In: M.C. Amoretti e N. Vassallo (eds.), Knowledge, Language, and Interpretation. On the Philosophy of Donald Davidson (pp. 9-32). Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag.

DRAFT – PLEASE DO NOT CITE

Introduction

M. Cristina AMORETTI
University of Genoa, Dept. of Philosophy,
Via Balbi 4, 16126 Genoa, Italy
cristina.amoretti@unige.it

Nicla VASSALLO
University of Genoa, Dept. of Philosophy,
Via Balbi 4, 16126 Genoa, Italy
nicla.vassallo@unige.it

Donald Davidson, one of the most original and influential contemporary philosophers, has made significant and contentious contributions to many different subjects within the analytic tradition: from decision theory to the philosophy of language, from metaphysics to the philosophy of action, from the philosophy of mind to epistemology. Such a wide range of philosophical interests is quite impressive, especially if we consider the rare unity and the systematic character of his writings. In his essays, arguments and ideas are deeply intertwined: they overlap, mutually refer to one another, and often presuppose earlier outcomes. As a consequence, it is sometimes difficult to understand just one particular thesis without considering the whole of Davidson's work. The main core of this complex and striking system can be identified with the notion of interpretation. In order rightly to appreciate the leading role of the interpreter, it is necessary to analyze some pivotal themes of Davidson's philosophy.

1. Theory of meaning

Davidson is by no means skeptical about the possibility of carrying forward a theory of meaning for natural languages, namely a theory able to specify a systematic interpretation of all the sentences in a given natural language. More precisely, he proposes employing an axiomatic theory. By way of a finite set of axioms we start defining the meaning of the words of a chosen language. Then, through suitable rules of inference, we derive a potentially infinite number of theorems—of the form "s means that p"—which describe the meaning of all the sentences of the language. The main trouble with this strategy is due to Davidson's rejection of any intentional entity. He actually endorses a rigid extensional approach, fearing that intentionality will involve just the kinds of problems about meaning that a theory of meaning was supposed to resolve. Moreover, he finds no use for meanings as entities and maintains that they do no useful work in semantics.

Despite the difficulties, Davidson does not give up on the project of developing a theory to serve as a theory of meaning for natural languages. He needs an extensional way to pair sentences with the world, and a bold hypothesis is that this can be done by a predicate as "is true iff". Thus, he thinks that it is possible to read what a sentence of a language means from a theory of truth à la Tarski, whose theorems take the form "s is true in L iff p". Actually truth is an extensional notion, which obviously does not conflict with his overall extensional approach. Hence it is possible to have a theory of meaning for a given language—namely a theory which helps us to interpret the speakers of that language—without appealing to problematic entities such as intensions. The original Tarskian project, whose aim was to analyze truth by way of translation, and therefore of identity of meaning, has been reversed. Davidson, in fact, assumes the concept of truth as primitive (since he thinks it is simple, clear and irreducible), and then he tries to employ a truth theory as the vehicle for a meaning theory. His goal is not to reduce meaning to truth, but to shed light on the notion of meaning by making use of the concept of truth.

Nevertheless, if a truth theory has to be used for interpreting natural languages, it faces several difficulties. To begin with, finding a way to translate all the sentences of a natural language into first-order logic sentences is compulsory so long as Tarskian methods are used. Moreover, indexical and demonstrative terms also need to be dealt with. Finally, some further constraints are necessary for a truth theory to be used for interpreting a speaker: such a theory must be conceived as an empirical theory and, for instance, it must be capable of supporting counterfactual claims.1

2. Radical interpretation

The project of radical interpretation aims to determine what is needed to interpret a speaker without the help of any bilinguals. According to Davidson, in order to interpret a speaker, the interpreter must possess a theory of meaning shaped like a Tarskian theory of truth and confirmed by the speaker's external behaviour and further empirical evidence. The problem is understanding if and how it is possible to ascertain the empirical correctness of such a theory of meaning.

A radical interpreter—an interpreter who doesn't know anything about the speaker's language—must initially discover the speaker's attitude towards her own utterances, namely whether she holds a sentence true or not in particular circumstances. In other words, the interpreter must have access to the speaker's "hold-true" attitudes. Holding a sentence true is already a semantic attitude, but according to Davidson it can precede interpretation. For example, the interpreter may know that a subject holds the sentence "Sta piovendo" to be true without having recognized which specific truth it is. However, even if we take the interpreter to know that the speaker holds a sentence as true, he is still not able to determine what the speaker believes and what her actual sentence means. Let us imagine that during a storm the speaker utters "Sta piovendo": in order to interpret this utterance and find out that it means "It's raining", the interpreter must be able to ascribe to the speaker the belief that it is raining. However, in order to ascribe to the speaker the belief that it is raining, the interpreter must know the meaning of the speaker's words. To put it more generally, let us assume that the interpreter knows that the speaker holds a certain sentence true: if she knew the meaning of the sentence, she could establish what the speaker believes, and, conversely, if she knew what

[1] According to Davidson axioms and theorems must be viewed as laws. For example, instances of "s is true iff p" have to be taken not only as true, but also as capable of supporting counterfactuals. The reason is that a sentence such as (1) "'snow is white' is true iff grass is green"—which is true but does not support counterfactuals—does not give us the meaning of the sentence "snow is white". By contrast, (2) "'snow is white' is true iff snow is white" is not merely true but also capable of supporting a counterfactual hypothesis. Lawlikeness can then act as a way to filter out true but uninterpretative truth theories. See for instance (Davidson 1967).

the speaker believes, she could determine the meaning of the sentence. The interdependence of belief and meaning is apparently inextricable. Hence it is crucial to find a way to break up the circle which binds them together. According to Davidson we can do this by defining a general theory of interpretation which could "deliver simultaneously a theory of belief and a theory of meaning" (Davidson 1974a: 144), which could yield "a method for holding one factor steady while the other is studied" (Davidson 1975: 167). The theory is that of radical interpretation, whereas the method is supplied by the principle of charity (that, with some obvious differences, we can already find in Quine2).

