

Donald Davidson's Non-Cognitivist Approach to Self-Knowledge

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"If I tell you that the unexamined life is not worth living, still less will you believe me"¹

With these words, Socrates defended himself to his accusers. His disciple Plato used these same words to accuse the society which has lost touch with the depths of authentic humanity. Since its inception, the problem of self-knowledge has been fundamental to western philosophy. Same is true of any ancient philosophy. The "unexamined life" that Socrates refers to is a life devoid of self-reflection, and hence of self-knowledge. Therefore, knowing oneself is the main task of philosophy, a form of knowledge that is supposed to be emancipatory in its very nature. This enterprise still remains at the center of philosophy today. In the late twentieth century, however, the problem has taken a new turn, as the question of how we know ourselves has been closely linked with scientific study of human mind and consciousness. In this paper, my main aim is to look at Donald Davidson's account of self-knowledge. Davidson is one of the most important contemporary philosophers who have, through a series of articles, tried to reformulate the idea of first-person authority and privileged access of self-knowledge. In doing so, Davidson distances himself from both the traditional account of self-knowledge as well as some of the contemporary accounts.

Broadly speaking, two different answers can be given to the question of "how do we acquire self-knowledge"? First view is regarded as the observational model of knowing our own minds presented by Descartes.

¹ Plato, 1909-14: 38a.

Second view is the inferential view presented by Gilbert Ryle. One is associated mainly with Descartes and the other with anti-Cartesians like Gilbert Ryle. The views presented by Descartes and Ryle on self-knowledge can be said to be a cognitivist account of self-knowledge. This cognitivist approach is based on an assumption that self-knowledge is a cognitive achievement where we gather new information about our own mental states either through observation or through inference. Unlike the cognitivist approach to self-knowledge, Davidson adheres to the non-cognitivist view of self-knowledge. For Davidson, our self-knowledge is based on presumption and cannot be said to be an achievement in the cognitive sense.

In Davidson's view, both the introspective paradigm of Descartes and the inferential paradigm of Ryle have come under attack. Unlike the observational approach of Descartes and non-observational approach of Ryle, Davidson presented an alternative view about self-knowledge. Davidson claims that knowledge of our own mental contents is based on the first-person authority. And the nature of this first-person authority and privileged access has been discussed at length in this paper. However before moving ahead and discussing Davidson's account of self-knowledge I will first initiate discussing the Cartesian account of self-knowledge. The second section will deal with Ryle's inferential account of self-knowledge. In the last section I aim to bridge the gap between these two extreme positions of Descartes and Ryle by putting forth Davidson's account of self-knowledge.

I

Before going into the detail account of Cartesian understanding of self-knowledge, it is important to understand the notion of self-knowledge. Self-knowledge can be understood as the knowledge of our own mental states, beliefs, desires etc. Intuitively, we believe that self-knowledge has some sort of epistemic status: we know what we are thinking in a direct, non-inferential way; others can know what we are thinking too, but this knowledge can be said to be indirect and inferential. In the field of epistemology and philosophy of mind, it is said that the first- person or the

subject has the privileged access to his own thoughts and beliefs. This access to the content of our own mind exists in such a way that others do not have such access.

Descartes' introspective account of self-knowledge as being directly given to us and are said to be free from error. On the basis of these characteristics of self-knowledge, Descartes holds that we know our thoughts infallibly through introspection alone. According to him no one could possibly be in a better epistemic position with respect to one's thoughts than the thinking individual himself. Let us now understand Descartes philosophical position with respect to self-knowledge in detail.

For Descartes, the fact that one exists as a thinking being is indubitable. He claims that a person has privileged access to the contents of one's own mind even in the doubt scenario. Descartes seems to hold a view that the knowledge of our own mind is infallible and is perfectly transparent. It is true that we all are unhesitatingly aware of our desires, beliefs and intentions; such knowledge about our mental states is known as self-knowledge. One of the most important and undeniable fact is that Descartes has clearly become the central figure on the subject of self-knowledge in analytic tradition. Descartes' indubitability and infallibility thesis with regard to self-knowledge plays a crucial role in understanding and articulating the notion of self-knowledge even today. Ultimately, this insight regarding the indubitability of the mental, led Descartes to advance a view about the metaphysics of mind that was widely influential, that is, Descartes' mind-body dualism. According to this view, mind and body are two distinct entities. The Cartesian view of the mind is that the subject is not only aware of the contents of his mind, there is a special method of knowing the mental contents of one's own mind. This method is known as introspection. Descartes claims that the subject comes to know about the mental contents through the model of inner observation. For him we come to know our psychological self-ascriptions through inner observation. He claims that

unlike the knowledge of the external world, knowledge of our own mind is based on a form of observation that is infallible.

