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*Distinguishing W. V. Quine and Donald Davidson*

Given W.V. Quine's and Donald Davidson's extensive agreement about much of the philosophy of language and mind, and the obvious methodological parallels between Quine's radical translation and Davidson's radical interpretation, many—including Quine and Davidson—are puzzled by their occasional disagreements. I argue for the importance of attending to these disagreements, not just because doing so deepens our understanding of these influential thinkers, but because they are the shadows thrown from two distinct conceptions of philosophical inquiry: Quine's "naturalism" and what I call Davidson's "humanism." Beyond surfacing the contemporary appeal of each perspective, I show how the clash between Quine and Davidson yields valuable insight into the history of analytic naturalism and its malcontents.

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# *Distinguishing W. V. Quine and Donald Davidson*

James Pearson

*Readers of Davidson and me are bound to be struck by how deeply we agree, and hence puzzled the more by occasional points of **apparent** disagreement.*

—W.V. Quine (my emphasis)

## *1 Introduction*

Donald Davidson admits to being perplexed by W.V. Quine’s paper “Where Do We Disagree?” Their views concerning the role played by sensory stimulations in translation “have converged” [Davidson, 1999, 82], but he “[does] not see how to reconcile” Quine’s empiricist epistemology with his own externalist semantics [Davidson, 1999, 84]. Although Quine takes their remaining differences to be little more than a matter of emphasis, Davidson suspects that their disagreement is substantive.<sup>1</sup>

There is little critical consensus about how to resolve disagreement between Quine and Davidson.<sup>2</sup> They undoubtedly agree about a number of controversial claims in the philosophy of language and mind: both reject the analytic/synthetic distinction, both accept anomalous monism, and both think translation and reference are indeterminate. The points at which they part—such as how to define observation sentences, and the extent to which logical form is indeterminate—seem technical (perhaps even peripheral) in contrast.

This has tempted some commentators to concur with Quine and to conclude their “disagreement” is *only* apparent.<sup>3</sup> If they agree upon all the essentials, we can isolate the shared features of their philosophical framework and criticize them together. Yet, I think that this approach deflects our attention from the most puzzling, and philosophically important, aspect of their discussion: what makes their differences seem incidental from Quine’s perspective and fundamental from Davidson’s?

This paper aims to diagnose why Quine and Davidson disagree about their disagreement. I will argue that this second-order disagreement stems from their differing conceptions of philosophy. Properly understanding it thus requires pondering Quine’s distinctive brand of “naturalism” and what I shall call Davidson’s “humanism.”<sup>4</sup> I will flesh out these perspectives by attending to their first-order disagreements, which, I contend, arise when one of them thinks a case meaningful that the other thinks unintelligible. Although Quine finds “naturalizing” the substance of Davidson’s philosophy conducive to his program, Davidson finds no philosophical value in “humanizing” Quine’s work, resulting in their opposed evaluations of their intellectual relationship. To suppress their differences is to obliterate the subtleties distinguishing their conceptions of philosophy and the corresponding limits they place on intelligibility.

Although articulating their naturalist and humanist commitments serves to differentiate Quine and Davidson, it does not adjudicate their dispute. On the contrary, it threatens to make a neutral adjudication seem impossible. I conclude by examining this difficulty, and argue that, in the case of naturalism and humanism, an otherwise tempting attitude of tolerance between competing programs is an unattractive concession to philosophical pluralism.

## 2 Quine's Naturalism

Considering how, and why, Quine thinks appealing to naturalism defuses the problem of skepticism about the external world brings his view into focus. In this section, I argue that naturalism inoculates Quine's epistemology against Barry Stroud's straightforward skeptical attack. Davidson's subtler skeptical argument persuades Quine to alter his definition of observation sentences, but, despite this emendation, Davidson remains convinced that naturalized epistemologists are in the grip of the "third dogma" of empiricism. I will turn to the humanism grounding Davidson's lingering dissatisfaction with Quine's epistemology in the next section.

Naturalists, in Quine's view, are those who accept that philosophy is continuous with natural science, and hence that no supra-scientific methods are available that would allow a distinctively "philosophical" critique of scientific methodology, or of scientific theories of reality. They must take seriously the (currently accepted) scientific view that all the evidence relevant to our theories of reality is obtainable via our senses; accordingly, naturalized epistemologists hold that we are warranted in believing theories which are able to explain and predict our sensory experience.<sup>5</sup>

Stroud argues that naturalized epistemology has no response to skepticism. Its apparent strength against skeptical attacks, he claims, is its removal of the avowedly "philosophical" ground upon which the skeptic presents her challenge. He quotes Quine:

I am not accusing the skeptic of begging the question; he is quite within his rights in assuming science in order to refute science; this, if carried out, would be a straightforward argument by *reductio ad absurdum*. I am only making the point that skeptical doubts are scientific doubts [Quine, 2008a, 258].

But Stroud argues that the skeptic *can* carry out Quine's imagined *reductio*. Since the skeptic can argue that we do not have

knowledge of the external world even on the assumption that our scientific theory is correct (because our theory tells us that it is underdetermined by the available data<sup>6</sup>), Stroud disagrees with Quine's suggestion that doubting scientific realism because of skeptical reflection is just "overreacting" [Quine, 1981a, 475].

Stroud fails to appreciate the subtlety of Quine's position. Quine is not providing a blanket response to all challenges that we may call "skeptical." Rather, he diagnoses each skeptical challenge naturalistically, finding some to be answerable and others unintelligible. It is this attitude which underwrites the passages where he gives the skeptic such short shrift:

My answer to skepticism is that reality itself, the term 'reality', the term 'real', is a scientific term on a par with 'table' 'chair' 'electron' 'neutrino' 'class', that all these are part of our scientific apparatus, our terminology, so that the only sense I can make of skepticism is the kind of sense that maybe our theory is wrong, that in the future the checkpoints aren't going to bear it out, checkpoints in observation, in experiment [Quine, 2008b, 152].

This response might sound simply petulant, for how can Quine profess not to *understand* the skeptic's doubt, which is obviously not captured by noting that our theory could be wrong?

Quine is not merely foot-stamping. In the first instance, he is engaging an inquirer who I shall call the *constructive* skeptic. He encourages the constructive skeptic to describe the case worrying her in more detail so that she may bring it to the highest tribunal countenanced by naturalists: the scientific tribunal. There, she may advance it as an alternative hypothesis to scientific realism. At this tribunal the principles of theoretical construction hold sway (simplicity, modesty, conservatism, etc.<sup>7</sup>), and Quine is confident that scientific realism will win out. The *reductio* Quine is imagining in the quote Stroud extracts is the surprising (and in Quine's view un-

likely) possibility that a constructive skeptic could describe a theory which is simpler, more modest, and more conservative than scientific realism, while enjoying its explanatory power.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, Quine would view Stroud's *reductio* as a legitimate expression of fallibilism. He *agrees* with Stroud's skeptic—an inquirer I shall call the *pessimistic* skeptic—that we may come to judge our theory inaccurate. Although scientific realism is presently esteemed as our best theory for predicting sensory experience, reflecting upon the history of science suggests it highly likely that parts of it are mistaken. We have every reason to expect our scientific progression (along with the sloughing off of theoretical blunders and excesses) to continue indefinitely. Accepting that science is fallible, then, is an attitude toward the discipline that the discipline itself—in endorsing inductive reasoning—demands. The pessimistic skeptic who withholds belief in her current theory because of its potential inaccuracy is, in Quine's view, overreacting, because she has misunderstood the self-acknowledged fallibility of inquiry.

