

AN INTERVIEW WITH DONALD DAVIDSON

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University of California at Berkeley

EACH YEAR AN interview with a significant modern figure in philosophy is included in *The Dualist*. This year, Professor Donald Davidson graciously agreed to answer questions provided by *The Dualist* and the Stanford Philosophy Department.

Professor Davidson currently teaches in the Philosophy Department of the University of California at Berkeley. His philosophical work has been influential across a wide range of topics, and he has been at the forefront of many debates in the philosophy of mind and action, philosophy of science, and philosophy of language over the past half century. His life and work will be presented in the upcoming book, *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, as part of the Library of Living Philosophers.

Krista Lawlor

Among major analytic philosophers, you, more than the rest, have stressed the idea that human action cannot or should not be understood in terms of willing conformity to rules, or in terms of psychological regularities that conform to laws. Is this merely a matter of a difference in emphasis or a more principled difference between you and other scientifically minded philosophers of action and mind?

Davidson: All events, including actions and thoughts, conform to laws when they are described in ways that instantiate laws (this is a tautology). What I have argued is that descriptions of events as actions or thoughts are not reducible either definitionally or nomologically to the concepts of the natural sciences. But we all know and count on rough common sense laws or regularities that let us explain and predict human behavior. I count the ‘laws’ of logic and of decision theory (among others) as neated-up versions of how people act and think.

Regarding your notion of conceptual schemes: how much in the way of human diversity in intellectual, cultural and moral matters do you think that the notion of conceptual schemes can account for?

There is, of course, endless variety in what different individuals, groups, societies have believed and do believe and considered good or

right or beautiful. When I have attacked the very idea of a conceptual scheme I was not questioning the existence of such obvious and important differences. What I was questioning was 1) the idea that we can distinguish between an unconceptualized content given in experience and an organizing scheme, and 2) the idea of radically incommensurable basic views of the world. We recognize all the differences against a shared background: everyone knows there is a common space and time in which other people (and lots of other things) exist, and we all know that some other people have minds much like our own. And so forth.

Michael Bratman

Michael Smith has argued that your theory of human action does not give an accurate account of the relation between two different perspectives we take on human intentional action: the “intentional” and the “deliberative”. [The Moral Problem (Blackwell, 1994)131-141.] In a similar vein, David Velleman has argued that your theory of human action does not give an accurate account of the relation between “the story of motivation” and the “story of rational guidance”. [“The Guise of the Good,” Nous 26 (1992)3- 26.] Both philosophers challenge the view, set out in your essays “How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?” and “Intending,” that when a person acts intentionally he acts because of “attitudes and beliefs from which, had he been aware of them and had the time, he could have reasoned that his action was desirable (or had some other positive attribute).” (Essays on Actions and Events, at p. 85) What do you think about these criticisms?

I'm sorry that I am not familiar with the criticisms and so the terms in which the question is couched, since they are not explained here, don't tell me what the criticisms are. But I do have a general reaction and confession. I readily confess that my account of motivation, intention, and action is crude and that there are many distinctions that are worth making that I did not. When I was writing on the subject, I thought there were basic problems of a logical and semantical sort that needed to be straightened out, and I wanted to describe a consistent and coherent framework. I still think a great deal of what is written on intention and action disregards these basic problems, and that if one disregards them, it is relatively easy to claim to be 'more subtle than thou.'

John Perry

I like to eat chocolate chip cookies because of the experience I

have when I do. My picture of what happens is that a certain type of cookie causes a certain kind of mouth state which causes a certain kind of brain state, which causes (or maybe just is) a certain kind of experience. It looks like I'm relying on type/type uniformities or laws between physical states and mental states every time I form an expectation of what experience eating a chocolate chip will lead me to have. I'm pretty sure I won't have to give up eating chocolate chip cookies if I adopt anomalous monism, but I'd like a little more reassurance before taking the step.

Don't worry, John. If I thought your picture was inconsistent with anomalous monism I'd give up anomalous monism, not chocolate chip cookies. There are endless type/type uniformities or laws on which we depend all the time. Life would be short without them. Anomalous monism only denies that these uniformities can be turned into 'strict laws' of the sort that physics sets out to provide.

