

# Self-knowledge and knowledge of language

March 30, 2004

There are a number of different positions available on the relationship between self-knowledge and language, some of which are endorsed are discussed in the two articles we read for this week. Below are some of the options, along with some thoughts about their plausibility.

## 1 McDowell's language-based view of thought

In slogan form, this is the view that *language is a vehicle for thought*. For an agent to be in a certain intentional mental state is for that agent to perform, or be disposed to perform, certain actions with contentful sentences of a language.

Point 1. This is not really a theory of self-knowledge. What we know, if McDowell is right, is that all of the mental states known by an agent are constituted by linguistic actions or dispositions. But this does not make their epistemology unproblematic; rather, it should be read as suggesting an account of self-knowledge based on (i) knowledge of one's own linguistic dispositions and (ii) knowledge of what the words of one's own language mean.

Point 2. Many have thought that animal beliefs make this sort of public-language-based view of thought implausible anyway.

## 2 The weakened McDowellian position

Some, but not all, mental states are constituted by linguistic dispositions. But the ones to which we have immediate access are so constituted; hence knowledge of language must play some special role in the explanation of self-knowledge.

One the face of it, this kind of view may seem more plausible than McDowell's. But it is no more a theory of self-knowledge than is McDowell's; rather, it is a view about the natures of the mental states to which we have privileged access which suggests a certain view of how that access is possible.

An analogue of point 2 may also hold again this view. Is it plausible to think that our having perceptual experiences which represent the world as being a certain way

essentially involve language? But it seems, as Shoemaker rightly notes, that we have a kind of privileged access to the way that our perceptual states represent the world.

### 3 Wright's constitutive view

As we know from last week, Wright gives a theory of the nature of mental states and their relation to language which, unlike the two views discussed above, *does* provide an account of the nature of self-knowledge. Wright's view is that it is (under normal conditions) sufficient for an agent to be in a certain mental state that that agent avow being in that mental state, where the avowal is a linguistic act of self-ascription. This is a view which gives language a role to play in the constitution of mental states, but does so in such a way that we get an immediate explanation of the reliability of one's views about one's own mental states.

We have already discussed a few objections to the view of the nature of mental states as response-dependent to which this view leads:

1. Johnston's missing explanation argument.
2. Boghossian's argument that response-dependence about mental content is incoherent.

Smith adds a few more:

3. It makes it mysterious how we can sometimes be in mental states without knowing that we are in them.
4. It gives no account of the phenomenology of self-knowledge; when we make judgements about our own beliefs, we feel that we are tracking some more or less independent fact, not constituting it by a decision about what to self-ascribe.

To these we can add a worry similar to that raised against the weakened McDowellian position:

5. It is very implausible that facts about perceptual content are constituted by self-ascriptions of experiences with a certain content; but if they are not, Wright's view will give us an account of self-knowledge which is, at best, limited. It's not obvious how serious this problem is for his account of our knowledge of the contents of beliefs, intentions, etc.

### 4 Davidson's interpretational approach to language and mind: Smith's interpretation

Background: how Davidsonian radical interpretation is supposed to work. Two roles for a theory of interpretation to play: (i) an account of the foundations (i.e., the metaphysics) of meaning and mental representation, (ii) an account of the epistemology of meaning and mind (i.e., of how we know what others think, and mean

by their utterances of sentences of their language). The question we have to ask is whether taking a Davidsonian theory of interpretation to play either of these roles can illuminate the nature of self-knowledge.

According to Smith, Davidson's central claim is that knowledge of what one means by one's words is guaranteed by the nature of meaning: given that the foundations of meaning are given by Davidson's kind of interpretational theory, and given the nature of that interpretational theory, speakers simply must know the meanings of expressions of their language.

Smith objects that this is a kind of transcendental argument for the necessity of knowledge of language, which is an appropriate response to skepticism, but not to the request for an explanation of self-knowledge.

It is not obvious that this is a fair objection. You can read Davidson as giving a version of the 'constitutive' theory of self-knowledge, versions of which we have also been given by Wright and Shoemaker. What kind of explanation of self-knowledge does this kind of theory leave out?

One might think that it leaves out an epistemology for self-knowledge: an account of the justification for beliefs about what one means. But proponents of these kinds of constitutive views will characteristically claim that there is no substantial epistemological story to be given.

## **5 Davidson's interpretational approach to language and mind: Higginbotham's interpretation**

Higginbotham's 'twist' on Davidson's views (p. 432) seeks to supply the step which Smith finds missing. The missing step seems to be that we can apply Davidson's transcendental argument to ourselves, and thereby find justification for the view that our beliefs about language are true. Difficult to see how this affects the dispute between Smith and Davidson.

## **6 Knowledge of syntax**

Our apparently immediate knowledge of which sentences of our language are well-formed. Discussion of some of Higginbotham's examples in §III; the representationalist thesis about knowledge of syntax.

## **7 Modest and ambitious versions of the linguistic strategy**

The question of how we know what words mean in our own language is interesting in its own right. But people are often interested in this question because they think that knowledge of meaning can help explain other puzzling sorts of self-knowledge.

But they do not always distinguish between modest and ambitious versions of this explanatory ambition.

The modest version is just that *some* of our self-knowledge can be explained by knowledge of language. You might think that this is plausible if you think that some beliefs, for example, are constituted by linguistic dispositions; one might then know what one believes by being aware of a disposition to assent to a certain sentence, and knowing what that sentence means in one's language.

The ambitious version is that *all* of our self-knowledge can be explained in terms of knowledge of meaning. This seems to me to be incoherent. The problem is not just that it is difficult to see how this could work for the case of perception; the problem is that using knowledge of meaning to explain knowledge that one is in a given mental state involves at least three steps: (i) the mental state in question is constituted by some sort of linguistic behavior, (ii) knowledge of that state is obtained by knowledge of which sentence is involved in the relevant bit of linguistic behavior, and (iii) knowledge of the meaning of that sentence. The problem is that to get to the point where step (iii) can do some work, you need to get past step (ii). But step (ii) presupposes a kind of self-knowledge; in some cases, it will be knowledge of one's 'inner monologue.' And this kind of awareness can hardly be explained away in terms of knowledge of meaning.

## 8 Meaning, speaker-meaning, and knowledge of meaning

It is easy on this topic to go back and forth constantly between the question of how we know what expressions of our language mean, and how we know what we mean by particular uses of such expressions. But these are different questions: speaker-meaning is one thing, and linguistic meaning another.

What a speaker means by an expression evidently has something to do with what the speaker intends to communicate by using the expression. So knowledge of speaker-meaning may just be of a piece with knowledge of intentions.

With the meaning of an expression, matters seem different. We have noted with respect to every mental state we have considered – belief, desire, intention, perceptual representation – that, even if we have privileged access to these states, there is yet a gap between being in the state and knowing that one is in the state which is made obvious by cases of self-deception and inattention. But things seem otherwise with respect to linguistic meaning: *it seems impossible to mean something by an expression without knowing that meaning of that expression in your language.*

This may be explained in part by our pretheoretic notion of understanding. Ordinarily we think that you cannot use an expression with its meaning unless you understand it, and that understanding an expression just is knowing its meaning.

What is involved in knowledge of meaning? Does it make sense to talk about partial knowledge of meaning? Is knowledge that a disquotational meaning-theorem states a truth (+ understanding of the theorem)<sub>4</sub> sufficient for knowing the meaning of the

expression mentioned? Can one have this sort of knowledge while lacking practical abilities plausibly necessary for understanding?