Quine is well aware that this response would seem glib to a third inquirer, who I shall call the radical skeptic. The *radical* skeptic insists that reality might not just *differ* from our current theory, but be *so* different that neither we, nor any future scientists, could come to know it. But in Quine's view, such a skeptic has made a semantic mistake, and the case she is trying to articulate is therefore unintelligible. Quine thinks that our words only become meaningful in the context of successful activity with others in the world, language being our "social art" [Quine, 1960, ix]. But, by talking about a "reality" that is *in principle* "beyond" our experiences, and which exceeds our ability to develop theories, the radical skeptic detaches her words from the circumstances in which she acquires them. The problem is that in stripping her words of their semantic origin, they become meaningless.<sup>9</sup>

This move brings out the force of Quine's semantic holism. In his view, our scientific theories about what there truly is cannot be strictly distinguished from the meaningfulness of sentences in or-

dinary language.<sup>10</sup> The radical skeptic's challenge depends upon "reality" being meaningful outside the bounds of possible scientific inquiry, but:

naturalism looks only to natural science ... for an account of what there is ... to ask what reality is *really* like, however, apart from human categories, is self-stultifying. It is like asking how long the Nile really is, apart from parochial matters of miles or meters [Quine, 2008a, 405].

In Quine's view, "real" is a term of our language that applies to that which our current theory demands. We refine our grasp of what is "real" through scientific activity. Analyzed naturalistically, the radical skeptic's challenge becomes: "Why am I warranted in believing that reality (which is a term of my theory that I use to refer to whatever I am warranted in believing) is as my current theory tells me (or future theory will tell me) it is?" This rephrasing demonstrates that in seriously asking the question, she is misusing the word "reality."<sup>11</sup>

Davidson also appeals to skepticism when criticizing Quine. Quine initially demurred from Davidson's attribution of the "third dogma" to his philosophy (the doctrine that there is a tenable dichotomy between unorganized experiential content and a conceptual scheme through which thinkers cognize that content) on the grounds that he viewed empiricism to be a theory of *warranted belief* rather than *truth* [Quine, 1981b, 39].<sup>12</sup> For Quine, historians have chronicled the different (and increasingly sophisticated) scientific theories, or "schemes," that inquirers have developed in order to enlighten themselves about the nature of reality. In "Meaning, Truth, and Evidence," Davidson turns to skepticism to try and explain why scheme/content dualism is not an innocent feature of any epistemology, even one that (like Quine's) conceives of empiricism as a theory of warranted belief.

Davidson objects to the epistemological significance that Quine

assigns to an individual's sensory stimulations. In taking stimulations to give the "content" which an individual's theory is to "fit,"<sup>13</sup> Davidson thinks that naturalized epistemologists cannot account for our interpersonal knowledge of the external world. Davidson instructs us to imagine an interlocutor stricken with a "rearranged sensorium" [Davidson, 2005, 55], which causes her to have rabbit-stimulations instead of warthog-stimulations whenever she is near warthogs. He points out that *if we know* of our interlocutor that she is being rabbit-stimulated in warthog situations, Quine's theory, by making private stimulations semantically relevant, tells us that we should translate her utterances in warthog situations to concern rabbits and, hence, forces us to conclude that she is systematically wrong about the world. But having now appreciated that the "warrant" naturalism accords our beliefs is based solely upon how well our scientific theory predicts our stimulations, we must accept that *we* might be radically mistaken about the public world, since *our* stimulations may similarly defectively represent the environment:

Although each speaker may be content that his view is the true one, since it squares with all his stimulations, once he notices how globally mistaken others are, and why, it is hard to think why he would not wonder whether *he* had it right. Then he might wonder what it could mean to get it right [Davidson, 2005, 55-6].

Davidson insists that we must reject the third dogma to deny the skeptic this purchase upon epistemology. In his view, the only "stimulation" relevant to our knowledge of the public world is the world itself, with which humans possess *unmediated* contact [Davidson, 1984, 198].

Quine thinks that the warthog argument demonstrates a problem with characterizing observation sentences as sentences whose stimulus meaning is approximately shared by members of a group.<sup>14</sup> The particular way in which an individual is stimulated should have no bearing upon the semantic question of how we translate her utter-

ances. For translation, all that matters is detecting others using the same expressions in the same contexts, which we can then translate with expressions *we* use in those contexts. Davidson's argument depends upon "imagining someone who, when a warthog trots by, has just the patterns of stimulation I have when there's a rabbit in view" [Davidson, 2005, 55]. Quine's solution is to admit that people with unique neurophysiologies cannot "share" a stimulus meaning. Another person can never have "just the pattern of stimulation" that I do. Removing "intersubjective likeness" of physical stimulation from his account, Quine now argues that intersubjectivity comes only with language use.<sup>15</sup> He believes that naturalism can now defuse Davidson's objection in much the same way that it defuses Stroud's, and he unrepentantly continues to talk about various "conceptual schemes" of reality [Quine, 2008a, 406, 471].<sup>16</sup>

Were Davidson's imputation of the third dogma to Quine essentially a challenge to refute skepticism, then it is clear from Quine's perspective that it fails to breach his naturalism. But although Davidson thinks skepticism an inevitable consequence of any epistemology (such as Quine's) which refuses to jettison the third dogma, he insists that:

[the] central argument for rejecting empiricisms that base knowledge on something unconceptualized is that nothing that is unconceptualized can serve as a reason for an empirical belief, or for anything else, since the relation of a reason to what it supports is conceptual and so demands that the reason have a propositional content [Davidson, 2001a, 286].

Davidson thinks one can only justify one's knowledge by appealing to one's other beliefs, not by appealing to physical facts, such as how one's sense organs are being stimulated. Of course, one's *beliefs* about how one is being stimulated can be a reason for one's other beliefs—but in Davidson's view, this is just to accept that everything relevant to epistemology is conceptualized, and thus

that one ought to reject scheme/content dualism.