As Davidson initially formulates it3, the principle of charity compels the interpreter to assume that, ceteris paribus, the speaker's beliefs are by and large true. To put it another way, the interpreter must presume that the interpretee is mostly right, and thus she must ascribe a great number of true beliefs to the speaker (beliefs that are true from the point of view of the interpreter). For instance, if the interpreter faced the twofold option of interpreting a speaker's sentence as if it expressed the belief that reindeer have two humps or, alternatively, the belief that reindeer have antlers, she should opt for the latter alternative.

More recently4, the principle of charity has been divided into two different strands: the principles of correspondence and coherence. The result above is achieved by the principle of correspondence, which breaks up the circle between beliefs and meanings: the only way out is to hold belief constant, and then solve for meaning. The first step towards interpretation has finally been taken. Actually, the attribution of attitudes to a subject is governed not only by those constraints imposed by the external world, but also by holistic constraints which connect all the speaker's beliefs with each other. This is what the principle of coherence prescribes. The interpreter must attribute beliefs and other attitudes to the speaker so as to make her out to be by and large rational. Hence the speaker's system of beliefs must be consistent, must respect the transitivity of preferences, and so on. However, in order to keep the overall coherence and rationality of the interpretee, sometimes it could be necessary to attribute to the speaker either false beliefs or beliefs very different from our own. As Davidson admits charity "is a confused ideal" (Davidson 1984a: xix), since the interpreter's goal is to maximize, not the agreement between himself and the interpretee, but rather her understanding of the interpretee. Finally, the overall system of the speaker's beliefs must result largely true and coherent.5 The interpretations we should privilege are always those which optimize understanding.

Contrary to Quine's conception, the principle of charity is not merely a pragmatic constraint on translation. Davidson actually takes it not to be an option, but a constitutive element of interpretation, since there could be no interpretation at all without it. The two thesis of indeterminacy of translation (interpretation) and inscrutability of reference are accepted but also revisited. The thesis of indeterminacy—according to which it is always possible to obtain different interpretations of a certain linguistic behaviour from the same observational evidence—must obtain, but loses its relativistic character. Different interpretations can be compared to different measuring systems: as nobody would maintain that temperature is a relative concept just because there are various scales (Celsius, Fahrenheit, etc.), it is also

[2] Actually, in Quine's work we can already find many other ideas, but in terms of syntax (translation), not of semantics (interpretation).

[3] In Davidson's essays it is easy to find several characterizations of the principle of charity which are slightly different from one another (see for instance (Lepore and Ludwig 2005: § 12)).

[4] For more details, see for example (Davidson 1999: 343).

[5] It is possible, then, that the interpreter attributes to the speaker few false beliefs or even limited contradictions. On the contrary, it is impossible that the interpreter attributes to the speaker a great number of false and/or incoherent beliefs. If this happened, the interpreter would be forced to review her own interpretation, and not to opt for the speaker's irrationality. If the interpreter were faced with a fully irrational speaker, in fact, the interpretation could not begin. Rather, the interpreter could not recognize the speaker as a *speaker*.

absurd to insist that interpretation is relative. In fact, two interpretations can merely differ in the particular way they track the same empirical and holistic constraints. If "what a speaker means is what is invariant in all correct ways of interpreting him" (Davidson 1999: 81), then it is possible to conclude that there is no such thing as "the meaning". Obviously, not only meaning, but also reference is a semantic concept featuring in a theory of meaning. According to Davidson, however, there is no independent account of what reference is. On the contrary, the concept of reference is actually subordinate to the notion of truth. The hypothesis of inscrutability is conceived as an ontological thesis that, as such, holds strong anti-relativistic potential. Indeed, since there is nothing to render relative, there could be no ontological relativity. Dismissing relativism, in short, does not lead to a stronger notion of reference and ontology, but rather to their complete dissolution.
According to Davidson, intersubjectivity and interpretability are two pivotal concepts that we must take for granted. In fact, if interpretation were not to be possible, there would be no possibility of analyzing meanings ex parte interpretis, and thus the whole Davidsonian project would simply fail (of course it is not necessary that the subject could always be interpreted in every single aspect and situation).
It is worth stressing that the principle of charity leads us to assume that the speaker has a coherent set of beliefs which is largely true, given certain conditions and rational constraints discovered by the interpreter. However, this principle does not by itself guarantee that those very conditions also specify the content of the speaker's beliefs.6

