

Handout #4

The Impossibility of Radical Interpretation

Indeterminacy

... belief and meaning cannot be uniquely reconstructed from speech behaviour. The remaining indeterminacy should not be judged as a failure of interpretation, but rather as a logical consequence of the nature of theories of meaning (just as it is not a sign of some failure in our ability to measure temperature that the choice of an origin and a unit is arbitrary). ("The Material Mind (1973), p. 257)

A theory is underdetermined by a statement of evidence E iff the theory accounts for E, but it is possible that an alternative theory accounts for E equally well.

Indeterminacy arises when two further conditions are met:

- i. Evidence marshaled for the theory is all the possible relevant evidence.
- ii. The concepts of the theory are purely theoretical concepts.

In decision theory the concept of degree of belief and desirability (how strongly someone believes something, and how much he desires it) receive empirical interpretations in terms of an agent's choice behavior, that is, the pattern of the agent's choice behavior wholly determines what his degrees of belief and desirabilities are: there can be no further hidden facts about them. Two apparently differing theories about degrees of belief and desirabilities (which use different systematic assignments of numbers to keep track of relations among degrees of belief and desirabilities) which account for the same choice behavior, i.e., correctly predict it, will state the same facts about the agent.

So the idea we are after is that what is special about alternative theories which admit of the possibility of indeterminacy is that they have the content of (at least some of) their theoretical concepts exhausted by their use in keeping track of the evidence in a way that results in the content of the theories' theoretical claims not transcending their predications about facts in the domain of evidence.

Broadly stated, my theme is that we should think of meanings and beliefs as interrelated constructs of a single theory just as we already view subjective values and probabilities as interrelated constructs of decision theory. ("Belief and the Basis of Meaning" (1974), p. 146).

Everyday linguistic and semantic concepts are part of an intuitive theory for organizing more primitive data, so only confusion can result from treating these concepts and their supposed objects as if they had a life of their own. (Ibid., p. 143)

Remarks

If there is an a priori argument that radical interpretation is possible, given the constraints and data available, then if there are alternative theories equally compatible with the evidence, there is indeterminacy.

The assumption that there is or can be indeterminacy is equivalent to the assumption that the interrelated concepts of the theory of interpretation, of meaning, reference, truth, belief, desire, preference, intention and so on are purely theoretical.

The assumption that the concepts of the theory of interpretation open the possibility of indeterminacy, and hence are theoretical concepts, which is implicit in accept the radical interpreter's standpoint as fundamental, shows how profoundly anti-Cartesian Davidson's approach to interpretation is.

The view that their fundamental job is to fit behavior into pattern made coherent by a theory entails that it is a profound mistake to suppose our primary mode of application or understanding of them lies in the first person case.

It cannot be taken for granted that these concepts are in the intended sense theoretical concepts.

In particular, if there threatens to be too much indeterminacy, that will call into question both the possibility of radical interpretation and the associated assumption about the character of the concepts involved.

Two Challenges

- 1) Making sense of the first person point of view compatibly with this view of the nature of psychological and linguistic concepts.
- 2) Making sense of indeterminacy from the point of view of the radical interpreter.

1) Can the radical interpreter (any of us really) make sense of his own position on this view?

- i. For our position as investigators of the world presupposes that we know our own thoughts but not on the basis of observations of our behavior, for that itself would presuppose prior knowledge of our thoughts.
- ii. Independently of this methodological point, it is obvious that we do know our own thoughts without inferring it from our behavior, and the question is how this can be compatible with the view that the concepts in question are theoretical.

2) A Potential Difficulty.

A complete data set for interpretation will include, for each object language occasion sentence s , an L-sentence, $L(s)$. Two data sets are equivalent iff if the L-sentence for s in the first is equivalent to the L-sentence in the second. $L1(s)$ is equivalent to $L2(s)$ iff the right hand sides express the same thing.

If we can confirm two non-equivalent data sets, then the corresponding TF-sentences will represent the object language sentence as having different interpretive truth conditions. If compatibly with the rest of the constraints we could construct an adequate theory of interpretation starting from each, we would have to conclude that the interpreter cannot, within the constraints, given the data, confirm a correct interpretation theory for the speaker. ☒ Radical Interpretation is not possible.

Which Assumption of the Interpreter's is Mistaken?

(Grace) Ceteris paribus, when we replace 'p' in (S)

(S) S believes at t that p

with a sentence that expresses the content of an environmentally prompted belief of S's, the sentence expresses also a condition in S's environment that prompts that belief.

(I) Ceteris paribus, the L-sentences that the interpreter confirms identify conditions under which a speaker holds true sentences that are also the prompting conditions, if any, which those beliefs, that are the basis of the speaker's holding those sentences true, are about.

The mistaken assumption is (I).