

Social Anti-Individualism, Objective Reference

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Donald Davidson taught me in graduate school. I have learned from him ever since. Quine and Hempel dealt the deathblows to the restricted approach to philosophy embodied in logical positivism. Davidson helped show how philosophy can say new and valuable things about traditional philosophical problems, including issues of fundamental human concern. His work is systematic and subtle. I think that on many basic matters it is right. Disagreement will occupy most of my remarks. But agreement looms largest in the broader scheme of things.

So first, agreement. I am in substantial agreement with Donald's discussion of the subjective—particularly our knowledge of our propositional attitudes as being authoritative and non-evidential. I also agree on what he calls perceptual externalism, and on its compatibility with authoritative self-knowledge. I agree that perceptual knowledge is non-evidential, and that it is fundamentally and directly about the physical world, not about sense-data. I see knowledge of other minds somewhat differently. I think that, like perceptual knowledge and self-knowledge, it can be direct and non-evidential.¹ But I agree in holding that self-knowledge and knowledge of other minds normally stand in a reciprocal relation.

Our disagreements lie primarily in our understanding of the role of the social in anti-individualism (or externalism) and in our understanding of the nature of objectivity.

First, let me characterize differences in our versions of social anti-individualism. We surely agree that as a matter of psychological necessity, we must communicate with others to learn a language. Davidson further argues that, as a constitutive matter, having thoughts and having language are dependent on relations to another person. My social anti-individualism is less global. I argue a priori that given that certain contingent matters are fixed,

¹ Cf. my "Content Preservation", *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 102 (1993), pp. 457-488, and "Reason and the First-Person" in *Knowing Our Own Minds*, C. Wright, B. C. Smithy, and Cynthia Macdonald eds. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998).

certain types of thoughts necessarily depend for their individuation on an individual's relations to others. For example, it is metaphysically or constitutively contingent that an individual allows that norms governing the use of his words partly depend on others' usage. It is contingent that some particular individual lacks sufficient background knowledge to distinguish arthritis from other rheumatoid diseases. Given that these contingent matters are in place, and given that *arthritis* is a non-indexical notion, it is metaphysically or constitutively *necessary* that in order to have a thought about arthritis, one be in certain relations to others who are in a better position to specify the disease. I believe that these arguments bear both on concept possession (the ability to think about arthritis as such) and on reference through thought (the ability to make reference to arthritis at all), whether or not one's thought contains some familiar way of thinking about arthritis. I do not hold that social relations are necessary for having thoughts. My apriori arguments for necessities of social anti-individualism presuppose that certain contingent matters are fixed.

Despite the fact that my arguments are more modest, more concrete, and I think more compelling than Davidson's, he rejects them. One ground Davidson gives is that the incomplete understanding that they invoke—an individual's inability to distinguish arthritis from other rheumatoid diseases—conflicts with first-person authority about attitudes involving the incompletely understood concept (26-27).² I cannot find a clear and cogent explanation of the supposed conflict. I suspect that the point rests on not distinguishing, as I do, between knowing what one's thoughts are in the sense of having the competence required to think them and knowledgeably attribute them to oneself, on one hand, and knowing what one's thoughts are in the sense of being able to give correct explications of them, on the other (27-28).³ This difference may connect to further differences between us regarding the specific ways having a thought depends on inferential relations that connect that thought to other thoughts. I believe that Davidson may be relying on a more restrictive view of these matters than I think tenable. But the view is not explicit in this context.

Another ground Davidson gives for his rejection is the proposal of a different interpretation of the particular cases. Where I held that a person could believe that arthritis occurs in the thigh, Davidson maintains that any such

² Donald Davidson, "Knowing One's Own Mind", *Proceedings and Addresses of The American Philosophical Association*, vol. 60 (1987), pp. 448-9.

