

Davidson's Thoughts
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Thesis: To have beliefs or in general *propositional attitudes* requires having a language (Davidson, p. 96).

a) Holism about beliefs

To have one belief you have to have many beliefs (as well as other attitudes). For instance, suppose I think x believes "this is a tree;" then I must think x also believes an unlimited list of things such as 'this has leaves', 'this has roots', 'this grows,' etc. since all of these things are part and parcel of having the concept of tree.

Thus, it is wrongheaded to assert of Malcolm's dog that it believes the cat is in the tree unless you also think it makes sense to assert of the dog has other beliefs about the tree which, for instance, identify this tree as this tree (Davidson, p. 97; p. 98) It seems a terrible stretch to ascribe all of this to Towser.

b) Evidence

It is a stretch because it is hard to imagine what evidence we would have for such attributions (Davidson, p. 98). The issue of evidence is a central concern (Davidson, p. 95) and a central cog in Davidson's argument for his thesis.

Specifically, it is hard to imagine having sufficient evidence to ascribe beliefs to x unless x exhibits the kind of complex behavior. Obviously, if x can be said to believe the cat is in the tree only if x can be said to believe the cat is in something that has leaves, etc., then my evidence for saying x believes the cat is in the tree must include evidence for saying x believes the cat is in something that has leaves; and so on for many other beliefs required by this beliefs about the cat-bearing tree.

I could only have evidence for ascribing all these beliefs to x only if x exhibits behaviors complex enough to justify my ascription. It is hard to see how I could ascribe the belief, "This is the oldest tree in the yard" or "This is the same tree I barked up yesterday" to x unless x has a language (Davidson, p. 110).

c) Complex behaviors

There is an objection Davidson considers at this point. It is very handy to ascribe *propositional attitudes* to animals as a way of predicting their actions and managing them. Why not take this as a justification for the ascriptions? (Davidson, p. 101)

Davidson points out that sophisticated guided missiles act as if they had *propositional attitudes* but no one thinks this unless they didn't know how they were designed. It is not a good explanation of the missile's behavior because there is a far simpler explanation that covers the facts better. But it must be granted the behavior of animals is far more complex than a missile's. So Davidson needs more ground for his thesis.

d) Surprised

Missiles are *automata* which exhibit complex, environment-sensitive behavior. We do not ascribe *propositional attitudes* to missiles though. Why? Well, we can explain their behavior *mechanistically*, in terms of how their parts work to produce their effects.

Animals are organisms which exhibit complex, environment-sensitive behavior too but we presume their behavior is also *mechanistically* explainable; in any case, we are not forced (by the evidence) to ascribe *propositional attitudes* to them, even granting it is useful to do so. What would force us to do this?

The element of surprise illustrates the transition point (Davidson, p. 103-04): surprise is only possible in a being which has a concept of belief. I am surprised when I consider a belief I had is false, thus to be surprised, I must have the concept of belief which involves having the concept of truth. Surprise is only an example, an illustration of a larger point: having beliefs requires having the concepts of belief and of truth.

How would I have evidence that x has the concept of belief? (Here I cut short some of Davidson's somewhat vague argumentation at Davidson, pp. 104-105.) I would have to be in a position to register that x can consider the truth of its own beliefs. I can only do this if I can communicate with x; that is, I must be able to translate x's considerations into my language – but translation implies x's thinking is structured like a language; communication implies language.

The only way I could have evidence that an animal has beliefs (non-metaphorically) is by speaking with it!