

Reply to Beisecker's "Interpretation and First-Person Authority: Davidson on Self-Knowledge"

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1. First Person Authority

At the heart of Beisecker's paper is an attack on Davidson's explanation of the asymmetry evident in the phenomenon of First person Authority. In this response I argue that Beisecker offers no reason to reject Davidson's explanation, and hence that his own exploration of alternative explanations is unmotivated.

The thesis of First Person Authority is the thesis that there is a presumption in favour of a subject's self-ascriptions, a presumption which does not attach to the ascriptions of psychological states to others. Davidson identifies the source of the asymmetry as follows:

- (1) Both S and S* know that S holds the sentence "p" to be true.
- (2) There is a presumption that S but not S* knows what S means by "p".

From which it follows that:

- (3) There is a presumption that S but not S* knows what S believes.

(3) is a statement of First Person Authority. The asymmetry stated in (3), then, is what needs to be explained. It is explained, according to Davidson, by the asymmetry stated in (2). But we are now owed an explanation of the asymmetry in (2): an explanation of the presumption that speakers but not their interpreters know what their words mean.

2. Interpretation

The asymmetry stated in (2), according to Davidson, is essential to, and hence explained by appeal to, the nature of interpretation. There are numerous passages in which Davidson addresses the issue. Beisecker quotes the following.

An interpreter of another's words and thoughts must depend upon scattered information, fortunate training, and imaginative surmise in coming to understand the other. The agent herself, however, is not in a position to wonder whether she is generally using her own words to apply to the right objects and events, since whatever she regularly does apply them to gives her words the meanings they have and her thoughts the contents they have. (KOM, p. 456).

So, we have an explanation of the asymmetry in (2), and since (3) follows from (2) we also have an explanation of the asymmetry in (3).

3. Beisecker

Beisecker says he does not challenge Davidson's explanation of the asymmetry in (2). Rather, and somewhat surprisingly, Beisecker claims to challenge the inference from (2) to (3). That is, he claims to grant that it follows from the nature of interpretation that a subject, but not her interpreter, typically knows what her utterances mean, but says he does not think this asymmetry explains the phenomenon of First Person Authority. Beisecker's argument consists of two closely related points. I will deal with each in turn.

(a) The first point:

Davidson's account of first person authority is, according to Beisecker, "limited". He says, "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?" (p. 5, original emphasis).

I find this question puzzling. Beisecker appears to be asking for a reason to move from the specific case (my own first-person ascriptions are likely true) to the general case (an arbitrary subject's first-person ascriptions are likely true). But Davidson's argument is already perfectly general. Reflection on the nature of interpretation demonstrates that

speakers *in general* cannot typically be wrong about what their utterances mean. It makes no sense to think that an arbitrary speaker is generally wrong about what her utterances mean, and hence it makes no sense to think that an arbitrary speaker is generally wrong about what she thinks. Note that we can know that a subject knows what she is thinking even if we do not know on a given occasion *what* she is thinking.

(b) The second point:

Beisecker goes on to say, “far from delivering us an account of this more extensive authority, the argument I [Beisecker] just presented on Davidson’s behalf actually undermines it” (p. 5). To get from an identification of the sentence S holds true as “p” to the conclusion that S believes that p, says Beisecker,

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 [(2)] seem to block, for the knowledge that “p” disquotes is secure only when one is trying to make sense of one’s own terms. (p. 6, original emphasis).

Beisecker is absolutely right. Clearly I cannot move from your utterance of “p” to the claim that you believe that p without assuming illegitimately that we speak the same language. But why this should be thought to tell against Davidson is a mystery. Not only does Davidson acknowledge this fact, it is one half of the very cornerstone of his argument. It is *precisely* the fact that I *cannot* state the meaning of your utterance by simply disquoting that Davidson appeals to in his explanation of First Person Authority. Consider:

S’s train of thought:

(S1) I hold true the sentence “p”

(S2) My utterance of “p” means that p

(S3) I believe that p

S*’s train of thought:

(S*1) S holds true the sentence “p”

(S*2) S’s utterance of “p” means that ???

(S*3) S believes that ???

The move from (S1) to (S2) (and hence to (S3)) does not require S to engage in interpretation, and there is a general (although not infallible) guarantee that S will specify her meaning correctly. The move beyond (S*1), in contrast, requires S* to engage in interpretation, and there is no general guarantee that the interpretation S* provides will be correct. Davidson says,

[t]here can be no *general* guarantee that a hearer is correctly interpreting a speaker ... he is liable to serious error... In this special sense, he may always be regarded as *interpreting* a speaker. The speaker cannot, in the same way, *interpret* his own words. The speaker ... cannot wonder whether he generally means what he says. (FPA p. 12, my emphasis).

This does not mean that First Person Authority is infallible. S can be wrong about what his utterance means, since what it means, according to Davidson, “depends in part on the clues to interpretation he has given the interpreter” (FPA p. 13). A subject can intend to mean one thing (intend to be interpreted one way) but act in such a way that he is best interpreted as meaning something else. But, crucially, S cannot improve on the following sort of statement: ‘My utterance of “p” is true iff p’. Whereas, again, according to Davidson, S* has no reason to assume this will be *his* best way of stating the truth-conditions of S’s utterance. So, far from undermining Davidson’s explanation, Beisecker states precisely the point Davidson wants us to accept. The process of coming to know what one’s utterances mean *cannot* be the same for the speaker as for the interpreter. [It is worth noting also that Beisecker’s challenge here looks very much to be directed against Davidson’s explanation for the asymmetry in (2), and not, as Beisecker had initially claimed, a challenge directed at the inference from (2) to (3).]

Beisecker adds, “when speakers need to make their meanings clear to others, they are well-advised to do much more than simply stutter (or disquote)” (p. 6). But it is important to distinguish: (a) stating the meanings of one’s own utterances, from (b) making the meanings of one’s utterances clear to another. With regard to (a) one can typically do no better than disquote; but with regard to (b) one should, rather, try to be *interpretable*: as

Davidson says, “to use a finite supply of distinguishable sounds applied consistently to objects and situations [one] believes are apparent to [one’s] hearer” (p. 14).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, then, Beisecker does nothing to cast doubt on the move from (2) to (3), and hence nothing to undermine Davidson’s explanation of First Person Authority. First, Davidson’s argument is perfectly general. Second, it in no way relies on the illegitimate assumption that the disquotation of another’s utterance yields knowledge of the meaning of that utterance. Rather, Davidson’s argument depends upon the fact that *interpretation* is required if we are to know the meanings of others’ utterances, whereas interpretation cannot typically be required in one’s own case.