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Triangular Externalism

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1. Outlines of Triangular Externalism

Content externalism (also known as "semantic externalism") is the thesis that the contents of an individual's thoughts and the meanings of his words depend on relations that the individual bears to aspects of his physical or social environment. Mental content and semantic meaning are not determined solely by internal properties of the individual's mind and brain. At least some properties of the content of thoughts and the meaning of words are external to the subject's skin, to the body or to the brain. Content externalism stands opposed to *content internalism*, which holds that the contents of an individual's mental states can be individuated fully in ways that do not require reference to any particular objects or properties in the environment.[1]

Content externalism comes in many different flavors. First, we can distinguish between *global* and *local* externalism, where the former holds for all kinds of thoughts and all classes of expressions while the latter is restricted to certain expressions and thoughts (e.g., thoughts involving natural kind words, proper names, and indexicals). Davidson is clearly a global externalist (cf. Davidson 1988: 47–48).

Second, we can divide externalism into two varieties – physical and social – depending on the kind of environmental factors that figure in the determination of mental content (Davidson 2001b: 2). Davidson's externalism combines elements of physical and social externalism. To understand his externalism, it is useful to start with the physical aspect.

Davidson (2001b: 2) calls his version of physical externalism *perceptual externalism*. The central tenet of perceptual externalism is the idea that "the contents of our thoughts and sayings are partly determined by the history of causal interactions with the environment" (Davidson 1990: 200); they are determined by "what has typically caused similar thoughts" and sayings (Davidson 1990: 201). Davidson declares:

> . . . in the simplest cases the events and objects that cause a belief also determine the contents of that belief. Thus the belief that is differentially and under normal conditions caused by the evident presence of something yellow, one's mother, or a tomato is the belief that something yellow, one's mother, or a tomato is present. (Davidson 1989: 195)

Externalist theories can be either *historical* or *ahistorical* depending on whether thought contents are said to supervene on the present and past or just on the present relations the individual bears to aspects of his environment. Davidson's perceptual externalism is a kind of historical externalism, for it is the *causal history* of the subject's relations with objects and events in the environment that is said to determine mental content (Davidson 1988: 44, 1990: 199–200). The main argument for historical externalism is the Swampman thought experiment. Davidson (1987: 19) invites us to imagine that lightning strikes a tree in the swamp and that, in the ensuing chemical reaction, something emerges from the swamp that is a molecule-by-molecule duplicate of some actual human being, for example, Donald Davidson. Let us call Davidson's tree twin *Swampman*. Since Swampman is a physical duplicate of Davidson, it does everything (nonintentionally described) that Davidson would have done if the lightning had not killed him.[2] Swampman's body describes the same motions through space that Davidson's would have, the same sounds issue from its mouth as would have issued from Davidson's. Although no one can tell the difference between the two, there is a difference. Swampman does not recognize anyone, know anyone's name, or remember anything before its creation. But this is not the only difference between Davidson and Swampman. Davidson claims that because Swampman has not learned words "in a context that would give [them] the right meaning – or any meaning at all," it cannot "be said to mean anything by the sounds it makes, nor to have any thoughts" (Davidson 1987: 19). Since Swampman lacks the relevant past causal interactions with objects in its environment, its utterances and brain states do not bear meaning or mental content, respectively.

According to Davidson, the history of causal relations between the subject and features of his physical environment is not sufficient for the determination of thought content. It is not enough to say that the content of a thought is determined by what typically causes the thought. We also need a way of singling out the relevant cause of a thought among all the possible causes, which include both proximal and distal ones. We need some way of determining whether I am thinking about, to use Quine's example, the nearby rabbit, undetached rabbit parts, a rabbit-fusion, the rabbit-shaped stimulation of my retina, or something else altogether (cf. Davidson 1990: 201). This is the problem of the inscrutibility of reference.