Peter Godfrey-Smith

Could you give us an example of a philosophical problem which (i) you regard as genuine and important, (ii) you have tried hard to work on, and (iii) you think is still entirely mysterious and unresolved?

No. There are plenty of problems that for me satisfy the first two conditions, and for which I know no solution. But if I began with the thought that something was a genuine and important problem, and which after hard work came to seem entirely mysterious, I would suspect there was something wrong with the original thought.

Richard Rorty

In recent years, there hasn't been much about extensionalism, or much clarification of your much-quoted remark that natural languages are already extensional, in your writings. Could you say something about these topics, and about whether they still hold the same interest for you that they once did?

For a long time I have said that extensionalism, roughly in the sense in which a semantics based on Tarski-type theories of truth is extensional, might never be shown to be adequate to account for (all of) the idioms of natural languages, and I have expressed the hope that someone would come up with more powerful or flexible tools to do the job. But the alternatives I am familiar don't appeal to me because they lack what I see as virtues essential to providing a real insight into the nature, or even possibility, of verbal communication. [Where did I

make the ‘much-quoted remark’?]

Patrick Suppes

Prof. Davidson, you are famous for your view of the importance of language for rational decision making in a fully developed sense. There is much recent literature on belief change, but little discussion systematically of the role of language in belief changes. Unless I am mistaken, you have not written much on rational belief changes. Do you think this is something worth developing within the general framework of your views on rationality?

I have neglected this subject not because I think it unimportant but because it is technically daunting and I was late in realizing that my project of ‘radical interpretation’ was seriously incomplete without it. It took me a long time just to think of a way of combining theory of meaning and belief with ordinary decision theory. At that point I noted that what was needed was a dynamic theory of how a person’s total belief/value/meaning system changed in the light of new input. I know others have worked on aspects of this problem. Please keep up the good work.

Various modern accounts of quantum mechanics and statistical mechanics use a subjective concept of probability in their theoretical formulations. Does such an intrusion of psychological aspects into physical theories seem mistaken to you?

I wish I knew enough about quantum mechanics to have an opinion worth expressing. I would be interested to know how ‘psychological’ it would make physics if using subjective probabilities turned out to be the way to go. I would welcome a lecture.

Kenneth Taylor

You’ve claimed that nothing can justify a belief except another belief. I take it that your view that the space of epistemic reasons — if you will allow me to put it that way — consists in beliefs “all the way down” is bound up with your rejection of empiricism’s duality of scheme and content. My worry has always been that one of the things that the duality of scheme and content gave us hope of understanding is what we might call the source of the objective representational content of our beliefs such that our beliefs enjoy a kind of answerability to how things are with the world. I wouldn’t want to claim that empiricism ever succeeded in revealing the source of the objective representational contents of our beliefs. But I’ve never fully understood what, in your

view of things, could be the source of such objective representational content. You reject the sort of causal/information-theoretic/teleological accounts that are, in some sense, the contemporary heirs of empiricism. I know you've defended a kind of triangulation approach. But could you help me see how having two minds rather than one in the picture helps with objective representational content? I can't see how that gives you any more than what I call a "jazz combo" theory of content. Imagine that you are jazz player, engaging in a jam session with other jazz players. You all try to play in such a way that others will both want to and know how to "go on" with you. One can see how a kind of normativity, a kind of "answerability" to how things are by the lights of others can emerge here. But it isn't obvious how to get answerability to a mind-independent world out of any such story.

Fair enough. I made a first stab at answering your final question in the misnamed 'A Coherence Theory...' Since then I have published quite a bit more, mostly in obscure places, and my 'Replies' to John McDowell and Barry Stroud in the book mentioned above are on this question. Very briefly, what two people supply that one cannot are 1) a space in which an appreciation of error can emerge, and 2) a specific (public, interpersonal) content to perceptual beliefs by narrowing down their relevant causes. I borrow the first idea from Wittgenstein. The second is a generalization of how ostensive learning gives an external content to simple sentences ('That's an elephant') and the predicates they introduce. These ideas (when spelled out, as they certainly are not here) are not intended to explain how our beliefs are 'answerable to a mind-independent world.' The world is mostly mind-independent, but our beliefs aren't 'answerable' to it; they are formed in, by, and about it in ways that when understood show why they cannot float free of those circumstances. [I confess I quail at the thought that these bite-sized answers will inevitably be quoted my final and complete word on these matters. Oh well, as I said in answer to the question 11, one should expect it.]

