CHAPTER 25

ABSTRACT: The discourse of Alzheimer's disease sufferers, studied in depth, is found to reveal the afflicted as being semiotic subjects, that is, persons for whom meaning is the driving force behind their behavior. This is despite the fact that the subjects are categorized, on the basis of standard psychometric measures, as being in moderate to severe stages of the disease. The research presented herein is meant to suggest the possibility that such disparities may be more common than is presently acknowledged, and that if so, such semiotic behavior as can be found in Alzheimer's sufferers may be used to help facilitate interactions between the afflicted and the healthy, and to inform further our understanding of cognition and intention by suggesting a complementary approach to assessing cognitive function. In keeping with the discursive approach to psychology, this study is based on the principle that meanings are jointly constituted by the participants to a conversation.

KEYWORDS: Dementia, discourse, cognitive function, intentional stance, discursive psychology, meaning, intentionality, psychometric testing, time and psychopathology

You can discover only what you have the conceptual resources to recognize.

Anonymous

Part One: The Idea of a "Semiotic" Subject

Introduction

Traditional studies of the cognitive and social effects of Alzheimer's disease (AD), or perhaps preferably, Alzheimer's condition (hereafter AC),[1] have involved the use of psychometric measures (neuropsychological test batteries) by psychologists, psychiatrists, and other professionals in the setting of the clinic or nursing home, and the use of other diagnostic measures (Activities of Daily Living Questionnaires) by caregivers in less formal settings. A certain picture of the AC sufferer emerges from such studies: the person is seen as confused, emotionally labile, guilty of inappropriate emotional and social behavior, prone to aimless wandering, and subject to difficulties in problem solving and concept formation, to name but a few characteristics (Allender and Kaszniak 1989; Bayles 1982). Some authors (Neville and Folstein 1979, 285) have asserted that dementia sufferers are "unable to perceive, attend, and recall." Such descriptions imply that the AC sufferer's life does not display patterns of deliberate action guided by

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[1] We prefer the term *condition* to the term *disease*, in that we are arguing that some of the behavioral problems incurred by afflicted persons are logically closer to those incurred by someone with a paralyzed arm than to the fever incurred by someone with malaria.

meanings. It has even been suggested that the disease and its effects have no meaning for and do not trouble the afflicted person. However, other authors (Church 1986; Hope and Fairburn 1990; Sabat 1991b; Stokes 1986; Wolkowski-Parr 1991) have argued in favor of another picture, one that shows afflicted persons as acting from reasons that are relevant in attempting to account for their behavior. These authors consider AC sufferers to be capable of meaningful behavior, and in possession of a largely intact sense of self (Sabat and Harré 1992). We will call these the "pessimistic" and "optimistic" diagnoses, respectively. We shall show that the conflict can be resolved in favor of the optimistic picture. However, to do so we shall need to rethink the nature of the predicament of the AC sufferer.

Our aim in this paper is to develop certain aspects of the "discursive" approach to psychology, and to demonstrate the power of the "discursive turn" in resolving a deep conflict of interpretation regarding the nature of Alzheimer's condition. From the discursive point of view, psychological phenomena are not inner or hidden properties or processes of mind which discourse merely expresses. The discursive expression is, with some exceptions, the psychological phenomenon itself. To take a very simple example: to have the concept of "cat" is to be capable of using the various words, signs, pictures, and sounds denoting and proper to cats in accordance with local customs.

The basic theory, then, is that there are only discursive practices (which of course include a wide range of symbolic manipulations) and the brain processes with which they are performed. Performances and brain processes can be linked by the concepts of "skill" and "instrument." A successful discursive performance—for instance, a description of how to get from one place to another, or a retelling of a memory—is a skillful use of a brain mechanism. If the mechanism is defective, the person is disadvantaged. It is our contention that a person suffering from Alzheimer's condition is like someone trying to cut wood with a blunt saw, or trying to play tennis with a racket with a warped frame. The basic intentions may be there, but the instrument for realizing them is defective. There is a tendency to mistake defects in the tool for defects in the tool user. And we shall try to show that this tendency is exacerbated by the use of insensitive psychometric diagnostic methods to assess the state of the Alzheimer's sufferer.

The fact that disordered or nonstandard discursive displays can put an individual in danger of being treated as a nonperson is proof, if proof were needed, of the extent to which personhood can be an interpersonal discursive construction, a property of conversations. Yet the demonstration of the extent to which agentic individuality can be recovered in the talk of Alzheimer's sufferers by analyses sensitive to the illocutionary force of conversational offerings supports the other main thesis of the discursive line of reasoning, namely, the Vygotskian principle that people's privatized symbolic activities are structured according to

the local rules and conventions of public discourse.[2] Thus, the Alzheimer's sufferers whose discourses we examine are trapped by their disability into a lived contradiction. Their public discourse offers little apparent chance for an interlocutor to engage in the mutual construction of personhood which sustains the ordinary human world, yet their private discourse, if it could be made publicly available, would support such a construction.

