

University of London

M.A. Philosophy of Mind 2000-1

Term 1: Seminar Classes 6-10

Handout for Week 2

Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Mind

1. Levels of Description

Davidson takes the mental to be constituted and exhausted by the categories we have for ascribing states of mind to one another in the ordinary way. We ascribe mental states to one another to make sense of our actions. What is more, our everyday psychological idiom is not reducible to the vocabulary of the physical sciences. Our everyday psychological talk describes a normative structure of attitudes and actions that makes sense of people's behaviour in rational terms. For Davidson it is the rational connections between the attitudes (and actions) that cannot be captured in purely physical terms. However, this irreducibility of intentional to physical talk does not mean that there are any irreducible mental entities. There is just one set of entities (events) and two vocabularies, with some of the events we describe in physical terms also be describable in intentional terms. So events are mental events just in case they can support intentional descriptions:

an event is an action if and only if it can be described in a way that makes it intentional (Davidson, *Actions and Events*, p229)

But what are the conditions governing our intentional descriptions. Not just any physical event is a mental event. We need some way of saying which physical events are mental events. In particular, we can say that mental events are those physical events which can be re-described in intentional terms, where the intentional re-descriptions are sustained by interpretations of the agent's behaviour as an actions performed for specific reasons. Actions are those bits of behaviour for which we need a psychological explanation, and where the psychological explanations we give are rational explanations (i.e. the citing of reasons). We cite reasons (i.e. what people believe, desire and intend) to explain why they do and say what they do and say. Notice, that the target of rational explanation is not behaviour construed as physical movement, but rather action identified under an intentional description. It is actions for which we give rational explanations. Actions are those bits of behaviour (bodily movements) an agent performs intentionally. But of course, actions come into view only when we interpret a creature as a rational agent acting on beliefs and desires. In this way, interpretation constitutes its own explananda. Interpretation provides rational explanations of things within the intentional sphere: and yet it is

interpretation which introduces the intentional sphere into our descriptions of the world. Talk of minds come about when we interpret people's behaviour in intentional terms:

'events are mental only as described' (Action and Events, p215).

2. The Holism of the Mental

At the outset, each attempt at explanation is a move within an interpretative scheme, an initial description of an action which makes sense only in the light of certain motives for action: beliefs and desires we ascribe to the agent. And the ascription of these beliefs and desires in turn makes sense only in the light of further attitude ascriptions:

Beliefs and desires issue in behaviour only as modified by other beliefs and desires, attitudes and attendings, without limit. Clearly this holism of the mental realm is a clue to the autonomy and to the anomalous character of the mental. (Action and Events, p.215)

Each of these further rationally related attitudes must be justified in the light of what the person does and says elsewhere and at other times. When interpreting a creature, each piece of evidence on behalf of a given interpretation retains its evidential standing just in case it forms part of an interpretative theory that incorporates more and more of a person's speech and behaviour within an overall intentional scheme: 'Every case tests a theory and depends on one.' (Action and Events, p221) In this way, the evidence for a given interpretation is part of the constitutive fabric of the interpretation itself. And the question of the correctness of any single intentional description of an agent depends on the cogency of the overall interpretation to which that description belongs -- this being a matter of whether we have respected the prevailing conditions for interpretation and satisfied the principles of interpretation such as rationality and charity -- and whether that interpretation enjoys the best possible (up to indeterminacy) fit with the physical facts of that agent's history. So, what it is for an agent to have a particular belief (or desire, etc.) is for him/her to be apt to be ascribed that belief (desire, etc.) in the course of giving an interpretation of him/her that makes best sense possible of his or her total life and conduct.

3. An essentially third-person epistemology of mind

This is an essentially third-personal or attributionist account of the mental. Once we have assured ourselves that the principles of interpretation governing our ascriptions of attitudes have been observed there is nothing more to say about intentional states. A theory of belief for Davidson is a theory of belief ascription. Beliefs and other propositional attitudes are exhausted by the criteria we have for awarding them to one another. As Davidson puts it, beliefs, desires, hopes and fears are:

...just those states whose contents can be discovered in well-known ways. If other people or creatures are in states not discoverable by these methods, it can be, not because the methods fail us, but because these states are not correctly called states of mind -- they are not beliefs, desires, wishes or intentions. (1989, p160)

In commenting on Davidson's third-personal view of the mental, Michael Root writes:

Other minds, on Davidson's view, are what we get when we interpret the behaviour of others. Bodies are what we have before we interpret their behaviour. (Root 1986, p294)

4. Interpretation and the fit (lack of fit) with scientific psychology

What we have is a method of re-describing physically characterised bits of behaviour, linguistic and otherwise, in intentional terms. It's by means of interpretation that we negotiate the transition from the physical to the intentional level of description. Belief, desire and meaning will be a matter of attribution: the result of the precise psychological and semantical categories we have devised to classify people's behaviour in rational terms. The rational mind is not the object of interpretation but the product of it.

Notice, that little or nothing can be said about the relation between the intentional level of description and the cognitive or neural levels posited by empirical research. The relation is one of imposition of intentional descriptions on the levels below: The levels are levels of description, remember and not levels of organisation in the organism. Nothing discovered at the levels below can have anything to contribute to our understanding of the mental given that rationality and charity are constitutive and exhaustive of the mental terms we use to identify minds.

Davidson does not eschew all empirical data but he insists that it is a matter of purely a priori reflection to determine which empirical details bear on the nature of mind. So when we ask which creatures have propositional attitudes we are told: "The question is not empirical: the question is what sort of empirical evidence is relevant to deciding when a creature has propositional attitudes" (Davidson 1982 p317). Put this way, there is still room for an a priori, philosophical dispute about the type of empirical evidence that bears on the correctness of psychological ascription. However, this view forces us to treat psychology not as a science but more as part of philosophy.

5. Can there be mental causality in this picture?

In short, yes. The events described as actions, under an intentional description, are also physical events (bodily movements). And as physically described effects they have physically describable causes. So when we say that psychological explanations bring to light the rational causes of particular behavioural effects -- events in a person's history -- we thereby licence the intentional re-description of the otherwise physical causes of the behaviour.

For Davidson, the mental supervenes on the physical, by which he means an event cannot alter in some mental respect without altering in some physical respect. And any two events alike in all physical respects will be alike in all mental respects.

In the case where we say a physical event, intentionally described, causes the an agent's behaviour, intentionally described could that physical event have taken place even if no mental state was present? No The mental concepts applied to an event cannot be changed without some change in the physical concepts applied. (Notice that supervenience is a constraint on applications of concepts, not a relation between entities). So if the mental event had not occurred, the physical event would have been different. So that very physical event could not have caused someone to behave thus and so without it also being a mental event that caused the agent to act.

6. Is there room for the first-person point of view?

It may seem that so essentially third-personal a view of the mind neglects or leaves no room for the first person point of view. The mental categories are those attributed by interpreters to make sense of people's behaviour. So it seems as though the mind is in the eye of the interpreter.

But this is too quick. A good interpretation must capture the person's own views and opinions about his or her own mental states, so long as it makes rational sense of them to do so. An interpretation that preserves the subject's point of view is better typically than one that disregards it. But how do we know our own minds? For Davidson, it is clear we do not interpret ourselves. But then we do not need to. Interpretation requires us to know what sentences a person assents to in order to know what he or she believes. In our own case, we know what we mean so we can know, without interpreting ourselves, what we believe. We literally speak our own minds.

Is this a satisfactory view of the first person? If not, we need to say why not.

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