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## Davidson's Answer to Kripke's Sceptic

Olivia Sultanescu and Claudine Verheggen

According to the sceptic Saul Kripke envisages in his celebrated book on Wittgenstein on rules and private language, there are no facts about an individual that determine what she means by any given expression. If there are no such facts, the question then is, what justifies the claim that she does use expressions meaningfully? Kripke's answer, in a nutshell, is that she by and large uses her expressions in conformity with the linguistic standards of the community she belongs to. While Kripke's sceptical problem has gripped philosophers for over three decades, few, if any, have been satisfied by his proposed solution, and many have struggled to come up with one of their own. The purpose of this paper is to show that a more satisfactory answer to Kripke's challenge can be developed on the basis of Donald Davidson's writings on triangulation, the idea of two individuals interacting simultaneously with each other and the world they share. It follows from the triangulation argument that the facts that can be regarded as determining meaning are irreducible. Yet, contra Kripke, they are not mysterious, for the argument does spell out what is needed for an individual's expressions to be meaningful.

### *Special Issue:*

Donald Davidson: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Edited by Claudine Verheggen

# Davidson's Answer to Kripke's Sceptic

Olivia Sultanescu and Claudine Verheggen

## 1. Introduction

This paper addresses anew the sceptical challenge posed by Saul Kripke<sup>1</sup> in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982), which defies speakers to justify the use of their expressions by producing some facts about them that determine or constitute their meaning what they do by their expressions. We believe that this challenge has not been addressed properly since it was first introduced thirty-five years ago, even though a way to address it has been for a long time in the offing. This is to be found in Donald Davidson's writings on triangulation, the very idea of which was introduced the same year as Kripke's book was published. Davidson himself did discuss Kripke's challenge at least twice in his writings (Davidson 1992; 2001b). Though he initially badly misunderstood it and, as a result, unfairly dismissed it, he later came better to appreciate it, and tried to meet it accordingly. However, most commentators' focus has been on Davidson's initial discussion and the solution he later sketched has been by and large ignored. Our main goal in this paper is to rectify this.

The paper will proceed as follows. We shall start by articulating Kripke's challenge as it strikes us. (This distancing, reminiscent of Kripke's own distancing from Wittgenstein, is intentional, as there is hardly any more agreement on how to interpret Kripke's views than there is on interpreting Wittgenstein's.) We shall, however, compare our interpretation, when needed, with

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<sup>1</sup>The challenge is really Wittgenstein's as it struck Kripke, but, for simplicity, we shall talk of Kripke's challenge, problem, and solution.

the major ones that have been offered over the years. Next we shall present Kripke's solution, in part so as to make the differences between his account and Davidson's as sharp as possible, as some commentators have been inclined to downplay them, but also in part because getting clear on Kripke's solution helps us to shed further light on how he understands the sceptical problem to begin with. We shall then proceed with Davidson's views, articulating first what may be regarded as the sceptical problem he takes himself to be solving. This is not in fact the very problem to be found in Kripke's writings, but it does bear important similarities to Kripke's problem. We shall end by presenting Davidson's solution to his problem and showing that it can be used as a solution to Kripke's problem as well. We shall argue that Davidson's solution is superior in that it provides a deeper account of meaning. This is due in part to the fact that it is not a sceptical solution, as Kripke's solution is; it is not, that is, a solution that concedes that the sceptic's initial demands on what she takes to be an acceptable theory of meaning cannot be met and that an alternative theory involving a sceptical solution has to be developed instead. But neither can Davidson's solution properly be called a straight solution. For Davidson's solution, even though it might appear to meet the sceptic's demands, also involves denouncing the conception of meaning on which the sceptic's demands rest as incoherent. As a result, the meaning-determining facts that can be provided on Davidson's view are to be conceived of in a way to which straight theorists may well wish to object.

## 2. Kripke's Sceptical Challenge

Suppose that I<sup>2</sup> have so far used the word 'blue' to describe the colour of some skies, seas, sweaters, sapphires, and the Smurfs.

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<sup>2</sup>Though the paper is co-written, we shall use the first-person singular pronoun when giving examples of meaning queries, as the sceptical inquiry is supposed to be conducted from the first-person singular point of view.

Suppose further that a sceptic asks me what the colour of her new green blouse is, and I say “green”, upon which the sceptic wonders aloud whether the proper answer should not have been “blue”. What makes me so sure, the sceptic probes me, that by ‘blue’ I do not mean bleen, and by ‘green’ I do not mean grue, in which case I should use ‘blue’, and not ‘green’, to describe green objects presently in my vicinity, just as in the past I used ‘blue’ to describe blue objects, and I should use ‘green’, and not ‘blue’, to describe blue objects presently in my vicinity, just as in the past I used ‘green’ to describe green objects?<sup>3</sup> Is there any fact about me that I could cite to justify my answering “green” rather than “blue”? Kripke spends a whole chapter of his book arguing, on the sceptic’s behalf, that no such fact could be found. But, the sceptic concludes, if no such fact can be found, then no fact establishes that I mean blue rather than bleen by ‘blue’, or that I mean green rather than grue by ‘green’; no fact makes my answer other than completely arbitrary. Indeed, if no such fact can be found, then there is no fact about what I mean by ‘blue’, ‘green’, or by any other expression. For the same sceptical question may be asked of any other kind of expression, leading to the same sceptical conclusion.<sup>4</sup>

Why is there no meaning-constituting fact to be found? This question has at least two parts: Just what are the individual facts that Kripke considers and finds lacking? (Does he cover all the possibilities?) And why does he find them lacking?

Kripke examines a wide variety of individual facts that could be thought to constitute my meaning what I do by a word, from

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<sup>3</sup>On the sceptic’s assumption, if one means grue by ‘green’, then, Kripke writes, “past objects were grue if and only if they were (then) green while present objects are grue if and only if they are (now) blue” (20). All page references to Kripke are to [Kripke \(1982\)](#).

<sup>4</sup>Kripke himself, following in Wittgenstein’s steps, concentrates on a mathematical example. For reasons that will become clear, we prefer to use examples of words referring to macroscopic items in the world around us, focusing on general terms.

my having internalized specific instructions as to how to use the word to my having grasped a sense, i.e., an abstract entity, which determines what I mean by the word, through my associating the word with a specific kind of experience, or a specific kind of mental image, or my being disposed to use the word in certain ways, or simply my irreducibly meaning what I do by the word. It is easy to see why specific instructions will not do, as they themselves will have meaning only if there are individual facts that determine this. It is also easy to see why specific experiences or mental images will not do, as it would be hard to make the case that such internal states are either necessary or sufficient to determine what I mean; indeed, it would be hard to counter the sceptic who keeps asking why the headache or the tickle I feel when I use ‘green’, or the sample of green I then have in my mind, indicates that it is green that I mean by ‘green’. As Wittgenstein might say, they might do so only if they had been so interpreted. But then the interpretations would, too, have to have their meaning constituted by individual facts, and eventually we would run out of words to interpret other words; we would reach the bedrock where words have to be directly associated with meaning-constituting facts. What could these be, and how could the associating proceed?

They could perhaps be the Fregean senses or Platonic objects Kripke mentions at the end of his sceptical inquiry, but how could my meaning green rather than grue by ‘green’ be the result of my having grasped the abstract property of green rather than that of grue? What kind of (per force non-linguistic and non-conceptual) event could my grasping be, such that it insures that it is one rather than the other property that I have grasped (see [Verheggen 2003](#))? Besides, Kripke argues, the idea in my mind that would constitute my grasping a particular sense is a finite object (54); how could it determine how I am to go on in a potentially infinite number of cases? This, we believe, is perhaps the main problem Kripke sees with the individual facts he considers: these facts are per force finite, but they somehow have

to apply to an infinity of cases.<sup>5</sup> So when I consult what is in my mind to figure out how to use a word, I have to go beyond, so to speak, what I find there, and there is always more than one way to do so. In other words, what is contained in my mind can always be interpreted in more than one way and so cannot, in effect, constitute what I mean by any given expression. This problem is also what prompts Kripke to reject the “primitive state” of meaning as a potential meaning-constituting fact. Accepting this, he writes, would be “desperate”, for the nature of this state is not only “completely mysterious”,<sup>6</sup> it is “chimerical”, in fact, “logically impossible”, for “such a state would have to be a finite object, contained in our finite minds. . . . Can we conceive of a finite state which *could* not be interpreted in a [deviant] way?” (51–52).<sup>7</sup>

The candidate meaning-constituting facts we have surveyed so far seem to have one problem in common: they will not do as determinants or constituents of meaning because they can

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<sup>5</sup>Just as it seems to be Wittgenstein’s main problem in the so-called rule-following considerations, as he keeps coming back to the question how the use of a word can determine its meaning and thus which of its applications count as correct or incorrect, since “the series [in Wittgenstein’s example, of the natural numbers] is infinite and the bit of it I can have developed finite” (1953, §147).