Davidson's solution to the problem of the inscrutibility of reference turns on what may be called *interpretationism*, that is, the view, roughly, that beliefs are not observable entities in themselves, but rather explanatory posits attributed to speakers to make sense of their behavior. According to Davidson, "[w]e have the idea of belief only from the role of belief in the interpretation of language, for as a private attitude it is not intelligible" (Davidson 1975: 170). Given the interpretationist view (which Davidson denies is an antirealist one – see Chapter 16 in this volume), there is no gap between an interpreter's best judgment of a subject's thought and the truth about the subject's thought. Under ideal conditions, one's thought contents are transparent to an inter-

preter. Davidson declares: "What a fully informed interpreter could know about what a speaker means is all there is to learn; the same goes for what the speaker believes" (Davidson 1983: 148). The problem of the inscrutibility of reference is solved by saying that the relevant cause of a speaker's thought is whatever is situated at the intersection of the two lines that can be drawn between the speaker, the interpreter, and the object or event in the world they are responding to and communicating about.

The interpretation process of identifying the particular thing that determines thought content Davidson calls *triangulation*. Triangulation is a term used in navigation and refers to a method of determining a third point from two given points and a complex three-place relation holding between the three points. Davidson uses the term to describe the process by which the communication between two or more people determines the meanings of terms and the content of thoughts. Two people triangulate on a given object or event when both of them react to the object or event and then react in turn to each other's reactions.

> We may think of it as a form of triangulation: each of two people is reacting differentially to sensory stimuli streaming in from a certain direction. If we project the incoming lines outward, their intersection is the common cause. If the two people note each other's reactions (in the case of language, verbal reactions), each can correlate these observed reactions with his or her stimuli from the world. The common cause can now determine the contents of an utterance and a thought. The triangle which gives content to thought and speech is complete. But it takes two to triangulate. Two or, of course, more. (Davidson 1991: 213)

Since, according to Davidson, thought content is determined by the triangular interaction involving two people and a shared public environment, his externalism may be called *triangular externalism*. The social process of triangulation is needed to select the content-determining features in the environment. Without two people triangulating a common cause, it cannot be determined what each of them is thinking about. But triangulation is not only needed *to know* what someone is thinking about. Davidson makes the stronger claim that the process of triangulation *constitutes* thought content. There would be no thought content to know about unless triangulation took place.

> [T]riangulation . . . is necessary if there is to be any answer to the question what [a creature's] concepts are concepts of. . . . the problem is not, I should stress, one of verifying what objects or events a creature is responding to; the point is that without a second creature responding to the first, there can be no answer to the question. (Davidson 1992: 119, cf. Davidson 2006: 1059–1060)

Triangular externalism has it that there would be no thought content in a solipsist world. Without an interpreter concretely triangulating with the speaker, there is no content and thus no thought and no language. The possibility of thought and language only emerges together with a community. "The possibility of thought . . . depends . . . on the fact that two or more creatures are responding . . . to input from a shared world, and from each other" (Davidson 1997b: 83, cf. Davidson 2001b: 7). Communication with people whose perceptual and concept-forming abilities and dispositions are similar to ours is constitutive of thought content.

Triangular externalism is of central importance for Davidson's overall philosophical position. Davidson uses triangular externalism to argue against epistemological foundationalism and external-world skepticism (see Chapter 32 in this volume). Granted that thought requires communication, as triangular externalism claims, it is not possible that I should know about my own thoughts but not know about other people's thoughts and the external world. None of the basic kinds of knowledge – knowledge of the external world, of our own mind, and of other minds – is reducible to one of the others, and none of them has a logical primacy over any other (cf. Davidson 1991). This conclusion speaks not only against foundationalism but also against external world skepticism. For if we know our own thoughts, then, given triangular externalism, we can infer that there is an external world and there are other like-minded creatures. In other words, if we know our own thoughts, triangular externalism allows us to recognize that we could never be in a position to doubt our knowledge of other minds or of an external world. ". . . [I]f we can think or question at all, we already know there are other people with minds like ours, and that we share a world with them" (Davidson 1990: 200–201, cf. Davidson 1999: 31).

Needless to say, the antiskeptical consequences of triangular externalism have met with criticism.[3]

2. Externalism, Interpretation, and Holism

We saw that Davidson uses the Swampman thought experiment to argue for historical externalism, that is, the view that "the correct interpretation of what the speaker means . . . depends on the *natural history* of what is in the head" (Davidson 1988: 44, my emphasis). We also saw that Davidson embraces interpretationism, that is, the view that there is no gap between an interpreter's best judgment of a subject's thought and the truth about the subject's thought. Though not inconsistent, interpretationism does not seem to sit well with historical externalism. Given that Swampman is not any harder to interpret than the rest of us, why is it is supposed to lack thoughts?

