

Social Externalism in Davidson and Wittgenstein

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According to social externalism, some mental states are individuated in ways that make a person's mental states dependent on her social environment. So two individuals who are alike in all individualistic respects can differ mentally, because they occupy different social environments. The manifesto for this conference asks: is there a more effective route to social externalism than that provided by the arguments of Tyler Burge? In particular, can social externalism be defended by showing that 'rules' or 'institutions' have an essential role in individuating our thoughts?

Structure of this talk:

1. Review Burge's arguments and their perceived inadequacy. Offer some reflections on the kind or strength of social externalist position that it's reasonable to expect – and in that light defend the interest of Burge-style social externalism.
2. Explore two elements of social externalism in Wittgenstein. Discuss the strength and plausibility of the social externalism we might trace to Wittgenstein's writings.
3. Examine the kind of social externalism found in Davidson's account of the role of triangulation in thought and language, and its relation to Wittgenstein's position.

I. Burge's Social Externalism

Burge's original arguments for social externalism.

Two ways in which some of S's thoughts are in part determined by aspects of her social environment, in ways that need not be reflected in any individualistic facts about her.

- Argument from partial understanding: e.g. "arthritis", "brisket". ('Individualism and the Mental'.) S is ignorant of some aspect of the meanings of words she uses, which is widely known in her community. Her thoughts are partly determined by the social practice, rather than by facts about her own practice, considered individualistically.
- Argument from ignorance of expert knowledge: e.g. "water", "cancer", "gene". ('Other Bodies'; 'Individualism and the Mental' n. 2). The meaning of S's term is dependent on scientific theory/expert knowledge. S doesn't know the theory/lacks the expert knowledge. Again, the contents of her thoughts are determined by aspects of her social environment (in this case, by her social relations to the relevant theory or expert knowledge), rather than by any individualistic factors.

Reasons for doubting the force of these routes to social externalism:

- We might dispute Burge's claim about how we should ascribe content in cases of partial understanding. (See e.g. Davidson's discussion of a real-life "arthritis" case in 'Knowing One's Own Mind'.)
- Even if we accept Burge's view of how content is ascribed in these cases, there's no *general* argument for social externalism here; no demonstration that thought is *in its nature* a social phenomenon. For these Burgean arguments do not apply to cases where someone fully understand the words that are relevant to specifying her thoughts, and knows all relevant scientific theories; there is nothing in these

arguments to show that the contents of a person's thoughts in such a case are determined by anything other than individualistic factors.

Burge's argument from non-standard theorising.

- Aim: to show that thoughts can be determined by social factors even in cases where I make no errors about the conventional, communal usage of the relevant words, and where there is no relevant specialist knowledge of which I am ignorant. (See 'Intellectual Norms and Foundations of Mind', 'Wherein is Language Social?')
- Applies to a wide range of words that are typically acquired by reference to examples, and which can be applied on the basis of perception: e.g. "sofa" – and most artefact kinds ("knife", "rope", "watch"); natural-kind notions; concepts of ordinary objects that are not natural kinds ("earth", "mountain", "bread"); notions associated with ordinary verbs ("to eat", "to sing", "to sleep")
- It's part of the conventional, socially-determined meaning of "sofa" that sofas are bits of furniture made for sitting. There's social consensus on a wide range of things to which the word "sofa" applies. I know the socially-determined meaning. I agree with others about which things are sofas. But I have a bizarre, false theory about sofas: I think that sofas are works of art or religious artefacts, and that the widespread view that sofas are furniture made for sitting on is a misapprehension.
- Burge's view: despite my bizarre theory, my thoughts still have the content *sofa*; and it's part of that content that sofas are pieces of furniture made for sitting. So the content of these thoughts is not exhaustively determined by individualistic factors. It is in part determined by the actual nature of the things to which I'm related by the social practices in which I participate. In fixing the meanings of words, and the contents of the thoughts we express when we use those words, a pattern of perceptually-based applications is more important than any explications we are inclined to give. Meaning and content are articulated by a process of reflection on the character of the things to which we apply the word; and other people are often better placed than I am to explicate my words and concepts. Such cases, Burge thinks, are very widespread.
[See also Williamson's similar cases.]

