

On Davidson's Belief Justification

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In this paper, I treat the justification problem of Davidson. In chapter 1, I introduce a common view to epistemic justification. In chapter 2, I summarize Davidson's position to this problem. And in chapter 3, I examine and criticize his view.

1. Epistemic Justification

1.1 What is Epistemic Justification?

In historically dominant tradition in epistemology, knowledge has been thought as "true justified belief." Knowing has been thought as not only to hit the truth but also to hit the truth with adequate correctness, or justification. If Knowledge is true justified belief, the justification problem is connected with the part of justification. This problem can be formulated as follows: Is there a good reason for holding certain belief? If so, how is it like? When this problem is argued, the representative positions are foundationalism and coherence theory.

1.2 Foundationalism and Coherence Theory

1.2.1 Foundationalism

Foundationalism claims that the principle of justification is derived from basic-belief, which has no necessity to be justified from other beliefs. According to foundationalists, there is two types of justified beliefs. One is non-basic belief which is justified inferentially by another more basic belief, and the other is basic belief which is justified immediately without dependence on any other beliefs in some way; for example, self-justification. The final basis of justification for all our knowledge is derived from such basic belief. For this meaning, our knowledge is founded on some belief that has epistemically privileged status.

Descartes as a foundationalist claims that all our knowledge are derived deductively from the belief each of us hold; the belief that "I am.." Descartes thinks that if we do have that belief we surely can find that belief to be true. Unless this belief is true, to hold this belief is impossible. It is the famous logic of 'cogito ergo sum'.

Recently, foundationalism comes to base on sensory experience instead of the belief of the existence of oneself. It is queer to think that a person may make a mistake about what she feels. Foundationalists claim that sensations are the sure ground of all the beliefs. That is to say, the contention of this type of foundationalism is that some sensations can

justify our knowledge absolutely.

1.2.2 Coherence Theory

In contrast to foundationalism, coherence theory claims that every belief derives some of its justification from other beliefs. That is to say, coherentists insist that any belief depends for its justification on inferential relations to other beliefs and eventually to the whole system of beliefs held by the believer in question. According to coherentist, the justification of whole system of beliefs is derived ultimately from the coherence of the system, where coherence is a matter of how tightly unified or interconnected the system is by virtue of inferential connections between its members.

Contrary to what this might seem to suggest, coherence theories do not deny that sensory observation and perception plays an important role in justification. What they deny is that this role should be construed in a foundationalist way, insisting instead that the justification of observational beliefs ultimately derives also from considerations of coherence. Specific coherence theories may also add other requirements for justification thereby departing from a pure coherentism, while still avoiding foundationalism. Davidson calls himself as a kind of coherentist but he adds other requirement for justification.

2. Belief Justification on Davidson

2.1 His Problem About Justification

Davidson grants that 'truth is correspondence with the way things are.'¹Then he explains about the problem of justification from the position of a coherence theory. He tries to find a reason for 'supposing most of our beliefs are true but that reason is not a form of evidence.'²He agrees with Rorty, who claims that 'there is no way to get outside our belief and our language so as to find some test other than coherence.'³ Davidson thinks that 'it is absurd to look for a justifying ground for the totality of beliefs, something outside this totality which we can use to test on compare with our beliefs.'⁴ And he rejects foundationalism for this reason. I will explain his rejection in detail later. According to him, 'what distinguishes a coherence theory is simply the claim that nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief.'⁵ Seeing from this thought, foundationalism is an idea that looks for a justifying ground or source outside our belief. Hence foundationalism is unintelligible to him. So he cannot use what is outside our belief, still he tries to show that 'there is a presumption in

favour of the truth of a belief that coheres with a significant mass of belief to defend a coherence theory.⁶