3. Ontological relativism

Davidson is well known for having firmly criticized ontological relativism and the dualism which, according to him, characterize it, that is dualism between conceptual scheme and empirical content (Davidson 1974b). More precisely, on the one hand there is an organizational scheme (which has been identified with the mind, a language, a natural language, a conceptual system and so on), on the other hand there is a neutral content (sense data, impressions, ideas, sensorial stimulations, propositions, mental representations etc.) waiting to be organized and carved up by the conceptual scheme. The crucial point is that different conceptual schemes could organize the very same content in incommensurable ways. And that would imply ontological relativism.
Arguing against the very notion of a conceptual scheme, Davidson identifies a conceptual scheme with a set of intertranslatable languages; thus, given two different languages, if we are not able to translate one into the other, then we can recognize two incommensurable conceptual schemes and come up with an example of ontological relativism. Accepting this identification, the notion of incommensurable schemes can be analysed through the notion of non-translatable languages. However, is it really possible to find a language which cannot be translated into our own language? If our attempts to interpret a speaker totally fail (that is, if we are faced with a case of complete incommensurability), Davidson maintains that we have no reason to deem that the speaker actually has a language, nor to suppose that she is a rational creature with beliefs and other propositional attitudes. And, if we are not able to attribute beliefs and other propositional attitudes to the speaker, then we cannot even think that she has a conceptual scheme. Now, let us suppose that our attempts to interpret a speaker only partially fail: have we then found two different conceptual schemes? Even if radical interpretation should be only partially successful, that would still imply that the interpreter has attributed a coherent and largely true set of beliefs to the speaker (coherent and largely true from the interpreter's own point of view). Thus the speaker's beliefs are the same as

[6] For more details, see for instance (Lepore and Ludwig 2005: § 12).

those entertained by the interpreter. In this way the interpreter can determine the meaning of the speaker's words and create the right space for the emergence of diversities and errors. In order to claim that there are some differences between two conceptual schemes, it is then necessary to extend their common base as far as we can. Given Davidson's interpretative methodology, it is never certain nor clear whether a particular contrast is due to a divergence between conceptual schemes or more simply to a difference of opinions. To put it another way, there are no elements to establish unambiguously and beyond any doubt whether two conceptual schemes are different or are one and the same conceptual scheme. As a consequence, the very notion of a conceptual scheme loses most of its consistency and plausibility.

To sum up, we face two alternatives. On the one hand, the mere fact that interpretation succeeds implies that there is no untranslatability as such; it means that speaker and interpreter share a common ontology with concepts which refer to the same objects in the world. On the other hand, if interpretation fails and the speaker cannot be interpreted, then there is no reason to consider the speaker as a rational creature endowed with propositional thought and language. Given this dilemma, Davidson maintains that the very idea of a conceptual scheme is basically empty and senseless, and that we would be better off without it. Hence, both theories of ontological relativism and ontological absolutism are clearly untenable.

4. Language and normativity

One of the most controversial theses held by Davidson is that "there is no such thing as a language", followed by the immediate qualification: "not if a language is anything like many philosophers and linguists have supposed" (Davidson 1986: 107). More precisely, he argues against the idea that it is an essential part of a language that speaker and interpreter on occasions of communication bring to bear syntactic and semantic conventional rules which they have gained in advance and share with each other. In other words, handling a system of prior shared conventional rules is neither necessary nor sufficient for interpretation.

From a theoretical point of view, in fact, we can imagine two speakers who do not share the same language (and maybe are not even able to produce the same sounds), and nevertheless they understand each other.7 Moreover, there are countless situations where, in order to interpret a speaker, knowledge of prior shared conventional syntactic and semantic rules is by no means sufficient. The correct understanding of malapropisms, slips of the tongue, and metaphors can only be achieved through appeal to our knowledge of the world, of human interests and attitudes, of the particular speaker and context, and so on.8 The above considerations, however, do not rule out the existence and actual importance of prior shared conventional rules. They simply lead us to refute the pretence of considering such rules necessary and sufficient for interpretation, and to recognize that it is not the sharing of the same meaning which makes communication possible, but rather successful communication which guarantees the sharing of the same meaning.

Another question is whether on particular occasions of communication we should think that rules governing a language are both prior and conventional, and also shared by speaker and interpreter. Davidson's answer is no: what is prior and conventional is not shared, and what is

[7] As we shall see, Davidson believes that his theory of triangulation has no need to use concepts like rule or convention (Davidson 1994).

[8] Lepore and Ludwig (Lepore and Ludwig 2005), moreover, stress that the interpreter must consider the speaker fallible. Thus, the interpreter cannot presuppose that the speaker knew the conventional meaning of the words he is actually employing. If Lepore and Ludwig are right, then Davidson is justified in maintaining that on any occasion of communication it may always be necessary to enrich knowledge of conventional meaning with further general knowledge and knowledge of the current speaker.

shared is not prior and conventional. On the one hand, what speakers bring to a single occasion of communication (their prior theory) is not only different from subject to subject, but also changes with regard to one single subject: it can vary on a future occasion of exchange and according to the particular audience the speaker is addressing. On the other hand, what speaker and interpreter share (the passing theory) is not the precondition, but the result of communication.

In short, the idiolect is conceptually primary, whereas public natural languages are only secondary. Obviously, Davidson does not mean to deny the existence of natural languages (conceived as abstractions built up from various different idiolects), but merely to question their conceptual priority. In Davidson's overall project, there is something prior to all occasions of communication which must be shared by both interlocutors at the very same time for communication to be successful. This essentially social element is the speaker's intention to be interpreted as she actually intends and expects to be interpreted. This basic intention—forcing the speaker to make herself interpretable as much as possible—explains why those speakers belonging to the same community are apt to make their idiolects uniform, and, more importantly, it creates the right space for the emergence of error. Indeed, error actually consists, not of violating a particular prior shared conventional rule, but of the failure of the speaker's intention to be interpreted as she actually expected and intended to be interpreted.