Shweder and Sullivan (1989), in their discussion of the "semiotic," or "meaning driven," subject in cultural psychology, provide a framework not only for viewing what people do, but also for refining the methods by which information is gathered concerning their mental and behavioral states. Shweder and Sullivan's approach has been applied to the problem of understanding human beings of diverse cultures, making room for the possibility that local meanings—meanings different from those that an investigator's own common sense would offer by way of interpretation—animate people's conduct. Perhaps those human beings who, by virtue of being categorized as ill, constitute a population set apart from those deemed to be healthy are in a predicament similar to that of the members of an exotic tribe. A semiotic approach to psychological life assumes that actor-intended meaning can, in numerous cases, provide the best explanation of action. But this opens up the possibility that meaning cannot simply be read from the surface of what people do. If confronted with conduct that appears to be nonstandard, one's first hypothesis should be that meaning to the subject was involved in the genesis of that conduct. Reflection and intention are built upon meaning systems (Geertz 1973; Shweder 1983). The key idea that we wish to promote in this paper is that the Alzheimer's sufferer's deficits in performance should be treated as one would treat the strange conventions of another culture, *through* which one looks for intelligible meaning systems. In other words, although it is possible to explain behavior on a chemical or a neural level, or by reference to neural dysfunction, considerations on the level of meaning provide what the above authors would consider the best—indeed, the only scientifically respectable—explanation of action.

In terms of providing care for Alzheimer's sufferers, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate how, by adopting the "intentional stance" (Dennett 1990) toward those with whom one is conversing, one opens up the opportunity for them to make audible and visible the fact that they are semiotic subjects. The focus in this study will be on the display of semiotic skills in the facilitated discourse of the Alzheimer's sufferer. A detailed study of the way the intentional stance is taken in the discourses of interlocutors must await another occasion.

[2] The general theoretical orientation of this paper derives from the Vygotskian thesis that most psychological phenomena appear first in the public-collective realm of interpersonal symbolic interaction and are to varying degrees appropriated or made private by individuals (Vygotsky 1962, 1978). "The mind" is no more than, but no less than, a privatized part of the "general conversation." Meanings are jointly constructed by competent actors in the course of projects that are realized within systems of public norms (Harré and Gillett 1994).

What it is to be a "semiotic" or "meaning-driven" Subject

In this paper, the word *meaning* will be used in three different ways: (1) for intention in acting, (2) for an interpretation of events and situations, and (3) for evaluations of events, situations, or actions. These three senses of *meaning* comprise the specification of what it is to be a semiotic subject. Semiotic subjects are people who can act intentionally in the light of their interpretations of the situations in which they find themselves, and who are capable of evaluating their actions and those of others according to public standards of propriety and rationality. To be a semiotic subject is have these capabilities. It does not follow that the capabilities will always be realized in speech and action.

It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that a certain class of AC sufferers are semiotic subjects in the sense of Shweder and Sullivan: are capable of speaking and acting in accordance with meanings of all three types listed above. We shall show that whether or not these capabilities are manifested—that is, whether or not the sufferers appear as semiotic subjects—is critically dependent on the discursive context in which they speak and act. Being seen and heard as a semiotic subject is an intimate characteristic of individual people, manifested in subtle patterns of their modes of discourse.

To investigate the question of the meaningfulness of actions and situations to individual people, an appropriate method must be adopted. In general, scientific research is patterned according to one of two main designs: the extensive, and the intensive. In an extensive design, a broad range of case studies is generalized in search of a common pattern. Such a design is typical of statistical studies in psychopharmacology, when one is looking for the overall effects of the use of a drug, for instance. Detail is sacrificed to generality. In an intensive design, a few cases are presented in depth, to exemplify types in as much detail as possible. The intensive design is characteristic of comparative anatomy, in which typical specimens are dissected in detail and a species is defined as consisting of all those individuals sufficiently similar to the chosen archetype. Generality is sacrificed to detail. Our empirical material is presented so as to exemplify a phenomenon, rather than to support a generalization. What is to be seen in the cases cited may be representative of many other cases, but further empirical research would be required to establish to what extent those things that are demonstrated here can be generalized. The present study is but a first step in that direction.

A word of caution must be voiced, however. The diagnosis of Alzheimer's covers a wide range of clinical pictures, with the early stages of the disease being very different from the later stages. Although the subjects discussed herein were at a moderate level of severity, their backgrounds and academic histories may make them special, and perhaps very well suited for demonstrating preserved semiotic behavior in the face of impaired performance on tests. Thus, they may fall into a group in which the discrepancy between formal tests of cognitive function and abilities shown in other ways would be greatest.

Reading 25.2   EXERCISE 4

The Intentional Strategy and How It Works

There are many strategies, some good, some bad. Here is a strategy, for instance, for predicting the future behaviour of a person: determine the date and hour of the person's birth, and then feed this modest datum into one or another astrological algorithm for generating predictions of the person's prospects. This strategy is deplorably popular. Its popularity is deplorable only because we have such good reasons for believing that *it does not work*. When astrological predictions come true, this is sheer luck, or the result of such vagueness or ambiguity in the prophecy that almost any eventuality can be construed to confirm it. But suppose the astrological strategy did in fact work well on some people. We could call those people *astrological systems*—systems whose behaviour was, as a matter of fact, predictable by the astrological strategy. If there were such people, such astrological systems, we would be more interested than most of us in fact are in *how the astrological strategy works*— that is, we would be interested in the rules, principles, or methods of astrology. We could find out how the strategy works by asking astrologers, reading their books, and observing them in action. But we would also be curious about *why* it worked. We might find that astrologers had no useful opinions about this latter question— they either had no theory of why it worked, or their theories were pure hokum. Having a good strategy is one thing, knowing why it works is another.