However, Quine is not compelled by these considerations, and so their quarrel shifts to terminological wrangling over the word “epistemology.”<sup>17</sup> What is the central concern of epistemology? Quine’s naturalized epistemologists seek “the rationale of reification” [Quine, 1990, 3]: a scientific explanation of how it is that we develop theoretical knowledge of the world, in which “we” are physical organisms equipped with five senses, whose experience is vibrant, conceptually complex, and of a world composed of diverse objects. Since our scientific theories hold that the physical world (of which we are a part) is governed by causal laws, our epistemological account ought to explain how the world *causes* us to have beliefs about it. The philosophical objection Davidson levels against this account, that unconceptualized facts *cannot* be “reasons” for beliefs, strikes Quine as belying a retrograde explanatory stance.<sup>18</sup> Quine agrees that our conscious experience of justifying our beliefs involves appealing to our other beliefs, but also thinks tailoring our theory of knowledge to our conscious experience privileges introspection over scientific method, and so overlooks the lessons we ought to learn from empirical investigation. In Quine’s view, once we reorient ourselves naturalistically, we see that there is no vicious circle in turning to science to explain our knowledge, no lingering philosophical worry that we have yet to explain our knowledge of science [Quine, 1969, 75-6]. Rather, we grasp that science and epistemology reciprocally contain each other [Quine, 1998, 684]. The naturalist uses science to establish the foundation of her epistemology (as an empiricist, she holds that what she knows is based upon the deliverances of her senses) and reconstructs her ontological theory of what there is using evidence acquired via her senses.<sup>19</sup>

Davidson’s theoretical inroads into our use of mentalistic predicates (which Quine agrees are indispensable for everyday discourse) and the dependence of thought upon language use can easily be integrated into Quine’s naturalist program [Quine, 1992, 72-3].<sup>20</sup> Davidson agrees with Quine that the physical world stimulates hu-

man organisms, which eventually results in individuals knowing about the world. Quine takes himself to be sketching an account of this entire causal story. He thinks Davidson is focused on (and produces a number of insights concerning) the later, social stages, in which inquirers learn how to gainfully respond to each other’s speech. In this way, Quine thinks he can “naturalize” the parts of Davidson’s work with which he agrees (anomalous monism, for example), and takes their viewpoints to be fundamentally consonant.

### 3 Davidson’s Humanism

How, then, are we to explain Davidson’s continued opposition to Quine’s viewpoint? In this section I shall argue that Davidson perceives an inadequacy in Quine’s account of objectivity for which he aims to correct in arguing that interpreters form an “epistemological triangle” with the world. By exposing how Quine’s late adoption of Davidson’s “triangle” *rhetoric* is not underpinned by adoption of the epistemic role that Davidson wishes to assign the concept of truth, I shall be positioned to explain Davidson’s inflation of their differences. Under Davidson’s “humanism” our conception of objectivity is dependent upon our intersubjectivity, a dependence that privileges grasp of the concept of truth as a condition for linguistic ability and cognition, that undermines skepticism of the external world and of other minds, and which reflects an insistence that the concepts generated through social interaction rather than “individualistic” scientific theorizing are the primary source of philosophical insight.

To clarify Davidson’s humanism I want to return to his charge that Quine’s empiricist epistemology is irreconcilable with his own externalist semantics. He elaborates this idea in some of his last papers, where he writes that “[Quine’s] epistemology remains resolutely individualistic ... there is no reason in principle why we could not win an understanding of the world on our own” [Davidson, 2001b, 10] because “[Quine] makes the content of empirical knowl-

edge depend on something that is not shared with others” [Davidson, 2001a, 291], namely, the stimulation of an individual’s sense organs. In Davidson’s view, “this is not a position which can get a grip on the objective character of thought” [Davidson, 2001b, 10] since the content of our beliefs would lack a connection with the public world and any external “control” [Davidson, 1999, 84]. These moves must be unpacked.

Davidson’s objection that Quine cannot capture the “objective character” of thought refers to a Fregean demand. In Frege’s view, communicators can be said to agree or disagree *only* if they share some “content.” He concludes that although communicators’ *thinking* is subjective, the thoughts *that* they think cannot have a purely subjective character.

Neither Quine nor Davidson posits a category of objective thoughts to satisfy Frege’s requirement. They both take indeterminacy of translation to undermine the thesis that “thoughts” (or the more contemporary “propositions”) could be the univocal “meanings” of particular utterances. But Quine, unlike Davidson, rejects Frege’s account of communication. In *Word and Object* he gives a deflationary, behaviorist ersatz of what we typically think of as communication that makes no appeal to intensional concepts. He thinks that “agreement” is *constituted* by seeming to enjoy “fluent dialogue and successful negotiation” (quoted in [Dreben, 2004, 289]) with one’s interlocutor and not, as Frege claimed, mutually grasping and endorsing some “content.” Quine renders the attribution of “beliefs” mere shorthand for our fallible predictions of our interlocutor’s dispositions to vocally react to stimulation by the world.

Quine thinks that he can explain objectivity within this extensional framework. Believing himself to have learnt Davidson’s lesson in agreeing to redefine observation sentences, Quine appropriates his terminology in the title of a very late paper, “I, You, and It: An Epistemological Triangle,” arguing that natural selection accounts for our “meeting of minds” about how to carve up our (unshared) sensory experiences and how to use language [Quine,

2008a, 486]. Each human organism has the capacity to determine perceptual similarities in its environment [Quine, 2008a, 475], and the human species has collectively evolved to be in “intersubjective harmony,” to find similar aspects of the world salient. Although we share no stimulations intersubjectively, evolution ensures a parallelism between the parts of the world we find perceptually similar, causing both “You” and “I” to subjectively respond to causal influence by similar parts of “It,” and allowing “communication [between us to proceed] apace” [Quine, 2008a, 486] in Quine’s attenuated, behaviorist sense.<sup>21</sup> To Quine, each individual’s utterances have the external control of other competent language users, who will balk at the misapplication of a sentence to the world.

But Quine here misappropriates Davidson’s terminology. He has begun describing a *semantic* triangle that purports to explain how our language comes to be about the world. In contrast, Davidson triangle is intended to be *epistemological* from the outset. He wants to use it to shed light not merely on how our linguistically expressible beliefs are about the world, but on how we become capable of having beliefs that are about the world at all.<sup>22</sup> Whereas Quine continues to valorize the subjective capacity to recognize perceptual similarities as “vital . . . for all learning, all habit formation, all expectation” [Quine, 2008a, 486]—in short, as the *biological* precondition allowing each individual mind to develop theories—Davidson rules intersubjective communication the precondition for having beliefs that are about the world, and thus for an individual mind to be so much as capable of objective inquiry.<sup>23</sup>

Davidson deploys the epistemological triangle to make vivid inquirers’ grasp of the concept of truth. In trying to explain his problem with Quine’s view, Davidson therefore objects to the limited status which Quine continues to award truth, and asks him to clarify his “slightly mysterious” [Davidson, 2005, 57]—and potentially belittling—description of it as “immanent” [Quine, 1981b, 22]. Quine responds that he is not claiming truth is *determined* by an individual’s current theory [Quine, 1999, 77].<sup>24</sup> Rather, he is em-

phasizing that truth is judged from within one's current theory, as a part of that theory. The disquotational paradigm for truth ("s" is true if and only if s) uniquely determines the satisfaction conditions for a truth predicate over the sentences with which an individual is competent. It follows that a speaker understands the ascription of truth to a sentence just in case she understands it: her ability to correctly use her truth predicate is secured by her linguistic competency. Quine suggests a genetic explanation for the truth predicate on the basis of its usefulness in communication.<sup>25</sup> He also grants that truth "doctrinally" transcends our theory: we do not say a discredited claim was true but became false, but that we thought it true though it never was [Quine, 1999, 77].<sup>26</sup>