The Swampman story can be made to fit the interpretationist view by supposing that the reason Swampman is thoughtless is that it has not been interpreted in the past. If repeated actual interpretations are constitutive of thoughts, the absence of history brings with it the absence of thought. Textual evidence, however, speaks against this reading of Davidson. Davidson claims that Swampman lacks thoughts not because it has not been interpreted in the past, but because it has not learned words "in a context that would given [them] the right meaning - or any meaning at all" (Davidson 1987: 19).

Another way to make the Swampman story fit interpretationism is to claim that the interpretability of a speaker depends on facts about how the speaker learned his words. Yet this claim does not square with our interpretative practice. First, we do not usually have to gather information about a speaker's language learning to be able to successfully interpret his utterances. Second, having this kind of information may have no bearing on the interpretation. Swampman is a case in point. Even when we know that Swampman is brand new, it is reasonable for us (the interpreters) to treat it as uttering sentences that are systematically translatable into our language, for this will give us

good predictions and explanations of its behavior. Thus, it is not clear how facts about language learning are supposed to figure in the interpretative process in such a way that Swampman's utterances turn out to be uninterpretable.

The best way to reconcile historical externalism with interpretativism is to treat them as independently necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for having thoughts. Having thoughts requires not only that one is interpreted, but also that one learned words in the right sort of way (Hahn 2003: 45).[4]

Apart from the tension between historical externalism and interpretationism, there is a tension between triangular externalism and holism. Davidson is a holist in that he holds that the meanings of words and the contents of thoughts depend on the meanings of other words and the contents of other thoughts, respectively. He declares, for instance, that "we can give the meaning of any sentence (or word) only by giving the meaning of every sentence (and word) in the language" (Davidson 1967: 22). And regarding thought content, Davidson writes that "a belief is identified by its location in a pattern of beliefs; it is the pattern that determines the subject matter of the belief, what the belief is about" (Davidson 1975: 168). Now the problem with holism is that it does not sit well with triangular externalism. There is nothing about triangular externalism that speaks against the atomistic view whereby a belief can have content independently of the web in which it is embedded.

By and large, there are two ways of reconciling externalism with holism: one can weaken externalism or holism. The first option is to say that the triangular interaction between the subject, the interpreter, and the shared environment is not sufficient for content determination. Thought content is determined not only by the triangular interaction, but also by the explanatory and inferential relations that hold among the beliefs in a system. On this picture, there are two independent elements that are responsible for content determination: a referential element (introduced by the subject's causal history) and an inferential one (introduced by holistic constraints) (Amoretti 2007: 315–316). Maybe this is why Davidson insists that "the contents of our thoughts . . . are *partly* determined by the history of causal interactions with the environment" (Davidson 1990: 200, my emphasis).

Another (and better) way of reconciling externalism with holism is to weaken the latter. To weaken holism means to regard it as nothing more than an extra constraint on interpretation (cf. De Rosa 1999: 204–205; Lepore and Ludwig 2005: 211–213, 339–340). Following this proposal, one could say that a speaker's sentence or thought must be interpreted in such a way that it is consistent with whatever interpretation have been given of the rest of his sentences or thoughts. Interpretative holism (as opposed to semantic holism) is perfectly compatible with triangular externalism.

3. Davidson on Other Forms of Externalism

Different kinds of externalism take different kinds of environmental facts as responsible for the determination of thought content. Two well-known kinds of externalism are due to Hilary Putnam and Tyler Burge. Putnam holds a kind of physical externalism whereby the hidden (e.g., chemical) structure of objects determines the reference of natural kind terms. Burge argues for a version of social externalism (which he calls

"anti-individualism"), whereby thought content is determined by the linguistic norms and practices of the language community. Understanding why Davidson rejects these kinds of externalism helps understanding his own externalism.