³ I emphasize this distinction in various places. Cf. "Individualism and Self-Knowledge" *The Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988), p. 662. Davidson's claim that on my view the relevant agents do not know what they mean or think suggests failure to draw this distinction. Cf. his "Knowing One's Own Mind", *op. cit.*, p. 449-450.

interpretation of a person's belief could not be right.⁴ He maintains that the error is a meta-linguistic one about the dictionary meaning of the word "arthritis". I do not, as Davidson charges, insist that "we are bound to give a person's words the meaning they have in his linguistic community" (28).⁵ My account is based on details particular to the case. I built into the case various facts that I believe make the meta-linguistic move unacceptable. Davidson does not discuss these.

Davidson's critical remark "we understand a speaker best when we interpret him as he intended to be interpreted" (p. 199) tells, I think, in favor of my view, not against it: Speakers commonly intend to be interpreted according to standards of usage that are in some respects better understood by others.⁶ But this is not the crux of the disagreement. For my social anti-individualist thought experiment does not even depend on my view that an expert and an individual with a misconception of the nature of a disease can share beliefs. It is enough if they share reference with non-indexical concepts.⁷ I believe it evident, from many other thought experiments in addition to mine, that partial dependence on others for securing the reference of one's words and concepts is a common and well-entrenched phenomenon. Non-indexical concepts (non-indexical predicational elements in propositional representational contents) must differ if their referents, or ranges of application, differ. Thus since the relevant concepts are non-indexical and their referents or ranges of application differ, the patients in the earth and twin-earth situations have different concepts or intentional thought contents, regardless of whether they share concepts or thoughts with their respective doctors.

Finally, Davidson expresses a distrust of thought experiments that center on conditions that in fact never arise. It is true that the twin-earth aspects of the thought experiment never arise. But these aspects are again inessential. The phenomena of shared reference and shared thoughts despite differences in explicational understanding, and the phenomenon of relying on others for fixing reference and for fixing standards of use, are ubiquitous in social life. The argument can work directly off these facts. I will not defend my view further here. I turn to Davidson's social anti-individualism.

⁴ He appeals to holism about belief and the uncontroversial point that such a person would associate arthritis with different background beliefs and inferences from someone who knows that arthritis can occur only in joints.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 449.

⁶ I believe that there is a network of principles, with many escape clauses, that carry a bias in favor of preservation of meaning and thought content between people who communicate with one another. Cf. my "Content Preservation" *The Philosophical Review* 102 (1993), pp. 457-488; "Interlocution, Perception, and Memory" *Philosophical Studies* 86 (1997), pp. 21-47; "Computer Proof, Apriori Knowledge, and Other Minds" *Philosophical Perspectives* 12 (1998), pp. 1-37; and "Comprehension and Interpretation" in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, L. Hahn ed. (Chicago, Open Court Publishers, 1999).

⁷ Cf. my "Wherein is Language Social?" in Alexander George editor, *Reflections on Chomsky* (London, Basil Blackwell, 1989).

As I noted, Davidson's version is very global. He holds that there are no beliefs without language, no language without an actual interpreter, and hence no beliefs without an actual interpreter. This very global social anti-individualism is linked to a set of further theses. He further claims that having beliefs constitutively depends on having a concept of objectivity, on having intentions to be interpreted as one intends to be interpreted, and on having knowledge of one's own thoughts. I doubt all of these theses. Detailed criticism of all of them here would be impossible. The systematic character of Davidson's work precludes it. I will fix on a pair of central points.

Davidson's triangulation thesis holds that to have thoughts, an individual must have a language that is actually interpreted by someone else. Davidson surely realizes that this thesis is unintuitive. But it is motivated by the plausible view that in order for an individual to have definite thoughts, there must be some non-arbitrary fact or ground that fixes what those thoughts are about. We can assume that something that regularly causes perceptual beliefs and which is discriminable for the individual gives one a start at finding a referent. But this consideration does not distinguish among, for example, light frequencies, retinal surface stimulations, various distal types of stimulations in the environment—such as physical surfaces, physical objects, properties of the objects—and various other elements in the causal chains leading to a purported perceptual belief. The fact that a speaker and an interpreter both respond to the same objects and properties in the distal environment, even though they respond to different light frequencies, different surface stimulations, and so on, gives a non-arbitrary basis for attributing referents to the thoughts. These referents provide a starting point for attributing concepts about those referents. Davidson holds that in the absence of such triangulation in the context of actual linguistic interpretation, there is no non-arbitrary ground for attributing what thoughts are about. Similarly, Davidson holds that in the absence of an interpreter, there is no non-arbitrary way to fix what would count as similarity of response to a purported cause.