Despite all this, since Quine focuses on disquotation and truth's transparent application to one's own sentences, Davidson thinks that he is blind to truth's real significance: its foundational epistemic role in applying to others' sentences. On Quine's account, extending one's truth predicate to someone else's utterances is merely part of developing a theory of translation for her. Davidson thinks that this inverts matters. His humanist project argues that sharing the concept of truth is a condition on interpretation, necessary for the subject of interpretation (be it another person or oneself) to be having beliefs about the world that she is capable of expressing in her utterances.<sup>27</sup>

Davidson famously argues that, under fortunate conditions, a theory of truth for another speaker may be used as a theory of meaning for her [Davidson, 1984, 35]. But, he also holds that grasping truth is dependent on finding other speakers meaningful [Davidson, 2001c, 202]. He claims a person acquires the concepts of truth and belief simultaneously at the point she recognizes that her interlocutor (and, thus, herself) may be erring about the nature of the shared world.<sup>28</sup> She now appreciates that there is a way she (subjectively) *believes* the world to be, and that there is a way the (objective) world truly *is*. Davidson writes that he has "[no] idea" how "one could come to have the belief-truth contrast" other than through commu-

nication with another being [Davidson, 2001c, 104].<sup>29</sup> He thinks that beings lacking the contrast cannot be said to have minds, because, although they may be capable of successfully negotiating the world, they cannot be interpreted as having beliefs about objects in the world.<sup>30</sup> There is no principled way of isolating objects within the continuous stream of information affecting such beings' sense organs about which they could be interpreted as thinking, talking, and knowing [Davidson, 2001c, 121].<sup>31</sup>

Quine can easily absorb into his view Davidson's claim that linguistic animals (and humans in particular) appreciate the truth-belief contrast as they acquire language.<sup>32</sup> But the force behind Davidson's humanist epistemology are his claims that the *only* intelligible genesis of a mind is its acknowledgement of the truth-belief contrast, which can *only* occur through communication with another mind.<sup>33</sup> Quine can see no way to establish these claims naturalistically. Davidson's report that he cannot imagine how the truth-belief contrast *could* arise except via communication is just an introspective claim, scientifically unfit to establish a *standard* for "mindedness."<sup>34</sup>

But Davidson's claims are not idle. Humanist epistemology captures a thought that is absent from naturalist epistemology: being answerable to each other about how we believe the world to be is a condition for our beliefs to count as being about the world at all (as opposed to our private experience). We can appreciate this difference by comparing Quine's and Davidson's accounts of the "control" offered to our beliefs by our fellow inquirers, and their respective rejections of solipsism.

Quine employs his behaviorist notion of fluency—the lack of conversational breakdown—as the sole criterion of successful translation. There are no semantic constraints upon the recognition of fluent discourse in others; fluency is behaviorally discernible even by those not fluent in the language. To promote fluency in the initial stages of translation, the translator must suppress the difference between how things are and the way she believes them to be: she



reckons her interlocutor's sentences true just in case (in her current manual) they translate sentences *she* calls true. This entails that the corrective epistemic standard provided by other inquirers who she translates as "disagreeing" with her only holds for as long as she stands by her current manual. In the face of sustained "disagreement," she may develop a new manual rather than seriously question the veracity of her own beliefs. But the same principle applies to our home language. All that favors our (typically unthinking) use of homophonic translation is its tendency to result in fluent discourse. Since our semantic theory at home is a fallible part of our web of beliefs, the "control" we offer each other is a standard that can be refused.<sup>35</sup> So Quine finds skepticism about other minds to be a constructive skepticism that is naturalistically answerable: the possibility that I am the sole inquirer, and that everyone I translate as talking about the world are mere automata (whose regular noises I have mistaken for utterances) is conceivable, but falls to Darwin at the scientific tribunal. Positing my evolution with fellow inquirers yields the best explanation I (currently) have for my own ability to inquire.

In contrast, Davidson makes the goal of interpretation imputation of the grasp of the concept of truth. The interpreter is not simply projecting *her* application of the truth predicate onto her interlocutor's utterances, but attributing to her interlocutor recognition of an independent standard transcending them both. If this attribution is justified, she is *obliged* to take her interlocutor's beliefs seriously as a possible corrective to her own.<sup>36</sup> Davidson rules the solipsistic threat (i.e., that *every* interpretation manual I use is mistaken since I am the sole inquirer) radical, not constructive. Solipsism cannot be formulated without ascribing beliefs to ourselves, which requires ascribing the truth-belief contrast to ourselves on the basis of the epistemological triangle, which in turn demands we also ascribe beliefs to another mind.<sup>37</sup> While solipsism is naturalistically answerable, it is humanistically unintelligible.

It is worth underscoring that although I have revealed David-

son's opposition to Quine to be principled, his humanist insistence that other inquirers constitute a robust epistemological standard to which each individual theorist is responsible is not a knockdown argument against Quine. Quine can simply refuse to accept that this standard is as robust as Davidson claims, and embrace the "individualistic" inquiry Davidson abhors as the epistemic lot of the naturalist.

Earlier, I noted that from Quine's naturalist perspective Davidson's focus is the "far end" of the causal chain that extends from the world through our sense organs to eventually bloom into our scientific theories about the world. To Quine, Davidson's radical interpretation is an interesting (and naturalizable) account of how linguistic animals *theorize* each other as minded. In contrast, Quine's empiricism is uninteresting from Davidson's humanist perspective because it describes stages prior to socialization. He thinks that no organism can count as acquiring "knowledge" of the objective world on the basis of its private sensory stimulations, and so Quine's naturalized "epistemology" is merely a metaphorical mentalistic extension of biology.

#### 4 *Interpreting Radical Deviants*

We have now located the source of Quine and Davidson's second-order disagreement as the opposition between naturalism and humanism. I believe that attending to this contrast also deepens our understanding of their first-order disagreements. By way of example, in this section I want to examine their discussion of a limit case in the philosophy of language: might linguistic beings exist whom we cannot interpret? Beyond being exemplary, I think that reflecting on this case exposes a deep connection between the adoption of naturalism or humanism and one's conception of logic. I will argue that Davidson's humanist perspective grounds an argument against the possibility of radically different logics. In Quine's view, the availability of this argument exemplifies the mistake of engaging in

non-naturalized “first philosophy.”

Suppose that we encounter an alien species who look roughly human (with roughly human sense organs) and who appear to be communicating.<sup>38</sup> An intrepid linguist starts trying to decode their language. A philosopher friend suggests she look to Quine’s and Davidson’s radical linguist experiments for guidance. Both start with logic. An early goal is to ascertain onto which of the alien noises she can map our truth-functional operators. For Quine, this step is crucial if she is ever to construct a manual of translation between their language and our own, because they allow us to recursively parse alien utterances. Without them, the envisaged manual would be (at best) an infinite list of paired utterances and useless for practical purposes. Moreover, since basic laws of logic are “obvious” (in the sense that they are “stimulus-analytic” for us, eliciting our assent regardless of how we are currently being stimulated), if she discovers that the aliens deny a logical law under her working translation manual, she ought to reject it rather than ascribe a suspect doctrine, such as “pre-logicality,” to them.<sup>39</sup>

The linguist must take a further step for Davidson’s project of interpretation. She must “read . . . the logical structure of first-order quantification theory (plus identity) into the language” [Davidson, 1984, 136]. Quine rules translation of logical quantifiers indeterminate.<sup>40</sup> To translate quantifiers one has to establish the entities being quantified over, which can be done in a number of incompatible ways that are, nevertheless, consistent with all the data of alien speech dispositions [Quine, 1960, 60-1]. For Quine, a manual of translation is successful if, whenever we utter an alien sentence from our manual, our alien interlocutor reacts in the way we expect her to (if we have issued a command, she performs the act we wanted her to; if we have asked a question, she speaks in a way we can translate as a response, and so on). But Davidson demands something stronger, namely, that we can be confident upon hearing an alien’s utterance that we know to what she is referring. Accordingly, although Davidson thinks “logical form may be indeterminate,” “the

range of indeterminacy is less than Quine thinks it is” [Davidson, 1984, 228]. *Every* act of interpretation requires constructing a Tarski style T-theory for our interlocutor, which necessitates reading first-order quantificational theory into our interlocutor’s language.

