

I WANT TO DRINK PAINT: A RATIONALIZED ACCOUNT OF DESIRES

VASILEIOS NIKORELOS & CHARLIE DJORDJEVIC

MSc Philosophy of the Social Sciences, LSE

Abstract. Donald Davidson has an interesting view on rationalizing acts; however, the crucial element of “pro-attitude” on which it rests remains under-developed. This paper first sets out the Davidsonian system with focus on rationalization and in terms of pro-attitudes. It then develops, using Lacan’s account of the necessarily linguist structures of pro-attitudes, an elucidation of desire. It closes with a few thoughts on further research.

I. INTRODUCTION

Davidson’s understanding of human intention is very nuanced and sophisticated. However, the crucial element of “pro-attitude” on which it rests remains wanting. In this paper, we will attempt an explication and elaboration of this concept. This will allow for a more nuanced account of “preferences”, “desires”, “pro-attitudes” and “demand.” It will also suggest further avenues of research into the nature of the subject and intentionality as a whole. First, we shall set out the Davidsonian system, focusing on the various components involved in rationalization. Here we review the little Davidson says about pro-attitudes. Second, we shall find a most unlikely ally in Lacan’s account of the necessarily linguist structures of pro-attitudes. We will show how this synthesis sheds new light on pro-attitudes and their relationship to the Davidsonian system. We will, finally, close with some brief thoughts on possible further inquiries.

II. DAVIDSON’S SYSTEM

i. Intentional explanation as necessary and irreducible

Davidson begins with the simple fact that we describe human actions in a way that is radically different to the language of physics. This immediately raises two questions: (1) why do we do this (i.e., what, if anything is *sui generis* about human acts qua human acts) and (2) can it be changed - more specifically, can intentional explanation withstand reduction (into a mature neuroscience or some other conceivable alternative)?

Why do we make intentional explanations?

To this first question, the answer is that human acts have an intentional component. Davidson begins by asserting that all human acts are token physical acts. Walking has a corresponding set of physical events, as does eating and thinking. However, the vocabulary we use to make sense

of the acts is not type-reducible to physics. For example, I can say my name loudly, quietly, in a fake voice, in a funny accent, in another language, etc. Each of these token physical events will, qua a physicalist vocabulary (L_p), be *radically different* from each other. However, in each token instances, *I have said my name*. Why? Partly because I intended to. Intention is a necessary component of the individuation of human movements into coherent actions. Let us call this the language of intention (L_i).

Let us unpack this further. We have an event, E. We can describe E in L_p, in which case we will see forces, particles, interactions, etc. The same E, described in L_i, is, say, a basketball game. Interestingly, the kind terms of the basketball game do not translate into the kind terms of L_p. What is a “foul” or a “point” in L_p? Further, if all we had access to was an L_p description, it is highly unlikely we would be able to follow the game. A player moving his right leg may be a re-positioning, a foul, a stepping out of bounds, a free throw, etc. But because (a) these demarcations are utterly senseless in L_p and (b) the physical movement of moving one’s leg is indeterminate (i.e., variably realisable) in L_i, we cannot map basketball descriptions in L_p onto basketball description in L_i in any non-ambiguous (or one-to-one) way so as to see the implications of the actions. That is to say that there is no way of comprehending the (social) *implications of actions* that are articulated in L_i from *descriptions of actions* in L_p. Description of the action needs to be ‘translated into’ L_i first. Thus, we seem to need L_i to make sense of the game - otherwise our L_p description becomes radically indiscriminate as to what actions are the meaningful ones with the implications; L_p admits all physical acts from a three point shot to a nose itch as token physical acts, thereby confounding our understanding of the game.

So what then is the nature of L_i? Davidson tells us that L_i relies on the following relationship: *cause* (belief & pro-attitude) > act. That is to say: beliefs and desires cause acts. This notion of a cause is necessary to individuate acts correctly. To use the famous example: I come home, turn on a light, scare some thieves who run into the night, and, as they leave, they escape my sight. To say when my act stops and the unintended consequences begin properly, we must assume that my intent causes me the proper act. I *intended* to turn on the light. That is my act. I did not *intend* to scare thieves and so that is not my act.

If an event can be described in these terms, invoking the belief and pro-attitude that serve (in the right way) as the cause of the action, Davidson calls it *rationalized*. A key part of this is that my belief and pro-attitude must *cause* the act. This cause is my intention carried out. First, we will elaborate this rationalization of events. Then we will look at each element of rationalization.