5. Events and anomalous monism

According to Davidson, adopting events9 in our ontology proves to be very useful to solve some controversial aspects of natural language semantics. We looked at the project of using a Tarski-style theory of truth to serve as a theory of meaning. A prerequisite to do that is formalizing all the sentences of the natural language in first-order logic. But, without events, translating sentences containing certain types of adverbial modifiers into first-order logic sentences seems to be an unfeasible task. Accepting events entails admitting the existence of the entities to which some particular expressions refer, expressions like: "her buttering toast", "his reading a book", "their passing an examination", "your holding a belief" and so on. It is worth stressing that sentences do not refer to events: reference to events is the job of some singular terms can. This is a consequence of Davidson's extensional semantics, which brings us to accept that co-referential expressions should be intersubstitutable salva veritate. Thus, since the reference of a sentence is its truth value, all true sentences would refer to the same event. That is to say that all events are identical, which is clearly unacceptable. Moreover, he believes that events are unrepeatable, concrete particulars located in the space and time. However, it is quite difficult to find a suitable and general principle for their individuation. Pushed by Quine's effective criticisms, Davidson has definitely given up hope of finding a principle of individuation for events based on causality, and he has finally embraced the view which Quine also advanced: two events are the very same event if they occur in exactly the same space-time zone.10

In spite of these difficulties, Davidson's theory of events can also help with avoiding some problems encountered when trying to explain actions and causality. For instance, thinking of events as unrepeatable, concrete particulars allows him to distinguish actions (conceived as events) from their descriptions, and causal relations (which connect two single events) from causal explanations (which instead involve descriptions of events).

[9] Here, the word "event" is used to indicate both a change and a state. In particular, the expression "mental event" is meant to denote also a mental state such as a belief.

[10] See (Quine 1985) and (Davidson 1985).

Furthermore, events have a pivotal role in Davidson's argument for anomalous monism. The thesis of anomalous monism attempts to offer a solution to the mind-body problem which denies the existence of any kind of real entities besides physical ones. At the very same time, though, it aims to preserve the autonomy of the mental and to eschew reductionism, namely the possibility of connecting mental properties to physical properties through strict psychophysical laws. Therefore, such a theory is a form of monism from the ontological point of view, but (given the mental's anomalousness) it is a dualistic theory from the conceptual point of view.

Davidson is actually looking for a solution to the problem of reconciling the existence of causal connections between the mental and the physical with the hypothesis of the anomalousness of the mental, which denies the possibility of strict laws connecting the mental and the physical. In other words, the problem is how to accommodate three apparently conflicting principles: (1) the principle of causal interaction; (2) the principle of the nomological character of causality; and (3) the principle of the anomalousness of the mental. According to (1), some mental events interact causally with physical events (since on the one hand mental events can be caused by physical events, and on the other hand mental events can also cause physical events, such as actions). In (2), events related as cause and effect must be covered by strict laws. Then, also mental events should be subsumed by such laws. However, (3) states that there can be no strict laws covering the interaction between physical and mental events. More precisely, there can be neither strict psychophysical laws nor strict psychological laws. Notwithstanding the above tension, Davidson believes that all three principles can be held simultaneously if we simply recognize that every particular causally interacting mental event must be token-identical to some physical event. It is actually the very same event (hence monism), which can be described using both mental and physical vocabulary. Therefore, (1) and (2) can be held to mean: every mental event can be subsumed by a strict law as it is token-identical to some physical event, and it has a physical description in terms suitable for this subsumption. But even (3) can be held true at the same time, because the mental (the event described in mental terms) is nomologically irreducible to the physical. The relationship which better describes the dependency of the mental on the physical is that of supervenience: the mental supervenes on the physical if a difference at the mental level always implies a difference at the physical level. The notion of supervenience seems to be able to reconcile ontological monism and nomological antireductionism of the mental to the physical.

6. Triangular externalism

So far, we have left unexplained how the content of our mental states can actually be determined. On the issue, Davidson endorses a kind of externalism—that is "triangular externalism"—and maintains that the content of our mental states constitutively depends on external factors, both causal and social.

To introduce triangular externalism, we can examine the nature of beliefs. Davidson claims that (some exceptions apart) the content of a belief[11] is objective, namely it is true or false independently of the actual existence of that particular belief and of its subject.[12] One can actually have beliefs if one is aware of the objectivity of their content. To put it another way, one must understand that what one believes could be either true or false, or rather that one

---

[11] Here, the word "content" is used to refer to what is traditionally known as "proposition" or "thought". Davidson, on the contrary, prefers to identify the content of a belief with an utterance (see Davidson 1989).