So far as we know, however, the class of astrological systems is empty, so the astrological strategy is of interest only as a social curiosity. Other strategies have better credentials. Consider the physical strategy, or physical stance: if you want to predict the behaviour of a system, determine its physical constitution (perhaps all the way down to the micro-physical level) and the physical nature of the impingements upon it, and use your knowledge of the laws of physics to predict the outcome for any input. This is the grand and impractical strategy of Laplace for predicting the entire future of everything in the universe, but it has more modest, local, actually usable versions. The chemist or physicist in the laboratory can use this strategy to predict the behaviour of exotic materials, but equally the cook in the kitchen can predict the effect of leaving the pot on the burner too long. The strategy is not always practically available, but that it will always work *in principle* is a dogma of the physical sciences. (I ignore the minor complications raised by the sub-atomic indeterminacies of quantum physics.)

Sometimes, in any event, it is more effective to switch from the physical stance to what I call the design stance, where one ignores the actual (possibly messy) details of the physical constitution of an object, and, on the assumption that it has a certain design, predicts that it will behave *as it is designed to behave* under various circumstances. For instance, most users of computers have not the loggiest idea what physical principles are responsible for the computer's highly reliable, and hence predictable, behaviour. But if they have a good idea of what the computer is designed to do (a description of its operation at any one of the many possible levels of abstraction), they can predict its behaviour with great accuracy and reliability, subject to disconfirmation only in cases of physical malfunction. Less dramatically, almost anyone can predict when an alarm clock will sound on the basis of the most casual inspection of its exterior. One does not know or care to know whether it is spring wound, battery driven, sunlight powered, made of brass wheels and jewel bearings or silicon chips—one just assumes that it is designed so that the alarm will sound when it is set to sound, and it is set to sound where it appears to be set to sound, and the clock will keep on running until that time and beyond, and is designed to run more or less accurately, and so forth. For more accurate and detailed design stance predictions of the alarm clock, one must descend to a less abstract level of description of its design; for instance, to the level at which gears are described, but their material is not specified.

Only the designed behaviour of a system is predictable from the design stance, of course. If you want to predict the behaviour of an alarm clock when it is pumped full of liquid helium, revert to the physical stance. Not just artefacts, but also many biological objects (plants and animals, kidneys and hearts, stamens and pistils) behave in ways that can be predicted from the design stance. They are not just physical systems but designed systems.

Sometimes even the design stance is practically inaccessible, and then there is yet another stance or strategy one can adopt: the intentional stance. Here is how it works: first you decide to treat the object whose behaviour is to be predicted as a rational agent; then you figure out what beliefs that agent ought to have, given its place in the world and its purpose. Then you figure out what desires it ought to have, on the same considerations, and finally you predict that this rational agent will act to further its goals in the light of its beliefs. A little practical reasoning from the chosen set of beliefs and desires will in many—but not all—instances yield a decision about what the agent ought to do; that is what you predict the agent *will* do.

Reading 25.3 EXERCISE 5

Extract 1

Kurt utters the words 'Es regnet' and under the right conditions we know that he has said that it is raining. Having identified his utterance as intentional and linguistic, we are able to go on to interpret his words: we can say what his words, on that occasion, meant. What could we know that would enable us to do this? How could we come to know it? The first of these questions is not the same as the question what we *do* know that enables us to interpret the words of others. For there may easily be something we could know and don't, knowledge of which would suffice for interpretation, while on the other hand it is not altogether obvious that there is anything we actually know which plays an essential role in interpretation. The second question, how we could come to have knowledge that would serve to yield interpretations, does not, of course, concern the actual history of language acquisition. It is thus a doubly hypothetical question: given a theory that would make interpretation possible, what evidence plausibly available to a potential interpreter would support the theory to a reasonable degree? In what follows I shall try to sharpen these questions and suggest answers.

The problem of interpretation is domestic as well as foreign: it surfaces for speakers of the same language in the form of the question, how can it be determined that the language is the same? Speakers of the same language can go on the assumption that for them the same expressions are to be interpreted in the same way, but this does not indicate what justifies the assumption. All understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation. But it will help keep assumptions from going unnoticed to focus on cases where interpretation is most clearly called for: interpretation in one idiom of talk in another.[1]

What knowledge would serve for interpretation? A short answer would be, knowledge of what each meaningful expression means. In German, those words Kurt spoke mean that it is raining and Kurt was speaking German. So in uttering the words 'Es regnet', Kurt said that it was raining, This reply does not, as might first be thought, merely restate the problem. For it suggests that in passing from a description that does not interpret (his uttering of the words 'Es regnet') to interpreting description (his saying that it is raining) we must introduce a machinery of words and expressions (which may or may not be exemplified in actual utterances), and this suggestion is important. But the reply is no further help, for it

[1] The term 'radical interpretation' is meant to suggest strong kinship with Quine's 'radical translation'. Kinship is not identity, however, and 'interpretation' in place of 'translation' marks one of the differences: a greater emphasis on the explicitly semantical in the former.

does not say what it is to know what an expression means. (pp. 125–126)

Extract 2

For quite different reasons, radical interpretation cannot hope to take as evidence for the meaning of a sentence an account of the complex and delicately discriminated intentions with which the sentence is typically uttered. It is not easy to see how such an approach can deal with the structural, recursive feature of language that is essential to explaining how new sentences can be understood. But the central difficulty is that we cannot hope to attach a sense to the attribution of finely discriminated intentions independently of interpreting speech. The reason is not that we cannot ask necessary questions, but that interpreting an agent's intentions, his beliefs and his words are parts of a single project, no part of which can be assumed to be complete before the rest is. If this is right, we cannot make the full panoply of intentions and beliefs the evidential base for a theory of radical interpretation.