Unlike the epistemic status of self-knowledge there is a non-epistemic way of understanding self-knowledge. According to the non-epistemic view or non-cognitive view, self-knowledge does not consist in observation of one's thoughts. Davidson's notion of first-person authority, Wittgenstein's expressivists account and Richard Moran's agential account are some of the examples of the non-epistemic view of the self-knowledge. I will discuss Davidson's non-cognitive account of self-knowledge in the last section of this paper. Descartes holds the belief that we know our thoughts infallibly through introspection alone. According to him no one could possibly be in a better epistemic position with respect to one's thoughts than the thinking individual himself. This introspective account of self-knowledge was quite unacceptable by many philosophers.

As we just mentioned, self-knowledge is the knowledge of a person's beliefs, desires, sensations etc. One can ask here, in order to understand this special feature of self-knowledge — is it possible for a person to falsely believe that he is in pain when actually he is not in pain? This question, and similar questions concerning one's beliefs, desires, intentions etc, has been answered differently by different philosophers. For Descartes it is not possible to falsely believe about our mental states. According to Descartes, to believe that 'I am in pain' is to be actually in pain and thus we have an **immediate** and **direct** access to our mental states. He argues that a person can never have false beliefs about his own mental lives. Thus according to Descartes we have privileged access to our mental contents which others lack. There is, therefore, an asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of the mental states of others.

Traditionally, it has been observed that philosophers have been interested in knowing the true nature of the self and inquire about the fact that how this self-knowledge is achieved? One such philosopher is Descartes.

Descartes' main objective was to attain certain knowledge. In order to reach at certainty he began to doubt everything and realized that we can only be certain of our own existence as a thinking being or a doubting being. Descartes thus claims that our mind is transparent to itself unlike the external world. Detached from matters of the external world, the mind can find certainty with respect to itself. Hence, we can be certain, not just that we exist as a thinking being, but of every truth about our own mind. This point can be understood with the help of an example—"I believe that there is a car outside my house." This proposition is infallible according to Descartes as it is based on the truth about one's own belief (in this case a belief about the car). For Descartes my belief about the car is directly given to me through some means which ensures its indubitability and infallibility. That is why Descartes contends that knowledge about our own mind is given to us directly unlike the knowledge of the external world a kind of that is susceptible to doubt and falsity.

Since we have a privileged knowledge about the mental contents of the mind, each individual uses a special method to know his own mental states. This method to explore the contents of our mind is termed as special as it is available to ourselves only. For him nobody can undermine the knowledge we have of ourselves because of the special method of knowing them. The knowledge of our own mental states is infallible because the method that we apply in acquiring it is also infallible. And the special method used to determine the content of one's own mind is known as introspection. Introspection is the process by which one comes to form beliefs about his/her own mental states and it is usually considered as a kind of inner perception². We might form the belief that someone else is happy on the basis of perception of his/her behavior and inferring from that to thinking that he/she is happy. But according to Descartes, a person does not have to perceive his/her own behavior to know what is going on in one's own mind,

² Introspection, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://www.iep.utm.edu/introspe/>

rather he/she has to introspect or look inside his/her mind to know whether he or she is happy.

For Descartes certainty in knowledge is very important. He argues that as long as you carefully attend to your own thoughts, nothing and nobody can undercut your thinking that you exist. Thus the method used by Descartes to have the infallible knowledge of our own mind is introspection, which, in turn, means “looking inward” or “looking within” to acquire knowledge of our mental states. Introspection enables direct and non-inferential access to the contents of the mental states. Thus the strongest assumption on behalf of self-knowledge being distinct from other knowledge lies in the certainty and infallibility of the method of introspection. The idea that introspective beliefs about facts involving our own mental states, enjoy a unique epistemic authority or privilege, which has played an important role in traditional rationalist epistemology. According to William James, Introspection can be defined as-

The word introspection need hardly be defined—it means, of course, the looking into our own minds and reporting what we there discover.³

The source of skepticism about introspection comes from the rejection of the Cartesian picture of the mind and self-knowledge. The view that one can have direct, infallible access to the contents of our mind has been rejected by many philosophers.