Reasons for doubting the force of this route to social externalism.

- As before, might dispute Burge's claims about how we should ascribe content in such cases.
- As before, even if we accept Burge's view about how content is to be ascribed in these cases, we might doubt the strength or significance of the conclusion they establish. The most these arguments show is that in many cases an individual's thoughts *do in fact* depend on her social environment. But they don't show that thought is *in principle* a social phenomenon: that the contents of thought *essentially* depend on social practices.
- Suppose we think that language and thought are not essentially dependent on social practices. That is consistent with accepting that such dependence is in fact very common; indeed, that it is absolutely pervasive. There at least three reasons why we do standardly use words with socially-determined meanings:
 - Pragmatic reason: we want to be understood; and the best way of being understood is to use words with same meanings that other people give to the same words. (See Davidson KOOM 28, esp. n 17; SP 116)
 - Deferring to a social practice allows us to use words in ways that depend on bodies of special knowledge that we don't have ourselves. That does not just

- involve scientific terms. It extends to words in many other areas: e.g. the semi-technical special vocabularies of sport, accountancy, law, and so on.
- It allows us to use words for kinds of thing – for example, kinds of animal or plant – that we have not encountered ourselves.
 - But, to repeat, none of these points shows that language, or thought, is essentially social.

A defence of the significance of Burge's social externalism

- Burge never intended to show that thought and language are *in their nature* social.
 - i. See the explicit statements in WLS: 275; 288; 289
 - Language is social in that interaction with other persons is psychologically necessary to learn language. Some philosophers have made the further claim that there is some conceptually necessary relation between learning or having a language and being in a community. I do not accept this view. I assume only that it is a psychologically important fact that we cannot learn language alone. (WLS 275)
 - It is metaphysically possible for an individual to learn his idiolect in isolation from a community. But . . . in learning words, individuals normally look to others to help set standards for determining the range of legitimate examples and the sort of background information used in explicating a word or concept. I believe that this is a psychological necessity for human beings. (WLS 288)
 - ii. And note the modesty of his formulations:
 - “Since fixing examples – or more broadly, referents – that partly determine an individual's concept or translational meaning is *sometimes* dependent on the activity of others with whom he interacts, the individuation of an individual's concepts or translational meanings is *sometimes* dependent on his interaction with others” (WLS 288)
 - “The individuation of our concepts and meanings is *sometimes* dependent on the activity of others from whom we learn our words and on whom we depend for access to the referents of our words.” (WLS 290)
- Independently of Burge, we can in any case ask whether the success of the case for social externalism depends on showing that thought is essentially social. Suppose we have succeeded in showing that the dependence of thought on social context is extremely pervasive: the contents of practically all thoughts of every actual thinker depend on the thinker's social environment. Whether or not that establishes the social externalist's case depends on what she is trying to show. There are at least two possibilities:
 - i. The social externalist may be trying to show that thought is in its nature a social phenomenon. In that case, Burge's arguments are insufficient.
 - ii. On the other hand, she may have a more modest aim. She may simply want to establish that thought is not in its nature a wholly asocial phenomenon: that it is not true that thoughts can always be individuated by reference to individualistic features of the thinker, together with features of her non-social environment. That is a substantial thesis: it contradicts a long tradition in philosophy, going back at least to Descartes. But in order to establish this more modest thesis, we do not have to show that no thoughts could ever be individuated without reference to the thinker's social environment. (We could

allow, for example, that someone's ability to have the thought 'I'm thinking' need not depend on any social factors.) We only have to show that it is *possible* for a person to have thoughts whose individuation *does* depend on her social environment. It seems clear that Burge himself is trying to establish only this weaker thesis. And that is, as I have said, a worthwhile philosophical thesis.

II. Wittgenstein and Social Externalism

Are there arguments in Wittgenstein that would establish a form of social externalism that is stronger than Burge's: arguments that would establish that thought is *essentially* social; that thought essentially depends on social practices or social institutions?

1. Some examples of social externalist thinking in Wittgenstein:

Examples illustrating the dependence of thought on a social environment – often with a similar structure to the twin-earth cases familiar from Putnam and Burge. Imagine two people with the same behavioural dispositions, same phenomenology etc., but in different contexts. It's obvious that they'd have different intentional states – in virtue of participation in different social practices and institutions. (e.g. PI §584: hoping that NN will come and bring me some money. RFM VI-34: a two-minute-man doing exactly what a mathematician in England is doing, who is doing a calculation; ought we to say that this two-minute-man is calculating?)