We are now in a position to say something more about what would serve to make interpretation possible. The interpreter must be able to understand any of the infinity of sentences the speaker might utter. If we are to state explicitly what the interpreter might know that would enable him to do this, we must put it in finite form. If this requirement is to be met, any hope of a universal method of interpretation must be abandoned. The most that can be expected is to explain how an interpreter could interpret the utterances of speakers of a single language (or a finite number of languages): it makes no sense to ask for a theory that would yield an explicit interpretation for any utterance in any (possible) language. (pp. 127–128)

Extract 3

The process of devising a theory of truth for an unknown native tongue might in crude outline go as follows. First we look for the best way to fit our logic, to the extent required to get a theory satisfying Convention T, on to the new language; this may mean reading the logical structure of first-order quantification theory (plus identity) into the language, not taking the logical constants one by one, but treating this much of logic as a grid to be fitted on to the language in one fell swoop. The evidence here is classes of sentences always held true or always held false by almost everyone almost all of the time (potential logical truths) and patterns of inference. The first step identifies predicates, singular terms, quantifiers, connectives, and identity; in theory, it settles matters of logical form. The second step concentrates on sentences with indexicals; those sentences sometimes held true and sometimes false according to discoverable changes in the world. This step in conjunction with the first limits the possibilities for interpreting individual predicates. The last step deals with the remaining
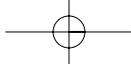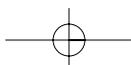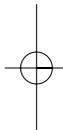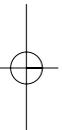
sentences, those on which there is not uniform agreement, or whose held truth value does not depend systematically on changes in the environment.[2]

This method is intended to solve the problem of the inter-dependence of belief and meaning by holding belief constant as far as possible while solving for meaning. This is accomplished by assigning truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our own view of what is right. What justifies the procedure is the fact that disagreement and agreement alike are intelligible only against a background of massive agreement. Applied to language, this principle reads: the more sentences we conspire to accept or reject (whether or not through a medium of interpretation), the better we understand the rest, whether or not we agree about them. (pp. 136–137)

[2] Readers who appreciate the extent to which this account parallels Quine's account of radical translation in Chapter 2 of *Word and Object* will also notice the differences: the semantic constraint in my method forces quantificational structure on the language to be interpreted, which probably does not leave room for indeterminacy of logical form; the notion of stimulus meaning plays no role in my method, but its place is taken by reference to the objective features of the world which alter in conjunction with changes in attitude towards the truth of sentences; the principle of charity, which Quine emphasizes only in connectives, I apply across the board.

Reading 25.4   EXERCISE

From: Mulhall, S. (1990). *On being in the World.* London: Routledge. (Extract pp. 99–106).

The Metaphysical Foundations

Up to this point in my exposition, I have refrained from critical assessment of the framework Davidson offers for the philosophy of language; the intention has rather been to show the strengths of that framework. If the reader can be persuaded to view as problematic those aspects of language mastery which Davidson finds mysterious (viz. our capacity to understand new sentences, and more generally our capacity to understand utterances on the basis of the meagre evidence available in speech transactions), then he will find the direction, scope, and form of the explanatory framework Davidson offers as a response to those problems to be both plausible and powerfully consistent.

   The exposition was also intended to suggest, however, that a huge amount of weight correspondingly falls on Davidson's initial descriptions of the everyday phenomenon of linguistic transactions which it is the concern of his theory to render comprehensible. For if those descriptions are simply misleading, then the impression of mystery which is engendered in the reader may be generated by this inaccuracy rather than by the real nature of the phenomenon described—and once the impression of mystery dissolves, the need for an explanatory framework (of whatever sophistication) dissolves with it. The pressing question now becomes: how accurate are Davidson's accounts of the everyday activity of communication by language?

   Two terminological points arise at once. First, Davidson continuously uses the terms 'interpretation' and 'understanding' as synonyms; he says, for example, that 'What is essential to my argument is the idea of an interpreter, someone who understands the utterances of another' (*ITI*, 157), and takes as the basis of his account of language mastery the assumption that someone who understands a given utterance has successfully interpreted it. Second, and in parallel with this, he refers to anyone who successfully interprets utterances as the possessor of a 'theory' of interpretation. It is no part of Davidson's position to claim that the theory of truth he offers as the best model of this interpretative capacity is known to any speaker in the form of propositional knowledge of its vocabulary and rules; but it is (and must be) essential to his project that unless an interpreter possesses a body of knowledge corresponding to, and similar in form to, such a theory, his ability to interpret becomes incomprehensible. The theory he offers takes the form it does precisely because we could not render intelligible our human capacity to successfully interpret the utterances of others without describing it in such a way: we must see the interpreter as a theorizer if we are to make sense of what he does.

To see why 'interpreting' and 'theorizing' go together at all, we might look at the definition of 'interpretation' provided in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*:

> **Interpret**. 1. vt. Expound the meaning of (abstruse or foreign words, writing, dreams, *etc.*); make out the meaning of; bring out the meaning of, render, by artistic representation or performance; explain, understand in specified manner ('we interpret this as a threat').

