

Unit VI: Davidson and the interpretational approach to thought and language

October 29, 2003

| | | |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| 1 | Davidson's interdependence thesis | 1 |
| 2 | Davidson's arguments for interdependence | 2 |
| 2.1 | Indeterminacy of non-linguistic beliefs (T&T, 15-16) | 2 |
| 2.2 | Argument from the paratactic analysis of attitude ascriptions (T&T, 17-20) | 2 |
| 2.3 | The problems of interpretation: action, belief, and meaning | 3 |
| 3 | Davidson's interpretational foundational theory of meaning | 3 |
| 3.1 | Argument from the possibility of interpretation | 3 |
| 3.2 | Theories of truth and theories of interpretation | 4 |
| 3.3 | Consequences of the interpretational theory and 'conceptual schemes' | 4 |
| 4 | Objections to Davidson | 4 |
| 4.1 | Epistemological arguments for metaphysical conclusions | 4 |
| 4.2 | Those epistemological arguments are based on too restrictive a conception of the evidence available | 5 |
| 4.3 | Implausibility of extreme holism | 5 |
| 4.4 | Technical problems with the interpretational project | 5 |
| 4.5 | A thought experiment about alternative conceptual schemes | 5 |

1 Davidson's interdependence thesis

Some philosophers have claimed that language is prior to thought, whereas others have claimed that thought is prior to language. Davidson claims that, in this debate, both sides are wrong: "neither language nor thinking can be fully explained in terms of the other, and neither has conceptual priority. The two are, indeed, linked, in the sense that each requires the other in order to be understood; but the linkage is not so complete that either suffices, even when reasonably reinforced, to explicate the other." (8)

He goes on to add: "The chief thesis of this paper is that a creature cannot have thoughts unless it is an interpreter of the speech of another." (9)

How do these two quotes fit together? Davidson is out to show the interdependence of thought and language. To show this, what he must mainly argue is that thought is not strictly prior to language; this is because he takes it as obvious that language use requires thought. This is why in much of the paper he seems to be arguing for the priority of language, whereas what he's really doing is arguing against the priority of thought.

2 Davidson's arguments for interdependence

2.1 Indeterminacy of non-linguistic beliefs (*T&T*, 15-16)

"The dog, we say, know that it's master is home. But does it know that Mr. Smith (who is its master), or that the president of the bank (who is that same master), is home? We have no real idea how to settle, or make sense of, these questions." (*T&T*, 16)

But this is inconclusive. It may show that there is something fishy about animal beliefs, but may just show that we are not good at characterizing those beliefs.

2.2 Argument from the paratactic analysis of attitude ascriptions (*T&T*, 17-20)

We attribute thoughts to creatures by using sentences like 'A believes that ...', 'A thinks that ...' and so on. Davidson asks: how are we to think of the logical forms of such sentences?

His answer is the *paratactic analysis* of these sentences. Consider first 'Galileo said that the earth is round.' According to Davidson, this sentence is to be analyzed as

The earth is round. Galileo said that.

where the 'that' is a demonstrative 'pointing' to the first sentence. Our original sentence is then true just in case Galileo said some sentence which samesays the one which 'that' refers to.

This seems nice for 'says'; but how could we extend this analysis to sentences about what creatures believe or think?

One idea, which Davidson maintains, is that we should maintain the same form of analysis; then the claim "Galileo believes that the earth is round" would be analyzed as

The earth is round. Galileo said that.

so that the original sentence is true just in case (perhaps) Galileo was disposed to endorse, or accept, or hold true, some sentence which samesays the one which is the referent of ‘that.’

But on this analysis of ascriptions of thought, the truth of any such ascription immediately entails that the creature in question is a language-user.

Problems for this analysis: (i) how much does its plausibility turn on an accidental feature of English? (ii) problems handling certain kinds of quantification in attitude ascriptions.

2.3 The problems of interpretation: action, belief, and meaning

The third and most important of Davidson’s arguments, however, has to do with an analogy he draws between the theory of action and the theories of mind and language.

He begins by noting (10-11) that we often explain the actions of agents by citing their beliefs and desires. Now suppose that you are watching someone perform an action, and that you want to explain that action in terms of his beliefs and desires. How do you figure out which belief/desire combination is the right one? Indeterminacy.

Davidson further notes that a formally analogous problem arises with the interpretation of speech, belief, and meaning:

“The methodological problem of interpretation is to see how, given the sentences a man accepts as true under given circumstances, to work out what his beliefs are and what his words mean. The situation is again similar to the situation in decision theory where, given a man’s preferences between alternative courses of action, we can discern both his beliefs and his desires.” (T&T, 14)

In the case of solving the indeterminacy problem for the explanation of action, it would make no sense to privilege desire over belief, or the reverse. And the same goes, Davidson suggests, for the interpretation of speech.

3 Davidson’s interpretational foundational theory of meaning

3.1 Argument from the possibility of interpretation

Just as we must assume some rationality in order to ascribe beliefs and desires to an agent, so we must assume the absence of large scale error to make

interpretation possible.

“The difficulty, it will be remembered, is that a sentence is held true because of two factors: what the holder takes the sentence to mean, and what he believes. In order to sort things out, what is needed is a method for holding one factor steady while the other is studied. . . .

What makes interpretation possible, then, is the fact that we can dismiss a priori the chance of massive error.” (T&T, 20-21)

He’s more explicit about what’s going on in ‘Radical Interpretation’:

“This method is intended to solve the problem of the interdependence of belief and meaning by holding belief fixed as far as possible while solving for meaning. This is accomplished by assigning truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right as often as plausibly possible, according, of course, to our own view of what is right. What justifies this procedure is the fact that disagreement and agreement alike are intelligible only against a background of massive agreement.” (RI, coursepack p. 259)

3.2 Theories of truth and theories of interpretation

The form of a Tarskian theory of truth.

We assign truth conditions to sentences (i.e., come up with our theory of truth) by (i) assuming that the speakers in questions have all true beliefs, and (ii) making use of the principle that generally if a speaker believes some proposition p and utters a sentence S to express this belief, S will mean p in the language of the speaker.

As Davidson puts it, “. . . if we know he holds the sentence true *and* we know how to interpret it, then we can make a correct attribution of belief. Symmetrically, if we know what belief a sentence held true expresses, we know how to interpret it.” (T&T, 14)

3.3 Consequences of the interpretational theory and ‘conceptual schemes’

“The methodological advice to interpret in a way that optimizes agreement should not be conceived as resting on a charitable assumption about human intelligence that might turn out to be false. If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything.” (RI, coursepack p. 259)

4 Objections to Davidson

4.1 Epistemological arguments for metaphysical conclusions

Recall Kripke's distinction between metaphysical and epistemological claims.

4.2 Those epistemological arguments are based on too restrictive a conception of the evidence available

The example of cognitive science - whether or not cognitive scientific explanations of thought are very good - shows that Davidson did not consider all the available options. There are more facts out there than which sentences agents hold true.

4.3 Implausibility of extreme holism

See T&T, pp. 20-21. If the ancients did not believe that the earth was flat, what did they believe was flat? Or didn't they believe this of anything?

4.4 Technical problems with the interpretational project

Two sentences can have the same truth conditions - i.e., be true in exactly the same situations - while still differing in meaning.

4.5 A thought experiment about alternative conceptual schemes

Aliens and stuff.