But what if any lines of thought can we find in Wittgenstein to support the idea that thought is essentially social? (Some would say that, given Wittgenstein's anti-essentialism, it's wrong to expect to find a Wittgensteinian argument to the effect that something is *essential* for thought. I disagree. Cf. Wittgenstein on the essential features of an expression. (e.g. PPF §7 (PI II ii p. 175))

2. First suggestion: Wittgenstein thinks that intention requires the existence of a custom, an institution, a practice, a technique.

“But that is just what is remarkable about *intention*, about the mental process, that the existence of a custom, of a technique, is not necessary to it. That, for example, it is imaginable that two people should play a game of chess, or even only the beginning of a game of chess, in a world in which otherwise no games existed – and then be interrupted.”

But isn't chess defined by its rules? And how are these rules present in the mind of someone who intends to play chess?” (PI §205)

“An intention is embedded in a setting, in human customs and institutions. If the technique of the game of chess did not exist, I could not intend to play a game of chess.” (PI §337; see also PI §197)

- What makes it the case that I intend to play chess? It can't be anything *static*: a sensation; a set of words (either written or visualized); a picture (either an actual picture on paper or a mental picture); etc. For anything of that sort is consistent with my having numerous different intentions, or no intention at all. So what *does* link the state I'm now in with playing a game of chess? In order to intend to play chess, something is required of me: roughly speaking, some sort of disposition or ability.

But something is also required of my social environment: the actual existence of the practice of playing chess.

“Where is the connection effected between the sense of the words ‘Let’s play a game of chess’ and all the rules of the game? – Well, in the list of rules of the game, in the teaching of it, in the everyday practice of playing. (PI §197)

- Does this line of thought establish that the existence of intentions is *in general* dependent on the existence of a *social* practice?
- A natural thought: We can separate two elements in what Wittgenstein is saying.
 - i. The existence of intention requires something dynamic – a practice or a pattern of dispositions – to link my current state to the object of my intention.
 - ii. The existence of some intentions requires the existence of a relevant social practice.

Then we can say the following.

- It is true that someone can only intend to play chess if their social context contains a practice of playing chess. And the same goes for many other intentions. I can only intend to spend €50 if I stand in an appropriate relation to the social practice of using Euros. I can only intend to get a job with SNCF if I stand in an appropriate relation to the social institutions involved in the existence of the SNCF. Perhaps I can only intend to go by a signpost if I stand in an appropriate relation to a social practice of erecting and following signposts (cf PI §198). And so on.
- However, that is a particular feature of the contents of these intentions: they are intentions to do things that essentially involve a social practice or institution. But that is not true for every intention. Consider, say, the intention to drink some water, or the intention to develop a repeated pattern in a particular way. In these cases, too, the existence of the intention requires something dynamic: a disposition, or a practice, or a technique. If I am drawing a decorative pattern, for example, no picture or set of written instructions will suffice to make it the case that I intend to develop the pattern in a particular way. What is needed is a technique of developing the pattern in a particular way; a practice of constructing and developing patterns; an appropriate set of dispositions. So the existence of the intention depends on the existence of a practice or technique. But it does not depend on the existence of a *social* practice or a *shared* technique.
- It is arguable therefore that this line of thought in Wittgenstein gets us no closer than Burge’s arguments do to the thesis that a person’s thoughts are essentially dependent on her social environment

3. Second suggestion: using a concept requires following a rule for the correct application of that concept; and following a rule is, or involves, a social institution.

“To follow a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (usages, institutions).” (PI §199)

The core argument that some have found in Wittgenstein:

- In order for someone to use a concept, there must be a distinction between applying the concept correctly and applying it incorrectly.
- If there were only a single individual, applying a ‘concept’ in isolation, there could be no such distinction. The individual could be disposed to apply her ‘concept’ in particular cases and withhold it in others. But there would be no standard by which the individual’s applications could count as correct or incorrect.