Now, the interest of this case surfaces when we suppose the linguist gets into serious difficulties. Try as she might, she cannot devise an entering wedge into the alien tongue. Whatever initial hypotheses she makes about its logical structure, she quickly encounters counterexamples. She begins to suspect that the alien language is uninterpretable.

To Davidson, this suspicion reveals a semantic error. He thinks “an uninterpretable language,” like “a radically different conceptual scheme,” is a contradiction in terms. *Either* the aliens lack language and are unminded, *or* they are using a language that we are currently experiencing difficulty interpreting; there is no third possibility. The linguist’s error is tempting because we cannot speak every language of which we are aware, and it seems only a small step to allow the possibility of languages so different from our own that they exceed our ability to learn them. But Davidson insists on inverting this dependence: something being a language is *predicated* on our ability to interpret it as meaningful (or, in the case of a human language one cannot speak, to interpret those who interpret it as meaningful).

Davidson criticizes Quine’s discussion of this case:

Quine says we might see that members of some group, from outer space, perhaps, are fluently conversing, though we could find no way to map our entities onto parts of their sentences. But how would we identify what we were witnessing as conversation? It is only quantificational structure, as far as we know, that entails an ontology, so if we cannot read such a structure into the spacepeople’s language, we quite literally do not know what they are talking about, if anything [Davidson, 1999, 81-82].<sup>41</sup>

But despite Davidson's dissatisfaction, Quine's evaluation of the case seems extremely similar to his own. Quine would stridently encourage the disheartened linguist to consider her hypotheses scientifically. Having chided her for suspecting that the aliens speak an *uninterpretable* language (since it is possible that future linguists will succeed where she has failed), he would defend the more conservative hypothesis that the alien language currently resists interpretation.<sup>42</sup>

Although neither Davidson nor Quine tolerates the supposition of an "uninterpretable language," the tone of their rejections importantly differs. Echoing Frege's dismissal of "logical aliens" (beings who deny a logical law) as mad, the humanist's ascription of mindedness to her interlocutor is inseparable from recognizing her interlocutor as using a language that cleaves to logical norms and refers to objects in the shared world. While Frege wrote metaphorically that the laws of logic "unfolded" the content of the word "true" [Frege, 1979, 3], Davidson's theory is an account of *why* logical aliens must be excluded from what we can call having cognition (and speaking a language): if a group of beings were uninterpretable in the sense that first-order logic *could not* be read onto their utterances, then they would lack the truth-belief contrast, and so, have no capacity to inquire about the objective world.

In contrast, from Quine's naturalist perspective, the import of first-order logic for the philosophy of language and mind is exhausted in recognizing that fixing the logical structure of the alien language is (currently) crucial to radical translation. More generally, the significance of logic to naturalized philosophy is in characterizing the entailment relation demanded by our current scientific theories.<sup>43</sup> Yet, because our scientific theories are fallible and revisable, so too is the logic grounding them. If we were to develop scientific theories better able to explain our world than our current theories, yet which could not be regimented into our current canonical logic, we ought to excise both our current theories and our current logic from our web of belief. Quine would describe this as a paradigm

shift, an evolution in our conceptual scheme.

Since Quine thinks scientific development might require us to extract even central beliefs from our web, he recognizes no firm link between first-order logic and mindedness. It is "a possibility in principle," he writes, that "another culture, another species, [could] take a radically different line of scientific development, guided by norms that differ sharply from ours . . . [and] predict as successfully and thrive as well as we" [Quine, 1981b, 181]. These norms include the prescriptions issuing from our logical laws, so we cannot know *a priori* that others' theories have quantificational structure, nor can we infer that others' canonical logic is quantificational.

Trying to interpret the species Quine imagines would certainly be difficult, and insofar as we begin radical translation by trying to map our canonical logic onto their utterances, might even seem (initially) impossible. We would be baffled by their alien mindedness. Nevertheless, if we come to understand their "radically different line of scientific development," and the implication relation of their canonical logic (however different from our own), we may be able to reject our logic in favor of theirs and translate them in the future.<sup>44</sup>

Unlike Davidson, Quine is thus willing to accept that thinking, talking aliens might exist who successfully create theories about their world that we are unable to capture using our logic, and whose language is currently uninterpretable to us because we cannot project our logic onto their speech. To Davidson, Quine's naturalistic openness stretches the application of our words to their breaking point. His humanism firmly locates the cases we, humans, find intelligible in the concurrent genesis of our mindedness and linguistic ability:

[A]spects of our interactions with others and the world are partially constitutive of what we mean and think. There cannot be said to be a proof of this claim. Its plausibility depends on a conviction . . . *a priori* if you think, as I tend to, that this is part of what we mean

when we talk of thinking and speaking. After all, the notions of speaking and thinking are ours. [Davidson, 2001a, 294]

For Davidson, philosophers aiming to clarify a concept must investigate how and why we use it in our language. This method suggests that the *purpose* of our concept “truth”—which we impute to another person using an interpretative truth theory—is “[to allow] us to say, in a compact and clear way, what someone who understands [a] speaker . . . knows” [Davidson, 2001c, 156]. A being whose utterances lack the quantificational structure necessary for developing an interpretive truth theory is not a being we cannot understand, but a being who *cannot be understood*, in virtue of lacking what we call “beliefs.”

Having reflected on this case, I think we can construct a Davidsonian argument against radically different logics that parallels his argument against radically different conceptual schemes. Any epistemologist who, like Quine, supposes that we theorize about the world *on the basis of* some logic cannot answer a new sort of skeptic, for, on this view, logical aliens may be developing theories about the world using a “logical” principle that *we* regard as unfounded. But, having recognized that from *their* perspective they are doing nothing wrong, we can wonder whether we are in a similar predicament, developing theories about reality in a way that the aliens think unfounded. We can cogently go on to wonder whether our logic is the *right* logic, and so come to question whether it even makes sense to say that an inquirer *has* a right logic.<sup>45</sup>

Davidson would have us reject the dualism upon which this skeptic relies. Just as there are no schemes by which humans organize empirical content, so too there are no logics by which inquirers theorize about that content. Humans reason logically about the world with which they are in unmediated contact, since to reason just *is* to obey the prescriptions of logical laws. Quine may press Davidson here on how he can establish the astonishing claim that through philosophical, not empirical, investigation we can de-

termine the nature of the mindedness of all the intelligent beings we can possibly encounter. But Davidson’s humanism stands firm in the face of such bewilderment: for him, the concept of “mindedness” is ours, and to determine its applicability we need only—and can only—reflect on its role in *our* language.