There is a commonly held belief that there is such a thing as a “self” that persists throughout one’s life. To say there is a “self” that persists throughout one’s life is simply to say that there is something about a person that services from birth, through childhood and adulthood and on until death,

³ James, 1890/1981: 85.

that makes a person the same person over time. This view of self has been accepted by Descartes, according to him there is a self-existing as a separate substance from the body. An important source of challenge to Descartes position came from David Hume. Hume stands in sharp contrast to Descartes position and rejects the very idea of the substance called “self” and thereby rejects the possibility of self- knowledge.

The point which Hume tries to argue for, is that when we try to look within ourselves, all we can observe are the thoughts that are currently going through my head- I am feeling thirsty, I am tired and so on. But we fail to see the self which is alleged to be distinct from these thoughts. Hume claims that we suppose that there is such a thing as a persisting self due to the fact that there is continuity from one idea to the next. And due to this continuity we come to know the changes in our mental life, as a result we wrongly think that there is a “self”. Hume’s critique to Descartes proved devastating to Descartes’ position. For when Hume looked within he reported that he could not find anything in his experience corresponding to Descartes single, simple, continuing self. Hence introspection which seems to have proved a ground for Descartes to establish a self is used by Hume to prove exactly the opposite view regarding the nature of the self.

According to Descartes’ introspective account of mental states, mind is like a theatre in which the ongoing show can be viewed by only one individual, the person whose mind it is. One can also question Cartesian infallibility account of self- knowledge, one can say that people can commit errors about their own mental states, one such criticism has been made by Gilbert Ryle. It may be possible that being guided by a friend we may realize what we believe or desire. It is not always the case that in order to know our mental states we have to look inwards. This observational view of mental states has been criticized by Gilbert Ryle. According to Ryle's view, we can achieve self-knowledge in exactly the same way as we achieve the knowledge of other people. In the upcoming section we will examine Ryle’s inferential view of self-knowledge.

II

One solution to the Cartesian notion of self is found in the philosophy of Gilbert Ryle as he criticized Descartes view of introspective self-knowledge and puts forth his dispositional account of self-knowledge. Unlike Descartes observational account of self-knowledge, Ryle famously argued that self-knowledge is an inferential matter and there is nothing special about it. According to Ryle, self-knowledge is in principle as fallible as any other kind of knowledge. For Ryle we come to know about our own mental states in the same way as we come to know about the mental states of others by observing their behavior. Ryle claims that self-observation is not a matter of immediate access to our intentional states. We ascribe intentional states to ourselves on the basis of what we say and do, thus for Ryle the immediacy of self-knowledge is an illusion.

Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* has a major impact in discrediting Cartesian dualism. Ryle's aim in writing this book was not to provide new information about mind, but to rectify the knowledge which already exists. Ryle refers to the concept of dualism as "Descartes Myth" and as "the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine". This Myth of "the ghost in the machine" makes the mind an invisible "thing" or "substance", which resides inside a visible substance called body. It is this concept of Descartes which Ryle intends to destroy. However Ryle does not intend to show that there is no mental life at all, rather his aim is to show that mind is not something distinct from the body. Ryle begins by attacking the term "mind" by saying that usage of this term in sentences like "a person's body and mind interact upon each other" or "my mind made my hand write" amounts to logically improper conjunctions, and cause-effect propositions. His problem is that in saying "I feel lazy", it is suggested that a person

must have taken peep into a windowless chamber, illuminated by a very peculiar sort of light, and one to which only he has access...And when the question is construed in this sort of way,

the parallel questions, “what knowledge can one person get of the workings of another mind?” and “how does he get it?” by their very wording seem to preclude any answer at all, for they suggest that one person could only know that another person was lazy...by peering into another secret chamber to which, ex hypothesis, he has not access.⁴