<sup>6</sup>For “[i]t is not supposed to be an introspectible state, yet we supposedly are aware of it with some fair degree of certainty whenever it occurs” (51).

<sup>7</sup>So far, Kripke makes it sound as if the interpretation problem is a result of the potential meaning-constituting facts being finite and my having somehow to consult them in order to use an expression. As we are about to see, however, the interpretation problem also affects facts that could not be consulted, such as dispositions. Indeed, it affects any kind of non-semantic fact, be it finite or infinite. As we shall see later, it is, in effect, the interpretation problem that makes a reductionist account of meaning unavailable.

Paul Boghossian has taken Kripke’s argument here to be question-begging: it “amounts to insisting that we find the idea of a contentful state problematic, without adducing any independent reason why we should” (Boghossian 1989, 542). But it seems to us that the idea of a contentful state, conceived of as a finite object, is problematic, for the very reasons Kripke gives. As we shall see later, however, this conception is not mandatory.

always be interpreted in such a way that any new application of a word may be deemed to be correct—thus, my not answering “blue” is correct if I take the candidate fact to determine my meaning blue by ‘blue’, and my answering “blue” is correct if I take the candidate fact to determine my meaning blue by ‘blue’. But nothing intrinsic to any of the candidate meaning-constituting facts considered so far<sup>8</sup> determines that one rather than the other answer is correct, which is to say that they all fail as determinants or constituents of meaning. There is, however, one kind of potential meaning-constituting fact we have not yet investigated: dispositions to use words in certain ways. This is the kind of candidate fact Kripke spends most time rejecting. So, what is wrong, according to him, with dispositions?

Prima facie, dispositions look rather promising, for they might be thought not to be subject to interpretation in the way that all the potential meaning-constituting facts considered so far are. After all, dispositions are not states of mind that we can somehow consult. “(Do I record and investigate the past physiology of my brain?)” (23). All the same, Kripke argues, “the totality of my dispositions is finite” (26) just as much as my past performance with a given word. Who is to say how I would apply ‘green’ in situations never envisaged before? Initially, however, it might be thought<sup>9</sup> that appealing to my disposition to use a word in certain ways, as what constitutes my meaning what I do by the word, is vastly superior to appealing to my past uses of the word, precisely because, whereas my past use of ‘green’ is compatible both with my now meaning green and my now meaning grue by ‘green’, my disposition to use ‘green’ in certain ways is not so compatible. For reasons we take to be related to Kripke’s (28), we do not think this is right, however. As Claudine Verheggen has argued (Verheggen 2015; Myers and Verheggen 2016, chap. 2), as long as we think of the disposition in non-semantic terms, we

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<sup>8</sup>Including of course primitive states of meaning, as long as these are conceived of as finite objects.

<sup>9</sup>Indeed, has been thought by Hannah Ginsborg (see e.g., 2011a, 155).

cannot appeal to it in order to explain what determines or constitutes the meaning of the word. For, to begin with, how would a non-semantic characterization of the disposition cover all the possible cases of my using 'green' correctly, where this includes, as suggested above, cases that differ from any encountered or conceived of so far? Moreover, a proper characterization of the disposition must not just cover the cases where I am disposed to apply 'green' correctly. For I may mean green by 'green' even when I apply it incorrectly, as, say, when I wish to misrepresent the Smurfs. In fact, it looks as if only the following characterization would capture what I mean by 'green': for me to mean green by 'green' is for me to be disposed to apply 'green' only in circumstances in which I mean green by 'green'. But this fully semantic characterization of the disposition sheds little, if any, light on what it is for me to mean green by 'green'. So it is probably not acceptable as an answer to the sceptic.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, though, it would at least take care of Kripke's main worry. A disposition is not only not a state that I can consult; it also is now conceived of in such a way that it can cover an infinite variety of cases. But Kripke has more to say against dispositions as potential meaning-constituting facts. And his objection may apply to all dispositions, even those that are semantically characterized.

According to Kripke, the challenge the sceptic has posed can be met only if two conditions are fulfilled: not only must an account of the fact that constitutes my meaning what I do by a word be provided; this fact must also "show how I am justified in giving the answer" (11; see also 23, 24, 37) that I do (in our example, "green" rather than "blue"). But now, Kripke continues, even if they could satisfy the first condition, dispositions would still fail to satisfy the second one, which he also often describes as that of the meaning-constituting fact having to "tell me what I ought to

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<sup>10</sup>Moreover, as we shall see in the next section, even if semantically characterized dispositions were to be accepted as meaning-constituting facts, there would be the question whether it makes sense to think that a socially isolated individual's dispositions could do the job.

do in each new instance" (24; see also 21, 43), or "guiding" me in the applications of the word (17).<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, he writes, "almost all objections to the dispositional account boil down to this one" (24). And at the end of his scrutiny of the dispositional account, he rephrases the objection in these terms: "The dispositionalist gives a *descriptive* account" of the relation between meaning and action, i.e., a word's application, but this relation is "*normative*, not *descriptive*" (37). This claim, so phrased, has caused more ink to be spilled than the rest of Kripke's entire book, and there is no consensus as to how Kripke understood it or as to how it should be understood. Here is how we (and, we think, Kripke as well) understand it.

It helps to begin with to go back to the first condition that Kripke thinks an answer to the sceptic has to satisfy and to make it sharper than we have so far. According to this condition, an answer to the sceptic must provide her with a fact that constitutes my meaning what I do by a word. We saw that all the facts Kripke considers (including the primitive state of meaning, at least as he conceives of it) fail to do so because they are such that they could lead to various applications, all of which could be deemed to be correct (or, for that matter, incorrect), leaving no room for the distinction between correctness and incorrectness. Or, to put it as Kripke does, all the candidate facts are such that it would be for me to say whether whatever application follows from them is correct or incorrect. But "[n]othing is more contrary to our ordinary view . . . than is the supposition that [in Wittgenstein's words] 'whatever is going to seem right is right'" (24). It is this inability to underwrite the distinction between correct and incorrect applications that makes perspicuous the claim that the individual facts Kripke considers cannot be meaning-constituting. For this distinction, uncontroversially, holds for any meaningful expression.

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<sup>11</sup>Ginsborg (2011a) can be understood as making the claim that dispositions satisfy the first but not the second condition, though she understands the second differently from how she takes Kripke to understand it.

Kripke's declaration that the relation of meaning to action is normative has sometimes been interpreted as just that, an expression of the platitude that all meaningful expressions must be governed by conditions of correct application. Thus Paul Boghossian writes:

The normativity of meaning turns out to be. . . simply a new name for the familiar fact that, regardless of whether one thinks of meaning in truth-theoretic or assertion-theoretic terms, meaningful expressions possess conditions of *correct use*. . . Kripke's insight was to realize that this observation may be converted into a condition of adequacy on theories of the determination of meaning: any proposed candidate for the property in virtue of which an expression has meaning, must be such as to ground the 'normativity' of meaning—it ought to be possible to read off from any alleged meaning constituting property of a word, what is the correct use of that word. (Boghossian 1989, 513; see also, e.g., Blackburn 1984, 281–82; Wright 1986, 256)

We believe that for the first condition imposed by the sceptic to be fulfilled is for there to be a fact that underwrites the distinction between correct and incorrect applications. And, with Kripke, we believe that none of the potential meaning-constituting facts he considers succeeds in doing that. But we also believe that the second condition adds something to the first. We are not alone in believing this—the question is what exactly is being added, whether meaning is indeed normative in any way other than the trivial one expressed by Boghossian.

