

Disquotation and First-person Authority: Remarks on Minh Nguyen's "Davidson's Four Explanations of First-person Authority"

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1. It is a curious feature of our linguistic and epistemic practice that assertions about a speaker's own state of mind appear to enjoy a greater credence (or presumption of truth) than assertions about another's mental states. How, then, are we to account for a speaker's epistemically privileged position with respect to their own states of mind? Should we, like Descartes, conclude that we have direct access into our own states of mind, but only indirect access into the minds of others? Why then should we believe that the mental states of others are anything like ours? In a couple places, Donald Davidson has suggested that an explanation of first-person authority naturally falls out of a proper understanding of interpretive practice. However, as is so characteristic of Davidson's work, these arguments are overly compressed and in desperate need of unpacking. In the paper we've just heard, Minh Nguyen offers up four possible reconstructions of Davidson's attempt to account for first-person authority, all of which he finds lacking. In my own remarks, I'd like to focus upon Nguyen's second reconstruction, his so-called "disquotational account." Not only is it the one to which Nguyen devotes the bulk of his paper, it's the line of thought I believe Davidson himself would find most compelling. And I suspect that Nguyen's presentation fails to do it full justice. Davidson's argument can be seen to license at least a limited kind of first-person authority. However, I will contend that it turns out to be much less than we would want a philosophical theory of first-person authority to provide for us. So while my verdict on Davidson's disquotational account will resemble Nguyen's (we're both "agin' it"), we won't have taken the same route to reach this verdict.

2. The disquotational account finds its origin in an argument Davidson gestures at towards the end of his aptly-named article, "First Person Authority." There Davidson claims that first-person authority is supposed to follow from the following two premises:

Premise (I): Speakers (and their interpreters) are presumed to know which sentences they hold true.

Premise (II): Speakers are presumed to know the meanings of their own utterances in a way that they aren't presumed to know the meanings of another's utterances.

So how is this argument supposed to go? According to Nguyen, Davidson begins by having us consider a speaker S who sincerely asserts some sentence "s." By premise (I), our speaker is presumed to know that it is "s" that the speaker holds true. And by premise (II), since our speaker is in a privileged position to know that "s" means *that m* in his own idiolect, then he is in a special position to know that he (the speaker) *believes that m*.

Nguyen complains that this argument is neither comprehensive nor complete. It isn't a comprehensive account of first-person authority because it doesn't apply to opinions that the speaker fails to make explicit; nor does it apply to sincere disavowals of belief (that is, assertions that one does not hold a certain belief as opposed to assertions of a negative belief). Nguyen further contends that the account isn't complete because it relies upon unjustified (and ultimately untenable) premises. Against premise (I), Nguyen points out that radical interpreters typically are not in a position to know which sentences speakers hold true. Concerning premise (II), Nguyen points out that speakers are often able to do more to clarify their utterances than simply stutter (that is, disquote).

3. Now I suspect that Nguyen has actually gotten Davidson's intentions backwards, and as a result, his complaints against both of the premises are misdirected. The first sign that things have gone awry is that Nguyen's reconstruction and criticism aren't directed at first-person authority so much as they target a transparency thesis that Davidson would do well to reject. The first-person authority that we want explained amounts to a sort of *incorrigibility*; that is, we want an account of why sincere first-person *ascriptions of belief* are most likely to be *true*. But Nguyen's reconstruction contains no sincere first-person ascriptions of belief. Instead, it proceeds from a sincere assertion of an arbitrary sentence "s" to that speaker's having a special entitlement to a belief about one's own state of mind. (Observe, too, that disquotation doesn't occupy a prominent place within the argument.) Since Davidson isn't worried about transparency, I don't think he'd be overly concerned about Nguyen's complaints that this account misses unexpressed opinions or even disavowals of belief, for the kind of authority we want explained involves self-ascriptions of belief, the contents of which are already made explicit as a 'that'-clause within the ascription.

4. So is there a plausible route from premises (I) and (II) to first-person authority? I think there is, but I fear it won't turn out to be what we want. The asymmetry that Davidson wishes to exploit in order to explain first-person authority is that one knows the meanings of one's own utterances in a way that one doesn't know the meanings of another's. As Davidson points out, this is because the gap that exists between an interpreter's idiolect and that of the interpreted subject simply doesn't exist when one tries to assign meanings to one's own utterances. In other words, one doesn't need to engage in radical interpretation in order to assign meanings to one's own terms. The homophonic (or disquotational) translation scheme will serve just fine for a speaker to make sense of his own utterances to himself. Indeed, it's the best one could do, and Nguyen's complaint that one can often do more than simply stutter to clarify or disambiguate one's own meanings *to others* just isn't to the point.