Let us take a toy example to frame this discussion. I see my friend Jerry. Jerry goes into a coffee shop. From this, I infer that (a) Jerry *wanted* tea, that (b) Jerry *believed* correctly that in the UK one can buy tea at a coffee shop, and a whole host of other things. Note that from fairly overt

behavior that could- for the sake of argument- be given in L_p , I have created a complex set of mental states and ascribed them to Jerry. Furthermore, I hold certain expectations inductively over past empirical observations and, similarly, expectations based upon my general notion of “coffee shop”, “tea”, “Jerry” and other concepts involved - I don’t expect Jerry to walk out of the coffee shop wearing a dress and carrying a watermelon. Finally, if he does walk out of the shop wearing a dress and carrying a watermelon, I will have no way of rationalising his actions - for I would have in mind neither a belief nor a pro-attitude necessary to ascribe an intentional state by which to rationalize his action. More generally, where one can make intentional ascriptions, one can rationalize one’s acts; where one cannot, the acts remain unrationalizable relative to one’s knowledge of the situation.

Is intentional explanation reducible?

The careful reader will notice that this process is circular. To understand Jerry’s actions, I attribute rationality and intention. To attribute rationality and intention to him, I must view his actions in a certain way. According to Davidson, this circle is inescapable for very much the same reason that a basketball game can’t be watched in L_p . In both cases, I need a set of categories, orthogonal to L_p , to individuate events correctly. Otherwise, Jerry’s walking and Jerry’s stumbling due to being pushed are indistinguishable. This means to answer our second question- can we reduce L_i into some other language? The answer is no. L_i is a self-supporting and self-reinforcing circle.

ii. Belief and pro-attitude

To summarise the above observations, intentional explanation is at once the only type of explanations that we do make and the only type of explanation that is adequate. Stuck in this way with intentions, we will now further characterise the two ingredients of intention (beliefs and pro-attitudes) towards evoking the peculiarities involved that we intend to capitalise on in this paper.

One element of intentional explanations of actions is beliefs. Beliefs, for Davidson, are (i) capable of being common to or relatable across persons in a significant way, (ii) constructible in words, (iii) inferable from acts, and (iv) internally consistent at the moment they are stated (i.e. I cannot hold two contradictory beliefs at the moment I act). From this minimum, Davidson is able to make sense of a vast array of human acts. For us, child sacrifice is wrong and is pejoratively called “irrational.” However, it is rational if one grants a certain ontology: there are demons, the demons have a nature that demands innocent blood, etc. The natives killing the child hold a belief about demons which is (a) consistent- they do not believe that there are and are not demons- (b) guides the act- they kill the child- and (c) is coherent- given their ontology, these beliefs make sense of the world.

The final part of this formula is what Davidson calls a pro-attitude. He does this to capture all possible intentional states. Wanting, planning, needing, hoping for, fear of, etc. can all be pro-attitudes. Other than stating that pro-attitudes have a vaguely emotional/biological component, Davidson is surprisingly vague on what these are and how they work. Davidson (1994b: 677) says “fortunately, it is not necessary to classify and analyze the many varieties of emotions, sentiments, moods, motives, passions and hungers whose mention may answer the question “why did you do it.”” He then gives some strange examples of desires, our favorite being the want to drink paint (Davidson 1994b: 675).

This seems deeply odd for a number of reasons. It seems like the nature of the pro-attitude should alter the rationalization. Buying someone a beer because *I am in a friendly mood* is radically different from buying a beer because *I want to sleep with them*. Also, it is unclear how pro-attitudes connect to beliefs and allow rationalizations at all. It is the latter that we shall discuss.

III. LACAN ON DESIRE

As a caveat, when we talk about desires, we are not referring to urges, pre-dispositions or preferences. We consider these elements as separate, distinct features that are brought under the notion of pro-attitude. As they are different, our account will be restricted to the domain of desires. The reason for treating this notion specifically is that, by clarifying it, we will be able to elaborate on its function in rationalization. To elucidate desires, we draw upon a distinct account made by Lacan. In this section we will introduce Lacanian theory as one that upholds the primacy of language as fundamental to socialisation, yet does this without the conventional correspondence between words and the objects that they signify.

Lacanian theory is a system of interwoven premises that progressively evolved throughout years of work. The major concern for Lacan, throughout his writing, was the construction of the Subject. Language is the determinate factor in the process of constructing Subjectivity (Chiesa 2007). In Lacanian theory, language is neither an instrument nor a mere capacity. It is through language that the subject is introduced into the social realm. By this acquisition of linguistic capacities the person is able to understand a huge variety of situations within her own life: from the conceptual schemes concerning norms and rules, which are expected to be followed, to the definition of her relation towards others - the mother, siblings, friends etc. Language literally enables the person's *socialization*, that is, the need to conform to linguistic rules in order to be able to communicate and participate in a society. This is a crucial feature of language acquisition, namely, that the person is not using the language arbitrarily, based on her will, but according to the existing rules and norms of language practices. While this seems a rather trivial truth, Lacan notes that it is at the stage of language acquisition when the individual understands the impasse

of expressing herself literally. This impasse is best seen via reference to the moment when a small child starts to learn new words. She learns that there is a correspondence between the object and the word to describe the object. For physical objects such as a glass, a window, a car this might seem obvious. But what about abstract ideas like “love”? What does “love” describe or refer to?