Kripke himself may be thought to have contributed to the ambiguity of the claim that meaning is normative, for, to begin with, he often fleshes out the idea that the meaning-constituting fact must show how I am justified in using an expression in the way I do by saying, as quoted above, that the fact in question must “tell” me how to use the expression; it must “guide” my applications of the expression. But this, many commentators have argued, is fatal to the claim that meaning is normative. If the claim that meaning is normative is to be understood in the guid-

ing sense, then it is unacceptable, for in order to be guiding the meaning-constituting facts would themselves have to be understood in a certain way and so be meaningful, and the question is what would in turn determine their meaning.<sup>12</sup> Now this may be thought to leave room for the claim that meaning is normative in a justificatory rather than guiding sense. But it is not obvious what the distinction between justification and guidance may be here (see Bridges 2014). Certainly the idea of justification can be subject to the very objection just made to that of guidance. The justificatory item, too, in order to be justifying, would have to be understood and so have meaning, for which the same question would arise. However, it seems to us that this is not the only way in which Kripke's appeal to guidance or justification can be understood, and that he does provide an alternative explanation. When I answer a new query, he writes, “I do not simply make an unjustified leap in the dark” (10). My answer is not “a mere jack-in-the-box unjustified and arbitrary response” (23). Admittedly, in this context, Kripke also talks of “following directions” and being justified “in terms of instructions I gave myself”, which reinforces the guidance objection (and which is a more natural way of talking when the example is a mathematical term such as ‘plus’ rather than a colour term such as ‘green’). But we think that the crucial idea that is being captured by the notions of justi-

<sup>12</sup>As Ginsborg puts it, “Any item, in the mind or elsewhere, which guided or instructed or directed its possessor in the use of an expression would in turn have to be an item with a meaning which its possessor would have to grasp, so the question of meaning or understanding would arise again for that item” (Ginsborg 2011a, 150). See also Stroud (1990, 123). Stroud notes that “[t]his [there being an item telling me what I mean by an expression] seems to be the demand that Kripke's ‘skeptical’ most often insists on. It appears to be behind the second of the two conditions he says any successful answer to the ‘skeptical’ challenge must meet” (1990, 123). See Miller (2017b) for an argument to the effect that Stroud's and Ginsborg's attacks on the idea that there must be an item that guides meaningful use are based on an assumption that can be rejected, namely, that guidance requires interpretation. If being guided by an item does not require interpreting that item, there is no regress, according to Miller. See Sultanescu (2019) for further discussion.

fication and guidance is that of meaningful use being intentional (in the sense of being the product of an intention) or intelligent, rather than merely automatic, parrotic or robotic. This, we contend, is the main idea behind Kripke's second condition.<sup>13</sup> We should also distinguish this idea from another way of construing the second condition that has often been attributed to Kripke.

This is again an ambiguity that may be due to Kripke himself, in particular, to his insistence that, given what I mean by an expression, it is not the case that I *will* apply it to the items to which it does apply, but that I *should* (37). As Boghossian has cashed this out, "to be told that 'horse' means horse implies that a speaker ought to be motivated to apply the expression only to horses" (Boghossian 1989, 533).<sup>14</sup> Thus Kripke's second condition has been interpreted as saying that meaning something by an expression entails categorical obligations as to how to use it.<sup>15</sup> And this has in turn generated a large number of ferocious

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<sup>13</sup>It might be thought that semantically characterized dispositions could meet this condition, so understood. But, for one thing, as noted above, to say that to mean something by an expression is to be disposed to use it in circumstances in which one means what one does by it does not exactly shed much light on what it is to mean what one does by an expression. This would be to give the kind of circular account Kripke dismisses in his discussion of dispositionalism (28, 30). At this stage at least, Kripke is looking, on behalf of the sceptic, for necessary and sufficient conditions for expressions having the meaning they have. For another thing, as already hinted, and as we shall see in the next section, even if semantically characterized dispositions were to be accepted as meaning-constituting facts, there would be the question whether it makes sense to think of a socially isolated individual's dispositions underwriting the distinction between correct and incorrect applications of expressions.

<sup>14</sup>George Wilson puts it this way: "For each of an unbounded range of (actual and possible) cases, if there is something that [a speaker] means by [a term] during *t*, then, were the question to arise, [the speaker] *must* [or *should*] apply [the term], as she meant it at *t*, to the case in question" (Wilson 1994, 381).

<sup>15</sup>Boghossian himself has denied that he meant to be understood in this way, though he has admitted that some of his early writings on the topic were misleading (Boghossian 2005, 207–08).

attacks (Hattiangadi 2007; Glüer and Wikforss 2009). We do not think, however, that this is the proper interpretation of Kripke's claim, not only because we think that, so understood, the claim is indefensible (pace Whiting 2013), but also because we think that there is a more plausible way to understand it, according to which meaning something by an expression entails hypothetical obligations as to how to use it, albeit obligations which are in important respects different from other trivial hypothetical obligations. Indeed, my meaning what I do by an expression obliges me to use it correctly if I want to record a fact about the world, as in my saying "the sky is blue", or incorrectly if I want to be puzzling, as in my saying "the sky is green". If I were to use 'blue' or 'green' differently under these conditions, I would mean something different by 'blue' or 'green'.<sup>16</sup> We take the claim that meaning is normative in this hypothetical sense to be a corollary of the first condition, according to which meaningful expressions have conditions of correct application, and thus to be different from the second condition Kripke's sceptic imposes on an adequate account of meaning, according to which the meaningful use of words must be revealed as intentional or somehow justified, and not just as robotic or arbitrary.

In short, then, according to Kripke's sceptic, an adequate account of what it is to mean something by an expression must not only provide the fact in virtue of which we mean what we do by it, a fact which underwrites the distinction between correct and incorrect applications. It must also show how it can be a fact to which we have a special kind of relationship, a fact which displays our understanding of the expression and shows how this understanding can figure in an intentional explanation of our use of the expression. These are the ways in which we understand how the sceptic's challenge is to be met. As we have

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<sup>16</sup>As McDowell puts it, quoting Wright, we are "committed to certain patterns of linguistic usage by the meanings we attach to expressions" (McDowell 1984, 325). See Verheggen (2011) and Myers and Verheggen (2016, chap. 2) for further discussion.

seen, however, Kripke concludes that the challenge cannot be met. And we concur with this conclusion in so far as we agree with Kripke that none of the facts he considers could constitute what one means by one's expressions. As we shall see later, there is however a kind of fact that Kripke fails to consider, or to put it more accurately, a kind of fact that he fails to consider properly. But first we need to turn to Kripke's own solution to the sceptical problem, and see how, according to him, we can distinguish between correct and incorrect applications of expressions, in the absence of facts determining their meaning, and how their use can be regarded as intentional, rather than merely robotic, in the absence of facts guiding or justifying their use. For we do not believe that Kripke altogether relinquishes these conditions on an adequate account of meaning, where these conditions are understood in a less stringent way than the sceptic's, to whom it has been conceded that there are no meaning-constituting facts of the sort she was seeking. That is, we take it that the solution, sceptical as it might be, would not count as a solution if it could not account for the distinction between correct and incorrect applications and for the intentional nature of our use of expressions.

### 3. Kripke's Sceptical Solution

According to the sceptic, since there are no facts that establish what I mean by my expressions, there is nothing that I mean by them. The sceptic's conclusion is obviously, as Kripke puts it, "insane and intolerable" (60). It must be rejected, but it must also be shown how language is after all possible (62). However, according to Kripke, the sceptical problem cannot be given a straight solution. A straight solution would prove the thesis the sceptic doubted (66); thus it would supply facts or conditions, "in either the 'internal' or the 'external' world", which constitute what we mean by our expressions (69, 87). A straight solution would, in effect, provide truth-conditions for our declarative sentences, that is, "conditions-in-the-world" that would make sentences

true if they obtained. But this picture of correspondence-to-facts is precisely what the sceptic rejects. In particular, no facts, no truth-conditions, correspond to ascriptions of meaning to someone's expressions (77). Rather, Kripke writes, we must replace

... the question, "What must be the case for this sentence to be true?" by two others: first, "Under what conditions may this form of words be appropriately [or justifiably] asserted (or denied)?" [more generally, under what conditions is a move in the language game allowed? (74)]; second, given an answer to the first question, "What is the role, and utility, in our lives of our practice of asserting (or denying) the form of words under these conditions?"