- But things are different in a social context: other people's applications of a concept provide a standard with which the individual's applications can be compared, and by reference to which they can count as correct or incorrect.
- So the distinction between applying a concept correctly and applying it incorrectly is possible only in a social context.

What's the evidence for ascribing this view to Wittgenstein?

Passages like the following:

If you have learned a technique of language, and I point to this coat and say to you, 'The tailors now call this colour "Boo"' then you will buy me a coat of this colour, fetch one, etc. The point is that one only has to point to something and say, 'This is so-and-so', and everyone who has been through a certain preliminary training will react in the same way. We could imagine this not to happen. If I just say, 'This is called "Boo"' you might not know what I mean; but in fact you would all of you automatically follow certain rules.

Ought we to say that you would follow the *right* rules? – that you would know *the* meaning of 'boo'? No, clearly not. For which meaning? Are there not 10,000 meanings which 'boo' might now have? – It sounds as if your learning how to use it were different from your knowing its meaning. *But the point is that we all make the SAME use of it.* To know its meaning is to use it *in the same way* as other people do. 'In the right way' means nothing. (LFM 182-3)

That passage is cited by Malcolm to support the view that, for Wittgenstein, rule-following is essentially a social activity ('Wittgenstein on Language and Rules', 171). And it could be read in a way that supports that interpretation.

But it's questionable whether that is the right interpretation.

An alternative reading.

- Wittgenstein isn't a reductionist about meaning, or concepts, or standards of correctness; he is not trying to construct a standard of correctness for the use of the word "boo" from lower-level, non-semantic facts about agreement in the sounds people find it natural to make after they have been given a certain training. Rather, he's taking it for granted that, when the word "boo" is explained to someone in the way he describes, the person will find it natural to understand that word as *meaning* such-and-such; and he is taking it for granted that people will generally agree in what they take the word "boo" to mean.
- The point of the passage from LFM is then this. There are many things we could have taken the word "boo", explained in the way Wittgenstein describes, to mean. We might then ask: what makes it right to understand the word as meaning what we do all take it to mean; what would be wrong with understanding the word in some different way – with taking it to mean something else? Wittgenstein's answer to that question is that there is no such thing as a right or wrong meaning for a word to have. If a word is explained in a particular way, we do all (or most of us) understand it as having a certain meaning. But there is no sense in which that meaning is correct.
- But that point has nothing to do with the idea that the distinction between applying a concept correctly and applying it incorrectly makes sense only in a social context.

Wittgenstein does of course think that an individual can only be applying a concept if there is a distinction between applying the concept correctly and applying it incorrectly. But we can

allow for that distinction without reference to a social context. An anti-reductionist, or quietist, account would say this:

- What makes it correct for an individual to apply her word ‘F’ to a particular thing is just this: her word ‘F’ means *F*; and this thing is *F*.
- Of course, for an individual to succeed in using her word ‘F’ to mean *F*, there must be a background of regularities in her behaviour, non-normatively described; that is a condition for the existence of a practice or a technique.¹
- Maybe it must also be possible for the individual to *find out that* she has misapplied her word.
- But neither of those points requires a social context.

III. Davidson and Social Externalism

1. A note on Davidson’s opposition to the idea that meaning something by a word is to be understood in terms of rules, conventions, customs, or institutions.

(See ‘Communication and Convention’, ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs’, ‘The Second Person’, ‘The Social Aspect of Language’ etc.):

‘the concept of following a rule is not quite appropriate to describe meaning something by saying something. . . . it is also questionable whether, even if we agree that the use of a language requires a social setting, we should accept without question the idea that meaning something demands (as opposed to sometimes involving) a convention, custom, or institution’ (SP 114).

Davidson’s reasons:

- using a word with a meaning isn’t appropriately thought of as following a rule; for instance, there’s typically no procedure one follows in applying the word
- meanings needn’t be shared
- meaning can’t be wholly conventional, because of malapropism, linguistic inventiveness, metaphor etc.

Given those points, maybe Davidson position doesn’t offer much comfort to the view being explored in this workshop. All the same, he does aim to offer an argument for social externalism that goes further than Burge’s: an argument to show that thought is *essentially* a social phenomenon.