Our reason for discussing correspondences between signifier (“chair”) and signified (chair-object) is due to Lacan’s move to criticize Saussurian notions of linguistics. He attacks the presumed relation between the signifier and the signified. The major problem with Saussurian linguistics, according to Lacan, is the kind of presumed relation best seen between chair-object and “chair” is not coherent in the example of “love.” Nor does it capture the possibility of expressing what “love” is. Lacan is arguing that this relation is problematic because a word cannot simply represent the whole variety of the notion of “love”. There will always be some aspect of the notion represented that will evade a complete representation by the word.

Why/how language is brought into an account of desires? Lacan’s theory provides a possible answer to the question. By acquiring a language at the early stages of development, human beings can verbalize their desires. The linguistic expression of desires is what makes it possible for the person to understand (and have an account of) what is desired (both for what she uses and hears as used). This kind, the linguistically expressed desires, is precisely our concern. These are the desires that could be brought into Davidsonian framework because the crucial element for them is language.

We then have a way to address desires via language. Yet the language used in an expression and its grammatical form need not reveal the function of the expression, and so its meaning or use in rationalizations. Consider three classes of utterances: “I want X”; “I demand X”; “I desire X”. For example, in our everyday life it is unlikely to hear someone say “I desire a glass of water.” Instead, we hear “I want a glass of water” or more politely “I would like a glass of water”. Lacan’s argument here is that desire through language will take the form of a demand. It is not, however, usually *stated* as a demand in practice. The implementation of expressing, “I want water”, “give me water!”, “may I please have water” differ, but the basic demand is the same for each token. Once a desire enters language it becomes a demand and gains some crucial features. It acquires a subject, that initially expresses this demand, and it also acquires an object; demands are always about something. This transition from non-linguistic to linguistically expressed desire allows us to have an account of a subject that demands and the object of its demand.

Let us, quickly, re-articulate our position. Language is the essential element in the formation of the Subject because the former enables the latter to function in the social realm. The relation between signifier and signified lacks the possibility to fully articulate all the aspects of the notion represented. Linguistically expressed desires inevitably follow the rules of language. In this transition a desire obtains the form of a demand, which means “need to be satisfied.” This

account concerns how we are to understand demands. It is crucial, then, to notice again that the kind of desires that we are concerned with are those that are linguistically expressed and not, for example, unconscious desires. Ultimately, it is language that plays a determinate role of how to account for desires. Additionally, we are here providing a treatment of desire only insofar it is expressed through language.

IV. CONCLUSION

It seems to us that in order to introduce desire as an element in the analysis of action, desire has to be linguistically expressed. Introducing this sort of clarification allows us to forge a link between elements that Davidson groups under the notion of “pro-attitude”. They are all linguistically expressed. By using some crucial remarks from Lacan’s theory, we have showed that language is a fundamental element for the definition of desire as such. Additionally, we have maintained the distinction between a desire, an urge, a preference, a convention etc. This distinction is crucial to our argument because it allows us to isolate the notion of desire without mixing it with other crucial but distinct elements of pro-attitudes.

With this in view, the relation between belief and pro-attitude becomes much less problematic. It is not that non-linguistic desires are, somehow miraculously, mapped onto necessarily linguistic beliefs. It is rather that desires, in order to count in rationalizations at all, are themselves linguistic. Thus, to Davidson’s necessary criteria of beliefs- that they are consistent and coherent- we can add necessary criteria to the account of desires- that they be objected, directed and that they imply a subject. These criteria of desires give us a valuable foothold to begin to further elucidate the relationships between desire, preference formation, language, culture and belief.

REFERENCES

Chiesa, L. (2007). *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan*. London, UK: MIT Press.

Davidson, D. (2006 [1973]). On the very idea of a conceptual scheme. In *The Essential Davidson* (pp. 196-209). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Davidson, D. (1994a). Psychology as Philosophy. In M. Martin and L. C. McIntyre (Eds.), *Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (pp. 79-91). London, UK: MIT Press.

Davidson, D. (1994b). Actions, causes and reasons. In M. Martin and L. C. McIntyre (Eds.), *Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (pp. 675-687). London, UK: MIT Press.

Moustafa, S. (2001). *Lacanian*. Paris, France: Fayard.