

Joint Attention and Triangulation

According to Donald Davidson, in order to have any propositional attitude whatsoever, a creature must “triangulate” (or at least have triangulated) objects and events in the outside world with other creatures sufficiently similar to itself. Hence, social interaction is considered fundamental for thought and language: a basic kind of triangulation, which is pre-cognitive and pre-linguistic – and thus it is also common to non human animals and infants – is necessary to fix the empirical content and to have the concept of objectivity, both necessary elements for thought and language. Conversely, as a pre-cognitive process, triangulation is sufficient neither to fix the empirical content, nor to have the concept of objectivity. Davidson actually maintains that another element must be added: it is language. Triangulation plus language can finally be considered necessary and sufficient for thought. Actually, Davidson has in mind two kinds of triangulation. In the first case, “basic” triangulation is considered as a non-intentional, pre-linguistic and pre-cognitive situation where two (or more) creatures mutually react to common external stimuli. In the second one, “full-fledged” triangulation is supposed to be already propositional, describing an intentional and linguistic situation where two (or more) cognitively mature human beings intentionally and consciously react to common external stimuli. Moreover, there can be no bridge linking the two: the former is embedded into a deterministic domain, while the latter is characterized by the normative constraints of rationality. In other words, there is no intermediate between complete absence of thought and full-blown thought. Davidson has obviously his reasons for defending the above picture of mind, primarily his will to account for a non-reductive conception of thought and language. However, I want to argue that this very reason is not compelling.

First of all, I feel that Davidson’s account does not provide any real support for the thesis that full-blown thought and language are necessarily social (i.e. that an intersubjective framework like that of triangulation is necessary for thought). Moreover, Davidson’s thesis that we cannot fill the gap between basic triangulation and full-fledged triangulation is a feature of his overall picture of thought and language that I have never been able to come to terms with. Contrary to Davidson, I feel that it is possible to preserve the non-reductive character of thought and language without giving up any attempt to explain the passage from the pre-cognitive to the full-blown thought.

I propose to add an intermediate kind of triangulation, which differs from basic triangulation because it is cognitive and intentional, but also from the full-fledged one because it is pre-linguistic and it does not admit second-order mental states. This intermediate process can be conceived in terms of joint attention: two creatures are involved in a process of joint attention when they are intentionally attending to an external object and to each other’s acts of intentionally attending to the object. I will argue that at this stage the creatures involved in the process of triangulation need to have primitive intentions and basic beliefs about the perceptual states of the other creature, but not higher-order propositional attitudes nor the concepts of belief and objective truth. In this way, it is possible to account for two prerequisites, which are necessary for full blown thought and language. These two prerequisites can be seen as a kind of counterparts of Davidson’s ones: a minimal sense of objectivity (the awareness that objects and events are external and independent from us and that there are other creatures who can jointly attend with us to those objects and events); some domains of current relevance where it is possible to ascribe basic beliefs about the perceptual states of the other creature.

In the end, I will try to explain how this alternative account of the emergence of thought and language guarantees their social character and is neither circular nor reductive. It is not circular because triangulation as joint attention is necessary and sufficient to account for the emergence of some domains of current relevance and of a sense of objectivity. However, language (and thus thought itself) is not required to achieve this minimal task. It is not reductive because the object or event that constitutes content is intentionally shared and recognized as such. Thus, content cannot be merely reduced to its typical cause without considering that such a cause has been intentionally triangulated. The theory of triangulation so conceived reconciles the results of the empirical sciences and our intuitions about the cognitive faculties of some non-human animals and infants with the idea that the mental is irreducible to the physical. However, I will point to a further possible problem: how can we explain those basic beliefs and intentions which are required by triangulation as joint attention? I think the only possible answer is that a pre-cognitive creature must interact for a certain period with a cognitive mature subject (who, by the way, must be sufficiently similar to her) in order to develop and to recognize intentions, and to acquire beliefs about the perceptual states of that subject. In this way the social character of thought and language is preserved but we are forced to admit that in order to have thought and language we must have interacted with a creature who already had full blown thought.