(Kripke 1982, 73)

Importantly, these assertibility or justification conditions "involve reference to a community" (79). "We say of someone else that he follows a certain rule [means what he does by an expression] when his responses [applications] agree with our own [in enough cases] and deny it when they do not" (92). The utility of this practice is evident, as it allows the individual to be included in transactions with others. To mean what one does by an expression is then to have the "general inclination" that one has "got it", the "feeling of confidence" that one can go on using the expression correctly, and it is to have the "particular inclination" to apply it in certain ways on particular occasions. These inclinations, which "are to be regarded as primitive", entitle one, subject to correction by others, to say that this is what one means by the expression and to judge particular applications to be correct (90–91). The caveat "subject to correction by others" is of utmost importance, as we do not want to say that whatever applications an individual deems to be correct are in fact correct. These inclinations have to be legitimized, so to speak, by others; that is, others have to share these inclinations and thus agree, by and large, with the individual's uses of her expressions. Ultimately it is this "brute" general agreement to apply expressions in certain ways in given circumstances that "licenses us to say" that we mean what we do by our expressions (97).



Does the sceptical solution meet the two conditions on an adequate account of meaning? Does it tell us what makes it possible to distinguish between correct and incorrect uses of expressions and what makes it possible for uses of expressions to be intelligent rather than merely robotic?

According to Kripke's sceptical solution, what "licenses" us to say that someone means what she does by an expression is that she is inclined to use it in the same way as the members of her community. What determines whether her uses are correct or incorrect are her community's inclinations to use the expression in certain ways. But what makes it the case that some rather than other ways of distinguishing between correct and incorrect uses are to be derived from the community's inclinations? What "licenses" our judgments as to what a community means by its expressions? Kripke remains silent on these questions, presumably for what he takes to be a good reason. Indeed, these inclinations are not to be thought of in non-semantic terms—this would be a community-wide version of dispositionalism and "open to at least some of the same criticisms as the original form" (111). Rather, they are inclinations to take some uses rather than others to be correct, and thus inclinations to use words to mean certain things by them.<sup>17</sup> Thus we take Kripke's sceptical solution to be non-reductionist.<sup>18</sup> We think that this reading is further

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<sup>17</sup>As we suggested earlier (in note 13), for Kripke, it makes no sense, however, to talk of an isolated individual's inclination to mean something by an expression because the individual's inclination could not underwrite the distinction between correct and incorrect applications.

<sup>18</sup>We are not alone in interpreting the sceptical solution as non-reductionist. See, e.g., Davies (1998). Martin Kusch, too, claims that the solution "is not a form of reductivism" (2006, 199). But it is not clear to us that the non-reductionism he defends is distinctively semantic. He characterises assertibility conditions as "rough and ready conditions for when it is appropriate, justifiable, permitted, or obligatory to make assertions of a certain type" (2006, 27), and he thinks that, "the meaning-sceptical alternative . . . is to see linguistic inclinations as 'primitive' . . . [W]e are entitled to say that Jones has grasped the concept of addition because he has passed our tests, among which, say, is that he answers '125' to '68 + 57 = ?'. We cannot further explain Jones's inclination

warranted by remarks like these:

Jones now means addition by '+' if he presently intends to use the '+' sign in one way . . . But nothing is said to illuminate the question as to the nature of such an intention. (Kripke 1982, 77)

It is important to realize that we are not looking for necessary and sufficient conditions (truth conditions) for following a rule, or an analysis of what such rule-following 'consists in'. Indeed such conditions would constitute a 'straight' solution to the sceptical problem, and have been rejected. (Kripke 1982, 87)

Kripke's solution has been criticized on several fronts, not least of which because it appears to reintroduce at the community level the problem facing the isolated individual who has to distinguish between what is the case and what seems to be the case (see, e.g., Blackburn 1984). It is indeed hard to make sense, on Kripke's view, of a community as a whole being mistaken about the application of a word.<sup>19</sup> However, we think that Kripke's solution suffers from an even more fundamental problem, which is revealed by his refusal to dig below, so to speak, people's inclinations to take certain uses of their words to be correct or not. This is that the solution obviously sheds little light, if any, on the question what makes it possible for there to be a distinction between correct and incorrect applications of expressions. We are able to say, of a particular individual, whether the applications of her expressions are correct, or incorrect, in so far as we are able to say that they conform to the ways her community would

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regarding plus-queries by drawing on concepts such as meaning, intention, grasping, or interpretation. To give up meaning determinism [i.e., the conception of meaning that the paradox is based on] is to recognize that none of these concepts can be used to explain linguistic behaviour" (2006, 38). However, on our view, these semantic concepts must be used in order properly to describe linguistic behaviour. The sceptical solution is a form of distinctively semantic non-reductionism.

<sup>19</sup>As we shall see, interestingly, Davidson escapes this kind of criticism, which might be thought to apply to his view. Another nagging problem for Kripke's view is that of determining which community an individual belongs to.

by and large use them. But we have not been told what makes it possible for the community itself to draw the distinction in the ways it does. Therefore, as we see it, Kripke's non-reductionism is ultimately a capitulation to quietism. Ascribing meaning to our expressions depends on the "brute fact that we generally agree" in our responses (96, 109)—once we have invoked people's inclinations to use words in certain ways, and to take certain uses rather than others to be correct, we have reached bedrock in the order of explanation.<sup>20</sup> Thus, even though Kripke succeeds in accounting for the distinction between the correct and incorrect applications of particular individuals' expressions, the first condition on an adequate account of meaning, that we be told what makes it possible to distinguish between correct and incorrect applications of expressions, is in effect not fulfilled. That it is not is essentially Davidson's criticism of Kripke who, Davidson writes, "does not even attempt to give an account of the contents of particular thoughts; at best, he explains when two thoughts are the same (or when two utterances have the same meaning)" (Davidson 2001b, 2; see also Stroud 1996, 189).

Before we look at Davidson's more constructive way to deal with the sceptical problem, let us see whether Kripke's sceptical solution meets the second condition. How does it distinguish between intelligent and robotic linguistic behaviour? How can uses of expressions not be mere unjustified and arbitrary leaps in the dark?

Kripke has two apparently inconsistent things to say about this. On the one hand, on the sceptical solution, meaning-ascriptions are justified in the way described above, that is, in so far as they play a useful role in our lives. This kind of justification is of course very different from the kind the sceptic has shown to be "untenable" (66), the kind of justification that would involve

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<sup>20</sup>Given the ambiguity of the notion of fact here, we take this to be compatible with Kripke's being either a factualist or a non-factualist about meaning. We prefer not to take a stand on this question here. For further discussion, see Sultanescu (2019).

appealing to facts about individual speakers or about a community. Still, the sceptical solution can be seen to help to distinguish between arbitrary and justified uses of words. I use my words in the way I do, draw the line between correct and incorrect uses of them in the way I do, and thus ascribe them the meanings I do, in light of the ways in which my community fellows do these things, indeed, as Kripke suggests, in light of how I have been taught to do these things (89–91).<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Kripke also says that "[t]he entire point of the sceptical argument is that ultimately we reach a level where we act without any reason in terms of which we can justify our action. We act unhesitatingly but *blindly*" (87). But we think that this claim can be reconciled with the previous one. For we take it that 'acting blindly' is not to be equated here with 'performing an arbitrary leap in the dark'. To act blindly is to act without consulting a state of mind that licenses the action; but it is still to act justifiably in so far as it is to act on an inclination that has proven useful and has been licensed by the community. Thus it looks as if Kripke's solution can accommodate the second condition on an adequate account of meaning. Interestingly, however, Davidson thinks not.

Davidson writes: "How can the simple fact that two or more people have gone on in the same way introduce the distinction between following a rule and just going on in one way or another? . . . Simply adding further creatures with identical dispositions cannot turn dispositions into rule-following . . . What is missing . . . is the idea of understanding" (Davidson 2001b, 3). We think, however, that the sceptical solution can be construed in such a way that the idea of understanding is present; what is missing, rather, is an account of what makes understanding possible. What Davidson should be objecting to is, again, Kripke's quietism. But first let us ask why Davidson thinks understand-

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<sup>21</sup>As Kusch writes: "teachers—not meaning-constituting mental states—provide the pupils with guidance; it is the teacher's advice and training—not meaning-constituting mental states—that pupils can draw on to justify the ways they apply their new terms" (Kusch 2006, 33).

ing is absent from Kripke's picture. What does linguistic understanding involve, according to Davidson?