2.2 His Objection Against Foundationalism

Now, let's see in detail how he rejects foundationalism. The target he attacks here is a type of foundationalism that 'grounds belief in one way or another on the testimony of the senses; sensation, perception, the given, experience, sense data, the passing show.'⁷ He demands of foundationalists that they should explain these two things: 'What, exactly, is the relation between sensation and belief that allows the first to justify the second? And, why should we believe our sensations are reliable. That is, why should we believe our senses?'⁸

The answer of foundationalists to the first question can be the following. One answer is 'to identify certain beliefs with sensations.'⁹ Hume, for example, seems not to have distinguished between perceiving a green spot and perceiving that a spot is green. But, such a way is obviously a mistake. Because beliefs are definitely differ from sensations: beliefs have propositional contents, but sensations don't. Noticing Hume's confusion, other philosophers tried to attain the same results by reducing the gap between perception and judgement to zero by attempting to formulate judgements that do not go beyond sensations. But to do this is useless. Because 'if the basic beliefs do not exceed in content the corresponding sensation, they cannot support any inference to an objective world.'¹⁰

What about to claim that we cannot be wrong about how things appear to us to be? As we have certain sensation, it necessarily connected with certain belief. But, 'it is difficult to explain this connection between some sensations and beliefs in a way that does not invite skepticism about other minds.'¹¹ And since sensations don't justify beliefs, this may be 'another form of coherence theory.'¹²

Then, suppose we say that sensations themselves, verbalized or not, justify certain beliefs that go beyond what is given in sensation. So, under certain conditions, having the sensation of seeing a green light flashing may justify the belief that a green light is flashing. But Davidson objects against this claim: The sensation of seeing a green light flashing justifies the belief that a green light is flashing, if and only if the person who has this belief believes that she holds this belief. Because even if she has this sensation indeed while she doesn't believe that she has this sensation, she doesn't contradict herself. So this sensation alone cannot justify the belief. If she believes that she holds this sensation, what justifies the belief that a green light is flashing is not the sensation but another beliefs that he holds the sensation of seeing a green light flashing. But, of course, this belief can't exclude the possibility that these beliefs are false. It is

possible that a person doesn't have the sensation with holding the belief that she has the sensation.

So, what on earth does Davidson himself thinks the relation between sensations and beliefs? He thinks that 'the relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes.'¹³ Therefore, he rejects foundationalism that claims a sensation justifies, or be an evidence of justification of, a belief. However, he doesn't claim at all that there is no relation between a sensation and a belief. Then, what is the relation? He says that this relation is causal. 'Sensations cause some beliefs and in this sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs.'¹⁴ According to Davidson, what justifies a belief is only what has a propositional content. Therefore, though a sensation causes a belief, it is not a reason for holding that belief.

Furthermore, it is also difficult for foundationalists to answer the second question. 'Even if sensations justify belief in sensation, we do not yet see how they justify belief in external events and objects.'¹⁵ Introducing intermediaries, like senses, that connect external events with us, 'they don't justify the beliefs they cause, while if they deliver information, they may be lying.'¹⁶ Although beliefs depend on sensations, the dependence is not an evidence or a justification but a cause. For these reasons Davidson suggests to give up foundationalism.

2.3 His Coherence Theory

Then, what is the Davidson's coherence theory? I try to summarize his contention in this section. In his argument, Davidson thinks of coherence of beliefs as correspondence between interpreter and speaker. According to him, 'most of the beliefs in a coherent total set of beliefs are true.'¹⁷ This claim stands on his interpretation theory. He claims that we should presume that a speaker believes that most of what we consider to be true is true in a situation of radical interpretation. He calls this fact "the principle of charity." And he says that this principle imposes restrictions on our interpretation. Because 'the methodological advice to interpret in a way that optimizes agreement should not be conceived as resting on a charitable assumption about human intelligence that might turn out to be false. If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behavior of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything.'¹⁸

But, correspondence between an interpreter and a speaker alone is not enough to justify beliefs. Because it may happen that 'speaker and interpreter understand one another

on the basis of shared but erroneous beliefs.¹⁹ 'It is an artifact of the interpreter's correct interpretation of a person's speech and attitudes that there is a large degree of truth and consistency in the thought and speech of an agent.'²⁰ In brief, principle of charity and radical interpretation depend on coherence and truth by only the interpreter's standards.