2. Davidson’s Case for The Social Character of Thought: An Overview

Davidson’s view:

- A creature can only have thoughts and language if it is in communication with other creatures with which it shares an environment.
- Communication between creatures who share a common world plays two essential roles.
 - i. It helps to determine the *contents* of thoughts.
 - ii. And it helps to secure the *objectivity* of thought. (See EE 129).

¹ (See RFM VII-26 for a nice example of this combination of non-reductionism and insistence on background regularities. We can’t give a non-circular account of ‘going according to the rule’ in terms of agreement, ‘because it is no more certain that one proceeding is in agreement with another than that it has happened in accordance with a rule’. It is true, nonetheless, that ‘going according to a rule is . . . founded on an agreement’.)

The objectivity of thought itself has two aspects:

- thought requires the *possibility of error*: a distinction between applying a concept correctly and applying it incorrectly
- if a creature is to have thoughts about the world, rather than merely responding to the world in regular ways, it must itself *grasp* the distinction between a correct and an incorrect application of a concept.

3. Davidson: Objectivity and the Social Character of Thought

In holding that the objectivity of thought requires a social context, Davidson takes himself to be endorsing a Wittgensteinian point: “the Wittgensteinian intuition that the only legitimate source of objectivity is intersubjectivity” (‘Externalisms’, 12-13).

3.i The social character of thought: the seems right/is right distinction

Davidson:

- “unless a language is shared, there is no way to distinguish between using the language correctly and using it incorrectly; only communication with another can supply an objective check” (TVK 209-10).²
- ‘perhaps [Wittgenstein] intended his argument to apply only to those concepts which are necessarily private. But I . . . think the argument applies to language quite generally. and so (I would say) to propositional thought’ (TVK 209, n. 1. See also SAL 124).

Davidson’s basic thought here is the one we have already seen in connection with

Wittgenstein:

- If we consider an individual in isolation, there can be no distinction between its applying a concept correctly and applying it incorrectly.
- For *however* an individual responds to objects and events in its environment, its responses will count as correct by *some* standard.
- So there is nothing in the behaviour of an individual, considered in isolation, to make one application of a concept correct and another application incorrect.
- But things are different if we consider the individual in a social context. For the responses of other individuals to the same objects and events make room for an objective standard of what counts as applying a concept correctly; they make room for a distinction between what seems right to an individual and what really is right.
- NB: Not saying that majority judgement is always right. Communication *makes room for* a norm: it doesn’t follow that norm is constituted by what most people say. (See e.g. ‘Externalisms’ 7)

Comment and Criticism:

This argument for the view that thought is essentially social is essentially the same as the ‘Wittgensteinian’ argument for the view that following a rule is essentially communal. So if we find the ‘Wittgensteinian’ argument unconvincing, we will not be convinced by this part of Davidson’s argument. In particular, we may think:

- It is true that thought requires a distinction between applying a concept correctly and applying it incorrectly.

² Cf: ‘As Wittgenstein says, by yourself you can’t tell the difference between [two] situations seeming the same and being the same’ (SAL 124); ‘room for error is created by cases in which one individual deviates from a course of action when the crowd does not’ (E 5)

- But we have been given no reason for thinking that this distinction can only exist in a social context.
- For all Davidson has shown, the distinction between correct and incorrect application could be founded in the regular and repeatable behaviour of an individual.

Davidson himself thinks otherwise: he is ‘not impressed with the self-testing procedures’ that some philosophers have proposed as a way of drawing the distinction ‘between using words correctly and merely thinking one is using them correctly’ without reference to ‘a social setting’ (SAL 119, and note 12). But there is a basic dilemma here for Davidson.

Our account of the seems right/is right distinction will either be reductionist or non-reductionist.

- Suppose we are aiming for a reductionist account of the distinction. Then it is true that we can’t get the right/seems right distinction out of reactions of an individual. If we are describing an individual’s responses to its environment in non-normative terms, then however much repetition and regularity there is, nothing an individual does can make it the case that one response is correct and another is incorrect. But if we are aiming for a reductionist account, the addition of other people makes no difference. That is a point that Davidson himself makes as clearly as anyone:
“how can the simple fact that two or more people have gone on in the same way introduce the distinction between following a rule and just going on in one way or another? . . . Simply adding further creatures with identical dispositions cannot turn dispositions into rule-following” (E 3).
- So, as Davidson insists, our account of the seems right/is right distinction must be non-reductive (see e.g. E 13). So if we are to be convinced that thought is essentially social, we need a convincing non-reductive reason for accepting that the distinction only makes sense in a social context. But it is unclear to me that Davidson has given us any such reason.