Of course it involves more than sheer dispositions to behave in certain ways, no matter how widely shared these dispositions may be. According to Davidson, "[m]astery of the word or concept [table] requires in addition" that one "understand that error is possible, that 'That's a table' expresses a judgment that has a truth value independent of its merely being uttered" (Davidson 2001b, 9). In other words, linguistic understanding requires that one be aware of the distinction between correct and incorrect applications of one's expressions, that is, that one be aware of there being such a distinction, not that one be able to tell whether any particular application of one's expressions is correct or not. Some may be reluctant immediately to accept this requirement, but Davidson has reasons to make it, which we shall examine later. For now, the question is, can Kripke's sceptical solution accommodate it? To some extent, contra Davidson, we think that it can. Admittedly, this requires us to emphasize, as we have above and as Kripke often does, the idea that an individual's inclinations are the product of training by and "interacting with a wider community" (89).<sup>22</sup> This makes room for the idea that, as an individual acquires inclinations to use her expressions in certain ways, she also recognizes the possibility of error—this is after all part of the training. Of course, Davidson may insist that, on Kripke's view, the training may not "give me the idea that there is anything more wrong with my action than that

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<sup>22</sup>Kripke does leave room for a physically isolated individual to follow rules, as long as "he passes the tests for rule following applied to any member of the community [that is considering him]" (110). On this scenario, if indeed the individual has always been physically isolated, it is hard to see how his uses could, from his point of view, be distinguished from mere stabs in the dark. His inclinations may be licensable by a community, but this makes for a totally externalist kind of justification, which is not what Kripke seems to have in mind when he says that an individual's meaningful uses cannot be arbitrary. This concession of Kripke's certainly is hard to reconcile with much else he has to say, hence our choice to downplay it here.

others don't like it" (Davidson 2001b, 3). This may well be the case, but on the (rather reasonable) assumption that the teachers themselves have the relevant kind of understanding, there is no reason to suppose that they could not inculcate it to their pupils. The question, which Kripke does not answer, but Davidson will, is: what makes this understanding possible to begin with?

In the end, therefore, Kripke's sceptical solution fails to give an adequate account of how the two conditions on meaningfulness can be met. It tells us that what licenses us to say that an individual means what she does by her expressions is that she by and large uses them in the same way as the members of her community. But it does not tell us what licenses us to say that the community means what it does by those expressions to begin with. And, even though the sceptical solution suggests how an individual might achieve understanding of her expressions, by receiving the right kind of training from members of her community, it does not tell us how a community might itself have reached this understanding. It will turn out that this understanding is actually mandatory for there to be meaningful use of expressions at all. In other words, the first condition for meaningfulness, that there be a distinction between correct and incorrect applications of expressions, can be fulfilled only by fulfilling the second, that speakers have the right kind of understanding of what they are doing. We now turn to Davidson to fill out the details of this view and to see how they contribute to a fuller answer to the sceptic.

#### 4. Davidson's Sceptical Problem

Davidson first discusses Kripke's sceptical problem in "The Second Person", where he says that it has a "relatively simple answer" (Davidson 1992, 111), according to which the mere fact that one seems to understand another counts in favour of the meaning attribution that made the appearance of understanding possible. He writes: "[T]he longer we interpret a speaker with apparent

success as speaking a particular language, the greater our legitimate confidence that the speaker is speaking that language" (Davidson 1992, 111). But this remark suggests that he mistakenly construes Kripke's problem as being about what justifies the attribution of certain meanings rather than others, instead of being about what constitutes these meanings.<sup>23</sup> It might therefore be thought that a treatment of Kripke's problem cannot be found in Davidson's writings. But Davidson himself appears to have realized eventually that his remark misrepresents Kripke's problem. Nearly a decade later, he revisits it and offers what we take to be an accurate, albeit sketchy, diagnosis of Kripke's solution as, roughly, "going with the crowd" (Davidson 2001b, 3). More importantly, Davidson, quite independently of his terse reflections on Kripke's solution, does offer, in the article mentioned earlier and elsewhere, an account of the constitution of meaning—an account of "what it is for words to mean what they do" (Davidson 1984, xiii)—such that it is plausible to think that a treatment of Kripke's problem can be extracted from Davidson's work after all. But Davidson's account of the constitution of meaning is articulated as a way of addressing what seems to be a different problem, though, as we shall see, the difference between them will turn out to be not as significant as it seems. Its starting point is the thesis of semantic externalism, that is, the idea that there is a constitutive connection between the meanings of our utterances (as well as the contents of our thoughts, though we shall focus on utterances) and their external causes, such that "in the simplest cases words and thoughts refer to what causes

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<sup>23</sup>For further discussion of this misconstrual, see Kusch (2006), and Myers and Verheggen (2016, chap. 3). It might be thought that these remarks are not an indication of any such misconstrual, but rather are a consequence of Davidson's alleged "interpretivist" or "interpretationist" stance, according to which what a speaker means by her expressions is determined by how a hearer or interpreter understands these expressions. We deny that Davidson ever was an interpretivist in this sense. See Verheggen (2017a) for further discussion. We thank an anonymous referee for prompting this comment.

them" (Davidson 1991a, 196). This is not to say, however, that all of the causal goings-on involved in the production of utterances play a constitutive role with respect to their meaning. Davidson's contention is merely that, in the simplest cases, the cases that anchor one's language in the world through the meaningfulness of its basic expressions, the type of external item to which a type of utterance is typically related is constitutive of what is meant by it (see, e.g., Davidson 1991a, 201). The obvious question is how to single out the *typical* causes of basic utterances, utterances through which one predicates features or properties of objects and events located in one's environment.

Answering this question turns out to be more difficult than it might initially seem. We wish to arrive at a point at which we are able to say, for example, that the typical cause of certain utterances that are based on perception are green things, and this is what makes them utterances about green things, rather than utterances about, say, blue things. But, according to Davidson, there are at least two conditions that must be met, or at least two problems that must be solved, in order for the typical cause to be properly singled out. For, as he puts it . . .

. . . the cause is doubly indeterminate: with respect to width, and with respect to distance. The first ambiguity concerns how much of the total cause of a belief [or of an utterance] is relevant to content . . . The second problem has to do with the ambiguity of the relevant stimulus, whether it is proximal (at the skin, say) or distal. (Davidson 1999, 129–30)

To see what Davidson has in mind, let us imagine that a creature produces an utterance of ' $\phi$ ' whenever she is causally affected by a green item, such that we can record this regularity, and take it to legitimize the claim that ' $\phi$ ' involves predicating *greenness* of the object in front of the creature; we would then regard utterances of ' $\phi$ ' as the same, in so far as we would take them to be about green items. However, the list of candidates for what might count as a typical cause of uttering ' $\phi$ ' is quite long. On the one hand, it includes not only green items, but

also intermediary elements of the causal paths between them and the creature's perceptual apparatus, as well as, more dramatically, intermediary elements of the causal paths between them and the Big Bang. Let us call this the distance problem. On the other hand, it also includes other features that typically characterise the green items encountered by the creature, such as, say, having a colour, or having a texture, or being delicious, or simply being an object. Let us call this the aspect problem. Thus, even if we establish that the typical causes of an utterance seem to be items of a certain kind, there are many, potentially endless, other regularities that we could record, because there are indefinitely many aspects pertaining to those items to which a creature could be viewed as causally responding. Given our commitment to arriving at the meaning of ' $\phi$ ' by investigating the causal connections in which the utterance of ' $\phi$ ' is involved, it seems that what we should say is that ' $\phi$ ' is about objects that are green or coloured or textured or delicious, or, perhaps, that it is simply about objects as such.<sup>24</sup> But this would be tantamount to admitting that causal regularities cannot by themselves supply a principle of selection for the relevant, meaning-constituting cause. Therefore, it cannot be the case that a use of an expression is meaningful simply in virtue of being involved in causal relations. We might, of course, be tempted to say that the creature utters ' $\phi$ ' whenever she appears to observe (or perceive, or represent, or notice, and so forth) a green item. This might go a long way toward correctly specifying the expression's meaning, but the trouble is that we would no longer be relying exclusively on causal resources; indeed, we would be resorting to semantic ones.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>What is more, we might notice that the creature produces an utterance of ' $\phi$ ' in other contexts, in which there are no green items present, such as those in which the lighting is poor, or those in which she is tired or sleeping, and so on, which poses yet another problem.