The main road leading to Putnam's version of physical externalism is Twin Earth thought experiments. Putnam (1975) asks us to imagine a world, Twin Earth, where everything is identical to Earth except the compound we call "water" (H_2O) has a different atomic structure (XYZ). XYZ is wet, colorless, odorless, and has all the same sorts of macro-properties as H_2O; nevertheless it has a different structure. Putnam claims that even though the residents of Twin Earth use the word "water" in all the same ways Earthlings do (because both are only familiar with macro-properties, let's say), the word "water" on Twin Earth refers to XYZ (and expresses the concept *twater*) and not H_2O. So Twin Earthlings only have thoughts about twater. Since the word "water" is used in all the same ways, and the Twin Earthlings are physiologically and psychologically identical to Earthlings, the only way to determine the content of their thoughts is through reference to the environment they are in (the one that has twater). Putnam concludes that the mental states involving natural kind terms don't supervene on physical states of our brains but on the physical states of our environment. In Putnam's famous phrase, "meanings ain't in the head" (Putnam 1975: 227).

Apart from rejecting realism (or essentialism) about natural kinds, Davidson criticizes Putnam for assuming that "[i]f a thought is identified by a relation to something outside the head, it isn't wholly in the head. (It ain't in the head.)" (Davidson 1987: 31). It is this assumption, Davidson argues, that gives rise to two mistaken views: first, that externalism poses a threat to first-person authority and, second, that externalism is incompatible with anomalous monism and the token-identity theory.

Anomalous monism is the view that although there are no strict laws to connect psychological types of events and physical types of events, any particular mental event is identical to some particular physical event. Claiming that there are no strict deterministic laws on the basis of which mental events can be predicted and explained amounts to a rejection of local supervenience. Davidson points out that externalism and anomalous monism are both committed to the denial of local supervenience. Externalism denies local supervenience by arguing against the thesis that any two nonrelationally physically indistinguishable persons must also be indistinguishable with respect to their thought contents. At the same time, anomalous monism and externalism are both committed to global supervenience. Externalism is committed to global supervenience because Davidson maintains that in the case of physical duplicates with different thoughts "there is *something* different about them, even in the physical world; their causal histories are different" (Davidson 1987: 33).[5]

Davidson argues that externalism is compatible not only with the token-identity theory, but also with first-person authority. The point is that "it doesn't follow, simply from the fact that meanings are identified in part by relations to objects outside the head, that meanings aren't in the head" (Davidson 1987: 31). To think otherwise, Davidson says, "would be as bad as to argue that because my being sunburned presupposes the existence of the sun, my sunburn isn't a condition of my skin" (Davidson 1987: 31). Just as sunburn has intrinsic properties that are located in the skin, thoughts (and meanings) have intrinsic (neurological) properties that are "in the head." But if thoughts have intrinsic properties – if they are not entirely outside the head – then there is some-

thing about them that can be known in a privileged, that is, nonempirical way. Davidson concludes that externalism poses no threat to the first-person authority.

Externalism and first-person authority may very well be compatible, but the sunburn-argument fails to establish this. The crux with the sunburn argument is that given externalism, the intrinsic properties of our thoughts play no decisive role for the determination of their content; instead, what determines thought content are extrinsic properties. But the extrinsic properties of our thoughts are not knowable in any privileged way. Hence, pointing out that externalism is compatible with token-identity theory has no impact on the issue of whether externalism and first-person authority are compatible (Bernecker 1996: 122–127).

Besides Putnam, the chief proponent of orthodox externalism is Burge. Burge's anti-individualism is motivated by means of a thought experiment involving a doctor and a patient who believes that "arthritis" applies to a disease one can have in one's thigh as well as in one's joints (Burge 2007). Burge suggests that, even though the patient incompletely understands the meaning of the term "arthritis," we should ascribe to him a belief about arthritis when he says, for example, "I have arthritis in my thigh." The reason is that the meaning of a term (here "arthritis") is determined by the extension it has for the members of the subject's linguistic community. Then Burge constructs a counterfactual world where "arthritis" refers not to arthritis, but to a variety of rheumatoid ailments that can occur in both muscles and joints. The idea is that when the identical twin of the patient says "I have arthritis in my thigh," he is saying something true. According to Burge, the reason the truth conditions of the patient's belief is different from that of his twin is because the two individuals possess different concepts. The patient's twin does not possess the concept *arthritis* because he inhabits a different linguistic environment. It is the linguistic community that determines the meanings of terms and the contents of thoughts.