[12] For instance, the content of the belief "The cat is on the mat" is objective because it is true or false independently of the existence of the subject and of such a particular belief. Even the content of a belief like "I am happy" is objective because it is true or false independently of the fact that I am actually entertaining such a belief and whether I am deceiving myself.

could have made a mistake.13 Moreover, even though for many beliefs (including abstract beliefs) this additional problem does not arise, it is necessary to explain how experience contributes to determining the empirical content of those beliefs concerning the external world.14 The theory of triangulation has actually been held to deliver both results.
In the most basic cases, what determines—partially at least—the content of a belief about the external world is its "typical" cause. However, there is the problem of narrowing down the cause15 which partially determines the content of a speaker's belief. Davidson maintains that a single subject is not able to isolate the "relevant" stimulus, i.e. the stimulus she is truly reacting to, the actual cause of the content of her particular belief. The individuation of the relevant stimulus basically depends on the presence of a second subject (namely the interpreter) who shares the same external world with the first, and perceives it in a similar way.
Let us consider, for example, the ringing of a bell: a single subject is not able to determine whether the relevant stimulus is at the level of his sensorial receptors, or of the sound waves, or of the bell. When a second "person" comes into the picture, the relevant stimulus can be narrowed down and identified with the external object, which is common to interpreter and interpretee and, as Davidson would say, is where the imaginary lines connecting the interpretee to the world and the interpreter to the world intersect.16 The triangle has finally been shaped: the first side links the external object to the interpretee; the second side links the external object to the interpreter; the third side links the interpreter and the interpretee, and it is represented by linguistic communication.
Through the theory of triangulation, Davidson wants not only to explain how beliefs about the external world acquire their empirical content, but also to account for our understanding of the idea that we could be wrong, that things could be different from how we believe them to be. In fact, without interpersonal communication we wouldn't be able to understand what it is to fall into error; and Davidson's triangle is just the basic paradigm of interpersonal communication. In the process of triangulation, the interpreter connects the speaker's responses to stimuli in their common external environment. Once several correlations have been established, given a certain response of the speaker, the interpreter will expect the corresponding external stimulus. But, when the interpreter's expectation fails, when the external stimulus and the typical response are no longer correlated as before, the space for the emergence of error finally comes out.17
Although triangulation is necessary, it is not sufficient in itself to determine the content of our mental states and to create the right space for the emergence of error. In fact, Davidson maintains that the line linking speaker and interpreter must be "thick" enough to amount to a language: when both speaker and interpreter linguistically communicate their own propositional contents to each other, they can finally make judgments about the external

---

[13] According to Davidson, understanding what it is to fall into error means having the concept of objectivity or objective truth. Understanding the idea that we could be wrong, in fact, requires that we are aware of the contrast between truth and falsehood, of the existence of things which are not dependent on us, which can be true or false independently of our thoughts, which are objective.
[14] Obviously those beliefs do not exhaust our doxastic system. However, Davidson maintains that they are particularly important because they anchor our propositional thought and language to the outside world.
[15] The great importance of the notion of causality is worth stressing, but also its problematic character. For instance, on the theory of triangulation, many critics stress the difficulty in narrowing down one single cause. See, among others, (Føllesdal 1999), (Lepore and Ludwig 2005), (Pagin 2001).
[16] The problem is that of guaranteeing that speaker and interpreter are actually responding to the very same stimuli and then are able to identify the same similarities. What determines the similarity of their responses must depend on the biological similarity of our sensory apparatuses (see, for instance, (Davidson 2001a)).
[17] Obviously, mere divergence between speaker and interpreter is not sufficient to establish who is actually making a mistake. However, it creates the right space where such a target could then be realized (through further linguistic exchanges or the intervention of other subjects).

world and become aware of the concept of objectivity (i.e. they understand that things could be different from what one believes they are).
From an analysis of the theory of triangulation, it is easy to appreciate how triangular externalism aims to reconcile two different kinds of external factors: the causal, environmental element and the social one. The contents of one's beliefs constitutively depend on one's causal history, namely on the history of all particular interactions had with objects and events in the outside world. However, causal interactions with the external world can actually contribute to the determination of one's mental contents only if they are embedded in an intersubjective space, and if one knows how to share such a space with other similar creatures. The "second person" (necessary in determining the relevant cause and explaining the emergence of the concept of objectivity) is thus the social factor that Davidson aims to integrate with the causal, environmental one.
The role the interpreter plays within the process for the individuation of one's mental contents sheds light on another critical element, i.e. holism. Contrary to other brands of externalism, triangular externalism does not allow external factors to totally determine the contents of one's beliefs. Davidson thinks that mental content actually depends on two distinct kinds of relation: the first between content and external world, the second among different contents. To put it another way, the external cause of our beliefs must be determined by taking into account the holistic constraints which bring together our system of beliefs. Therefore, within the theory of triangulation the causal element and the holistic one cannot be separated.

7. Truth
In Davidson's mind the concept of truth is fundamental. As such, it can neither be reduced to other simpler and more basic concepts, nor considered philosophically irrelevant. The notion of truth cannot be defined, but at the most illuminated by showing how it is systematically related to other concepts. Davidson's own theory is thus quite different from the main traditional theories of truth (the correspondence theory, the coherence theory, pragmatist theories, epistemic theories, the deflationary theory, the redundancy theory and so on).
Initially, Davidson develops a coherence theory of truth18, but then, in a second phase, he also recognizes its limits. The main problem is that coherence is not enough to guarantee truth. In fact, many critics have observed that it is possible to imagine many systems of internally coherent beliefs which, however, are different and incompatible with one another. If this is right, we have difficulty in deciding which the true system is just by looking at their coherence.
In order to set the limits of coherence theories and to fully understand the notion of truth, Davidson maintains that the best one can do is to analyze how the concept of truth is related to the concept of belief. On the one hand, he thinks that the notion of truth can only emerge in an interpretative space (where beliefs are obviously involved). Actually, through the theory of triangulation one becomes aware that what one believes could be either true or false, that how things are outside oneself is independent of what one believes. On the other hand, having beliefs and other propositional attitudes with a specific content depends on the fact that one possesses the concept of objective truth. In Davidson's perspective, in fact, if one does not grasp the concept of objective truth, one cannot even possess beliefs or any other propositional attitude. Given these relations, and then reflecting on the "nature" of belief, Davidson argues that a coherent set of beliefs must also be largely true.
What has been said about radical interpretation implies that a coherent set of beliefs must be largely true from the interpreter's point of view. In order to interpret a particular subject, in