<sup>25</sup>Davidson is, undeniably, not the first one to recognize this problem, which plagues causal theories of content (Fodor 1984; Godfrey-Smith 1989). In the

It seems to follow from the above that the creature must play some role in the disambiguation of the cause. And it might be thought that the specific target of her answers would become obvious if we could scrutinize her perspective. However, according to Davidson, her perspective, too, fails to single out a cause. For neither the question of how far away from the creature the relevant cause is located nor the question of the relevant aspect, which persists even after we have a specification of the location of the cause, can be answered from the point of view of a socially isolated creature:

If we consider a single creature by itself, its responses, no matter how complex, cannot show that it is reacting to, or thinking about, events a certain distance away rather than, say, on its skin. The solipsist's world can be any size; which is to say, from the solipsist's point of view it has not size, *it is not a world*. (Davidson 1992, 119, emphasis added)

Davidson's point, much like Kripke's, is not epistemological; he is making a claim about the constitution of meaning. The reason the responses of a solitary creature cannot reveal what she is responding to is that, strictly speaking, there is nothing meaningful to be revealed. For, as we have seen, they cannot be deemed meaningful—they cannot count as the same as other responses—solely in virtue of being involved in causal regularities. It is therefore plausible to think that, in order to produce meaningful responses, the creature herself must actively *take*

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*Stanford Encyclopedia* entry overview of such theories, one may find the following assessment: "at present there is no approach that is commonly agreed to correctly separate the content-determining causes from the non-content determining causes while at the same time respecting the need not to invoke existing semantic concepts. Although each attempt may have technical problems of its own, the recurring problem is that the attempts to separate content-determining from non-content-determining causes threaten to smuggle in semantic elements" (Adams and Aizawa 2017). As we shall see, the explanation for this, according to Davidson, is precisely that the smuggling of semantic elements is, indeed, inescapable. In other words, semantic facts are irreducible.

some causes of her responses to be the same as others; this would enable the responses themselves to count as the same, and thus to be meaningful. But she cannot do this unless she is in a position to recognize that causes occur independently of her taking them to occur, and, consequently, that there might be a gap between the external world and her perspective on it. To recognize this possible gap is in effect to recognize that merely possessing a perspective on something does not guarantee the accuracy of that perspective; it is to recognize that the way things appear might be different from the way they are. Crucially, according to Davidson, a creature cannot come to recognize this by herself, in isolation from others, for the distinction that such a creature may draw between mere seeming and being is entirely up to her, which is to say that there is no intelligible distinction between seeming and being, no possible gap between what seems to be the case and what is the case. Consequently, such a creature cannot be in a position objectively to recognize that the sounds she utters might amount to incorrectly applied expressions, which in turn is tantamount to her being incapable of producing meaningful sounds, utterances governed by conditions of correctness. In short, the creature must possess the concept of objectivity, and thus be aware of the distinction between correct and incorrect uses, in order for her responses to be meaningful. But she cannot discover this distinction in solitude.<sup>26</sup>

It might be thought that this conclusion can be avoided by considering the possibility that the responses of the creature, taken in themselves, independently of the causal chains that resulted in them, are apt to indicate what they are about, such that

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<sup>26</sup>This interpretation of Davidson is not the standard one. Most often commentators have taken Davidson to claim that, for someone to have a language, two independent tasks need to be accomplished, viz., the determination of meaning and the acquisition of the concept of objectivity. As we see it, Davidson thinks that the two tasks can be accomplished only at once. Verheggen first offered this interpretation in Verheggen (2007). See also Verheggen (2013), and Myers and Verheggen (2016, chap. 1).

a more thorough investigation of those responses will provide a clue to the kinds of things to which she is responding. (This would amount to renouncing externalism.) But the aspect problem, which is, initially at least, a problem about the ambiguity of external causes, also permeates the domain of responses to those causes, given that, for now at least, we are to think of these responses in non-semantic terms. Just like features of the world around us, our reactions to these features have more than one aspect, and therefore can be taken or characterised in more than one way. This holds regardless of whether these reactions consist in mental images, sensations, instances of behaviour, or something else, for what they consist in will have to be thought of as devoid of meaning, as uninterpreted, or, to borrow Wittgenstein's famous metaphor, as *dead* (Wittgenstein 1958, 4; see also Myers and Verheggen 2016). Thus, one's responses cannot disambiguate the causes that led to them, for they are, themselves, ambiguous. This is what Davidson is getting at in the following passage:

Since any set of causes whatsoever will have endless properties in common, we must look to some recurrent feature of the gatherer, some mark that he or she has classified cases as similar. This can only be some feature or aspect of the gatherer's reactions . . . in which case we must once again ask: what makes these reactions relevantly similar to each other? Wittgenstein's problem once again. (Davidson 2001b, 4–5)

Davidson's reflection on the scenario of a solitary creature thus reveals a conception of the relation between mind and world according to which the idea that the world imposes itself, in some sense or another, on minds, is unintelligible. The world—and we must conceive of our own natural inclinations, our own “innate similarity responses” (Davidson 1992, 120), as pertaining to that world—cannot be seen as dictating or supplying, by itself, meanings for our utterances. This, importantly, does not entail that the features of the world are not independent of how we come to think or talk of them; the possibility of a gap between the world

and what we think or say about it remains. Rather, on this conception, there cannot be any automatic or immediate latching, by our minds or our utterances, onto those features. The latching onto the world requires effort; it requires the involvement of our agency. We shall say more about the nature of this involvement in the next section, when we discuss Davidson's solution to the problem.

Davidson's problem, then, seems to be the same as Kripke's problem after all: what is it about a creature that renders the utterances she produces meaningful? Moreover, Davidson and Kripke pursue what seems to be the same strategy, namely the investigation of plausible candidates—facts about the creature's causal interactions with her environment, on Davidson's view, and facts about the creature's mental and behavioural history, on Kripke's view. They both initially conceive of these candidates as endowing expressions with meaning through associations that do not require the active involvement of agents. Moreover, they both come to recognise that none of those candidates can, merely in virtue of associations of that sort, endow sounds with meaning. Indeed, we might say that Davidson's candidates for the role of meaning-endowing facts are, initially at least, just as useless as Kripke's, which might suggest that Davidson's externalist assumption is of no help. But Davidson's response to the recognition of the alleged uselessness of causes in fixing meanings is fundamentally different from Kripke's response to the challenge. What exactly is Davidson's response?<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Recently, it has been suggested that Kripke's sceptic "can run his sceptical problem even if the aspect problem is somehow solved. Suppose that the speaker is caused by a certain aspect of an object, say, the whole table in view, to utter 'table'. Such a fact cannot prevent K[ripke's]W[itzenstein's] sceptic from claiming that the speaker by being so caused to utter 'table' actually means *tabair*. . . We still need to say what fact about the speaker can rule out such rival sceptical hypotheses" (Hossein Khani 2017, 115–16). But this objection begs the question against Davidson's line of reasoning. The triangulation argument is supposed to show precisely that we cannot claim that an aspect of an object has caused a response unless the creature responding has taken the object to

## 5. Davidson's Solution

Davidson's solution starts with the suggestion that it becomes possible for a creature to produce meaningful utterances as soon as there is a second creature with which the first can interact. The two creatures can be viewed as supplying the base points of a triangle, the apex of which is provided by some feature of the world that causally affects both of them. This makes possible what Davidson calls "triangulation", which is, roughly, the simultaneous interaction of two creatures with one another as well as with a feature of the world they share.<sup>28</sup> The notion of triangulation, understood to encompass linguistic interaction between the two creatures, is, as we shall see, the core of Davidson's—manifestly non-reductionist—solution to the sceptical problem and of his account of the constitution of meaning. But, prior to linguistic triangulation, there is what Davidson calls primitive or basic triangulation (see, e.g., Davidson 1999, 128, 2001a, 292), which is ubiquitous among a variety of creatures and does not require the use of language; it is, in this respect, a simpler process.

The role played by primitive triangulation does not amount merely to that of providing a contrast to linguistic triangulation; reflecting on it also sheds additional light on the sceptical problem itself by showing what exactly is required to disambiguate causes and thereby fix meanings. For, according to Davidson, as soon as primitive triangulation occurs, that is, as soon as a

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be some way rather than another, that is, unless the creature has adopted a semantic attitude with a determinate content (the presence of which will, of course, rule out rival sceptical hypotheses). Claiming that Kripke's sceptic can mount his problem even after the relevant aspect is fixed ignores what Davidson takes fixing the relevant aspect to require.