So let us now consider a speaker S who sincerely asserts, not just “p”, but rather “I believe that p.” By premise (I), S will know that it is “p” that S holds true. Observe that since this isn't an instance of radical interpretation, Nguyen's complaint about premise (I) would seem to miss its mark. For if he's right, and radical interpreters are actually in a worse position to know which sentences a speaker holds true, then the speaker would already seem to enjoy some sort of authority with respect to claims about their own states of mind.¹ Moreover, premise (II) tells us that our speaker does not need to engage in any radical interpretation to know that “p” mean that p for him, as he would, if this were a third-person ascription instead. The homophonic translation is indeed the best he can do. So it would seem that S's assertion that “I [S] believe that p” does indeed have a special security for him that wouldn't apply to cases in which S makes third-person belief ascriptions.

5. This argument shows that one has a special assurance for their own first-person ascriptions of belief that they don't have for third-person ascriptions. My first-person ascriptions of belief are especially warranted for me since I don't have to engage in radical interpretation to discover the meanings of my own terms. The issue now is whether we should with this as an explanation of first-person authority? At this point, I'd ask you to step back and notice just how limited this account is. Davidson sets out to explain “the difference in the sort of assurance you have that I am right when I say ‘I believe Wagner died happy’ and the sort of assurance I have.” (FPA, p. 109) But I don't think that this is really what we want of an account of first-person authority! Rather than just being assured that *one's own* first-person ascriptions of belief are most likely to be true, one should rather demand an account of why sincere first-person ascriptions of belief *in general* are especially equipped to withstand challenge. That is, when interpreters recognize that another has made a sincere first-person ascription of belief, why should *they* be prepared to regard the other's first-person ascription as enjoying a special sort of credence?

¹ Davidson refuses to rely upon this asymmetry to explain first-person authority, since he believes that that would already beg the question. (FPA, p. 109)

Far from explaining this more extensive authority, the argument I just presented would actually seem to undermine it. For once again, let us suppose that a speaker S sincerely asserts, “I believe that p.” Moreover, let us further suppose (and let’s not pause to wonder how) that S’s assertion is generally recognized as a first-person belief ascription. By premise (I), any arbitrary interpreter, including the speaker, will most likely know that it is the sentence “p” that S holds true. But to get from that to the conclusion that “S believes that p,” an interpreter would have to be in a position to know that “p” *in the speaker’s tongue* means that p *in the interpreter’s tongue*. And this is precisely what Davidson’s remarks concerning premise (II) seem to block, for the knowledge that “p” disquotes is secure only when one is trying to make sense of one’s own terms. At this point, Nguyen’s remarks against disquotation strike home, for when one does try to make one’s meaning clear to another, often they can do much better than stutter (or disquote).

6. So in the end, I wind up agreeing with Nguyen that Davidson has failed to show how first-person authority arises naturally out of an appropriate understanding of our interpretive practices. I just fear that Nguyen has misrepresented Davidson, with the consequence that he fails to see how his own considerations do indeed bear against Davidson’s explanation of first-person authority. To be sure, Davidson’s comments on the subject are notoriously opaque, and perhaps neither of us have gotten Davidson’s account right. We’re all radical interpreters here. So maybe it’s best to stop now and invite our audience to concoct a better, appropriately “Davidsonian” account of first-person authority.

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First-person Authority: Davidson understands FPA to be "the presumption that a speaker is right when he sincerely attributes a belief, desire, or intention to his present self, while there is no such presumption when others make similar attributions to him." ("First Person Authority" *Dialectica* 38 [1984], p. 101)

The Disquotation Account: At the end of "First Person Authority," Davidson contends that FPA follows from the following two premises:

Premise (I): Speakers (and their interpreters) are presumed to know which sentences they hold true.

Premise (II): Speakers are presumed to know the meanings of their own utterances in a way that they aren't presumed to know the meanings of another's utterances.

Reconstruction #1 (Nguyen)

1. S sincerely asserts "p".
2. S presumably knows that S holds-true "p". [By premise (I)]
3. S presumably knows that "p" means that m. [By premise (II)]
4. S presumably knows that S believes that m. [From 2. and 3.]

Reconstruction #2 (Beisecker)

1. S sincerely asserts "I believe that p".
2. S presumably knows that S holds-true "p" [By premise (I)]
3. S presumably knows that "p" means that p. [By premise (II)]
4. S's first-person ascription is presumably true. [From 1., 2., and 3.]

Does this *really* explain FPA?

Davidson sets out to explain "the difference in the sort of assurance you have that I am right when I say 'I believe Wagner died happy' and the sort of assurance I have." (FPA, p. 109) But I don't think that this is really what we want of an account of first-person authority! Rather than just being assured that *one's own* first-person ascriptions of belief are most likely to be true, one should rather demand an account of why sincere first-person ascriptions of belief *in general* are especially equipped to withstand challenge. That is, when interpreters recognize that another has made a sincere first-person ascription of belief, why should *they* be prepared to regard the other's first-person ascription as enjoying a special sort of credence?

But the argument above doesn't deliver the requisite goodies:

1. S sincerely asserts "I believe that p".
2. I (an arbitrary interpreter) presumably knows that S holds-true "p" [By premise (I)]
3. I presumably knows that "p" means that p. [**Not by premise (II)!!!**]
4. I will agree that S's first-person ascription is presumably true. [From 1., 2., and 3.]