I do not find it plausible that the presence of an interpreter, who need bear no causal relation to the interpreted individual, could play any role in constituting the nature of an individual's mental states. I believe that any interpreter must try to interpret mental states whose natures are independent of his or her interpretation. I will not develop this general doubt. I will also lay aside considerations about whether by memory and self-criticism an individual could develop triangulation on his own linguistic practice. I have never been convinced by arguments that hold that this is impossible in any deeper sense than that human children cannot do it.

The ground for doubt that I want to highlight stems from my view that the role that Davidson gives triangulation is filled much earlier in the ontogeny and phylogeny of the mental. Perceptual representation is individu-

ated not only in terms of what an animal can discriminate.⁸ It is individuated by reference to how perception figures in the animal's basic activities and functions. The first thing that a psychologist of animal vision asks is how vision aids the animal in coping with its particular environment. Perceptual representation is always individuated with an eye not only to what the animal or its systems can discriminate, but also to how the discriminations are used by the animal on the environment. The relevant functions and activities are broadly biological and ecological. They are activities like navigating around obstacles, finding home, catching prey, foraging for food, escaping predators, linking up with a mate, and so forth. Relevant objects and properties in the distal environment are those that the animal uses perception to deal with. *Insofar as there is perception*, these are the objects of perceptual representation, other things equal. Similarity of response is also understood in terms of responses (across comparable animals and within an individual animal's own life) appropriate to these activities. The relevant distal objects, properties, and relations are further narrowed down by considering what features are accessible through the sensory receptors. For vision, these would be fundamentally features like color, shape, motion, distance, moving physical bodies, and so on. Other perceptual representations—those of food, danger, or shelter—would have to be explained in terms of their relations to representations of properties like these.

I said "insofar as there is perception". Not all sensory systems are perceptual systems. Perceptual systems link directly to animal activity—unlike servo-regulator sensory systems for regulating heartbeat, digestion, or even most mechanisms for balance. Perceptions—at least many perceptions—are functionally available to the whole animal. Moreover, perceptual systems exhibit perceptual constancies. There are principles or mechanisms in the systems for representing properties or other entities as the same even as proximal stimulation and perspective or mode of presentation vary. For example, a perceptual system might enable an animal to treat an object as stationary even as its retinal image grows dramatically and as its percepts of the object, its shape, and its position change. Or a perceptual system might enable an animal to treat a color as the same even though the illumination (hence the light intensity available to the retina and the perceptual mode of presentation) vary dramatically. Treating entities as the same is responding to them in ways that are functionally the same relative to the animal's basic activities. The science of vision has gone very far in providing rigorous explanations, in these terms, of perception in a wide range of animals.

⁸ Cf. my "Perception", *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 84 (2003), pp. 157-167; and "Perceptual Entitlement", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67 (2003), pp. 503-548..

In my view, the triangulation problem—often called the “disjunction problem”—that Davidson discusses to motivate appeal to linguistic communication in the triangulation thesis is no longer a serious problem. A solution is open to reflection. The same solution has long been exploited in psychology—especially animal psychology and visual psychology. Discriminated elements in the distal environment are the objects of perceptual representation because the distal environment is what enters into animal activity, and because triangulation already occurs within genuine perceptual systems. Given this framework, just which properties and objects are perceptually represented can be determined by empirical testing. Triangulations offered by interpreters in linguistic communication are not needed to provide a non-arbitrary ground that fixes what perceptual representation is about.

