

The Coherence Theory of Truth

Discussion Text:

Interpretation, meaning and skepticism (Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge”)

Imagine you wake up one day to find yourself in an utterly unfamiliar situation. You have no idea where you are or how you got here. The noontime sun is punishingly hot. You're uncomfortable, hungry, and thirsty. You slowly gaze around the unfamiliar countryside, shake your head in disbelief, and settle down on a nearby boulder in a thicket of trees to contemplate your situation. Before long you hear voices, distant and faint at first, but closer and clearer with each passing moment. The voices come from a small band of men traveling down the savannah along the forest's edge. Equipped with bow and arrow, they're obviously a hunting party. You're disappointed to hear that they speak a language utterly unfamiliar to you. You can't understand a word. Not knowing what to expect from them, you lie low and observe them. As they round the bend, their faces turn white as chalk. After an instant of stunned silence, they point energetically and yell, “Flarg! Flarg!,” then dash madly for the trees and clamber up. “What's this all about?” you wonder as you shuffle sideways to get a look at what scared them so: a huge hippopotamus charging toward them! Apparently, they had surprised it while it was grazing. They keep track of it carefully while up in their perch, frequently pointing to it and saying, “Flarg.” After it's gone, they creep down and continue on their way. You follow along behind for the remainder of the day. (They notice you but don't seem to care.) Whenever a hippo is in view, whether it be swimming, walking, grazing, or charging, they point and say “flarg,” but otherwise they never say “flarg.”

Let's reflect for a moment on what you would make of these people. In particular, how would you interpret the word “flarg?” And what beliefs would you attribute to them?

The best interpretation of “flarg” is that it means “hippo,” because they appear to use it to refer to hippos, and only to hippos. Understanding “flarg” to mean “hippo” makes their assertions turn out true. But why not interpret “flarg” to mean “biscuit” or “pencil” or “lily?” Because that would be extraordinarily uncharitable – you'd then be interpreting them as making false assertions every time they pointed and uttered “flarg.”

What beliefs you attribute to them depends on their behavior. When they point and say “flarg,” you understand them to be expressing their belief that there's a hippo. When they flee from a charging hippo, you understand them to believe that a hippo is charging, and that a charging hippo poses a threat. (You

Epistemology II

Topic 4

consequently attribute to them a fear of charging hippos.) When they climb up the tree, you understand them to believe that climbing a tree is a way to escape the threat. (You also attribute to them a desire to not be injured, or else their escaping behavior makes no sense.) When they climb down after the hippo is no longer in sight, you understand them to believe that the hippo is gone and no longer threatens them. You also attribute to them belief in all the obvious and relevant consequences of all the beliefs just mentioned.

Notice something important: all the beliefs we just mentioned are true. You don't attribute false beliefs to them. You would not attribute to them the belief that a ground squirrel is charging, nor the belief that the hippo approaches to invite them to dinner, nor the belief that trees are lethally toxic to the touch. Of course, you might find it necessary to attribute some false beliefs to them as you follow them around all day. For example, suppose you knew that a maimed and emaciated adolescent elephant was approaching unseen by the group. Recently its ears and trunk were, tragically, cut off by vicious hooligans, making it impossible for it to nourish itself. Consequently, from afar it looks very much like a hippo. The hunters notice it from afar, scream "Flarg!," and head for the treetops again. In this case, you'd attribute to them the false belief that the animal is a hippo. But notice that this false belief is reasonable. It makes sense given the true background beliefs you attribute to them about a hippo's appearance, along with the true beliefs you attribute to them about the observable properties of the animal in question.

Notice something else important: you also attribute a well-rounded, consistent, and coherent set of beliefs to them. Because you attribute the belief that a hippo is charging, you also attribute the belief that an animal is charging, that hippos exist, that hippos can charge, etc. Because you attribute the belief that trees are nontoxic, you avoid attributing the belief that trees are toxic, or the belief that trees are probably toxic, or the suspicion that they are toxic.

To sum up, we find ourselves interpreting others' beliefs as being mostly true, reasonable, and coherent. A thoroughgoing principle of charity informs our interpretation. We came to this conclusion by studying a simple example of what Donald Davidson calls "radical interpretation." Radical interpretation occurs when we need to, as they say, "start from scratch" in understanding others. This would happen if we knew neither what their words meant nor what they believed. The example about the hippos was like this.

That's all very interesting, but how does it apply to epistemology? The application comes in two stages.

Epistemology II

Topic 4

First, at least in the central and most basic cases, we as interpreters must “take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief.” Of course, that’s just a methodological statement about how interpretation must proceed: we must interpret beliefs as being mostly true. But Davidson says its significance goes far beyond that, because the way an interpreter must understand belief is the way beliefs must be. The content of a set of beliefs must mostly reflect what causes them. This doesn’t guarantee that all beliefs are true. But it does guarantee that most beliefs must be true, so any particular belief is at least likely to be true. “Belief is in its nature veridical,” as Davidson puts it.

Second, any being capable of thought is in a position to appreciate that belief is by nature veridical. You need only “reflect” on the nature of belief to accomplish this. This guarantees that all thinkers have available a reason for thinking that their beliefs are mostly true, creating a “presumption in favor” of each particular belief being true. And now the external-world skeptic is in trouble.

We might understand Davidson’s basic argument like so:

1. If all thinkers are in a position to know that most of their beliefs must be true, then skeptical worries (about justification, at least) are utterly unmotivated. (Premise)
2. All thinkers are in a position to know that most of their beliefs must be true. (Premise)
3. So skeptical worries are utterly unmotivated. (From 1 and 2)

That’s Davidson’s main argument in “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,”¹ but a couple other comparative points are worth mentioning. First, earlier we saw that Sellars thought the nature of concept and language acquisition guaranteed that you were a reliable believer (§§8–9). Davidson’s view resembles Sellars’s in this respect: something about the nature of beliefs, concepts, and the like guarantees reliability. And both Davidson and Sellars expressed confidence that all believers could somehow appreciate this important fact, though in both cases it seems fairly clear that ordinary people do not in fact base their beliefs on any such fact or the sophisticated reasoning that reveals it.

Second, earlier we saw Bonjour pose a dilemma to foundationalists who favored the given as the ultimate basis of knowledge (§10). Bonjour’s dilemma was that the given must be cognitive or noncognitive; but if it’s cognitive, then, like a belief, it stands in need of justification; and

Epistemology II

Topic 4

if it's noncognitive, then it cannot justify belief; so either way, the given fails to solve the regress problem. Davidson poses essentially the same dilemma: either sensory experiences can, in virtue of their content, stand in "logical" relations to beliefs, or they cannot; but if they can, then they "may be lying" and so, like beliefs, we need a reason to trust them; and if they cannot, then although they might be able to "cause" beliefs, they cannot justify them; so either way, foundationalism fails to solve the regress problem and skepticism threatens. This perceived failure of experiential foundations leads Davidson to conclude that "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief." And this motivates him to seek the response to skepticism we reviewed earlier, culminating in the argument 1–3.

Davidson, Donald, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," pp. 307–19 in Ernest Lepore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (New York: Blackwell, 1989). © 1989 by Ernest Lepore.