The example Ryle uses to explain the Myth of dualism is to imagine someone on a campus visit of a university. He looks at various colleges of the university, visits the classroom buildings, the library etc. At the end of the tour the visitor then asks where the university is? According to Ryle’s view he has mistakenly assumed that the university is some separate entity existing apart from all of its constituents. He has mistakenly placed “university” in the same category as “classroom building”, “library” etc. Ryle claims that “university” is not a separate existing entity rather it refers to the entire collection of “classroom building”, “library” etc. all taken together. So too, Ryle contends, the “mind” should not be thought of as some separate entity independently of its operations and the “body”.

Further Ryle points out that the person has no direct access of any sort to the events of her own inner life. His main aim is to deny Descartes’ introspective view of knowing one’s own mind. According to Ryle, privileged access to the working of the mind is unacceptable, since there is no secret chamber to peep into nor any special method or way of peeping into the secret chamber. Now, one can question—what is the way of knowing one’s own mind according to Ryle? Ryle being a behaviorist puts forth his behaviorist position in knowing the working of the mind. It is the doctrine that the knowledge of the mental contents of the mind can be known by observing the behavior. In order to understand Ryle’s position it is important to understand Ryle’s meaning of introspection

⁴ Ryle, 1949: 169.

Introspection is an attentive operation and one which is only occasionally performed, whereas consciousness is supposed to be a constant element of all mental processes, and one of which the revelations do not require to be receipted in special acts of attention.⁵

The point that Ryle wants to emphasize is that introspection as a special infallible method of knowing one's own mind is unacceptable. He accepts that the mind is conscious of the mental process but it does not mean that we have a special method of knowing the mental states which others lack. Ryle claims that I often know that my legs are crossed, not by looking, but by exercising my faculty of proprioception. Proprioception is a special way of perceiving the dispositions of one's body. According to Ryle I cannot use proprioception to find out whether your legs are crossed or not.

Now one may question – what then Ryle has to say about the mental concepts? According to Ryle, knowledge of the mental contents is not possible through introspection or by observing the inner state of mind but for Ryle mental concepts are no more than dispositions. Importantly one should keep in mind that while rejecting introspection, Ryle does not deny that we can attain self-knowledge. According to him we can have the knowledge of our own mind in exactly the same way as we know the minds of the other's. For Ryle “mind” means complex abilities and dispositions. Ryle contends those who think of the mind as something over and above a complex of abilities and dispositions commits “category mistake.” Disposition is a way to behave in a certain way, that means that they will do certain things if certain situations arise. For instance to say that someone is intelligent is then to say that in given circumstances he would behave observably in ways we call intelligent. In response to Descartes introspective account of knowing one's own mind, Ryle puts forth the view that we do not need any “private

⁵ Ibid., p.165.

theatre” to provide stages for any extra “objects” such as “private” sensations or “sense-data.” Ryle argues that, Descartes acceptance of the introspective account of knowing one’s own mind results into a “category mistake”. It is due to this category mistake, we falsely identify the words like “knowing”, “believing”, “imagining”, “sensing” etc. to a private, non-spatial “mind” which can only be known through the method of introspection.

Now one may question what does privileged access really mean? The doctrine of privileged access is something that Ryle calls “Descartes’ Myth”. Ryle being a common-sense philosopher strongly disliked the appeal to privileged access. According to this doctrine

a person has direct knowledge of the best imaginable kind of the working of his own mind. Mental states and processes are conscious states and processes, and the consciousness which irradiates them can engender no illusions and leaves the door open for no doubts. A person’s present thinking, feelings and willings, his perceivings, rememberings and imaginings are intrinsically “phosphorescent”; their existence and their nature are inevitably betrayed to their ownes.⁶

To say that a person has knowledge of the best imaginable kind of the workings of his own mind is, to say that his introspectively based beliefs about his own mental states and processes cannot be mistaken. In other words, such beliefs are infallible. This is one dimension of the doctrine of privileged access. To say that one’s mental states and processes are “phosphorescent” means that it rules out the possibility of ignorance with regard to the existence of one’s mental states. It means that it is not possible for a person to ascribe mental states to oneself without knowing that he/she is in that mental state. Now, one can question—do we really have such special “privileged access” to what we think and feel?