However, the situation that interpreter and speakers are coherent only shows a necessary condition for their beliefs to be true. Then, what does guarantee their beliefs to be true. Unless we regard truth as coherence, we cannot get a guarantee that the coherence yielded by principle of charity is the truth by the interpreter's standard, but the objective truth. Therefore we are led to the position that divorces truth from the world and give up our intuition of truth. In this respect Davidson also declares that his purpose is not to define truth by coherence and belief.²¹ But, if he accepts truth is beyond mere coherence, the coherence by principle of charity is not enough to bring objective truth. So, Davidson has to show that 'coherence yields correspondence'²² with truth.

2.4 His Answer to Skepticism

2.4.1 An Omniscient Interpreter

Davidson tries to answer skepticism with two sorts of argument. As the first answer against skepticism, he tries to prove that most of our knowledge is true by supposing that an omniscient being interpret us.

In order to exclude the possibility that why speaker and interpreter understand one another on the basis of shared but erroneous belief, he introduces an assumption: an omniscient being, who believes all and only the truth. In other words, this being 'is omniscient about the world, and about what does and would cause a speaker to assent to any sentence in this (potentially unlimited) repertoire.'²³ According to Davidson's interpretation theory, contents of beliefs are theoretical being that is not yielded until interpreted. And, in a situation of radical interpretation, an interpreter interprets sentences held true according to the events and objects in the outside world that cause the sentence to be true. Then, when the omniscient interpreter is in a situation of radical interpretation, except the beliefs that is regarded as the necessary cost of holding speaker's belief system to be coherent, all the beliefs are counted as to be true, hence most part of the interpreter and the speaker's beliefs get correspondence. Though this correspondence is by the interpreter's standards, since these are objectively correct, the speaker is seen to be largely correct and consistent by objective standards.

2.4.2 Causes of Beliefs

The second answer stands on the claim that 'beliefs are

by nature generally true.'²⁴ According to Davidson, 'what stands in the way of global skepticism of the senses is the fact that we must, in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases, take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief.'²⁵ That is to say, while the contents of beliefs are fixed only after interpretation to them, the beliefs necessarily have their causes, and generally we take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief, therefore any belief is justified if it is correctly interpreted. Davidson claims that this point is a nature of beliefs, and in this sense, all beliefs are justified.

3. My Objection to Davidson

3.1 On Assuming the Omniscient Interpreter

In this section I will argue that Davidson should not assume the omniscient interpreter in order to justify the beliefs.

Precisely, what is the omniscient being who interprets beliefs? And, how can we consider a being to be omniscient? In other words, how is the omniscient being justified itself?

First, one may say that the omniscient being doesn't need any justification because it is so determined by the definition. But Davidson cannot take this way. Because, it means that the correctness of beliefs of us depends on a source of justification outside of beliefs. But this is a kind of foundationalism which Davidson already rejected. If Davidson wants to assume the omniscient interpreter, her beliefs, as our beliefs, must be fixed only through some interpretation without calling on outside of beliefs.

If contents of beliefs are fixed only through some interpretation, in the circumstance that we interpret her, we may find that our beliefs almost correspond to her beliefs but we cannot find whether she is omniscient or not. Therefore, we also cannot exclude the possibility that each of us are a brain in a vat and 'understand one another on the basis of shared but erroneous beliefs.'²⁶

It is only another omniscient interpreter who can say that all her beliefs may, and are, true. But no matter how the new character appears, only to be arisen a new problem similar to previous. Is it possible to say that the interpreter is not the brain in a vat but omniscient without referring a new omniscient interpreter?