## 5 *Adjudicating Between Quine and Davidson*

I have been arguing that Quine and Davidson’s disagreements result from their different conceptions of philosophy, and the corresponding cases that each finds intelligible. Both privilege the limits of our language in grasping what is possible. Yet, for Quine, our language delineates what we *currently* find intelligible, because it is in language that “science ventures its tentative answers” to the vexed questions of “what there is and of what what there is does” [Quine, 2008a, 405]. We endeavor to answer the questions we ask (philosophical or otherwise) on the basis of our best scientific theory of the world; indeed, we are only able to ask them because of that theory. For Davidson, our language delineates what *is* intelligible, because our capacity for speech develops contemporaneously, and interdependently, with our capacity for thinking. Philosophical questions are to be answered by evaluating how and why we acquire and use those of our concepts we find problematic. Despite their wholesale agreement on a variety of philosophical theses, then, their philosophical projects fundamentally differ. How might we arbitrate between these projects?<sup>46</sup>

A decisive resolution is difficult because naturalism and humanism ultimately concern the proper methodology of philosophy. Straightforward philosophical attack risks begging the question. P.F. Strawson speaks to an incommensurable difference between sensibilities:

[T]he choice between [Quine’s naturalism and ordinary language philosophy] is ultimately, perhaps, a matter

of individual temperament; and if I have made my own preference clear, it is no more than that—my own preference. It has been said that the best conceptual scheme, the best system of ideas is the one that gets us around best . . . For one content to lead his life—at least his intellectual life—in the rarefied atmosphere of science, the choice . . . will go one way. For one content to lead *his* intellectual life in the muddier atmosphere of the more mundane . . . it will go the other [Strawson, 1990, 318, original emphasis].

Although Davidson is no ordinary language philosopher, he shares with Strawson the desire not to live his intellectual life in “the rarefied atmosphere of science.” He thinks philosophy is the self-reflective activity of understanding ourselves by investigating the concepts upon which we depend. He meets Quine’s insistence that our grasp of what is possible is contingent, depending on the concepts used in our current scientific moment, with disdain. To humanists, the alien minds (and the future “humans” who understand them) which Quine finds intelligible are *nonhuman* in virtue of having a disjoint set of concepts based on a radically different language. They belong to science fiction, not philosophy, for they are—on proper reflection—unintelligible: we cannot coherently articulate or conceptualize their existence using our language.<sup>47</sup>

If preferring one attitude over the other is a matter of sensibility, we may do well to recall the metaphilosophical project engaged in by Quine’s teacher, Rudolf Carnap. In his masterwork, *The Logical Syntax of Language*, Carnap argues that some philosophical disputes can only be resolved indirectly. Inquirers whose shared sensibility means they agree upon an argumentative framework mutually benefit from engaging each other. But to engage an inquirer who disagrees about the framework in which our arguments are to be evaluated is futile. Carnap recommends that we instead *tolerate* those inquirers whose framework (and sensibilities) we do not share. Once competing projects have developed, the theoretical con-

structions each perspective allows can be compared and a pragmatic adjudication between sensibilities may be possible.<sup>48</sup>

Quine and Davidson’s disagreement cannot be captured by Carnap’s theory,<sup>49</sup> but, having traced it to their opposed sensibilities, we might think it warrants a similarly tolerant attitude. Carnap himself sought philosophical “progress,” hoping to shift argumentative focus away from (what he saw as) fruitless metaphilosophical discussions and onto clearly demarcated philosophical programs. Should we likewise postpone judgment on the debate between naturalism and humanism, and pragmatically decide in the future which viewpoint has allowed for the best theoretical constructions?

I think that this would be a mistake. One reason is that delaying often promotes sidelining, and I have argued that attending to Quine and Davidson’s second-order disagreement is necessary to understand their first-order disagreements. I will close with a different objection to being tolerant in this case, illustrated by another exchange between Quine and Davidson [Quine, 1992, 95-8]. Call two theories *empirically equivalent* iff whatever observation counts for (against) one theory counts for (against) the other. Call a theory a *global system* if it is a theory about our whole world that claims to fit all of our possible observations. Now suppose we come to develop two empirically equivalent global theories, T1 and T2, which are incompatible: some true sentences in one theory are false in the other. Let T1 be a theory that future Quineans have built upon naturalist principles and T2 a theory that future Davidsonians have built upon humanist principles, so that the disputed sentences concern limit cases of intelligibility.<sup>50</sup> What should our attitude be towards the “truth” of T1 and T2?<sup>51</sup>

On Quine’s “sectarian” view, we should hold the theory we are currently using true and the other meaningless or false, but feel free to swap if the new perspective we gain in so doing is helpful. Davidson disagrees. On his “ecumenical” view, we should use subscripts to eliminate formal inconsistency and hold both theories true within some larger, inclusive language. Quine comes to favor sectarian-

ism because naturalism (one cannot adopt a reflective position outside of one's scientific theory) trumps empiricism (empirically adequate global theories ought to be taken as true). As an empiricist he finds ecumenism attractive since both theories are empirically adequate, but, as a naturalist, he thinks one cannot decide *outside both* to treat them evenhandedly. Empiricism is not, of course, the source of Davidson's ecumenism: humanism is.

Suppose you are a sectarian, swapping between T1 and T2 whenever helpful. When using one theory you affirm sentences that you deny when using the other. How is a Davidsonian radical interpreter to interpret you? To avoid uncharitably concluding that you hold true a contradiction, she must interpret you as speaking two languages—or, equivalently, as subscribing to two theories—which she must try to isolate and interpret individually. Since Davidson requires interpreters to be as charitable as possible, she must count each of your theories mostly true. Hence, *she interprets you ecumenically*, since *both* of your theories are true in the terms of her language. Since this policy will go as well for self-interpretation as for the interpretation of others, we ought to be ecumenical if faced with two global theories of our own.

The upshot of this is that the conflict between humanists and naturalists will not be resolved by a comparison of their projects at a point when each has developed. For, unlike the disputants that interest Carnap, they do not share standards of success. For Quine, philosophy stops where science stops. The naturalist's goal is an empirically adequate understanding of reality, and, if she is lucky enough to develop two such theories, she can swap between them as she chooses. Yet the humanist sees important (and distinctively philosophical) work left to be done in understanding the language in which we can frame these competing theories. She will ask what it says about us, and our concepts, that we find truth in both. Without the hope of eventual resolution, to tolerate an interlocutor's naturalism or humanism at a distance—thinking her sensibility beyond the reach of argument—is to accept that what we currently label “phi-

losophy” may be a set of not just distinct, but incommensurable, activities.