3.ii The social character of thought: *grasping* the seems right/is right distinction

Davidson insists that, if a creature is to have thoughts about an objective world, it must think of itself as having such thoughts; it must grasp the subject/objective divide. And that, he thinks, requires a context of interpersonal communication:

“We have no grounds for crediting a creature with the distinction between what is thought to be the case and what is the case unless the creature has the standard provided by a shared language” (TVK, 210).

(That puts the point in a thoroughly epistemic way. But it is clear that Davidson means to be making a constitutive point.) Why does he think that interaction with others is essential for grasping the subjective/objective distinction?

There are at least three strands in Davidson’s argument for his position. I do not find any of them convincing:

- i. Interaction with others is the only thing that can *force* an individual to recognize the distinction between how things seem to him and how they really are.
“Someone cannot have a belief unless he understands the possibility of being mistaken, and this requires grasping the contrast between truth and error – true belief and false belief. But this contrast . . . can emerge only in the context of interpretation, which alone forces us to the idea of an objective, public truth.” (TT 170)
- ii. Interpersonal communication *shows that* an individual grasps the subjective/objective distinction.

“What would show command of [the contrast between what is believed and what is the case]? Clearly linguistic communication suffices. . . Communication depends on each communicator having, and correctly thinking that the other has, the concept of a share world, an intersubjective world.” (RA 105)

iii. Interaction with others provides a way of *coming to grasp* the subjective/objective distinction.

“I confess I do not know how to show [that the *only* way one could come to have the belief-truth contrast is through having the concept of intersubjective truth]. But neither do I have any idea how else one could arrive at the concept of an objective truth.” (RA 105.)³

Comment:

- We can agree that interaction with others provides a context in which it is *likely* that an individual will come to draw the distinction between how things seem to him and how, objectively, they are. But there is no reason why such interaction should *force* him to draw that distinction. And in any case, why couldn't a person come to grasp the subjective/objective distinction without anything forcing him to do so – for example, by grasping a simple causal theory of perception? (On this, see more below.)
- Even if it is true that only interpersonal communication can *show that* someone grasps the subjective/objective contrast, that does not establish that communication is *required* for grasping it. Similarly, even if interaction with others is in fact involved in *coming to grasp* the distinction, that doesn't show that such interaction is involved in *what it is to grasp* the contrast.
- It is extremely plausible that interaction with others does in fact play a crucial role in the developing child's grasp of the contrast. But, as before, it is hard to see why that should be the only context in which someone could come to grasp the belief-truth contrast. Couldn't it also emerge in the context of an individual creature's interactions with its environment, with the individual coming to grasp a simple theory of perception?

Grasping the seems right/is right distinction: a simple theory of perception

- A suggestion: grasp of the belief-truth contrast can in principle emerge in the context of an isolated individual's interactions with its non-social environment: a person's use of a simple causal theory of perception in reflecting on its own experiences can play the role in this story that communication with others plays in Davidson's story. (For this idea, see writers in the neo-Kantian tradition: e.g. Strawson, Evans, Campbell.)
 - The child has the idea of objective truth when she grasps the idea that the way things seem to her is causally explained by the way they are, together with her own position in the world.
 - That kind of naïve causal thinking involves the belief-truth contrast: the contrast is implicit in the idea of explaining the way things seem by reference to the way things are in the world.
 - And it is empirically plausible that a child's gradual development of a causal understanding of the world and her interactions with it plays an important part

³ In later writings Davidson says something less cautious: “*Only* communication can provide the concept [of objectivity], for to have the concept of objectivity . . . *requires* that we are aware of the fact that we share thoughts and a world with others” (EE 202, my italics).

in her acquisition of the idea of an objective world that is independent of her and her beliefs.

Davidson would not be convinced by this suggestion. He might raise two objections.