⁶ Ryle, 1949: 15.

For Ryle “privileged access” is merely a fiction, in Ryle’s word “The Myth”. Ryle thinks it is absurd to say that a person can be “conscious” of smelling or thinking something because the very act of “smelling” or “thinking” already implies that one is aware of such occurrences. Ryle argues that since there is no special way of knowing our own mind, we know our own mind in the same way as we come to know about the minds of others, that is, by inferring their behavior. Thus Ryle rejects the asymmetry between one’s own mind and knowing the mental states of others.

To put things in a broader perspective, Ryle’s position on privileged access is a necessary effect of his critique of Cartesianism. It is well known that for Descartes, one can have privileged access to the contents of our own minds, knowledge of other minds is problematic. For Ryle this idea of privileged access itself was unacceptable. According to Ryle we know our own minds in the same way as we know the minds of the others by observing the behavior. Most importantly we should keep in mind that Ryle is not a philosophical behaviorist as his view on self-knowledge has been characterized as a weaker or softer version of this doctrine. The point to be focused is that Ryle does not confine his descriptions of what the agent will do to purely physical behavior rather it can be understood more clearly as a disposition to behave in various circumstances.

In chapter six of *The Concept of Mind*, after discussing the “introspection” and “privileged access”, Ryle turns his attention to the relationship between self-knowledge and the use of the term “I.”⁷ After putting forth his behaviorist account of self-knowledge, Ryle argues that the mystery often felt in connection with the concept of the self is due to what he terms “the systematic Elusiveness of ‘I.’” He maintains that once the logic of the first- person pronoun is understood, there is no longer any need to feel or talk about mystery in relation to the concept of the self.

⁷ Ryle, 1949: 195-198.

Ryle rejects the Cartesian account of mind by stating that the word “I”, indicates directly to the person who can be called “my”, it is not in itself a name; and indeed it can be used in different ways like “I crossed the road”, “I thought hard” etc. Ryle holds that to know about our mental states we do not have to introspect rather have to base my knowledge on the behavior. According to him we can know the mental states of others in the same way as I know the mental state of myself by observing their behavior, though there must be some difference of degree.

For Ryle there are cases where “I” or “me” certainly cannot be replaced by “my body” e.g. “I remember” cannot be replaced by “my head remembers”, nor can we say “my brain does long divisions” or “my body battles with fatigue”. He says it makes perfect sense to say that “I caught myself just beginning to dream, but not that I caught my body beginning to dream.”⁸ According to Ryle, “I” or “self” can be understood as a person. He further talks of the “systematic elusiveness of ‘I.’” For him all personal pronouns are “index words”, “I” is not an extra name for an extra being; it indicates when I say or write it, the same individual who can also be addressed by the proper name of say “Gilbert Ryle.”⁹ He says “I” in my use of it always indicates me and only indicates me whereas words “You”, “She” and “they” indicates different people at different times.¹⁰

Ryle claims that this distinction between higher order and lower order actions make two important contributions in solving the difficulties connected with “I”. Firstly, it explains that a person cannot describe himself in any of the given statement since that statement cannot describe itself. Secondly, this distinction explains the difference between the pronouns “I” and “you.” Thus, for Ryle, the Elusiveness of the term “I” is explained by the concept of higher order actions. Important point that Ryle wants to put forth is that “I”

⁸ Ibid., p.181.

⁹ Ibid., p.180.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.189

or “self” cannot be identified with body or mind. According to him, this pronoun “I” is capable of referring to both physical and mental acts. Thus in order to criticize Descartes’ special method (introspective method) in knowing the mental states Ryle tried to explain the Elusiveness of the pronoun “I.”

