

Handout #6

Are There Any A Priori Arguments for Radical Interpretation?

... the acquisition of knowledge is not based on a progression from the subjective to the objective; it emerges holistically, and is interpersonal from the start. (Davidson 1991, abstract, p. 191)

The solipsist's world can be any size; which is to say, from the solipsist's point of view it has no size, it is not a world. (Davidson 2001 (1992), p. 119)

The Necessity of Language for Thought

This is essential to the idea that the standpoint of the radical interpreter is fundamental for understanding the nature of thought. In addition, Davidson's argument for this, if successful, would at the same time support a very strong version of the requirement that language be public and would support the main premise of the argument for the primacy of the third person point of view.

Main arguments for the necessity of language for thought

- The argument from holism
 - Only linguistic behavior is rich enough
- The argument from the concept of belief
 - Belief requires the concept of belief, which requires language.
- Arguments supporting premises of argument B.
 - The argument from surprise
 - The argument from the concept of error
 - Supports the argument from the necessity of communication, which supports the primacy of the third person point of view
 - Supported also by
 - The argument from triangulation
 - The argument from knowledge of other minds

[A] The Argument from Holism

(A1) Beliefs and other propositional attitudes are ascribable only in dense networks of such attitudes.

(A2) Attributing a dense network of propositional attitudes to another requires for support a rich pattern of behavior that gives substance to the attributions.²⁹⁶

(A3) The pattern of behavior required cannot be exhibited in the absence of verbal behavior interpretable as speech acts.

(A4) Therefore, only linguistic animals can have propositional attitudes.

[B] The Argument from the Concept of Belief

(B1) One can have propositional attitudes (thoughts) only if one has beliefs.

- (B2) One can have beliefs only if one has the concept of belief. [C]
(B3) One can have the concept of belief only if one has a language. [D]
(B4) Therefore, one can have propositional attitudes (thoughts) only if one has a language.

[C] The Argument from Surprise

- (C1) One can have a general stock of beliefs only if one can be surprised.
(C2) One can be surprised (i.e., come to realize that one or more of one's beliefs (expectations) was not correct) only if one has the concept of belief.
(C3) Therefore, one can have beliefs only if one has the concept of belief. [B2]

[D] The Argument from the Concept of Error

(D1) To have the concept of a belief, one must have the concept of error, or, what is the same thing, of objective truth (i.e., a way things are independent of how one believes them to be).

(D2) The claim that a creature possesses the concept of error, or objective truth, stands in need of grounding, i.e., we need some account of how a creature is able to have such a concept, what conditions must be in place in order for the creature to have it: this must take the form of explaining how there could be scope in the creature's behavior or experience for application of the concept.

(D3) We can understand how a creature who was in communication with other creatures could have the concept of error, as a tool used in interpretation to achieve a better rational fit of a speaker's behavior to the evidence we have for his beliefs and meanings; that is, the concept would have some work to do (it would have some scope for application) for interpreters of others' speech.

(D4) There is scope for the application of the concept of objective truth in a creature's behavior or experience only if it is (or has been) in communication with others.

(D5) Therefore, from (D2)-(D4), to have the concept of error or objective truth one must be (or have been) in communication with others.

(D6) Therefore, from (D1) and (D5), to have the concept of belief, one must have a language, and be (or have been) in communication with others. (That is, (B3).)

[E] The Argument from the Necessity of Communication

(E1) Necessarily, every thinker is in communication, or has been in communication and potentially is in communication, with others.

(E2) Therefore, necessarily, every thinker is interpretable in any environment in which he is located, by any other speaker.

(E3) Therefore, radical interpretation is possible, and the only content that can be given to psychological and linguistic concepts is provided by their role in accounting for behavior, in the context of a theory of interpretation formulated from the third person standpoint.

[F] The Argument from Triangulation

(F1) We can make sense of there being a determinate object of thought for a creature only if we can see it as a speaker triangulating with another speaker in communication about a common object of thought.

(F2) Nothing can have thoughts unless there can be determinate objects of its thoughts.

(F3) Therefore, nothing is a thinker unless it is a speaker which is in communication (or has been in communication) with another speaker.