Davidson is critical of the arthritis case in support of anti-individualism (cf. Davidson 1987: 25–29). First, he has "a general distrust of thought experiments that pretend to reveal what we should say under conditions that in fact never arise" and he credits his own externalism with relying on "what I think to be our actual practice" (Davidson 1990: 199). Ironically though Davidson himself makes use of thought experiments – Swampman and the Omniscient Interpreter – that are quite foreign to "our actual practice." Second, Davidson finds it implausible to suppose that an incomplete understanding can be sufficient for concept possession. When a subject is seriously mistaken about the meaning of the words he is using, he must be described as using the words with a non-standard meaning (Davidson 1987: 25–28; cf. Nordby 2005). Third, Davidson rejects the idea that thought contents and word meanings can be determined by "the linguistic practices of the person's community, even in cases where the individual is mistaken about the relevant practices" (Davidson 1990: 198). By tying "a speaker's meaning to an élite usage he may be unaware of" (Davidson 1990: 199), anti-individualism violates the doctrine of first-person authority and misconstrues speaker's meaning. Davidson declares:

> [U]nless there is a presumption that the speaker knows what she means, i.e. is getting her own language right, there would be nothing for an interpreter to interpret. . . . [N]othing could count as someone regularly misapplying her own words. (Davidson 1987: 38)

Fourth, Davidson rejects the idea that we can treat the particular sentence used by a speaker to express a belief as a transparent medium, through which the interpreter can simply gaze and read off its content. In working out what others think, we often need to translate their use of words into our idiolects. We cannot, as Burge urges we should, take utterances like "I have arthritis in my thigh" at face value, any more than we can take a speaker's sincere utterance of "I have a hippopotamus in my refrigerator" at face value (Davidson 1968: 100–101).

Burge is an externalist because he thinks that thought content is partly determined by linguistic norms and practices of the language community. By contrast, Davidson is an externalist because he thinks that without interpretation there is no thought content. Thought content is determined by the constraints on successful communication and interpretation. Notwithstanding the important differences between triangular externalism and anti-individualism, Davidson and Burge agree that there is a social element that enters into the causal process of content determination. Since Davidson claims that thought content presupposes interpretation and communication, triangular externalism can be regarded as a form of social externalism (cf. Hahn 2003: 52–55).

4. Triangulation and the Determination of Thought Content

Davidson provides two transcendental arguments for triangular externalism: an argument from content determination and an argument from objectivity. In this and the following section, I shall discuss these arguments in turn and suggest that both of them are circular.

Davidson holds that the content of a thought is determined by what typically causes it. "[A]n example is the way the fact that a certain mental state has been typically caused by seeing cows allows us to think 'There's a cow'" (Davidson 1990: 201). But interactions of a single person with his environment are not enough to determine what typical causes a particular thought of this person. As was explained in Section 1, Davidson argues that triangulation is needed to identify the typical causes that determine thought content. The argument for triangulation from content determination is summarized as follows:

> Social interaction, triangulation . . . gives us the only account of how experience gives a specific content to our thoughts. Without other people with whom to share responses to a mutual environment, there is no answer to the question what it is in the world to which we are responding. The reason has to do with the ambiguity of the concept of cause. . . . In the present case, the cause is doubly indeterminate: with respect to width, and with respect to distance. The first ambiguity concerns how much of the total cause of a belief is relevant to content. The brief answer is that it is the part or aspect of the total cause that typically causes relevantly similar responses. What makes the responses relevantly similar in turn is the fact that others find those responses similar. . . . The second problem has to do with the ambiguity of the relevant stimulus, whether it is proximal (at the skin, say) or distal. What makes the distal stimulus the relevant determiner of content is again the social character; it is the cause that is shared. The stimulus is thus triangulated; it is where causes converge. (Davidson 1997c: 129–130)