Perception is not thought. As a matter of terminology, I take concepts to be certain elements in the representational contents of propositional attitudes. I take thought to be a generic category for propositional attitudes. To think, an animal must have more than perception. As Davidson rightly emphasizes (98-101, 124ff.), it must engage in inferences that tie different beliefs together; it must have intentions connected to beliefs; and so on. Independently of the triangulation thesis, Davidson claims that a creature without language cannot have beliefs. One argument is that without a language an animal cannot have the holistic interconnection among beliefs necessary to give the beliefs definite representational identities.

I believe that Davidson is correct to insist that to have propositional attitudes, an individual must be capable of connecting any given attitude with a range of others through capacities for propositional inference. But I see no apriori ground to think that in the absence of language, an animal's psychology cannot have requisite holistic connections. I want to enter two caveats here. One is that holistic, inferential connections do not do all of the work in determining propositional content. Perceptual beliefs have conceptual representational content that is parasitic on the representational content of perceptions. Perception-dependent concepts have quite definite representational identities that depend not only on their role in simple propositional inferences (a role necessary to enable them to be concepts), but also on their relation to perceptual representations, which have their own definite representational, though non-conceptual, identities. The other caveat is that the nature and extent of the requisite holism should not be assumed apriori. There may be areas of propositional inference for an animal or young child that are relatively specialized in the sense that principles and concepts appropriate to a given domain or type of enterprise are not transferred to other domains. Cognitive specialization seems to be a natural product of evolution, and I see no apriori reason why it should not apply to propositional attitudes as well as

more primitive action sets and perceptual representations—as long as beliefs and intentions of any given sort are connected to some others by a range of inferential capacities—deductive, inductive, categorizational.

Davidson sometimes lists concepts that cannot be correctly attributed to animals. There are, of course, many concepts for which there is no empirical ground to believe an animal has them. It is extremely plausible that many concepts could not mark abilities in an individual's psychology if that individual did not have language. But listing such concepts does not show that attributing simple logical constants, perceptual concepts, and other primitive concepts fitted to an animal's basic activities and abilities is mistaken.

Sometimes Davidson claims that to have concepts and propositional attitudes, a being must have many *general* beliefs, or beliefs about *natures*, or beliefs about *what it is to be* an F (98, 101, 124, 195). I am not sure whether having a language is necessary to having such beliefs.⁹ I think we need a much richer analysis of purported internal connections between having a language and having explicational and explanatory abilities. But I also see no reason why an animal must have beliefs about natures or essences, or a conception of laws or criteria, to have beliefs. I am not even sure that it is necessary that an animal have non-modal general beliefs, as long as it makes inferences according to general principles.¹⁰

Davidson does not defend these claims about the need for general beliefs and beliefs about natures. I am aware that others have. I believe that such defenses as have been mounted do not survive close scrutiny. What is *needed* to have propositional attitudes is an interconnected set of capacities for propositional inference in the formation of belief and in intentional activity—all making use of definite representational contents. The attribution of such abilities should yield genuine, non-otiose explanations of the individual's or species' activities. In the last two or three decades, I believe that empirical explanations of the behavior of very young children and higher, pre-linguistic animals have met these constraints. There is evidence that higher animals use simple reasoning about perceivable objects and events to carry out plans, including long term plans involving adaptable, flexible, multi-form relations

⁹ I think that simple quantification is probably available to non-linguistic higher animals, though I have never been convinced by (Quinean) arguments that quantification is constitutively necessary for objective reference.

¹⁰ Cf. note 9. The very having of concepts requires associated inferential capacities. Inferential capacities are general. I believe that an animal need not be capable of representing logical truths associated with the relevant inference rules. Whether an animal must be capable of *representing* some sort of generality (that is, have quantifiers) if it is to have propositional attitudes seems to me less obvious. One can certainly imagine inferences involving propositional connectives among singular perceptual thoughts, following inference rules for the connectives together with substitution of identities. I believe that certain types of animal memory introduce generality in ways that go beyond perception and that higher animals may have simple beliefs in quantified form. These issues need more exploration.

between means and ends, that are illuminatingly explained only in terms of inferences among simple propositional attitudes. In the case of many non-human species, it seems to me an open empirical question whether they have propositional attitudes. I think that there is empirical ground, however, to think that non-human apes are among those that do. No apriori argument that I know of preempts or rules out these apparent empirical grounds.