[18] See (Davidson 1983).

fact, one must apply the principle of charity, attributing to the speaker a system of beliefs which is by and large coherent, and simultaneously interpreting the sentences the speaker holds true as actually true (exceptions apart). The mere fact that interpretation succeeds guarantees that—from the interpreter's perspective—the speaker's beliefs are largely true. If they were not, interpretation could not even begin. From the interpreter's point of view, therefore, a mostly coherent set of beliefs must be largely true. Only after a common base has been established can one also attribute errors to the speaker.
Since radical interpretation does not guarantee that a mostly coherent set of beliefs must also be largely true tout court, Davidson considers the theory of triangular externalism. According to this theory, what determines the content of one's beliefs, at least in the most basic cases, is their "typical" cause. At this basic level, when a subject is acquiring her first language there is no room for error, because the concept of objective truth emerges together with propositional thought. The very fact that we have beliefs and other propositional attitudes is therefore sufficient to assure us that there is an external world, that there are other creatures sufficiently similar to us, and that the world cannot be very different from how we believe it to be. Now Davidson has finally demonstrated what he wished: given the externalist nature of mental content, a mostly coherent set of beliefs must be largely true.

8. Self-Knowledge

Davidson recognizes three distinct but interconnected kinds of propositional knowledge: knowledge of the propositional contents of one's own mind ("I know that I desire to go on holiday"), knowledge of the external world ("I know that the cat is on the mat") and finally, knowledge of the propositional contents of other minds ("I know that Emily desires to go on holiday"). In his terminology they are called, respectively, subjective, objective and intersubjective knowledge. Subjective knowledge is "not based on inference or evidence" (Davidson 1990: 203), i.e. we do not need proofs, observations or any further particular knowledge in order to know what we believe.19 Objective knowledge, by contrast, causally depends on our sensory apparatus, namely on evidence and observations. Finally, intersubjective knowledge almost completely depends, not only on observation, but also on linguistic communication.
Davidson firmly believes that none of these kinds of propositional knowledge is fundamental, and thus he refuses any attempt at derivation. There is not one kind of knowledge the others can be derived from, nor a pair from which one can arrive at the third. Not even subjective knowledge is independent or has priority over the other two kinds of knowledge. Assuming the truth of triangular externalism, in fact, we must recognize that we could not know the propositional contents of our own mind if we did not communicate with other human beings in a public external world (and thus if we did not know the external world and the propositional contents of other minds). That is to say, objective and intersubjective knowledge cannot be derived from subjective knowledge.20
Nevertheless, Davidson maintains that there is an evident asymmetry between, on the one hand knowledge of one's own mental states, and on the other knowledge of the external world and knowledge of the contents of other minds. As we have said, what one knows about one's own mental contents depends neither on inferences nor on evidence. But, more importantly,

[19] It is worth mentioning that there is a tendency to characterize knowledge of the contents of one's own mind as a kind of "direct" knowledge to emphasize that it is not based either on inferences or on causal interactions with the external world. This terminology, however, can be misleading and create confusion between subjective knowledge and direct non propositional knowledge ("I know *To the light house*", "I know Emily", "I know my faults").
[20] A similar argument can be developed to demonstrate that each kind of knowledge needs the others. The reason is that, accepting triangular externalism, the very possibility of having propositional thoughts depends on linguistic interactions with other human beings in a common external world.

knowledge of the contents of one's own mind has a special presumption of truth, an authority which is not shared by the other two kinds of propositional knowledge: if a speaker sincerely affirms that she believes that p, there is a presumption that she knows she believes that p. Apart from exceptional cases, it would be absurd to question one's self-attributions. Obviously, this does not mean that one is omniscient or infallible regarding the knowledge of the content of one's own mind.

Davidson believes that first person authority can be explained without appealing to the notions of introspection, privileged access or a priority21, but is to be explained rather by reflecting on the very nature of interpretation. The subject knows what she believes, not because she has privileged access to her own beliefs or she knows them by introspection or a priori, but because it is an essential presumption of interpretation. In fact, if we could admit that the speaker can systematically mistake what she believes, then interpretation could not even start. That is a consequence of the interpretative procedure regarding radical interpretation: the interpreter knows that the speaker holds a particular sentence true, and that holding a sentence true depends both on what the speaker believes and on the meaning of the sentence. In order to start interpretation, the interpreter must presume that the speaker knows she is holding a particular sentence true and—according to what we have just said—that the speaker knows what she believes. First person authority is "saved" thanks to interpretation. In short, if we accept Davidson's interpretative procedure we must also admit first person authority, because if we rejected first person authority we would be forced to refute the interpretative procedure too.

It follows that first person authority does not derive from the special characteristics of subjective knowledge. Rather, it depends on interpretation and on the particular character of self-attributions.