Robert Jones

You appear to hold the view (see, e.g., "The Problem of Objectivity," (1995), "Rational Animals," (1982), and "Thought and Talk," (1975)) that language — i.e., full-blown intersubjective linguistic communication — is a necessary condition for thought. One might characterize your argument as follows:

1. *Thought* → *Beliefs*
2. *Beliefs* → *Propositional attitudes*
3. *Propositional attitudes* → *Second-order beliefs (i.e., beliefs*

about beliefs)

4. Second-order beliefs → Concept of objective truth

5. Concept of objective truth → Language

6. ~Language

Therefore,

7. ~Thought

This involves a dependency upon having the ability to hold the meta-concept of objective truth, something you appear to believe only humans have.

In developmental psychology there is an experimental condition called the “false belief task.” It has been argued that in order to pass the test, we require of human children just the sorts of things you require for attribution of propositional attitudes, namely the meta-concepts of belief and objective truth. Recently chimps and tamarin monkeys have been the subjects of the false-belief task (following a non-linguistic set-up) and have apparently passed the test, indicating perhaps an ability to deal with false beliefs and, importantly the concept of truth.

One might argue that this provides a counter-example to your point of view. Do you reject this type of empirical result, and, if so, exactly what behavior would you accept (must it be full-blown language?) that might cause you to rethink this view?

Of course I don't reject 'empirical results' — who could? But I am highly skeptical of claims that these results prove the existence of propositional thought. I do think that a number of ingenious experiments may reveal essential steps in the development of propositional thought. Incidentally, in my view, the only sense in which thought requires 'the concept of objective truth' is: you may recognize that you were wrong. I doubt that this should be called a second-order thought.

The Dualist

In the 1993 collection of Oxford Readings, Causation, you argue in your article “Causal Relations” that one can make a singular causal statement without knowing the appropriate law. That is, when one makes a singular causal statement, “...all that follows is that we know there must be a covering law” (84: emphasis mine). Where does the knowledge that there is a covering law come from? You seem to imply that inductive reasoning provides the appropriate justification — if so, how do you avoid the classic criticisms of inductive reasoning? Must an agent simply make an assumption about the regularity of nature?

I should have said: if a singular causal statement is true, there must be a covering law (leave out the ‘we know that’). I take this to be a conceptual truth, so induction has nothing to do with it. (Of course, empirical evidence has everything to do with supporting a singular causal claim or a general hypothesis.) I don’t think accepting the conceptual truth amounts to assuming the regularity of nature. It’s a bit too much to try to defend the conceptual connection between laws and cause here. For what it’s worth, see my “Laws and Cause,” *Dialectica* 49 (1995): 263-279 (in the last part of this article I’m way over my head).

Do you have any advice for students considering a career in philosophy? What led you into philosophy and your particular specialties within philosophy?

My only advice to someone contemplating a career in philosophy: ask yourself if you are so besotted with the subject that you are pretty certain your interest will sustain you through many years of working hard for low pay and being, as it will seem to you, more frequently misunderstood than not.

I was led into graduate work in philosophy by accident: I tell the story in my intellectual autobiography (in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, in *The Library of Living Philosophers*). I became besotted through the influence of Quine and my students. A graduate student of mine at Stanford, Daniel Bennett, introduced me to the theory of action, and having to teach philosophy of language slowly awakened me to the importance of elementary semantics in many areas of philosophy. One thing led to another; I have never thought I had a program, nor have I intended to produce a system.

Can you describe some of your current and future projects? Do you have any specific hopes about the way your work might set the agenda for other philosophers?

I have more projects than I am apt to complete: to put together three more volumes of my essays; to write short books on epistemology (if that is what it should be called, anyway, my externalist theory of triangulation), and on predication and truth. I don’t want to ‘set the agenda’ for anyone, but since like everyone else I find what I do interesting I hope others will also find it interesting and be inspired to do their own thing along related lines.

