

What is belief, such that first person authority can exist?

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In First Person Authority, Davidson asks why first person authority exists. First person authority is the peculiar knowledge that one has about one's own beliefs, accessible to that one without pain or penalty. Davidson asks why first person authority exists. I want to ask how belief can possibly admit first person authority.

1 Beliefs as Propositional Possessions

I want to explore a particular analogy. Davidson argues that beliefs about propositions have as their informational content nothing more than the proposition believed. Consider another possession which shares this property: a piece of paper on which any given proposition is written. The goal in this exploration is to determine what other properties beliefs must have by how closely the analogy matches. The belief that I will consider is that "George Washington was the first President."

Beliefs exist as relationships between the believer and a proposition. This relationship is isomorphic to the relationship of a possessor to a possession, with the believer as the possessor.

The possessor can do a number of things with his piece of paper. He can pack the piece of paper away, make it more readily accessible, study it, or lose it. Let us suppose that for some reason, he cannot show it to others (to make it more like a proper belief), although he can tell others about its contents. However, with the proper scientific instruments, and through extended scrutiny or evasive methods, it is perfectly conceivable that others could determine the contents of the page, just like they could study a person's brain to determine its stored information, with instruments and physical and biological understanding. By analyzing the patterns of neuron firing and brain connections, and with time for analysis, anything in the brain ought to be open to third persons, although there remains the problem of translation. In contrast, the possessor of either the belief or the paper may check the nature of the proposition whenever he wants, without translation (it is without translation in the case of the paper if we assume that the possessor is also the author, as argued by Davidson).

In all of these ways, the piece of paper is like a belief. I believe there are three (metaphysical) ways that these two differ: in immediacy, coherence, and activity.

Beliefs appear to be immediately accessible. There is no noticeable process isomorphic to retrieving the page and reading it. Whether or not any work is needed to "retrieve" the belief, there is no work done in determining the contents of our current beliefs. One just knows. One does need to spend time and energy to explore the extents and implications of a proposition, but that is the case with both the belief and the paper.

By coherence, I mean the following difference between beliefs and pieces of paper. When the possessor of the paper reads the text, he gains another belief, namely that the paper expresses the proposition that George Washington was the first President, as he wrote it at an earlier time to reflect his own belief on the subject. Even as he reads the page, he is forming this proposition. These new beliefs could in turn be isomorphic to additional pieces of paper, but with the result that there is a proliferation of beliefs-about-beliefs, something that does not happen for normal beliefs (unless it is made to happen intentionally). Beliefs are monadic enough that they are complete both in storage and use.

It also seems like beliefs are in some sense “active”. They present themselves for review or as lenses through which to view the rest of the world at the least provocation. In trying to interpret the world, we are forced to interpret it using the propositions that we hold true. If someone mentions “the first President,” it seems impossible to ignore one’s belief about the specific referent of that phrase.

In some ways, clearly, a belief is not like a piece of paper. It is not, however, obvious where, if anywhere, first person authority appears in these differences. Speed does not seem to be a necessary quality of what it means to know things as a first person. The coherence property I ascribed to beliefs could simply be a result of our ability to ignore information we do not need. All knowledge is active, both first person and third person knowledge, so it is not clear how that can be useful for distinguishing between the two.

2 First Person Authority

At this point is it useful to describe what I consider to be the primary characteristics of first person authority before returning to these points in more detail. Davidson says that

It comes closer to characterizing first person authority to note that the self-attributer [of a belief statement] does not normally base his claims on evidence or observation, nor does it normally make sense to ask the self-attributer why he believes he has the beliefs, desires, or intentions he claims to have. (4)

The claim that self-attribution is not based on evidence may be an unjustified simplification. Our claims about our beliefs do come from data of our brain-state contents. It just so happens that our mechanisms for collecting that data are so streamlined and transparent that we do not notice.

Here, however, we need to tread carefully. These words conjure up images of an “inner eye” with an eye-stock sticking into the interior of the mind. Davidson ridicules this view, because it requires a separation between self, process, and information which cannot exist in a system as integrated as the brain (assuming that everything mental and subjective is subvenient on the brain).

Consider the process of interpreting a belief, more carefully this time. In the first person case, the informational content of the belief is an essential part of the “program” which produces the claim. In the third person, a data-collection and interpretation “program” is run on whatever inputs it is given, and these inputs could be the the very information fed to the first program, but as an input to the second the result would be different. The difference might be the difference between the beliefs that “I think George Washington was the first President” and that “Jimmy thinks that George Washington was the first President.” Although the propositions are the same, as well as the other entity in the belief relationship (me), the nature of the belief is subtly shifted (and could have been shifted more).

Based on the “brain-data” understanding of beliefs, it does make sense to ask why one believes that one has certain beliefs. However, because the process is different for these beliefs, the first person beliefs have coherence that the third person beliefs do not. Another way to understand this point is as an “interpretation”. The awareness of a belief is based on data, both in the first and third person. Moreover, the process of recognizing it as a belief and determining the contents of the belief must occur in both the first and third person. However, in the third person, this process of recognition involves evaluation and analysis. Not so for the first person. As a result, the third person has unignorable “beliefs about beliefs” (just like the possessor of the proposition-containing paper), while the first person does not.

Davidson points out the role of interpretation in a complete understanding of first person authority. Davidson considers it the fundamental difference: “There is a presumption— an unavoidable presumption built into the nature of interpretation— that the speaker knows what he means. So there is a presumption that if he knows the he holds a sentence true, he

knows what he believes” (14). I agree that it is important, but I think it is only the tip of an iceberg of the differences.