9. Summaries of essays

In "Fly swatting: Davidsonian truth theories and context", Mark Sainsbury analyzes some difficulties raised by context-dependence which may worry a Davidsonian truth-theorist. Sainsbury concentrates on two kinds of difficulties. On the one hand, indexicality compromises Davidson's project raising doubts about the possibility of isolating specific semantic knowledge from any other knowledge. It actually forces a departure from the ideal of homophony, and thus from the hope of deriving the truth conditions of any particular utterance on the mere basis of axioms whose ambition is to characterize solely semantic knowledge. On the other hand, context-dependence raises some technical questions about the analysis of specific idioms like, for instance, "grunt". In the first case, Sainsbury shows how exactly semantic and non-semantic knowledge work together to determine the true conditions of the familiar indexical expressions. In the second, he argues that there is no "general method" for bringing all forms of context-dependence within Davidson's project, and that consequently a piecemeal examination of various particular cases is actually required.

In "Davidson and Frege on Predication", Eva Picardi confronts Davidson's and Frege's theses on predication. According to Davidson, in order to understand the unity of the proposition it is necessary to link the role of predicate expressions to the concept of truth, not to ontology, nor to the characteristics of the attitude of judgment. Following Tarski and Quine, Davidson points out that the function of predicates is to be true of objects, and in order to explain the unity of the proposition, no entity can correspond to a predicate. Even though this point is something he has in common with Frege, Davidson does not accept the Fregean approach to predication. Picardi shows that—notwithstanding Davidson's criticisms—Frege's thesis,

[21] Here, the notion of a priori knowledge does not imply any metaphysical necessity. A priori simply means "independently of empirical investigation".

according to which concepts are particular kinds of functions, is not only correct, but also the only possible solution to the problems of the regress of copulas. At the same time, moreover, Frege's thesis offers a unique explanation for both first and second level predication. Picardi maintains that appealing to functions as rules of correspondence between arguments and values is essential in explaining how quantifiers (generalized) work. Frege was one of the first to recognize that the so-called "paradox" of the concept "horse" that he actually invented, is spurious and not present in Ideography. Those who currently refer to the paradox try to demonstrate the questionable thesis of semantic ineffability in the framework of Frege's (and Wittgenstein's) theories. Affirming that certain fundamental notions we apply do not fit into an authentic definition, but are only an elucidation, is perfectly compatible with the attempt to give a systematic explanation of how the truth- conditions of the sentences of a language systematically depend on the semantic value of the expressions which compose them.

In "Events and Conservativity: Clues towards Language Evolution", Massimo Piattelli Palmarini shows how Davidson's original theses have deeply influenced and enriched, not only philosophy, but also other important disciplines, like for instance cognitive sciences. More specifically, Piattelli Palmarini analyzes the crucial progress made by the contemporary semantics of natural language thanks to the deployment of the concept of event, i.e. thanks to Davidson's classical idea that words and expressions of natural languages refer to and quantify events. Within this general, and mainly Davidsonian framework, Piattelli Palmarini then focuses on the critical puzzle of the conservativity of natural language determiners (among which quantifiers are a remarkably interesting sub-case), and on the specific consequences that conservativity could have for the reconstruction of language evolution.

In "Davidson and Dummett on the Social Character of Language", Jennifer Hornsby critically discusses what the social character of language could be. As argued by Dummett, and contrary to Davidson's main thesis, Hornsby believes that to fully appreciate the social character of language it is necessary to admit that when a language is used, a shared language is used, whose norms determine the meaning of the language's sentences. Notwithstanding the fact that Hornsby defends a Dummettian view of language, she doubts whether Dummett's own arguments against Davidson are effective. Moreover, she also claims that dispensing with the whole Davidsonian project cannot be a successful strategy to clarify and understand what constitutes the essentially social character of language. Hornsby's argument is that we need to take material from both Dummett and Davidson to determine what constitutes the essentially social character of language correctly. In particular, we need to use the Davidsonian idea of a communicative intention alongside the idea of a shared language.

Pascal Engel, in "Davidson on Epistemic Norms", explains why Davidson's overall philosophy can be characterized as a kind of normativism: the mind has essentially normative properties which can be identified with the norms of rationality in the process of interpretation. Firstly, Engel analyzes how Davidson investigates the question of epistemic normativity, and then he also outlines a more precise picture of Davidson's own normativism. This close examination highlights two major problems: first of all, Davidsonian norms do not have any normative force, that is they do not have any power of prescribing how we ought to act or believe; secondly, they lack specificity too, and thus they do not allow us to make all the particular distinctions we actually need. Engel concludes that Davidsonian norms are not norms at all, but rather idealized principles of interpretation. Therefore he suggests an alternative conception of epistemic norms, namely a stronger and more fine-grained conception.

In "The Place of Ontology in Davidson's Theory of Interpretation", Andrea Bottani explores some ontological consequences of Davidson's theory of radical interpretation. Bottani observes that in Davidson's approach there is a deep connection between matters of language

and matters of fact, between semantics and ontology. As a result, on the one hand the interpreter's ontology shapes radical interpretation, and on the other successful interpretation becomes a condition of ontological acceptability. After having clarified how semantics and ontology are actually interconnected within Davidson's theory of radical interpretation, Bottani shows that such a connection does not depend solely on formal constraints as the assumption of a Tarskian theory of truth, but is due also to the regulative principles of the theory of interpretation, basically to the principle of charity. On these premises, Bottani aims to demonstrate that the alleged role of ontology in radical interpretation conflicts with another central theoretical aspect of Davidson's theory, that is with the thesis of the inscrutability of reference.