I think that accepting the fragmentation of philosophy on the basis of philosophers' differing sensibilities is a mistake. For sensibilities are neither immutable nor beyond reproach. It is preferable, in my view, to critically examine others' sensibilities (and to self-reflectively do the same to one's own): for example, there are cases in which the naturalist might accuse the humanist of an anthropocentric prejudice, and others in which the humanist might accuse the naturalist of a scientific prejudice. This activity not only promotes dialogue between philosophers of different stripes, rather than academic isolation or complacency: it also forces each of us to confront our own blind-spots.<sup>52</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Of the three divergences with Davidson that Quine identifies, he casts their disputes about ontological relativity and observation sentences as essentially terminological [Davidson, 1999, 73-4], and suggests that his own views on truth are “closer to Davidson’s than he seems to have thought” [Davidson, 1999, 77]. Davidson denies the first two claims [Davidson, 1999, 81-2], and is puzzled about how to evaluate the third [Davidson, 1999, 85], which I unpack below in some detail.

<sup>2</sup>Each have advocates who, at least, unite in finding them different. For a defense of Quine, see [Koppelberg, 1990] and [Bergström, 2001]; for a defense of Davidson, see [Rorty, 1991] and [McDowell, 1994].

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, [Tersman, 2001]. Others, such as George Romanos, find their differences of “very little philosophical interest” [Romanos, 1983, 183].

<sup>4</sup>Unlike Quine, Davidson never branded his conception of philosophy. Although recent critics have sought to bring Quine and Davidson together under a variety of umbrellas (including naturalism [Ramberg, 2001] and logical pragmatism [Glock, 2003]), I believe doing so only obscures the source of their disagreement. My choice to call Davidson’s approach to philosophy “humanist” will become clear in the course of my argument.

<sup>5</sup>The “currently accepted” qualifier here is important, showing that Quine’s commitment to physicalism—and even empiricism—is subordinate to his naturalism. In another formulation, Quine writes that to be a naturalist is to accept that “it is within science, and not some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described” [Quine, 1981b, 21]. Our *current* science is empiricist (holding that all our evidence for reality stems from our five senses) and physicalist (holding that the world to be explained is entirely physical). Since future science might conceivably necessitate non-physical theories (Quine remarks some explanations of quantum theory are virtually mentalistic), and since we could conceivably evolve a (verifiable) capacity to know directly about the world that is not mediated by our five senses, either physicalism or empiricism could be abandoned [Quine, 1992, 20-21]. Quine’s commitment to naturalism, though, would remain: naturalistic philosophy would seek to explain the concepts of our new science, and naturalized epistemology would take a revised stance that we are warranted in believing those theories that explain and predict our total sensory and extra-sensory experience of the physical and non-physical world.

<sup>6</sup>It is worth quoting the argument Stroud sketches in full: “The *reductio ad absurdum* would presumably run something like this. Either science is true and gives us knowledge or it does not. If it is not true, nothing we believe about the physical world amounts to knowledge. But if it does give us knowledge, we can see from what it tells us about the meagre impacts at our sensory surfaces during perception that we can never tell whether the external world really is the way we perceive it to be. But if that is so, we can know nothing about the external world. So once

again nothing we believe about the physical world amounts to knowledge” [Stroud, 1984, 228]. As I will now show, this is clearly not the *reductio* which Quine had in mind.

<sup>7</sup>Quine sketches these and other desiderata for scientific hypotheses in the sixth chapter of [Quine and Ullian, 1978].

<sup>8</sup>A variation is a constructive skeptic who doubts one or more of the tribunal’s standards—claiming, for example, that complex theories are preferable to simple ones. In Quine’s view, the onus is upon this skeptic to make the best case she can for complexity. Although he doubts that she will succeed, accepting that she *may* succeed is part of his naturalistic attitude. Science is self-correcting: its standards for judging theories are potential candidates for judgment.

<sup>9</sup>Quine writes, “Our words have no meaning beyond what they acquire through our learning of them, and all our learning of them goes back directly or indirectly to the association of utterances with concurrent sensory stimulation...the existence of external objects is itself just one among the tenets of our scientific theory, albeit a primordial one, and it is sustained to the degree that the theory as a whole conforms to observational data. The very meaning of the existence thesis lies no deeper” [Quine, 2008b, 206-7].

<sup>10</sup>Quine says, “We learn truth conditions of some sentences relative to other sentences. We learn thus to use the component words to form new sentences whose relative truth conditions are derivable. Which of these dependencies of truth value are due to meaning, or language, and which belong rather to a substantive theory that is widely shared, is in my view a wholly unclear question. It is no mere vagueness of terminology that makes language and theory indistinguishable in this connection” [Quine, 1975, 310].

<sup>11</sup>Stroud complains that since Quine’s account of language acquisition (in particular, the acquisition of our term “reality”) is one more part of his naturalist theory, it is just something else which he *believes* to be true, and which is thus subject to radical skeptical doubt [Stroud, 1984, 247]. But the only naturalistically legitimate doubts are those which are scientifically assessable, and hence Quine places the onus upon Stroud to give an alternate theory of language acquisition—more explanatory, conservative, and modest than his own—which explains how and why humans should have, oddly, developed the word “reality” to refer to something that is forever beyond human experience.

<sup>12</sup>Quine is thinking of the pragmatist definition of truth that he finds in Charles Sanders Peirce, which he had explicitly rejected [Quine, 1960, 23-4]. He thinks that we cannot define truth by equating it with the ideal scientific theory of the world, not just because our theories are underdetermined by the total possible evidence we could have for them (thus making it doubtful that there *is* a single ideal scientific theory), but also because of semantic holism. We cannot hold the sentences of our current theory to be true if and only if they “match” sentences within the ideal scientific theory, because isolated sentences are “meaningless intertheo-

retically” [Quine, 1960, 24]. Quine happily concedes that “if empiricism is construed as a theory of truth, then what Davidson imputes to it as a third dogma is rightly imputed and rightly renounced” [Quine, 1981b, 39], because he thinks that there is no need to seek an account of truth that goes beyond Tarski’s analysis. The next section will examine the far deeper significance that Davidson awards the concept of truth.

<sup>13</sup>Davidson knows that this characterization is too simplistic, since nothing in Quine’s theory straightforwardly corresponds to “content.” My stimulations are not the “evidence” for my theory, for example, because I typically know nothing about them. Nevertheless, naturalized epistemologists seek to elucidate the evidential support an individual has for her theory, and make ineliminable reference to private stimulations in doing so: “the theory of evidence, as Quine conceives it, can forget about evidence and simply study the relation between sensory stimulations and the meaning of the observation sentences to which the stimulations prompt assent and dissent” [Davidson, 2005, 52]. Davidson takes this structure to reveal a problematic scheme/content strain in Quine’s thought.

<sup>14</sup>For present purposes, we can define the stimulus meaning of an utterance *u* for a speaker *S* as the ordered pair of sets of stimulations that would elicit assent and dissent respectively from *S* if asked “*u*?” (Quine discusses some complications in [Quine, 1960, 32-4].) The radical translator begins constructing her translation manual by matching observation sentences in the native language to sentences in her own language.

<sup>15</sup>Quine writes, “what floats in the open air is our common language, which each of us is free to internalize in his peculiar neural way” [Quine, 1992, 44]. He now defines a sentence as observational if it has a constant stimulus meaning for an individual over time, and observational for a community if, firstly, it is observational for each member, and secondly, if the members assent to or dissent from the sentence in the same observable circumstances.