Ryle held that we know our own mind in the same way as we know the mind of others, by inference from observational evidence. However this inferential account of self-knowledge has been criticized by Donald Davidson. Davidson claims

Ryle was wrong. It is seldom the case that I need or appeal to evidence or observation in order to find out what I believe; normally I know what I think before I speak or act. Even when I have evidence, I seldom make use of it.¹¹

According to Davidson we know what we believe and do not have to infer knowledge of one’s own mental state. As per the inferential model of self-knowledge, knowledge of ourselves as well as of others depends upon noticing how we and others behave in particular circumstances. Hence the idea of privileged access does not make sense in Ryle’s Philosophy. Also one can question unless the speaker is aware of his own mental states, his actions will lose their significance. Hence the speaker cannot be held responsible for his actions. But in real sense we are responsible for our actions. Thus, criticizing Ryle’s position, Davidson claims that the speaker is authoritative about the contents of his/ her own mind.

Davidson’s view is in contrast to Descartes and Ryle’s views. Davidson, by rejecting the Cartesian mind body dualism puts forth his view on first-person authority and privileged access to the content of the mind. According to Davidson, first-person authority and privileged access are the

¹¹ Davidson, 2001: 14.

real facts which we have to explore. Thus in the upcoming section of my paper, I will explore Donald Davidson's view about self-knowledge and first-person authority.

III

After dismissing Descartes' picture of the mind and his introspective method of knowing the contents of the mind, Donald Davidson claims that it is true that there is a special way of knowing one's own mind but this knowledge for him is not indubitable. As opposed to Ryle, Davidson accepts that there is an asymmetry between first-person and the third-person mental states. Now the question that can be asked is that how does Davidson explain this asymmetry? Davidson explains this asymmetry with the help of first-person authority. Davidson with the help of first-person authority tried to explain the asymmetry between the knowledge of our own mental states and our knowledge of the mental states of others. However, first-person authority is not derived from a special means of knowing our own minds, like, introspection, as was suggested by Descartes and the Cartesians in general. On the contrary, Davidson suggests that this first-person authority can be explained with the help of interpretability. According to him, in order to have communication and interpretation to be possible we have to presume first-person authority.

Traditionally first-person authority has been understood in terms of having privileged access with regard to the content of our own mind. Privileged access can be understood as a special way of knowing our own mind which others lack. In this sense Descartes talks about the authority over the content of our mind and this special access is given to the speaker of the beliefs which can be known through the method of introspection. However this special way of knowing the psychological self-ascription has been criticized by Ryle. Davidson does not accept privileged access in the Cartesian sense. One can question—in what sense does Davidson talk about first-person authority without adhering to a traditional idea of privileged access?

From a common sense point of view all of us presume that what someone says about her psychological states is true, though there are occasions when we learn about what we believe or want by talking with our close friends or family members, or by being guided by a therapist. These are the cases where a person may lack authority. Sometimes a psychological state is so foreign that it may seem to belong to some other person. These are the indirect ways of knowing our own mental states. The indirect ways of knowing can be said to be based on observation or evidence. When a person makes use of these indirect ways of knowing one's own mind then he lacks authority. At times a person can have psychological state from which she is detached, for instance, she may have a desire repressed years ago about her loved one and on being told by others she may come to know about her feelings.

This special authority has been explained by Davidson as first-person authority. This special authority according to Davidson is based on presumption and it is important for us to explain what Davidson means by this authority.

In spite of the fact that few contents of the mental states are known indirectly and are based on observation but this cannot be the case always. Ordinarily we are well aware of our desires, intentions and believes, and believe that our knowledge about the content of our mental state is better than others. Now, one can ask—what is the basis of this claim? On what basis do we claim to have better knowledge of our psychological states than others?

Donald Davidson continued to assume that first-person authority to be understood in non-epistemic sense but remain in dispute with the idea that each one of us is infallible about our own psychological states. Now before going into a detailed account of Davidson's philosophy, it is important to understand the meaning of first-person authority. Most commonly first-person authority can be understood as the speaker having the authority on his

psychological self-ascriptions. It can also be understood as something to which the speaker has privileged access. To put it differently, first-person authority indicates a unique authority that we ordinarily have, with respect to our own psychological states.

First-person authority seems to ground a person's authority that is not based on evidence. Now let us understand the meaning of first-person authority according to Donald Davidson. As Davidson writes

The existence of first-person authority is not an empirical discovery but rather a criterion, among others, of what a mental state is.¹²

Davidson claims that every person enjoys special authority with respect to his own intentional states. By first-person authority Davidson means that if any person ascribes the presence of any intentional state to his/her self then it is presumed that whatever he is saying is true, unless there is evidence to the contrary.