<sup>28</sup>The idea of triangulation, i.e., "the mutual and simultaneous responses of two or more creatures to common distal stimuli and to one another's responses" (Davidson 2001c, xv), was introduced in Davidson (1982) and developed throughout his later writings (Davidson 1991a,b, 1992, 1994, 1999, 2001b).

creature interacts non-linguistically with another as well as with a shared item in the world, we might take ourselves to have grounds for claiming that the cause of their responses could already be disambiguated: it is the one located precisely at the intersection of the “lines” of the triangle formed by the two creatures reacting to the world. But this suggestion would be too quick. While we are perhaps in a position to say that the response produced by the two creatures is to a distal item in their common world, the question of the relevant aspect of that item remains open, for there are—indeed, there continue to be—endless aspects that one could settle on. Going back to our example, we might still ask whether their reactions concern the greenness of the object, or its colour, or its texture, or its being an object, and so forth. This reveals, once again, the force of the aspect problem.<sup>29</sup>

What could disambiguate causes, then? According to Davidson, primitive triangulation is necessary to execute this task, though, importantly, nothing short of *linguistic* triangulation is sufficient. In the context of primitive triangulation, one is in a position to observe the reactions of another creature to the environment, as well as to start correlating or associating—in a way that does not yet amount to forming beliefs—stimuli in the environment with those reactions. Thus, one is in a position to form expectations, and to be faced, sooner or later, with the failure of those expectations, for, sooner or later, the other creature may react differently, in seemingly bizarre ways. The contrast between the two creatures’ reactions is what makes it possible, according to Davidson, for them to recognize that they have different perspectives on their common environment, and, in light of this recognition, to grasp the distinction “between appearance and reality, mere seeming and being” (1991b, 209).

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<sup>29</sup>Again, this interpretation of Davidson is not the standard one. Many commentators have taken Davidson to claim that the meaning-determination problem was solved as soon as the distance problem was solved. For further discussion see, again, Verheggen (2007, 2013), and Myers and Verheggen (2016, chap. 1).

However, they grasp this distinction only if they take full “cognitive advantage of the three-way relation” (1992, 120), or only if they settle, in some way or another, the seeming tension between their responses. Crucially, this can be done only by producing meaningful utterances, for it is only by producing such utterances that they can communicate what they take themselves to be responding to and grasp the objects (or causes) of the other’s responses; it is only by using meaningful expressions, by exchanging fully-fledged contents, that the triangulating creatures can settle their divergence and count as fully-fledged speakers (and thinkers).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>This picture suggests that, according to Davidson, “the sharing, inherited and acquired, of similarity responses” (Davidson 1990, 61) is a necessary condition for communication, for only if similarity responses are shared can the creatures react to the same distal stimuli and to each other’s reactions. Alex Miller has recently argued that, “the preconditions for the possibility of meaning [on Davidson’s account] are of roughly equal strength to those imposed by K[ripke’s] W[itzenstein]” (2017a, 320). He thinks that “Davidson’s condition—that there be others with like ‘innate similarity responses’—is virtually identical to the condition imposed by . . . [the] sceptical solution” (Miller 2017a, 321). Recall, however, that, on Kripke’s sceptical solution, what is necessary is that there be agreement with respect to the ways in which expressions are applied in particular contexts. Davidson, on the other hand, does not think that such agreement is necessary, for the two triangulating creatures could, in principle, come meaningfully to use their expressions, as well as to categorize things, differently. (Indeed, one possibility in the settling of the disagreement is that they agree to disagree.) Thus, the agreement that is necessary on Davidson’s picture concerns “facts about salience, attention, and tendencies to generalize in some ways rather than others” (Davidson 1990, 61), which may not result in agreement with respect to the ways in which expressions are applied. To take an example, what matters for the possibility of triangulation is that we be able to discriminate, pre-semantically, green things from things that are not green. But we do not need also to agree in the particular applications we make to green objects or in the ways we categorize those objects. What is essential to meaningfulness, according to Davidson, is mutual understanding, not uniformity in the applications of expressions. The preconditions for the possibility of meaning are, therefore, weaker on his account, which is what makes it importantly different from a communitarian account. Note also that, as we remarked in Section 2, Kripke’s sceptical solution does not even pur-



It might seem here that we are simply moving in a circle. For, according to Davidson, it is in virtue of interactions with others and, simultaneously, with the world, that our expressions have the meanings they do. But such interactions, in order to be meaning-endowing, must themselves involve meaningful utterances, that is, they must themselves involve uses of expressions governed by conditions of correctness. This, it would appear, is tantamount to the claim that our uses of expressions are governed by conditions of correctness in virtue of their being governed by such conditions. Davidson's answer might thus be taken to be a species of the non-reductionist picture briefly considered by Kripke himself in his discussion of candidates for a straight solution, according to which meaning states are primitive. But we believe that taking it so would be misguided. While Davidson's non-reductionism seems, on the face of it, consistent with the view that a meaning state might be "simply a primitive state, not to be assimilated to sensations or headaches or any 'qualitative' states, nor to be assimilated to dispositions, but a state of a unique kind of its own" (Kripke 1982, 51), this is as far as the similarity between the two goes.

One crucial difference between the version of non-reductionism envisaged by Kripke and Davidson's version can be traced to their fundamentally different ways of conceiving of the nature of meaning states. As we have seen earlier, according to Kripke, a meaning state is characterised as "a finite object, contained in our finite minds" (51), one which could always be interpreted in more than one way. But if the meaning state is primitive, "of a unique kind of its own" (51), it need no longer be conceived of as something that calls for interpretation, precisely because it is—by definition, as it were—intrinsically meaningful. Moreover, such a state need not be thought of as finite, at least not in the way in which the other states he con-

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port to offer us an account of the nature of conditions of correct application governing expressions. See Myers and Verhegen (2016, chap. 3) for more discussion.

sidered, such as dispositional states, were thought to be finite. Kripke fails fully to recognize the possibilities afforded by the adoption of a non-reductionist position because he seems to be gripped by a conception of meaning according to which meaningfulness requires items, internal entities located in our minds, which can guide us in our uses of expressions by *telling us* what we ought to do in each new instance (1982, 24), and which are thus conceived of as essentially distinct from these uses, and as accompanying them.<sup>31</sup> This construal of meaning is indispensable to Kripke's seeming success in showing that no fact can be invoked to answer his sceptic, and, more specifically, that no primitive meaning facts could be accepted by such a sceptic.<sup>32</sup>

By contrast, Davidson offers a strikingly different conception of the primitive meaning states. They are not to be conceived of as consisting in, or as involving in any way, particular entities that are associated with, or which accompany, uses of expressions. Just as "in thinking and talking about the beliefs of people we needn't suppose there are such entities as beliefs" (Davidson 1989, 60), in thinking and talking about people's meaningful uses of those expressions, we need not suppose, indeed we ought not suppose, that there are entities contained in speakers' minds or elsewhere. Later, he claims that, "having a belief is not like having a favourite cat, it is being in a state; and being in a state

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<sup>31</sup>This problem is also noted by Stroud, who thinks that Kripke fails to recognize that Wittgenstein opposes the idea of "thinking of thought, meaning, and understanding as something that *accompanies* the handling of sounds, marks, or other objects" (Stroud 1996, 173).

<sup>32</sup>Our interpretation of Kripke's dismissal of primitive meaning facts thus differs from other interpretations, such as Crispin Wright's. As we have seen, we take this dismissal to be motivated by a confusion concerning the finite nature of meaning states, whereas Wright takes it to be motivated by a conception of meaning states as involving "the combination of first-personal avowability with disposition-like connections to behaviour" (2001a, 148). The resulting tension, he thinks, cannot be resolved simply by taking these states to be primitive. In our view, Kripke is wrong to dismiss non-reductionism so quickly, whereas in Wright's view, he is right to do so. See also Wright (2001c, 177–78).

does not require that there be an entity called a state that one is in" (Davidson 1997, 74). By the same token, meaning something by an expression need not involve an entity either. In the way in which "the only *object* required for the existence of a belief is a believer" (Davidson 1997, 74), which suggests that beliefs should no longer be construed as individual items that reside in the mind, the only object required for the existence of a meaning is a speaker. The possibility of conceiving of meaning and content in this way is afforded by the triangulation argument, according to which to be a fully-fledged speaker is not for one's mind to be a container of states of meaning and understanding that somehow dictate to one how expressions are to be used; it is, rather, to have a capacity, not only for intentionally producing meaningful utterances, but also, necessarily, for viewing these utterances as responses to an objective world, and, therefore, as being correct or incorrect.

