

# Lectures 11: Central Themes

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Key idea: 'entities such as meanings ... are not of independent interest' (Davidson 1984, p. 154).

What kind of thing might entities such as meanings of interest?

Method:

1. Identify a fact which stands in need of explanation.
2. Show that a postulate about meanings is involved in one candidate explanation of that fact.

Whether there are meanings, and what meanings are, depends on whether any of these candidate explanations are correct.

## 1. Meaning Is Reference

### 1.1. Fact in need of explanation #1

Consider utterances of the following sentences:

1. 'Earth is being warmed by human activity.'
2. 'Mars is being warmed by human activity.'

The first depends for its truth on how things are with Earth whereas the second depends for its truth on how things are with Mars. Why do the two utterances differ in this way?

### 1.2. Attempted explanation sketch

Guess about meanings: It is because the utterance of 'Earth' stands in some relation to Earth whereas the utterance of 'Mars' stands in that relation to Mars.

Terminology: Call this relation 'meaning'.

Terminology: Since the relation between a word and a thing the word can be used to talk about is usually also called 'reference', the guess about meanings could be put by saying *meaning is reference*.

Guess about principles: What makes a sentence true somehow depends on what its constituent words mean.

### 1.3. Question One

If we take this view of meanings, can we explain the first fact in need of explanation?

## 2. Meaning Isn't (Only) Reference

### 2.1. Question Two

Is there anything meanings are needed to explain which we cannot explain if we take the above view of them (that is, if we hold that meaning is reference)?

### 2.2. Fact in need of explanation #2

Lois knows that 'Superman is superman' is true; but Lois does not know that 'Clarke Kent is superman' is true. Why?

### 2.3. Observation

If we adopt the view that meaning is reference, then

1. 'Superman' means superman.
2. 'Clarke Kent' means Clarke Kent.

but:

3. Superman is Clarke Kent

therefore:

4. 'Clarke Kent' means Superman.

therefore:

5. 'Clarke Kent' and 'Superman' do not differ in meaning.

## 2.4. Argument

1. The contrast in what Lois knows about the sentences is a fact in need of explanation.
2. The explanation, whatever it is, will hinge on the meanings of the words 'Superman' and 'Clarke Kent'.
3. If meaning is reference, this explanation is impossible.

therefore:

4. Meaning is not, or not only, reference.

Should we reject a premise or accept the conclusion?

## References

Davidson, D. (1974 [1984]). Belief and the basis of meaning. In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (pp. 141–154). Oxford: Oxford University Press.