- First, it is true that if a non-communicating individual believes that the way things seem to her is in part explained by the way things are, then she grasps the belief-truth contrast. But it is question-begging to suppose that a non-communicating individual could have that belief. To ascribe that belief to her is to presuppose that she can make sense of the belief-truth contrast. And that is just what is in dispute.
- Second, and relatedly, an isolated individual can certainly interact with her environment in ways that depend on registering complex interactions between a host of causal factors. But nothing forces us to describe such an individual as *thinking about* causal relations rather than as simply *responding in regular ways* to causal relations; and we have no good reason for describing her in that way.

Response:

- On the first objection, about question-beggingness. If this were a good objection, then Davidson's own view would be vulnerable to a directly parallel objection. As Davidson himself acknowledges (e.g. E 13), to describe a creature as *communicating* presupposes that she grasps the belief-truth contrast. So to say that an individual is communicating is no less question-begging than to say that an individual explains the way things seem to her by reference to the way things are. But this sort of question-begging is inevitable when we are dealing with a concept like *thought* which, as Davidson insists, cannot be analysed in terms of anything else that does not presuppose it.
- On the second objection. It is true that nothing *forces* us to describe a non-communicating creature that interacts with its environment as believing how things seem to it is in part explained by how things are; it is always open to us to describe such a creature in non-intentional terms. But the same is true for Davidson's views: nothing forces us to describe a creature that interacts with others as communicating with them. Davidson would rightly insist that there can nonetheless be good reasons for thinking that x and y are communicating and not simply interacting. But by the same token: there can be good reasons for thinking that x isn't merely interacting with environment, but thinking about it; even if x is not communicating with others.

4. Davidson: Content-Determination and the Social Character of Thought

In Davidson's view, the content of a belief is the normal cause of beliefs of that kind. But what is the normal cause of such beliefs: the content-fixing cause? Davidson argues that a thinker's interaction with other people in a shared environment plays a crucial role in answering that question. The problem, Davidson thinks, has two dimensions: there is a problem of 'width' and a problem of 'distance' (ET 129).

4.i The problem of width

- Suppose a child says 'There's a cow' in the presence of a cow, thereby expressing a belief. What is the content of that belief? Does her word 'cow' mean *cow*, or something more general (e.g. *quadruped*, or *ruminant*), or something more specific (e.g. *brown cow*)?
- In Davidson's view, that is a matter of what the subject classifies as relevantly similar. For example, and very crudely: if the subject is disposed to classify cows (and only

cows) as similar to this thing, then her belief is about cows; if she is disposed to classify quadrupeds in general as similar to this thing, then her belief is about quadrupeds.

- It is at this point that a social context comes in. For, according to Davidson, the idea of an individual thinker classifying things as similar to each other can be understood only by reference to a social context.
- A person classifies objects as similar if she responds to those objects in similar ways. But what counts as responding to objects in similar ways? After all, any pattern of responses to objects will count as similar by some standard.
- Davidson's view: a thinker's responses to objects count as similar responses when others find it natural to classify those responses as similar.
"All creatures classify objects and aspects of the world in the sense that they treat some stimuli as more alike than others. . . The criterion on the basis of which a creature can be said to be treating stimuli as similar, as belonging to a class, is the similarity of the creature's response to those stimuli; but what is the criterion of similarity of responses? *This* criterion cannot be derived from the creature's responses; it can only come from the responses of an observer to the responses of the creature" (TVK 212).
- So we have the following situation. The child responds to various different objects in her environment by saying 'cow'. Saying 'cow' on these different occasions counts as responding to her environment in similar ways because observers find it natural to classify these different utterances of 'cow' as similar responses. The meaning of the subject's word 'cow', and the content of her belief, is determined by the normal cause of these similar responses. But what *is* their normal cause? That brings us to the second aspect of the problem.

4.ii The problem of distance.