I think it is difficult to say this unless one adopts an idea of foundationalism. Therefore, the supposition of the omniscient interpreter cannot give the justification to the Davidson's coherence theory. So long as staying inside beliefs, it seems that the idea of the omniscient interpreter itself cannot be admitted since we don't have methods to distinguish between the omniscient interpreter and a brain in

a vat. Even if Davidson solves this problem, a new difficulty will be waiting for him: the idea that the omniscient interpreter must be able to interpret us obviously conflicts with Davidson's interpretation theory.

On the one hand this idea premises that we surely have beliefs and make meaningful speaking; on the other hand it needs to premise that the contents of our beliefs are the theoretical composition which occurs only in the context of interpretation in order for most of our beliefs to be true. So if he wants to explain the justice of our beliefs by the omniscient interpreter, it is necessary to claim that the contents of the beliefs, at least for our own, is not merely a theoretical composition but something independent from interpretation. But it is very difficult matter for Davidson. Because to claim this compels him to revise his interpretation theory radically.

3.2 On the Nature of Belief

Now, consider the assumption of a brain in a vat. That is; we may not have a body actually, and be a brain which is preserved alive in a vat. Then what we think sensory experience must totally be an illusion which is caused by a stimulation given by an evil scientist to us. Therefore it is possible that 'a person's sensory stimulations could be just as they are and yet the world outside very different.'²⁷ From this view, skeptics conclude; all of beliefs we hold about surrounding world may be false. Since it is at least possible that we are brains in vats, we can make errors over a wide range. There is some plausibility in the conclusion of skeptics, because in this case contents of beliefs of the brain are fixed independently of their causes.

But Davidson claims, "If I am right, we can't in general first identify beliefs and then ask what caused them".²⁸ The brain in a vat connected to a sound device may say, "It is snowing at here Mt.Fuji." It seems that the brain speaks English indicating a mountain in Japan. But, according to Davidson, it is a mistake to interpret the language she speaks as Japanese. With a correct interpretation in which causes of her belief are incorporated, her language is, so to speak, "the vat language", which indicates the things actually around the brain such as the stimulation given by the evil scientist, and so on. Consequently, her utterance is true. But, for us, such conclusion is quite unusual. Because, her utterance seems for us to be false obviously.

We cannot identify correctly all causes of certain belief without exception. Therefore our interpretation is not always

correct. Our interpretation of the brain may differ widely from that of the omniscient being. But, in this case, who makes a correct interpretation is rather the omniscient being than us. However, Davidson should not assume that the omniscient being. He cannot get justification from coherence between the omniscient being and us. Then, we may be coherent with a speaker, still we cannot exclude the possibility that the speaker and we understand one another on the basis of shared but erroneous beliefs. We cannot rely on the omniscient being to bridge a gap between our coherence and truth in fact.

Notes

1. Davidson, D. "A coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" (1983), in *The Essential Davidson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.p.227
2. *Ibid.*,p.232
3. Rorty, R. "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature"(1979). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. p.178
4. Davidson, D. "A coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" (1983), in *The Essential Davidson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.p.232
5. *Ibid.*,p.228
6. *Ibid.*,p.226
7. *Ibid.*,p.228
8. *Ibid.*,p.228
9. *Ibid.*,p.228
10. *Ibid.*,p.229
11. *Ibid.*,p.229
12. *Ibid.*,p.229
13. *Ibid.*,p.229
14. *Ibid.*,p.229
15. *Ibid.*,p.229
16. *Ibid.*,p.230
17. *Ibid.*,p.226
18. Davidson, D. "Radical Interpretation" (1973), in *The Essential Davidson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.p.193
19. *Ibid.*,p.236
20. *Ibid.*,p.236
21. *Ibid.*,p.226
22. *Ibid.*,p.225
23. *Ibid.*,p.236
24. *Ibid.*,p.238
25. *Ibid.*,p.236
26. *Ibid.*,p.236
27. *Ibid.*,p.231
28. *Ibid.*,p.235