

24.500 Topics in Philosophy of Mind

Other Minds

Spring 2003/handout 5

Davidson, "Three varieties of knowledge"

Knowledge:

A: of the contents of my own mind

B: of the world around me

C: of what goes on in other people's minds

The claim is that one can't have one of these kinds of knowledge without having the others.

An outline of the argument:

1. Belief is a condition of knowledge

2. In order to have beliefs, one must grasp the concept of objective truth

What seems at least defensible is that in order to have the *concept of belief*, "one must grasp the concept of objective truth". So we need an argument that having beliefs entails having the concept of belief (see "Rational animals", 104).

3. In order to have the concept of objective truth, one must communicate in a language with another

What seems at least defensible is that in order to *discover* that some creature has the concept of truth, we need to observe the creature communicating in a language with another.

Alternatively, 2 and 3 could be replaced by:

2* In order to have beliefs, one must communicate in a language with another.

And one might begin the argument for 2* by claiming that in order to discover that some creature has beliefs, we need to observe the creature communicating in a language with another.

4. Knowledge of other minds is a necessary condition for linguistic communication

5. Knowledge of the world is a necessary condition for linguistic communication

Therefore:

6. If one has any knowledge at all, one has A- and B-type knowledge

What about C?

we are not in a position to attribute thoughts to others unless we know what we think since attributing thoughts to others is a matter of matching the verbal and other behavior of others to our own propositions or meaningful sentences. Knowledge of our own minds and knowledge of the world are thus mutually independent. (213)

Knowledge of the contents of our own minds must, in most cases, be trivial. The reason is that, apart from special cases, the problem of interpretation cannot arise. When I am asked about the propositional contents of my own mind, I must use my own sentences. (213)

“The second person”

What’s the least n such that there could be n speakers of a language? Answer: 2.

speaking a language...does not depend on two or more speakers speaking in the same way; it merely requires that each speaker intentionally make himself interpretable to the other (the speaker must ‘go on’ more or less as the other expects, or at least is equipped to interpret).

This is certainly a necessary condition for successful *communication*. But why is it a condition that must be satisfied in order to speak a language at all? Why couldn’t someone go on in the same way—satisfy all the conditions for being *interpretable*—without actually being interpreted? (115)

What explains the fact that it seems so natural to say that the child is responding to the table, as opposed to, say, the retinal image of the table, when it utters ‘table’?

The child finds tables similar; we find tables similar; and we find the child’s responses in the presence of tables similar. It now makes sense for us to call the responses of the child responses to tables. Given these three patterns of response

we can assign a location to the stimuli that elicit the child's responses...It is the common cause of our response and the child's response.

If we consider a single creature by itself, its responses, no matter how complex, cannot show that it is reacting to, or thinking about, events a certain distance away rather than, say, on its skin. The solipsist's world can be any size; which is to say...it is not a world. (119)

Again, the move is from the conditions under which we know/have evidence for p to the conditions under which p is true.

"Epistemology externalized"

There is a presumption that we are right about the contents of our own minds; so in the cases where we are right, we have knowledge

The 'so' is questionable

But any particular item of such knowledge is logically independent of our beliefs about a world outside

The point seems to be that if P is a proposition to the effect that I am in such-and-such mental state, and Q is a proposition about a world outside, the P and Q are logically independent. Hence, on this view, mental states are neither object-involving (believing that Smith is bald, seeing Jones), nor factive (knowing that it's sunny, seeing that the cat is on the mat).

and so cannot supply a foundation for science and commonsense beliefs. This is how skeptics, like Hume, reason, and I think they are right; knowledge of the contents of our own minds cannot be the basis for the rest of our knowledge.

Here the 'so' seems quite unwarranted (unless skepticism about induction is assumed).

Suppose I think I see a mouse disappear behind a chair. Clearly this belief could be mistaken. But would this belief be wrong if I did not truly believe that a mouse was a small four-footed mammal, or a chair an object made for sitting?

Shouldn't this be: "But would I *have* this belief if I did not...?"

Because of the holistic character of empirical belief, then, it is impossible that all our beliefs about the world are false

More strongly:

in the simplest case words and thoughts refer to what causes them...it cannot happen most of our plainest beliefs about what exists in the world are false

The word/thought cases should be distinguished, since words (unlike, perhaps, thoughts) can be identified non-semantically.

Davidson's externalism distinguished from Putnam's and Burge's:

I agree...that the usual cause of my use of the word determines what it means, I do not see why sameness of microstructure is necessarily the relevant similarity.

I am not impressed with the arguments for social externalism, for three reasons:

1. [we understand a speaker best when we interpret him as he intended to be interpreted; this will explain his actions far better than if we suppose he means and thinks what someone else might mean and think who used the same words 'correctly']

2. [there is a conflict...with first person authority]

Not clear why there is, given Davidson's argument that Putnam-cases don't pose a problem.

3. [a general distrust of thought experiments that pretend to reveal what we would say under conditions that in fact never arise]

Hmm. What about the omniscient interpreter, swampman,...?

Burge and I are essentially in agreement...on perceptual externalism

Anyone who accepts perceptual externalism knows he cannot be systematically deceived about whether there are such things as cows, people, water, stars, and chewing gum.

The argument of "the second person" again:

The identification of the objects of thought rests, then, on a social basis