Someone interpreting a dream expresses the meaning of the dream in another medium, that of language; someone interprets a foreign word by giving its meaning in our native tongue; an abstruse word may be interpreted by explaining its meaning in less technical terms. In all these examples, the process of interpretation is linked with a transition between languages or between sectors of the same language; the point is to clarify meaning by giving it expression in another way, and the presupposition is that the original expression of that meaning was obscure, problematic, or difficult to understand. 'Interpretation' thus conjures up an image of translation from one domain to another, from one mode of description or expression to another; and it implies that this transition is necessary for understanding.

   It is this image, and this implication, which Davidson builds into his conceptualization of *all* linguistic transactions:

> We interpret a bit of linguistic behaviour when we say what a speaker's words mean on an occasion of use. The task may be seen as one of redescription. We know that the words 'Es schneit' have been uttered on a particular occasion and we want to redescribe this uttering as an act of saying that it is snowing. What do we need to know if we are to be in a position to redescribe speech in this way, that is, to interpret the utterances of a speaker?
>
> (*ITI*, 141)

Once the task of interpretation is explicitly conceptualized as a movement from one level of description to another, it becomes clear why an interpreter is likely to be viewed as a theorizer: 'in passing from a description that does not interpret (his uttering of the words "Es regnet") to interpreting description (his saying that it is raining), we must introduce a machinery of words and expressions (which may or may not be exemplified in actual utterances)' (*ITI*, 126). It seems natural to assume that such a systematic capacity to redescribe must involve a 'machinery', a set of systematized rules governing the transition between descriptive levels; and how else ought we to model a system of translation rules except as a theory? 'To belong to a speech community—to be an interpreter of the speech of others—one needs, in effect, to know . . . a theory [of truth], and to know that it is a theory of the right kind' (*ITI*, 161).

   The presumption that interpretation should be seen as a species of redescription is reinforced by the sense in which Davidson embeds a theory of interpretation within a more general theory

of human behaviour and by the form he assumes such a more general theory should take:

> A theory of interpretation, like a theory of action, allows us to redescribe certain events in a revealing way. Just as a theory of action can answer the question of what an agent is doing when he has raised his arm by redescribing the act as one of trying to catch his friend's attention, so a method of interpretation can lead to redescribing the utterance of certain sounds as an act of saying that snow is white.
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> <div align="right">(<i>ITI</i>, 161)</div>

If all behaviour requires redescription in order to be grasped as human action (with its freight of intentions, beliefs, and desires), then that segment of behaviour which involves the utterance of sounds also requires redescription in order to be understood as a linguistic utterance with a specific meaning. The more primitive behavioural evidence requires organization by linguistic and semantic concepts; and once again the notion of organizing evidence seems to demand the use of the terms 'theorizing' and 'theory'. This is why Davidson feels justified in regarding every-day references to linguistic meaning (e.g. in reporting what some-one said) as a mode of theory-building—or, as he puts it: 'Everyday linguistic and semantic concepts are part of an intuitive theory for organizing more primitive data. . . . If our ordinary concepts suggest a confused theory, we should look for a better theory, not give up theorizing' (*ITI*, 143).

Davidson gives this redescriptive picture plausibility by focusing on examples of utterances in a foreign language. At the very beginning of his paper 'Radical interpretation',[1] for example, we are presented with a German uttering a sentence in German, and it would seem natural to say that we are interpreting such an utterance when we say what it means in English—indeed, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* definition we examined earlier uses translation from a foreign tongue to exemplify the use of the term 'interpretation'. This does not, however, license us to regard a fellow-German's comprehension of Kurt's utterance as being the product of interpretation, precisely because Kurt's utterance is not in a language foreign to his compatriot. To say to a German 'Es regnet' just *is* to say 'It is raining'; and once the gap between speaker's and hearer's native tongues is closed, there is no room for the concept of interpretation because there is no reason for presupposing the need for a redescription of the utterance.

Davidson suggests a reason for rejecting this conclusion. 'The problem of interpretation is domestic as well as foreign: it surfaces for speakers of the same language in the form of the question, how can it be determined that the language is the same?' (*ITI*, 125) As Ian Hacking has noted,[2] however, the difficulty with this suggestion is its flagrant implausibility; it is as if every time I enter into conversation with another English speaker, I have to hold before me the possibility that he is an alien. Davidson's

[1] In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*.
[2] In a paper entitled 'A parody of conversation', in E. LePore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986.

illustrative examples tend to involve cases of incorrect or non-standard use of certain English words—for instance, I may on a specific occasion be uncertain whether you are using the words 'yawl' and 'ketch' correctly (cf. *ITI*, 196); but such examples cannot do the work he requires of them. First, my uncertainty about the correct use of such abstruse or technical terms may well lead me to bluster because I fear that I am confused rather than you; but this is definitely not a worry about whether we are speaking the same language. Second, the scepticism Davidson invokes gives the impression of approaching paranoia because it simply lacks any grounds which might justify the generality he claims for it. Given the sense of interpretation outlined above, we may say that someone listening to a complex poem or a flow of abstruse terminology is interpreting what he hears; we may even stretch a point and say that our comprehension of malaprops and other linguistic errors involves interpretation—but if someone remarks that 'it is raining', and raindrops are running down the window-pane, it makes no sense at all to say that I am interpreting his utterance. The vast majority of things said in everyday linguistic transactions between members of the same linguistic community are not interpreted at all; there can therefore be no mystery about how such universal interpretation is possible, or on what evidence it might be based.

