Davidson’s Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge

I. Coherence and Correspondence: Preliminaries (137-141)

A. What does Davidson mean by a coherence theory of truth and knowledge? (137, second paragraph)

B. Why does Davidson stress that his coherence theory of truth concerns beliefs, rather than sentences of propositions? (138)

C. Why does Davidson note that “All that a coherence theory can maintain is that most of the beliefs in a coherent total set of beliefs are true”? (138)

D. Why does Davidson not want to define truth in terms of coherence and insists that “if a coherence theory of truth is acceptable, it must be consistent with a correspondence theory”? (139-140)

E. What does Davidson mean by skepticism and how does it pose a challenge to a coherence theory?

F. What does Davidson mean when he says that “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief”? How does this view distinguish a coherence theory from others? (141)

II. The Alternative to Coherence: Grounding Belief in Sensory Experience (141-146)

Davidson’s reasons for rejecting this alternative to his own coherence theory are very much the same as Sellars’ reasons for rejecting empiricism. We, therefore, won’t linger over the details of his arguments, but simply try to pick up a few key points.

A. What is Davidson getting at when he says that “Hume seems not to have distinguished between perceiving a green spot and perceiving that a spot is green”? (141)

B. What is the “obvious thought” that “Emphasis on sensation or perception in matters epistemological springs from”? (142)

C. Why can’t the relation between a sensation and a belief be logical? Davidson suggests that if the relation can’t be logical, the obvious answer is that it must be causal. Why does he think that “a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified”? (143)
D. Why does Davidson believe that the idea of a confrontation between our beliefs and the world (as a way to ascertain whether our beliefs are true of the world) through the intermediary of sensory experience doesn’t make sense? (143-144)

III. Davidson’s Argument

A. Why does Davidson frame the problem he must solve as that of finding “a reason for supposing most of our beliefs are true that is not a form of evidence”? (146)

B. Davidson presents the goal of his argument, the conclusion he wants to convince us of, as the idea that “belief is in its nature veridical.” (146) Keep this in mind as you read his argument. Does his argument actually establish this point?

C. Why does Davidson believe that belief and meaning are interdependent (that is, we cannot know what some sentence means without knowing what beliefs it expresses and vice versa)? What does he mean by proposing that the only way to “illuminate the nature of meaning and belief” is to investigate “the causal relation between assenting to a sentence and the cause of such assent”? (147)

D. Davidson says he will adopt “the stance of a radical interpreter when asking about the nature of belief.” (148) All he means by a radical interpreter is just someone who understands nothing of the language he is attempting to understand (translate).

E. What does Davidson mean by “the principle of charity”? Why does Davidson think the radical interpreter should adopt the principle of charity? Why does he think it makes for “mutual understanding, and hence for better interpretation, to interpret what the speaker accepts as true as true when we can”? (148-149)

F. Why does Davidson think his understanding of interpretation implies that “most of the sentences a speaker holds to be true . . . are true, at least in the opinion of the interpreter”? As a corollary to this point, why does he think it implies that “it is impossible for an interpreter to understand a speaker and at the same time discover the speaker to be largely wrong about the world”? (149-150)

G. How does Davidson respond to the objection “that speaker and interpreter (may) understand one another on the basis of shared but erroneous beliefs”? (150-151)