Davidson also claims that to have beliefs, a being must be capable of surprise, in the particular sense that it has a *conception of a mistaken belief and a conception of objective truth* (102). I do not find this claim persuasive. In my view, there is a persistent tendency in twentieth century philosophy to move too easily between requirements on having propositional attitudes with objective reference and requirements on attitudes involving a *conception* of objectivity. In the work of some very fine philosophers, the move is just conflation. Davidson does not conflate the two levels. He makes the move quite explicitly.

But I see no impressive justification for it. I think the claim that to have a belief, one must have beliefs about beliefs—and about their objective truth or falsity—is not a conceptually compelling claim. I think it quite implausible. I believe that this claim, and its attendant background considerations, are not nearly strong enough to oppose an increasingly sophisticated and well-entrenched body of empirical explanation. Empirical evidence suggests that there are animals and very young children with beliefs, but no beliefs about beliefs.¹¹

A *conception* of objectivity does require the interconnected set of abilities that Davidson lays out in many subtle and compelling ways. A conception of objectivity is perhaps intimately connected with having a language. A conception of objectivity may well be distinctive of human beings, at least on our planet. But having simple capacities for propositional inference among perceptual beliefs, memories, intentions, and plans that represent a world that is objectively independent of those beliefs does not require a *conception* of objectivity. Having such beliefs perhaps requires a capacity for learning and for surprise in the ordinary sense. It certainly requires a system of first-level beliefs and intentions and first-level capacities for propositional inferences, which are subject to norms for veridicality, correctness, error, entitlement, and so on. But meta-conceptions of these matters are not constitutively necessary.

The notions of correctness and error in representation already have a grip on perceptual representation. They gain grip in the context of the perceptual constancies embedded in animal perceptual systems and in the context of the

¹¹ Cf. for example, Daniel Povanelli, *Folk Physics for Chimps* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000); Michael Tomasello and Josep Call, *Primate Cognition* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997).

use of perception to fulfill animal needs and functions in the animal's normal environment. Notions of (propositional) truth and falsity become applicable when representation is embedded in a system of propositional inference, and when questions of rational and other epistemic norms for inference and belief formation are apropos. This system necessarily involves at least limited inferential holisms, and it again serves the animal's functions in its normal environment. Such a system does require certain capacities to represent independently of the immediate perceptual context which I will not detail here. But having a language and having a concept of objectivity are not necessary conditions on having propositional attitudes. They are conditions on various types of understanding. Propositional abilities emerge before any capacity to understand them.

I have other differences with Davidson. I differ on what it takes to answer the sceptic. I differ on important details of the epistemology of perceptual belief.¹² But I want to conclude on a harmonious note. Excellence in philosophy is not fundamentally a matter of getting things just right. It is a matter of richness in argumentation. It is a matter of depth and breadth of insight. It is a matter of opening new subjects for reflection and of reorienting reasoning about old subjects. It is sometimes a matter of developing new truths or approximate truths. Donald has done all these things, and in good measure. We do not pause frequently enough to celebrate, admire, and praise achievement in philosophy. Here is a case and an occasion where we should do so. Let us hope that we will be given even more from this rich source of philosophical wisdom.¹³

¹² On the former, see my "Some Reflections on Scepticism: Reply to Stroud" in *Reflections and Replies: Essays on the Philosophy of Tyler Burge*, Hahn and Ramberg eds., forthcoming, MIT Press. On the latter, see my "Perceptual Entitlement", *op. cit.*

¹³ This comment is a lightly edited and lightly supplemented version of my oral comments on Donald Davidson's *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* at the convention of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association in Spring of 2002. I have retained some of the informality of the occasion—using "Davidson" in passages of discord and "Donald" where the cadences express harmony.