I want to suggest that Davidson's underlying reason for his illicit extension of the notion of interpretation goes beyond the arguments he explicitly cites: it is rooted in a certain conception of what we hear when we listen to another person's speech. In one discussion, he considers the question of what might be said to recur in a sequence of linguistic transactions:

> The only candidate for recurrence we have is the interpretation of sound-patterns: speaker and hearer must repeatedly, intentionally and with mutual agreement, interpret relevantly similar sound-patterns of the speaker in the same way.   (*ITI*, 277)

Here, Davidson implies that what we *really* hear when we listen to another speaker (even an English speaker) is a sequence of sound-patterns. Once this assumption is made, it follows that radical interpretation must begin at home, for clearly a process of systematic redescription is needed to effect the transition from sound-patterns to utterances with a specific meaning—and here is where the 'machinery' of words and expressions comes into its own. This assumption of bare sound as the interface between speakers is paralleled by Davidson's more general view of bare movement as the interface between human actors:

> We wonder why a man raises his arm; an explanation might be that he wanted to attract the attention of a friend. . . . [This] explains what is relatively apparent—an arm-raising—by appeal to factors that are far more problematical—desires and beliefs.
>
> <div align="right">(*ITI*, 158–9)</div>

Only someone who believed that, when looking at another human being's actions, all we *really* perceive are bare movements could suggest that what is most apparent in such encounters is an 'armraising' rather than a wave.

What we therefore find at the foundations of Davidson's philosophy of language—what, in effect, we need to presuppose in order to make sense of his illicit and otherwise unintelligible use of the term 'interpretation'—is a metaphysics which is most easily expressed in quasi-ontological terms. In order to say anything philosophically instructive or revealing about language, we must assume that when a human being speaks to us, we hear sound-patterns; when he acts we see bare movements. The world we really perceive is radically devoid of any human significance, until we use our interpretative theorizing to organize this primitive data into units of human meaning—words, actions, gestures. Within this generally alien world, we are alienated in particular from language and from human behaviour as a whole, for the significance and the humanity we find in those phenomena of our everyday life are a result of our reading our concepts into the data we directly apprehend. Every language is at root a foreign tongue, every person an alien; a world which requires radical interpretation from its human residents is a world in which they can never be at home.

Davidson's commitment to the notion of bare sounds and bare movements as the experiential basis from which any understanding of human speech and action must arise is strikingly analogous to empiricist sense-datum theories of knowledge. In both, it is presupposed that everyday experience of the world can be illuminatingly viewed as a logical or theoretical construction out of brute data—'the given'; and in both an unsubstantiated belief in the possibility of a systematic redescription of the everyday world in terms of this postulated category of brute data is held to reveal something fundamental about the ontology of that world—about its metaphysical structure, as it were.

Davidson discusses certain aspects of the empiricist world-view when analysing the dualism of conceptual scheme and empirical content:

> I want to urge that this second dualism of scheme and content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized,

cannot be made intelligible and defensible. It is itelf a dogma of empiricism, the third dogma. The third, and perhaps the last, for if we give it up it is not clear that there is anything distinctive left to call empiricism.

(*ITI*, 189)

In light of the fact that we can only make sense of Davidson's descriptions of everyday linguistic transactions as involving 'interpretation' and 'theorizing' by invoking a metaphysics which runs precisely parallel to that of the empiricists, such explicitly anti-empiricist declarations as the one just quoted assume more than a hint of irony. Even those who lead the hunt for empiricist dogmas can find that the task of extirpation must begin at home.

For the purposes of this book, however, it is important to note that this metaphysics of the given—revealed as it is by Davidson's emphasis upon the concept of 'interpretation'—exemplifies to perfection the stance of the interlocutor in Section xi of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Incapable of finding a home for the notion of continuous aspect perception in his framework of thought, Davidson describes the everyday phenomenon of perceiving words and other human beings as if aspect-blindness were the normal human state. His emphasis on processes of theorizing as necessary in order to organize bare sounds and movements into words and actions could stand as a paradigm of that reliance upon an activity of inferring or reading-off which characterizes the interlocutor of Section xi; and it commits him implicitly to a general notion of visual perception as divisible into what is really seen and what is interpreted, i.e. as divisible in precisely the way Wittgenstein rejects in the remarks we have been examining. The example of Donald Davidson therefore shows not only that Wittgenstein's target in his work on aspect perception is no straw man, but also that any attempt to take Wittgenstein's strictures to heart would result in a fundamental change in the guiding framework of much contemporary analytical philosophy.

Reading 25.5   EXERCISE 7

From: McDowell, J. (1986). Singular thought and the extent of inner space. In *Subject, Thought and Context* (ed. P. Pettit and J. McDowell). Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Extract pp. 158–161).

8. In disconnecting experience from the external world, the fully Cartesian picture makes it problematic how the items it pictures can be anything but dark (see section 5 above). Independently of any general empiricism about the materials for concept-formation, it seems plausible that if we conceive propositional attitudes on the same principles, as occupants of the same autonomous inner realm, we make it no less problematic how it can be that they have a representational bearing on the world.