To put it in Davidson's words

We should treat his utterance as if it were true unless or until, we have sufficient evidence or other epistemic grounds, to the contrary.¹³

Davidson suggests that my knowledge about the psychological self-ascriptions is not based on observation. For Davidson we normally know what we believe or intend. Even if we have evidence we do not or need not depend upon it or make use of it. As Davidson remarks

¹² Davidson, 1995: 234.

¹³ Davidson, 1984: 101.

It is seldom the case that I need or appeal to evidence or observation in order to find out what I believe; normally I know what I think before I speak or act. Even when I have evidence, I seldom make use of it.¹⁴

Initially Davidson suggests that the authority should be understood as a presumption, the presumption that a subject is not mistaken when she attributes to herself beliefs, intentions, desires and other psychological states.¹⁵

To put it in Davidson's words-

There is a presumption - an unavoidable presumption built into the nature of interpretation- that the speaker usually knows what he means. So there is a presumption that if he knows that he holds a sentence true, he knows what he believes.¹⁶

Davidson first-person authority is based on presumption. Whenever a speaker utters something, it is presumed to be correct as this presumption is based on the authoritative nature of the speaker. For instance, if a speaker utters a sentence—"I am feeling hungry," the interpreter will accept the sentence uttered by a speaker to be true, as the speaker is authoritative about the contents of his mind. And this authority according to Davidson is solely based on presumption. As Davidson claims

The authority which rests on the fact that, whatever the objective meaning of a sentence may be, the individual subject is the only one who is in a position to authoritatively tell.¹⁷

¹⁴ Davidson, 2001: 14.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.3.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.14.

¹⁷ Ibid.,p.12.

In general, the authoritative nature with respect to psychological self-ascriptions is presumed by all. Such authority is thought to be directly accessible to the subject about their own mental states. This immediacy of the psychological self-ascriptions is available to the first-person rather than third-person. For Davidson this knowledge of the mental states of the speaker is not based on evidence. This is the base for an asymmetry between the first and third person knowledge of intentional states as the latter is based on evidence whereas the former is not.

Based on the above discussion of Davidson's view on first-person authority we can summarize mainly three characteristics of first-person authority namely--immediacy, authority and fallibility. Davidson regards self-knowledge as immediate. To put it in Davidson's words

What I know about the contents of my own mind I generally know without appeal to evidence or investigation. There are exceptions, but the primacy of unmediated self-knowledge is attested by the fact that we distrust the exceptions until they can be reconciled with the unmediated.¹⁸

Davidson admits that first-person knowledge is directly known. It can be understood as some kind of immediacy without appeal to evidence or investigation. For Davidson this immediacy is something that is understood in terms of non-evidentiality or lacks evidence or is not based on observation or inference. This immediacy can be further explained with the help of an example-- if a person believes that she is sad, this belief of her is self-warrant or self-justified. This belief is justified by the fact that she believes that she is sad; no further evidence is required to prove her belief. However, this immediacy is not due to privileged access and we should not confuse it with Cartesian notion. This immediacy can be understood with the help of privileged access. Davidson believes that we have privileged access to the

¹⁸ Davidson, 2001: 205.

content of our mind and this knowledge is not based on evidence. However whatever is known directly should be based on evidence. Now, one can question how can a person have privileged access to the content of his own mind without evidence? Do we have privileged access to what we are intentionally doing? In order to answer these questions we should first understand the meaning of privileged access. Traditionally privileged access has been understood in terms of introspective account but Davidson does not accept privileged access in this sense. First and foremost we should identify the relevant range of propositions to which we have privileged access. These ranges are usually specified by subject matter- propositions about our own current propositional attitudes, propositions about our own sensations or propositions about our own intentional doing.