The "second problem" is that of deciding whether the relevant cause of a thought is distal or proximal and of locating the relevant distal cause among the many elements in the causal chain. The first problem is that of establishing a standard of similarity for the similarity of responses to a given cause. Davidson maintains that triangulation offers a solution to both problems. The relevant cause is the shared public cause that lies at the intersection of the two lines one can draw from between the two interacting people and the objects or events in the environment they are responding to. In other words, the relevant cause is "the nearest mutual [typical] cause" (Davidson 1999: 41). And the similarity-standard for responses to a nearest mutual typical cause is that the interpreter judges the responses to be similar.[6]

The argument from content determination is faced with a host of objections. Due to space restrictions, I will limit myself to discussing what strikes me as the most serious problem.

Triangulation is introduced by Davidson as a method of determining thought content by singling out the relevant cause of a thought among all the possible causes. Triangulation, we learned, relies on communication. And communication occurs when two or more people react to an object or event in the environment and then react in turn to each other's reactions. To be able to react to another person's reaction to an object in the environment the speaker has to conceive of himself and of the other person as thought-possessing beings and, furthermore, has to conceive of the object in the environment as an object one can think of. According to Davidson, "it is only when an observer *consciously* correlates the responses of another creature with object and events in the observer's world that there is any basis for saying the creature is responding to those objects and events" (Davidson 1991: 212, my emphasis; cf. Davidson 1997b: 86). Sometimes, Davidson goes further and claims that we must not only be *conscious* of the triangle but must *know* of it. In any case, the point is that we already need to grasp what thoughts are in order to communicate. But if having thoughts and understanding what they are is a requirement on communication, and if communication, in turn, is a requirement for an account of thought content, then we are turning in circles. The argument from content determination seems to be circular in that it presupposes an answer to the very question it is supposed to be a response to – what determines thought content?[7]

5. Triangulation and the Objectivity of Thought

Davidson argues that there is an intimate connection between the idea of epistemic error and the ability to have thoughts. The connection is roughly this. A necessary condition for having thoughts is that one has a conception of an objective, that is, mind-independent world. To be able to think a thought, one must understand that there are facts that obtain independently of one's thinking. The conception of a mind-independent world that is a precondition of thought, in turn, presupposes an appreciation of the appearance/reality distinction. If one does not appreciate the difference between how things seem and how they are, one cannot understand objectivity and truth. But if one does not understand objectivity and truth, one cannot understand subjectivity and error either. For it is impossible to understand claims about how things

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seem to oneself, unless one appreciates that the *percipi* can deviate from the *esse*. Therefore, Davidson says: "Having a belief demands . . . appreciating the contrast between true belief and false, between appearance and reality, mere seeming and being" (Davidson 1991: 209).

Given the connection between the idea of epistemic error and the ability to have thoughts, Davidson raises the question of how we can acquire the concept of epistemic error. Learning the concept of epistemic error, Davidson argues, presupposes participation in instances of triangulation. The idea is that when, after having reacted similarly to a shared stimulus, one of the triangulating subjects all of a sudden reacts differently to the same stimulus, this provides an opportunity to grasp the idea of epistemic error. Davidson writes:

> [T]he triangle does make room for the concept of error (and hence truth) in situations in which the correlation of reactions that have been repeatedly shared can be seen by the sharers to break down; one creature reacts in a way previously associated by both creatures with a certain sort of situation, but the other does not. This may simply alert the non-reactor to an unnoticed danger or opportunity, but if the anticipated danger or opportunity fails to materialize, a place exists for the notion of a mistake. We, looking on, will judge that the first creature erred. The creatures themselves are also in a position to come to the same conclusion. If they do, they have grasped the concept of objective truth. (Davidson 1997a: 26–27)

The argument that emerges runs something like this: We cannot have thought contents unless we have thoughts. To have thoughts, we need to grasp the idea of epistemic error. And to grasp the idea of epistemic error we have to observe the person we are communicating with react abnormally to a shared stimulus. The occurrence of an abnormal reaction indicates that the triangulating partner is making a mistake. Hence, the participation in instances of triangulation is a necessary condition for the possession of thought.[8]