In the physicalistic modern version of the insistence on autonomy, the self-standingness of the inner realm suffices to exclude intrinsic involvement with the world, without any need for an appeal to phenomenology. And in the most clear-sighted form of the position, the darkness of the interior is institutionalized. The intrinsic nature of inner states and events, on this view, is a matter of their position in an internal network of causal potentialities, in principle within the reach of an explanatory theory that would not need to advert to relations between the individual and the external world. Representational bearing on the external world figures in a mode of description of those states and events which takes into account not only their intrinsic nature but also their relations to the outside world.[1] Light enters into the picture, so to speak, only when we widen our field of view so as to take in more than simply the layout of the interior.[2]

Since there is light in the full composite picture, it may seem absurd to suggest, on the basis of the darkness in the interior, that this position leaves us squarely in the Cartesian predicament without resources to deal with it. The composite picture is offered as, precisely, a picture of the mind in full and intelligible possession of its perspective on the external world. If we want to consider the mind's relation to the world, according to this position, we ought not to worry about the nature of the internal component of the picture taken by itself.

What makes this unsatisfying, however, is the way in which the internal component of the composite picture, and not the compositely conceived whole, irresistibly attracts the attributes that intuitively characterize the domain of subjectivity. Consider, for instance, the idea of what is accessible to introspection. If introspection is to be distinguishable from knowledge at large, it cannot be allowed access to the external circumstances which, according to this position, partly determine the full composite truth about the mind; so its scope must be restricted to the internal component (remarkably enough, in view of the darkness within).[3] Again,

consider the topological constraint derived from Frege (see section 3 above). It is in the internal component that we have to locate the difference which Frege's constraint requires us to mark between pairs of (say) beliefs which in the full composite story would be described as involving the attribution of the same property to the same object, but which have to be distinguished because someone may without irrationality have one and not the other. There is nowhere else to locate the difference once the picture of the mind is structured in this way. So Frege's notion of a mode of presentation is supposed to have its use in characterizing the configurations of the interior (remarkably enough, in view of the fact that they are in themselves blind).[4] But a mode of presentation should be the way something is presented to a subject of thought. The same point emerges more generally in the way it is natural, in this two-component picture of mind, to speak of an item's role in the strictly internal aspect of the composite truth about the mind as its *cognitive* role:[5] something's cognitive role should be its role in the cognitive life of (surely) a subject of thought. It is impossible not to be concerned about the boundary around the internal component of the two-component picture, and the darkness within it, if one is concerned at all about the relation between subjectivity and the objective world.

Quite generally, nothing could be recognizable as a characterization of the domain of subjectivity if it did not accord a special status to the perspective of the subject. But we create the appearance of introducing light into the composite picture precisely by allowing that picture to take in all kinds of facts which are *not* conceived in terms of the subject's point of view. So if the composite picture contains anything corresponding to the intuitive notion of the domain of subjectivity, it is the dark interior. The difficulty is palpable: how can we be expected to acknowledge that our subjective way of being in the world is properly captured by this picture, when it portrays the domain of our subjectivity—our cognitive world—in such a way that, considered from its own point of view, that world has to be conceived as letting in no light from outside? The representational content apparently present in the composite story comes too late to meet the point. The difficulty has an obviously Cartesian flavour, and it seems fair to suggest that the answer to the question I raised and left open at the end of section 6 is 'No'. It is possible to embrace the modern position with a clear scientific conscience, something that is no longer true of the full-blown Cartesian picture of mind. But if the result is merely a materialized version of the Cartesian picture, complete with characteristically Cartesian problems about our relation with external reality, the philosophical advance is unimpressive.[6]

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[1] The clearest formulation of a position like this that I know is McGinn, 'The Structure of Content' (see n. 31 above).

[2] Here one of those intuitive marks of subjectivity (see section 6, and in particular n. 31, above) shifts its location in our picture of mind.

[3] See McGinn, 'The Structure of Content', 253–4. Here the other of those intuitive marks of subjectivity undergoes a sea change.

[4] See, for instance, McGinn, 'The Structure of Content', 230 (sense as 'intra-individual role'; cf. 220–1, 223–4).

[5] See McGinn, 'The Structure of Content', 219 (cognitive role as 'an entirely intra-individual property').

[6] McGinn's anti-Cartesian remarks, at pp. 254–5 of 'The Structure of Content', betray an insensitivity (by my lights) to the genuineness of the concerns about subjectivity (contrast McGinn's 'third person viewpoint') which generate the Cartesian danger. McGinn's soundly anti-Cartesian intentions cannot save him from the Cartesian danger because he does not see the point at which it impinges on his position.

It may not be to everyone's taste to accept an invitation to reflect philosophically about the position of subjectivity in the objective world, with Cartesian pitfalls as a real danger, calling for vigilance if we are to avoid them.[7] Modern analytic philosophy has to some extent lost the sense of the Cartesian divide as a genuine risk for our conception of ourselves. But I suspect that the reasons for this are at least partly superficial. It is true that we have epistemologies whose drift is not towards scepticism. But these can seem to yield a stable picture of our cognitive grasp on reality only if the Cartesian divide is genuinely overcome; and modern fallibilist epistemologies typically do not embody any clear account of how that is to be done, but rather reflect a (perfectly intelligible) refusal to persist in a task which has become too plainly hopeless to bother with. In any case, it should be clear by now that the Cartesian danger is not specifically a threat to our knowledge of the external world; the problems of traditional epistemology are just one form in which the Cartesian divide can show itself.

