Social Externalism in Davidson and Wittgenstein

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I.   Burge's Social Externalism

Burge's original arguments for social externalism.
- Argument from partial understanding: e.g. "arthritis", "brisket".
- Argument from ignorance of expert knowledge: e.g. "water", "cancer", "gene".

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 and ignorance of expert knowledge.
- Even if we accept Burge's view of how content is ascribed in these cases, these arguments don't show that thought is *in its nature* a social phenomenon.

Burge's argument from non-standard theorising.
- 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.
- 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: 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.

Reasons for doubting the force of this route to social externalism.
- As before, we can dispute Burge's claims about how we should ascribe content in such cases.
- As before, 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 the contents of thought *essentially* depend on social practices.

Suppose we accept 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. Some reasons why this might be so:
- 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.

- It allows us to use words for kinds of thing – for example, kinds of animal or plant – that we have not encountered ourselves.

<u>Defending the significance of Burge's social externalism</u>
- Burge never intended to show that thought and language are *in their nature* social.
    - "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)
    - "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)
- What is the social externalist trying to show? Two possibilities:
    - that thought is in its nature a social phenomenon.
    - 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.

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?

<u>1.   First suggestion: intention requires a custom, an institution, a practice, a technique.</u>
- "'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)
- "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.
    - 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.
    - The existence of some intentions requires the existence of a relevant social practice.

- But then: the existence of an intention depends on a social practice if it is the intention to do something that essentially involves a social practice or institution. But that is not true for every intention.
- So this line of thought in Wittgenstein gets us no closer than do Burge's arguments to the thesis that a person's thoughts are essentially dependent on her social environment.

2.   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)

- 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)

An alternative reading of LFM 182-3

An alternative view of Wittgenstein on the is right/seems right distinction:
- 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.
- 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]
- But that doesn't require a social context.

III.   **Davidson and Social Externalism**

1.   Davidson's Case for The Social Character of Thought: An Overview
- 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.

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[1] See RFM VII-26 for a nice example of this combination of non-reductionism and insistence on background regularities.

ii.   And it helps to secure the *objectivity* of thought. (See EE 129).
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.

2.   Davidson: Objectivity and the Social Character of Thought

2.i   *The existence* of a seems right/is right distinction
- "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).
- '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 argument:
- essentially the same as the 'Wittgensteinian' argument discussed above
- and open to essentially the same objection: 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).

A basic dilemma for Davidson:
- 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 the reactions of an isolated individual. But from this point of view, the addition of a group of individuals doesn't help, as Davidson himself says:
  > "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). But is there any convincing non-reductive reason for accepting that the distinction only makes sense in a social context?

2.ii   *Grasping* the seems right/is right distinction
 "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).

Three strands in Davidson's argument:

- "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, my italics)
- "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, my italics)
- "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, my italics.)

Grasping the seems right/is right distinction: a simple theory of perception
- 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 in her acquisition of the idea of an objective world that is independent of her and her beliefs.

Two Davidsonian 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.
- Second, 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.

Responses to the objections.

3.   Davidson: Content-Determination and the Social Character of Thought
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 at two points in answering that question: with respect to a problem of width; and with respect to a problem of distance (ET 129).

3.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?
- In Davidson's view, that is a matter of what the child classifies as relevantly similar.
- But 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?
- Davidson: 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).

- Then: The child responds to her environment in similar ways, by saying 'cow'. The meaning of her word 'cow', and the content of her belief, is determined by the normal cause of these similar responses. But what *is* their normal cause?

3.ii   The problem of distance.

- An individual utterance of the word 'cow' stands at the end of a causal chain with many stages. Each stage of the causal chain is *a* cause of the child's utterance.
- Similarly, 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, 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.
- Things are different in a social context. If a child is communicating with another person about a world of shared objects, then 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).

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.

3.iii   Comment and Criticism:

- Davidson's account takes for granted a basically nominalist view of similarity, kinds, and properties.
- 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. But that is a fundamentally epistemic point. It does not directly support the claim that a non-communicating could not have thoughts with determinate contents at all.
- 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 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.