3 Awareness and Its Consequences

Evaluation and analysis are processes in the realm of objective reason. In as much as subjective considerations play a role in attempts at analysis, the analysis is biased and crippled. Reason is fundamentally “third person”. It acts by following the consequences of definitions which anyone might choose to explore. So long as reasoner make no mistakes in such an exploration, and if they follow the same lines of reasoning, they are forced into the same result. This is what makes reason so powerful.

In fact, the difference between third person-ness and first person-ness is, from the point of view of reason, exactly first person authority. If two people have access to exactly the same information with the same immediacy, it is impossible for them to distinguish between each other. Nagle would say that the objective “method” is exactly the process of abstracting away the central-ness of oneself in one’s own world. This is like the example of the two omnipotent gods, one of which is in a valley and one of which is on a mountain, but neither knows which one he is. A practical effect which makes this distinction easy is that our knowledge about the universe is centered at a particular place in space and time and takes effort to expand, but these differences do not appear fundamental.

I keep using the phrase “from the point of view of reason” because there exist other methods of considering these problems of the nature of belief. I will present another, and some discussion to evaluate if it is appropriate for the task. To do this, I will be considering the ideas and arguments presented in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, which is far more about the philosophy of objectivity and subjectivity than about motorcycles.

I want to introduce another concept into this discussion, which Davidson intentionally leaves

out: awareness. Awareness has a number of levels and object. One can be aware with respect to full propositions: “I am aware that George Bush is the president of the United States” or “I am aware that I believe George Bush to be the president of the United States.” More primitive awareness happens with respect to more direct things. I am aware of the words I am writing on this page. Or I am aware of the computer screen and the keyboard. Or I am aware of something in the tactile world and something in the visual world, but I have not yet recognized that it is the computer screen and keyboard and that they are related. Awareness also admits a kind of implicit interpretation. We are aware of things *as* other things. This awareness is built on top of a set of beliefs. One can be aware of someone as English and try to interpret their words into English (because one has the belief that they will speak English), but then have to revise that belief when the interpretation fails.

Pirsig talks about awareness in the context of the problem of the time lag between perception and recognition, awareness and understanding. Any attempts to think rationally about things in one’s environment have to have as their objects a more complete understanding of those things than possible in awareness, and that understanding exists only in the memory. Above, I said that from the point of view of reason, this time lag is not important. However, from a subjective standpoint, it is central.

4 First Person Authority as Awareness

Consider the differences between the paper and the belief, this time considering the qualities that relate to awareness— that is, the subjective qualities.

Immediacy suddenly becomes more important in the context of time lag. Our very ability to think is based on this readiness or persistence of beliefs. Thought does not happen in the memory (we do not only “remember” having thought something); it happens in the present, even as we are simultaneously interpreting the present into future past. The objects we think about in the present are things of the past, but the opinions we have about those things

are part of the thoughts themselves. Recognized objects are not pieces of our present, but beliefs are.

Beliefs as an awareness also explain their coherence. It is not that beliefs have been already interpreted; they are awarenesses, and have not yet been interpreted. If I think about my belief that George Washington was the First President, I can ask if I know what those various elements of the belief mean, and ask many questions about the belief. The reason that the one question that is difficult to truthfully ask is “do I believe this proposition” is because I would have to ignore an aspect of the universe as I am currently aware of it to do that, namely the belief.

The activity of beliefs takes a new meaning under subjectivity. No longer are beliefs objects of a rational process (although they are this from the point of view of reason). Subjectively, beliefs are agents or subjects which have the interpretation of other things as their object. The reason for this is nothing more than that everything subjectively is a free agent, because the understanding of what forces cause it to exist in a certain manner are in the realm of objective reason. One might object that really either beliefs are self-effected or they are not, but I think the truth of self-effecitivity is in the relation of a thing to other things.

These characteristics, which are essential to first person authority, cannot be understood just with reason. They concern awareness, which exists before reason. In other words, the objective conception of beliefs, that beliefs are rational relations between subjects and proposition, is incomplete.

5 Subjective Understanding

The problem of what belief is, beyond any particular mode of understanding, is greater than can be considered in this paper. I only wish to outline one attempt, made by Pirsig in this direction. In exploring these ideas, he conjures up a train as a metaphor for life.

In my mind now is an image of a huge, long railroad train, one of those 120-boxcar jobs that cross the prairies all the time with lumber and vegetables going east and with automobiles and other manufactured goods going west. I want to call this railroad train “knowledge” and subdivide it into two parts: Classic Knowledge and Romantic Knowledge.

In terms of the analogy, Classic Knowledge, the knowledge taught by the Church of Reason, is the engine and all the boxcars. All of them and everything that’s in them. If you subdivide the train into parts you will find no Romantic Knowledge anywhere. And unless you’re careful it’s easy to make the presumption that’s all the train there is. This isn’t because Romantic Knowledge is nonexistent or even unimportant....

Romantic Quality, in terms of this analogy, isn’t any “part” of the train. It’s the leading edge of the engine, a two-dimensional surface of no real significance unless you understand that the train isn’t a static entity at all. A train really isn’t a train if it can’t go anywhere. In the process of examining the train and subdividing it into parts we’ve inadvertently stopped it, so that it really isn’t a train we are examining.

This is the reason we have such a difficult time trying to describe subjective experience. It is because the process of describing it is the process of taking it apart and transforming it from romantic knowledge into classic knowledge.

The process of “taking apart” a belief leaves only the proposition, but that is not all that a belief is. However, a belief is also a mental object “in motion.” The belief is that subjective object which contains the proposition of the belief.