[7] McGinn's remarks about the 'third person viewpoint' (see n. 42 above) suggest a refusal to acknowledge a problem characterizable in these terms. See also Jerry A. Fodor, *The Language of Thought* (Harvester, Hassocks, 1976), 52, for a refusal to allow that the distinction between the personal and the sub-personal matters for 'the purposes of cognitive psychology'. Fodor seems to me to be right (and more clear-sighted than others here) that cognitive science should not seek to involve itself in issues of this sort; but by the same token quite wrong to suppose that cognitive science can take over from the philosophy of mind. Freud, whom Fodor cites, cannot be appealed to in support of the idea that psychology (in the sense of discourse, with a theoreticity suitable to its subject matter, about the mind) can simply disown an interest in subjectivity (or the personal); Freud's point is rather that there are aspects of one's subjectivity that are not transparent to one.

What the Conversations Showed

Trivialization: The Positioning of the AC Sufferer as "Incompetent"

Although there was a program of activities (including games) at the day care center each day, Dr. B. did not involve himself in these, preferring to spend his time either with staff members or with the interviewer (Steven R. Sabat [SRS]), or taking walks on his own when no one else was available. He could easily have been described as being aloof, a loner, or unsociable. However, conversations with him indicated that such descriptions would be incorrect. One such conversation occurred in response to his characterization of the games as "filler." It should be noted that such a description might easily be given by any number of otherwise healthy semiotic persons who found such games boring, purposeless, or unengaging.

SRS: *It was interesting for me last week when I asked you what you thought about the games they were playing in the next room. You said, "It's filler."*

Dr. B.: *Uh, okay, that was information. It's, it is filler.*

SRS: *Do you mean it's nonsense and doesn't amount to much and just passes the time?*

Dr. B.: *Ya, but I certainly don't want this to embarrass because if it gets out.*

Dr. B. thought little of such activities and thus avoided them. In so doing, he was expressing an attitude that became explicit in his explanation above. At the same time, he held the staff members (who coordinated the activities) in very high regard and did not want to hurt or embarrass them in any way. Thus, his comment in the last of the above lines. Although his statement is syntactically ill-formed, its meaning is not difficult to draw from the context and is not at all illogical. Here his behavior is clearly driven by the meaning the situations held for him. He expanded upon this further when we talked about the game Trivial Pursuit:

Dr. B.: *Ah! That is impossible—like an asshole!*

SRS: *Do you think it's a foolish thing?*

Dr. B.: *Yes, well my wife and I are very strong academic people and uh, so we start talking to each other, we talk at a very high level right away. Uh, and uh, I mean uh, most of these people here, most of them are good. But when I get closer uh, I uh, get information that's much, uh, that Trivial Pursuit—I wish I could find out how to make it break.*

Dr. B. was saying that, although the other participants at the day care center were good people, he felt that he had little in common with them (a feeling that he expressed by contrasting his conversations with them to the way in which he and his wife talk to each

other), and so he kept his distance and did whatever he could to avoid what he thought to be distasteful situations. Thus, his behavior in response to the invitation to play games was driven again by the meaning (or lack thereof) he found in such situations. He was guided by a conceptual scheme composed of his own proclivities and tastes, used that conceptual scheme to compare what he had been offered with his customary way of life, and found such situations lacking in substance. In terms of the psychology of "accounts," he was providing interpretations in the light of which his conduct appeared both intelligible and warrantable. His comment about Trivial Pursuit being "impossible" could also mean that he found it an impossible task to retrieve unimportant items of information from memory. Again, his reaction to the game can be understood as being based upon the meaning he derived from the situation as a whole.

Dr. M.'s sense of being positioned as incompetent reveals itself in rather less dramatic terms than those offered by Dr. B. The association with Dr. M. began with SRS telling her of his work with other Alzheimer's sufferers and his interest in the abilities that remain in the face of the disease's progress. She responded with the first indication of what Shweder and Sullivan would call a semiotic subject: "Uh, I want t—to know is how do you do, could do something that would be useful to me." In the face of word-finding problems that were extremely frustrating to her, she clearly demanded that her time be spent on matters that were of import to her. Thus we began by discussing word-finding problems:

SRS: *How do you remind yourself of a word when you are trying to find that word?*

Dr. M.: *That's very different on the other s—, very in different places.*

SRS: *Hmm.*

Dr. M.: *Sure. I uh, I can handle myself when I try to not let myself be presented as an Alcazheimer's [sic], I'm very different.*

SRS: *Oh, you mean in a social situation?*

Dr. M.: *Um hum. I mean that if I'm, if wherever I am, and I want to keep myself uh, somewhat not involved.*

SRS: *Um hum.*

Dr. M.: *Uh, I am different from the time when I feel all, all clear.*

SRS: *Um hum, um hum. So you have ways of staying out of situations,*

Dr. M.: *Um hum.*

SRS: *that, when you feel like you're not quite able to deal with—*

Dr. M.: *That's right.*

SRS: *what's going on.*

In this dialogue we see that Dr. M. is aware of those circumstances that are difficult for her, and aware that she feels better when she avoids being presented as an Alzheimer's sufferer, and that she has developed ways to achieve that end. One such strategy involved her changing the subject of conversation when she was stuck for a word. In such cases, her interlocutor might infer incorrectly that she is unable to stay on track in conversation and violates conversational rules, while she would know that by changing the subject, she could avoid the frustration and embarrassment of word-finding problems.