Discussing self-knowledge, Davidson never talks about privileged access explicitly, but he still believes that there is an evident asymmetry between first-person and third-person points of view. This point can be understood more clearly with the help of an example of privileged access in the sense of imagination that Davidson discusses

I say to you: ‘form an image of your grandmother,’ and if I ask ‘how do you know that the image is of your grandmother?’¹⁹

According to Davidson this question is ill-conceived. The point that Davidson wants to put forth is that in the above example a person can be wrong about the image of her grandmother but the image will be of that person only and one cannot question about it. The reason why the image cannot be questioned is that the person has privileged access to his/ her mental contents. Thus access to my mental content would be superior to yours. For Davidson privileged access lies in presumptive acceptability of first-person authority. Davidson claims that the first-person access is not in fact a kind of access one may have to the mind of another subject as the

¹⁹ Heil, 1988: 247.

knowledge of other person is based on evidence but the knowledge about the content of one's own mind is not based on any evidence. To put it in Davidson's words

The privileged status we enjoy with respect to the contents of our own minds is analogous. That is, in introspecting and describing our thoughts we are not reporting episodes that appear before our mind's eye. Were that so, we should be at a loss to account for the privileged status such reports are routinely accorded. The access I enjoy to my own mental contents would be superior to what is available to you, perhaps, but only accidentally so. Its superiority would be like that I enjoy with respect to the contents of my trouser pockets.²⁰

Davidson conflates first-person authority with privileged access. He claims that since we are authoritative about our psychological self-ascription and this authority is based on presumption. Thus, for Davidson there is something special in knowing the contents of the mind and its specialty lies in the fact that it is not available or given to anyone else. So Davidson's notion of privileged access is based on presumptive acceptability. As Davidson claims

The difference follows, of course, from the fact that the assumption that I know what I mean necessarily gives me, but not you, knowledge of what belief I expressed by my utterance. It remains to show why there must be a presumption that speakers, but not their interpreters, are not wrong about what their words mean. The presumption is essential to the nature of interpretation—the process by which we understand the utterances of a speaker. This process cannot be the same for the utterer and for his hearers.²¹

²⁰ Ibid., p.248.

²¹ Davidson, 2001: 12.

The point that Davidson wants to emphasize is that there is no guarantee that the hearer will interpret the words uttered by the speaker correctly. But one cannot deny the fact that the words of the speaker will be automatically understood by the hearer.

For Davidson, it is natural to know what I believe or intend, unlike the knowledge of others knowledge about our own mental states is not based on evidence. For Davidson

People generally know without recourse to inference from evidence, and so in a way that others do not, what they themselves think, want or intend.²²

So we can see that Davidson claims that I can know the beliefs or other propositional attitudes of others from what she says and how she behaves that is from the empirical investigation. But my knowledge about my own beliefs or any other propositional states is not based on any evidence or observation. Davidson further points out that we do have privileged access to the psychological self-ascriptions but this does not imply that we have infallible knowledge about the contents of our own mind. He claims that all the propositional attitudes of a subject are liable to error.

For Davidson, the presumption about the mental contents is not based on evidence, thus according to Davidson, there is no epistemic ground to show the authoritative nature of the subject. Thus one can clearly say that Davidson presented a first-person authority view of knowing our own minds and also accepts that the subject had privileged access to his/her own mental contents.

Thus, one can conclude on the basis of the above discussion that contrary to the traditional observational and inferential account of self-knowledge,

²² Ibid., p.48.

Davidson accepts the first-person authority view of knowing our own minds. According to the first-person authority view, we assume that the subject is authoritative about his/her psychological ascriptions. And the interpreter will always believe that whatever the subject is uttering is true. Unless we grant the speaker this form of authority with regard to his/her own mental states, communication in terms of interpretation becomes impossible.

One can question- is authoritative speaker and interpreter sufficient for communication? For Davidson, along with the speaker, the hearer, the role of the external world is significant for communication to take place. Thus along with first-person authority, Davidson also advocated an externalist account of mental content and meaning. Now the threat to this Davidson's account of self- knowledge is- how can we have privileged access to our own thoughts if their meanings are determined externally?

For Davidson the externalist threat to privileged self- knowledge rests on a faulty picture of the mind. According to Davidson the subject knows what he thinks, intend and believe. Davidson tried to hold his externalist position along with the consistency of privileged access by putting forth the doctrine of first-person authority of the mental contents. To sum up let's put in Davidson's words

First-person authority, the social character of language, and the external determinants of thought and meaning go naturally together.²³

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²³ Davidson, 2001: 35.

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