometimes criticized because it involves a very demanding understanding of concept-possession. Theories of nonconceptual content make a sharp distinction between conceptual representation and other forms of mental representation—

Bermúdez is no exception—but they do not always explain the significance of this distinction, and without this the distinction can appear merely terminological. This is a particular danger for Bermúdez’s project, where having a concept is linked to having linguistic abilities. So for him, the question about whether conceptual thinking can be explained in terms of nonconceptual thinking amounts to this: whether the kind of thought which only language makes possible can be explained in terms of the kind of thought which can be had without language. An interesting project, certainly; but one that can be undertaken without mentioning nonconceptual content. In the absence of further motivation for the Priority Principle, critics of nonconceptual content could accept the main lines of Bermúdez’s argument while ignoring its appeal to nonconceptual content. They could just understand “nonconceptual content” as an abbreviation for *the content of a kind of thought which can be had without language*. But surely the term was meant to be more than just a simple abbreviation?

Nonetheless, Bermúdez’s book is ambitious, clearly written and contains a number of plausible and interesting new moves—chapter six on the awareness of the self in proprioception, for example, is the best in the book and merits further discussion. I do think that Bermúdez misrepresents what he is doing—solving a paradox, rather than proposing a novel reductive account of self-conscious thought—but this does not detract in any important way from the other virtues of the book.

Tim Crane

*University College London*