Michele Marsonet, in "Language and conceptual schemes", examines Davidson's critique of the notion of a conceptual scheme. Following the analytical tradition and its linguistic approach, Davidson identifies a conceptual scheme with a set of intertranslatable languages, and then he tries to demonstrate that a language, for it to be considered as such, must be translatable into our own language and also associated with our own ontology. Given those premises, it is quite straightforward to conclude that there are no incommensurable conceptual schemes, and that the very idea of a conceptual scheme is completely meaningless. Marsonet firstly compares the Davidsonian view of a conceptual scheme with the notion of a "conceptual apparatus", and then he shows the necessity to modify and enrich the criteria through which conceptual schemes are traditionally identified. More precisely, Marsonet claims that the supremacy of language should be abandoned, in order to adopt a less rigid and more articulated notion of a conceptual scheme.

As the title of the article, "Davidson's Naturalism", already tells us, Mario De Caro analyzes the original kind of naturalism held by Davidson. This naturalism is chiefly expressed in the theory of anomalous monism, a conception of the mental which aims to reconcile ontological monism and antireductionism. More specifically, De Caro examines whether it is possible to accommodate the token identity thesis, the supervenience of the mental on the physical and semantic externalism within the theory of anomalous monism. First of all, he analyzes the various notions of supervenience which can be found in Davidson's work, to then show that there has been a major shift away from the hypothesis of individual supervenience (according to which mental states supervene solely on brain states) to that of global supervenience (which requires, at the subvenient level, physical states different from brain states). On the one hand, De Caro emphasizes that, given Davidson's triangular externalism, such a shift is necessary; on the other, he also points out that numerous difficulties stem from it.

In "Davidson, Self-Knowledge, and Skepticism", M. Cristina Amoretti aims to evaluate whether Davidson's triangular externalism is or is not affected by one of the most famous objections raised against externalist theories on mental content: the Reductio Argument. According to these critics, combining externalism with certain characteristics of self-knowledge leads to overly strong and highly counterintuitive anti-skeptical consequences, and thus to the refutation of externalism. First of all, Amoretti argues that triangular externalism is not affected by the objection raised by the Reductio Argument; secondly, she outlines some consequences for the anti-skeptical argument that Davidson hopes to derive from his own theory. Her conclusion is that triangular externalism is not an authentic answer to the skeptic about the external world.

Thanks to their heterogeneity, the nine essays in this volume offer a clear testimony of Donald Davidson's authority, and they undoubtedly show how much his work—even if it has raised many doubts and criticisms—has been, and still is, highly influential and significant in contemporary analytical philosophy for a wide range of subjects. Moreover, the various

articles not only critically and carefully analyze Davidson's theses and arguments (in particular those concerning language and knowledge), but they also illustrate how such theories and ideas, despite their unavoidable difficulties, are still alive and potentially fruitful. Davidson's work is indeed an important and provocative starting point for discussing the future progress of philosophy.*

References

Davidson D. (1967), "Truth and meaning", reprinted in (Davidson 1984b), 17-42.

Davidson D. (1974a), "Belief and the Basis of Meaning", reprinted in (Davidson 1984b), 141-154.

Davidson D. (1974b), "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", reprinted in (Davidson 1984b), 183-198.

Davidson D. (1975), "Thought and Talk", reprinted in (Davidson 1984b), 155-170.

Davidson D. (1983), "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge", reprinted in (Davidson 2001b), 137-153.

Davidson D. (1984a), "Introduction", in (Davidson 1984b), xv-xxiii.

Davidson D. (1984b), Essays on Truth and Interpretation, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Davidson D. (1985), "Reply to Quine on Events", in: E. Lepore and B. MacLaughlin (eds.), Actions and Events: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 172-176.

Davidson D. (1986), "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs", in: E. Lepore (ed.), Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 433-446.

Davidson D. (1989), "What is Present to the Mind", reprinted in (Davidson 2001b), 53-68.

Davidson D. (1990), "Epistemology Externalized", reprinted in (Davidson 2001b), 193-204.

Davidson D. (1994), "The Social Aspect of Language", in: B. McGuinness and G. Oliveri (eds.), The Philosophy of Michael Dummett, Kluwer, Dordtecht, 1-16.

Davidson D. (1999), "Replies", in: E.H. Hahn (ed.), The Philosophy of Donald Davidson, Open Court, Chicago, Ill.

Davidson (2001a), "What Thought Requires", in: The Foundations of Cognitive Sciences, J. Branquinho, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 121-132.

Davidson D. (2001b), Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Føllesdal D. (1999), "Triangulation", in: E.H. Hahn (ed.), The Philosophy of Donald Davidson, Open Court, Chicago, Ill., 719-728.

Lepore E. and K. Ludwig (2005), Donald Davidson. Meaning, Truth, Language, and Reality, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Pagin P. (2001), "Semantic Triangulation", in: P. Kotatko, P. Pagin and G. Segal, Interpreting Davidson, CSLI Publications, Stanford, Ca., 199-212.

Quine W.V.O. (1985), "Events and Reification", in: E. Lepore and B. MacLaughlin (eds.), Actions and Events: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 162-171.

* We wish to thank Marcello Frixione for reading a draft of this introduction and giving us precious advice, both on theoretical and stylistic matters.