So, what is it for words to mean what they do, according to Davidson? In a nutshell, the answer is that it is for them to have been used by speakers in ways governed by conditions of correctness, where to be a speaker is to be an agent of a special sort. To be a speaker is to have used words meaningfully and to have thereby been understood by another in triangular interactions that involve not only the shared world but also its recognition, by both triangulating creatures, as a world.<sup>33</sup> Semantic facts are thus facts about agents, and they obtain, at least initially, in virtue of agents' linguistic triangular interactions with other agents.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>So, a second speaker is required for the existence of any speaker. But a second speaker is not required for just any semantic fact to obtain, as it were, given that not all cases of meaningful uses of expressions need to be traced back to triangulation scenarios (see also note 35). Moreover, many semantic facts are required for any semantic fact to obtain, because, to put it very briefly, mutual understanding requires repeated triangulation. Thus, Davidson's picture is thoroughly holistic; there cannot be any instance of meaningful use without there being many other instances. See Myers and Verheggen (2016) for more discussion.

<sup>34</sup>We could also express this point in terms of the notion of *property*: mean-

This reveals, once again, that specifying the grounds of semantic facts requires that we use semantic notions, which is another manifestation of the inescapable circularity of Davidson's position. What the triangulation argument shows is that one must possess a language in order to single out features of the world, a singling out which turns out to be required for having a language. Indeed, the upshot of this argument is that moving in a circle is the only thing one can do when trying to shed light on the nature of meaning; the challenge is to cast the circle widely enough to be illuminating. It is, therefore, important to note that the domain of things on which semantic facts depend has been, in light of this argument, expanded. That in virtue of which, on Davidson's picture, expressions have meaning necessarily includes causal relations with the environment as well as with other speakers. It is, thus, a much richer, and a more constructive, non-reductionist picture than the one sketched by Kripke.

Now, how exactly should we respond to the sceptic's puzzlement about the idea that expressions used meaningfully in a context can correctly be applied to an infinity of cases? Because meaningful use, for Davidson, is not grounded in objects in the mind that tell speakers what to do with their expressions, the puzzle of how meanings can provide guidance with respect to an infinite number of cases does not arise for him. It does not arise not because he "brushes such questions under the rug" (Kripke 1982, 52), as the non-reductionist portrayed by Kripke as the potential author of a straight solution allegedly does, but because Davidson's conception of meaning as a primitive phenomenon does not allow room for it. To take meaning states to be primitive *is* to take the idea of conditions of correctness governing

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ing something by an expression, like having a belief, "is just exemplifying a property" (Davidson 1997, 75), a semantic property. To be a full-fledged speaker is, then, to exemplify semantic properties. However, we must bear in mind that these properties are features of agents, rather than of entities inside the minds of such agents.

uses to be primitive, irreducible to anything else, for, as we have seen, there is an essential connection between meaning and such conditions. It is in the very nature of meaning states that they classify performances into correct and incorrect, and so there is nothing puzzling about the fact that they do this.

Finally, let us see whether this picture is able to meet the two conditions on an adequate account of meaning, which, recall, are as follows: such an account must show what makes it possible for uses of expressions to be, first, correct or incorrect, and, second, intentional, as opposed to “leaps in the dark” (Kripke 1982, 10). On Davidson’s account, a speaker’s expressions are governed by conditions of correct application only if the speaker has successfully used at least some of them in triangular interactions, that is, only if some of her expressions have been used, and understood by the triangulating creatures to be used, to pick out some aspects of the world.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, expressions can be so used only by individuals who recognize that there is a distinction between correct and incorrect uses of expressions; it is they who must take certain uses, rather than others, to be correct, thereby enabling these uses to be governed by conditions of correctness, and hence meaningful. To put it differently, it is in virtue of the

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<sup>35</sup>Thus, to repeat, it is not the case that, for every single expression, a triangular scenario must have endowed it with meaning. Many expressions in one’s repertoire need not come to be endowed with meaning in this manner, especially since a wide range of expressions are not even used to talk about one’s immediate surroundings. Davidson’s point is, rather, that, “somewhere along the line [of words and concepts acquired] . . . we must come to the direct exposures that anchor thought and language to the world” (Davidson 1991a, 197), and this anchoring necessarily requires triangulation of the linguistic sort. Nevertheless—and this brings us back to Kripke’s own mathematical example—triangulation may still be required in order for one to be competent with expressions that pertain to certain domains. As Myers and Verheggen have shown (2016, chaps. 5–8), the nature of normative content, and thus of normative discourse, can be accounted for by relying on the triangulation argument. We believe that a similar account could be offered to elucidate the nature of mathematical content, and thus of mathematical discourse. We obviously cannot develop this account here.

fact that these uses are not made arbitrarily, that they are made by individuals who take them to be correct or incorrect, as the case may be, that they can be governed by conditions of correctness, and it is in virtue of taking them so that individuals are speakers. This shows that the two conditions formulated by Kripke’s sceptic, neither of which could be met without also meeting the other one, are deeply interdependent.<sup>36</sup>

However, whether or not this way of meeting the sceptic’s conditions counts as a straight answer, that is, whether or not it will be understood to show the scepticism to be unwarranted, depends on how the sceptical question is construed. If we understand it as a general question about the possibility of conditions of correctness governing our uses of expressions in a way that is compatible with these uses being conceived of as cases of intentional action, then there does not seem to be anything preventing us from claiming that Davidson has a straight answer to offer. The answer starts with the recognition that the question of what makes it possible for conditions of correctness to govern the use of expressions leads to the question of what makes it possible for individuals to be speakers, for it is speakers themselves who must be at the origin of such conditions. It then answers this question via the triangulation argument. On the other hand, if we understand the question asked by the sceptic as formulated from within a conception of meaning as involving objects in the mind that the agent may consult prior to her using expressions,

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<sup>36</sup>Thus, we believe that Ginsborg is right when she challenges the order of the conditions misleadingly assumed by Kripke in his remarks—more specifically, his assumption that the correctness condition governing a use must be constituted prior to any normative attitude toward that use (Ginsborg 2011b). However, she misidentifies the required attitudes, as she does not take them to involve assessments of semantic correctness. She is also wrong in claiming that the second condition (which involves the attitudes) is prior to, or can be met independently of, the first (which involves the distinction between correct and incorrect uses). What Davidson’s solution reveals is that the two conditions are either met together or not met at all. See Myers and Verheggen (2016, chap. 2) for more discussion of Ginsborg’s view in relation to Davidson’s.

then Davidson could be understood as rejecting, rather than answering, that question. He might be taken to show that the expectation that the world contains such things as meanings, understood as entities accompanying uses, is incoherent, and can only be the result of confusion.

Lastly, it seems to us that, even though it depicts the conditions of correctness governing the use of expressions as dependent on the taking of particular uses by particular speakers to be correct in particular triangular contexts, Davidson's solution has resources, which are superior to those made available by Kripke's own solution, for accommodating the idea of objectivity. This idea is expressed by the Wittgensteinian maxim according to which "nothing is more contrary to our ordinary view—or Wittgenstein's—than is the supposition that 'whatever is going to seem right to me is right' (§258)" (Kripke 1982, 23–24). We are unable to develop a complete treatment of this issue in this paper, whose main purpose is merely that of articulating, rather than that of fully defending, a Davidsonian answer to Kripke's sceptical challenge (see Verheggen 2017b for further discussion). Suffice it to say that, according to this answer, a shared world is indispensable for the emergence of semantic facts; indeed, its involvement is a necessary condition for that emergence. Without real features of the world capable of causing people's reactions, features which make divergence in reactions so much as possible, there is, according to Davidson, no prospect for acquiring the concept of objectivity, and thus no possibility for uses of expressions to be meaningful. While the real features of the world do not dictate meanings, they do supply a necessary constraint for the project of fixing them, for it is only against these features that uses could be taken by speakers to be correct or incorrect. This, it appears to us, could lead us to a satisfactory conception of objectivity.

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