A critic might object that if learning the concept of epistemic error requires awareness of a deviant reaction to a stimulus, as Davidson maintains, the reference to a second person is superfluous. All that is needed for a subject to grasp the idea of epistemic error is that it realizes that it now reacts to a stimulus in a way that is different from the way it reacted to the same stimulus in the past. The critic concludes that the above argument fails to establish the intersubjective character of the concept of objectivity.[9]

Even if it is empirically false that "[t]he source of the concept[s] of objective truth [and error] is interpersonal communication" (Davidson 1991: 209), the argument from objectivity is still a good one. It is a transcendental version of Wittgenstein's private language argument (Pagin 2001: 208–209). Wittgenstein famously argued that one person by himself cannot use language either correctly or incorrectly, since there is no independent standard of evaluation. The required independent standard is provided by the practice of the language community of which the person is a member. Similarly, Davidson maintains that the repeated stimulus responses of a person are the same or similar in virtue of being treated as such by other people. A second person is needed to provide a standard of similarity (or regularity) of the first person's responses. Davidson writes:

The criterion on the basis of which a creature can be said to be treating stimuli as similar ... is the similarity of the creatures's responses to those stimuli; but what is the criterion of the similarity of the responses? *This* criterion cannot be derived from the creatures's responses; it can come only from the responses of an observer to the responses of the creature. (Davidson 1991: 212)

So, according to Davidson, intersubjectivity is needed for establishing standards of similarity of stimulus responses which, in turn, are needed for acquiring the concept of epistemic error which, in turn, is needed for the possession of thought.

The problem with Davidson's argument from objectivity is that it runs in circles. The attempt to fix the standard of similarity of stimulus responses in terms of agreement within a language community presupposes the very thing it is supposed to explain – thoughts. For comparing and contrasting one's own stimulus responses to those of others people amounts to performing a mental operation; it is a kind of thinking. So we already need to possess thoughts to grasp the concepts of error and objectivity which, in turn, are said to be preconditions for the possession of thoughts. Since we could not triangulate unless we already had thoughts, triangulation does not seem to help us understand what it takes to have thoughts.

Notes

1   It is important not to confuse the internalism/externalism distinction in philosophy of mind with the internalism/externalism distinction in epistemology. Internalism about justification is the view that all the factors required for a belief to be justified must be cognitively accessible to the subject and thus internal to his mind. Something is internal to one's mind so long as one is aware of it or could be aware of it merely by reflecting. Externalism about justification is the denial of internalism, holding that some of the justifying factors may be external to the subject's cognitive perspective.

2   It is not clear that the Swampman story is coherent. If Swampman does everything, nonintentionally described, that Davidson would have done if the lightning had not killed him, we must assume that it is also a reliable indicator of intentional events. Swampman can reliably identify intentional and voluntary actions (e.g., first-degree murder) and distinguish them from unintentional and inadvertent actions (e.g., involuntary manslaughter). But how is that possible? The difference between these types of actions does not reveal itself in any physical differences. How can a mere indicator of physical properties discriminate between irreducibly intentional events?

3   For further discussion of these issues, see Lepore and Ludwig (2005: 322–342), Ludwig (1992), Stroud (1999), and Verheggen (2011).

4   For further discussion of this issue, see De Caro (2011: 187–193), Hahn (2003: 40–45), and Lepore and Ludwig (2005: 338–339).

5   For further discussion of these issues, see De Caro (2008) and Seager (1992).

6   For a detailed reconstruction of the argument from content determination, see Bridges (2006: 296–313), Glüer (2006: 1008–1015), Ludwig (2011: 80–93), and Pagin (2001: 201–206).

7   For further discussion of this issue, see Glüer (2006: 1012–1014) and Pagin (2001: 204–206).

8   For a detailed reconstruction of the argument from objectivity see Bridges (2006: 292–295), Glüer (2006: 1008–1015), Ludwig (2011: 69–80), and Pagin (2001: 206–209).

9   Among those who claim that a single creature comparing past and present stimulus responses is sufficient for the emergence of the concept of objectivity and truth are Bridges (2006: 294–295), Briscoe (2007), and Child (1996: 19).

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