- An individual utterance of the word 'cow' stands at the end of a causal chain with many stages: one stage is the presence of the cow; but there are many stages further away from the child; and many stages closer to the child (a pattern of light rays, an image on the child's retina, and so on). Each stage of the causal chain is *a* cause of the child's utterance.
- In the same way, there are many candidates for being 'the normal cause' of the *class* of the child's utterances of 'cow'. Similar utterances (utterances of the word 'cow') are caused by similar physical objects (cows). But equally, those similar utterances are caused by similar patterns of light rays (patterns that are similar in *some* respect); by similar retinal images; and so on.
- If we consider the child in isolation, Davidson thinks, there is no basis for selecting cows as the normal cause of the child's utterances of the word 'cow', rather than patterns of light rays, retinal images, or objects or events at some other stage of each of the relevant causal chains.
- But things are different in a social context. Suppose the child is communicating with another person about a world of shared objects. The proximal causes of the child's utterances (patterns of light rays, retinal images, etc.) play no role in causing the other person's utterances. But the distal causes of the child's utterances of the word 'cow' (i.e. cows) do also cause other people's utterances. On the assumption that the child and her interlocutor are using words with shared meanings, meaning must be determined by distal causes rather than proximal causes:
"What makes the distal stimulus the relevant determiner of content is . . . its social character; it is the cause that is shared" (ET 130; see also TVK 212-13).

(Note: this gives a reason for preferring a distal stimulus to any unshared, proximal stimulus. It doesn't give us a reason for preferring the closest distal stimulus (e.g. cows) to distal stimuli that are further back in the causal chains, which will also be shared. I pass over this point.)

So in Davidson's account, a thinker's social environment plays a double role in determining the content of her thoughts: it is involved in determining which of the thinker's responses to her environment count as similar responses; and it is involved in determining what stage in the causal chains that produce those responses is the content-giving stage.

4.iii Comment and Criticism:

Does this part of Davidson's story about triangulation give a convincing rationale for holding that thought is essentially social?

- Davidson's account takes for granted a basically nominalist view of similarity, kinds, and properties. If we accepted a view on which some properties are objectively more natural than others, we wouldn't need to appeal to shared similarity responses in the ways Davidson's account involves. The same is true if we think that the contents of some states of human beings and other animals are evolutionarily determined. (Cf Burge on evolutionarily determined perceptual content.) And similarly for various other views of content.
- If our interest is in the *method of interpretation* – in the process of *ascribing* thoughts to other people or animals – then Davidson's observations are very plausible. If a creature is interacting with other similar creatures in a shared environment, it will be much easier to determine what it is reacting to, and what its thoughts are about, than it would be if the creature did not interact with others. Indeed, it might be impossible to ascribe determinate thoughts to a non-interacting creature. But that is a fundamentally epistemic point. It does not directly support the claim that such a creature could not have thoughts with determinate contents at all.
- Suppose we agree with Davidson in thinking: (a) that there is no absolute standard of similarity, so that the notion of similarity must be understood by reference to human or animal similarity responses; and (b) that the existence of thought requires a pattern of similar responses to similar stimuli. Does he give convincing reasons for thinking that such a pattern can only exist if the creature actually interacts with other creatures who find it natural to classify the first creature as responding in similar ways to similar stimuli? Why couldn't a creature respond consistently to objects and events in its environment without interacting with other creatures at all? If the creature really is doing so, then the following counterfactual will be true: if there *were* other creatures just like the first, then they *would* agree in classifying the first creature as giving similar responses to similar stimuli. But it is hard to see why the actual existence of these other creatures should be necessary for it to be true that the first creature is responding in regular ways to objects and events in its environment.

IV Conclusion

- Burge's arguments don't show that the contents of thought *essentially* depend on a thinker's social environment. But they do identify something that is in fact a deep and pervasive feature of thought. And they have a genuine philosophical significance, in refuting the view that thought is essentially individualistic.
- We examined two lines of thought from Wittgenstein. The first line of thought anticipates Burge: it shows that the contents of intentions and other mental states

often depend on social practices; that is a significant result; but it does not show that thought is in its nature a social phenomenon. The second line of thought is the familiar idea that the distinction between applying a concept correctly and applying it incorrectly requires a communal context: it is doubtful that Wittgenstein accepts that idea, and I do not find it compelling.

- Davidson aims to show what Burge does not: that thought is in its nature a social phenomenon. A social context, he thinks, is necessary for the existence of a seems right/is right distinction. It is necessary for a person to grasp the seems right/is right distinction. And it is necessary for the determination of the content of thought. I have argued that Davidson's arguments for these claims are unconvincing.

References

Burge, T.