<sup>16</sup>To expand a little, Quine would ask Davidson to fill out the details of his skeptical challenge. If we have discovered that some people have deviant neurophysiologies—perhaps when they are wired to brain scanners, different parts of their brain light up when they see warthogs compared to the parts of the brain that light up in most of the population—and the skeptic is a *constructive* skeptic worried that she might be a deviant, the naturalist response is that she should get her brain scanned. If the point is instead that undiscovered deviant neurophysiologies might exist, the naturalist will counsel this *pessimistic* skeptic that, although our neurophysiological theories are fallible and doubtless incomplete, scientific realism is currently our best theory. If the skeptic turns *radical* and suggests that science may *never* reveal the “true” nature of “reality” to us, we must rebuke her for allowing her imagination to overrun her knowledge of semantics. She has failed to describe a meaningful possibility in the terms of our language.

<sup>17</sup>Because of Quine’s predilection for scientific methodology and his attention

to neurology, Davidson claims that Quine is a biologist, while he is the “true” epistemologist [Davidson, 1999, 83]. Quine insists that he is the “true” epistemologist because he is concerned with our knowledge of the external world, labeling Davidson a semanticist [Quine, 1999, 74].

<sup>18</sup>Quine rebukes non-naturalized philosophers for engaging in theoretical “make-believe” by *imposing* conceptual structure onto epistemology, rather than *discovering* structure by attending to the science of psychology [Quine, 1969, 75].

<sup>19</sup>Quine frequently turns to the example of Neurath’s boat to illustrate this point (e.g. [Quine, 1969, 16, 127]; [Quine, 1981b, 178]). Philosophers cannot entirely dismantle the epistemological boat in dry-dock, reconstructing it to conform to their preferred design. Rather, the boat is already at sea, and naturalized philosophers are those enlightened souls who acknowledge they stand on its deck with scientists. The crew can work together to carefully repair damaged parts of the boat (and even improve its overall design), but only while keeping it seaworthy, else they run the risk of drowning in a skeptical sea. We should view empiricism as a plank of the boat that is structurally central though conceivably removable; naturalism is not a plank at all, but the shared attitude of the crew.

<sup>20</sup>This is not to say that Quine *accepts* all of Davidson’s theories (for example, unlike Davidson, Quine believes that we can sensibly talk of animals thinking despite lacking language [Quine, 2008a, 479]), but that he views Davidson’s theories, based as they are in physicalism, scientifically (and hence naturalistically) assessable.

<sup>21</sup>Since Quine thinks that our ability to find others’ utterances meaningful depends on how we are both causally affected at the “It” vertex of the triangle, Davidson counts him an ally in semantic externalism. However, Quine would object to the intensionalist ring of Davidson’s preferred formulation, that our words have their semantic “content” in virtue of causal chains stemming from shared, distal parts of the world.

<sup>22</sup>There is a lot more to say about the extent to which post-Quinean naturalists can capture various aspects of linguistic and epistemic normativity. I shall address this issue in a future paper by contrasting the positions that are available to post-Davidsonian humanists. Equipped with a robust conception of our answerability to each other from the outset, humanists’ accounts of normativity are more organic, if less economical, than naturalists’.

<sup>23</sup>This explains Davidson’s remark that Quine’s epistemology is “individualistic.” Quine’s view remains essentially unchanged from an early paper: “I am a physical object sitting in a physical world. Some of the forces of this physical world impinge on my surface. Light rays strike my retinas; molecules bombard my eardrums and fingertips. I strike back, emanating concentric air-waves . . . our *knowledge* must depend thus solely on surface irritation and internal conditions” [Quine, 1957, 1, my emphasis]. Quine thinks that “surfaces”—and the “stimulations” he later prefers—correctly depict the epistemological subject as part of the



causal structure of the physical world. He also thinks that individuating an individual's perceptions by her stimulations avoids the complications of specifying "the" cause in the external world of our interlocutor's perception at a particular moment [Quine, 2008a, 475]. From Davidson's perspective, this last restriction thwarts our attempt to grasp what our interlocutor's beliefs are about.

<sup>24</sup>Taking naturalized epistemology as his inspiration, Bergström develops an "empiricist" theory of truth along essentially these lines, which Quine finds "appealing" but "disconcerting," and explicitly rejects [Quine, 2008a, 489].

<sup>25</sup>We can use a truth predicate to explicitly mention sentences in our utterances ("Grass is green" is true if...), and thereby avoid use/mention mistakes by signaling to our interlocutor that we are intending to convey what we take the sentence to mean [Quine, 1960, 272]. A truth predicate also allows us to endorse another's assertion without a lengthy repetition (e.g. "That's true") and quickly defer to authorities (e.g. "Everything Einstein said is true").

<sup>26</sup>Quine also holds that truth is "semantically" transcendent, because the truth predicate for a language cannot be defined within that language. Elaborating on truth's "doctrinal" transcendence, Quine writes that he does not believe "science in even the broadest sense" of "informed belief" will take a stance on the truth or falsity of every sentence within a language, making comprehensive knowledge of all truths an unrealizable *goal* for science, not a *product* of scientific inquiry, and truth "[a]n ideal of pure reason, yes, and hallowed be its name" [Quine, 1999, 78]. This jolly remark might seem surprising given his naturalist response to skepticism, for if truth is doctrinally transcendent, surely reality must be too. If, like Bergström, one *identifies* the truths of reality with the truths of one's current theory the skeptic is denied concepts of "truth" or "reality" external to her theory with which to coherently present her challenge. But, in accepting that an individual's concepts of "truth" and "reality" name goals which transcend her current theory, has Quine reopened the door to skepticism? The answer is no, because Quine can maintain that, as we are naming goals from within our theory, these goals are a part of our theory. He will naturalistically rephrase the skeptic's doubt that our current theory even *approximates* the "reality" which is its aim as wondering whether current science, despite its simplicity and impressive predictive power, is badly wrong. Quine will agree that future experiences may show that part of our theory is badly wrong. Yet, once again, to doubt scientific realism on this basis alone—on science's fallible grasp of its goal—is "overreacting" [Quine, 1981a, 475].

<sup>27</sup>Given Davidson's avowed anti-empiricism, and that he places no special weight on the *biological* category human, one may wonder why I am not content to call his position "rationalist." (My thanks to Anil Gupta and Jamsheed Siyar for pressing me here.) But just as I see Quine's naturalism as *prior* to his commitment to empiricism, I see what I am calling Davidson's humanism as *prior* to the rationalist strain in his thought. He tries to convey it by repeatedly (and, unfortunately, rather opaquely) saying that he is appealing to "our" concepts and "our" language

(see especially [Davidson, 1999, 85]; [Davidson, 2001a, 294]; [Davidson, 2005, 84]. What Davidson means by emphasizing "our" is best appreciated by reflecting upon examples. To him, any being which *is* "minded" is a being that *we humans would call* "minded" because the case is described using concepts framed within our language. Similarly, his anti-empiricist view that conceptual content is not determined by sense experience issues from his humanist reflection upon the role played by "conceptual content" in our language. Although it is unfortunate that the word "humanism" is pregnant with other meanings, it firmly locates Davidson's philosophy in reflections on *our* practice, which is more immediate to *us* than the practices of (our conception of) *rational beings*. It also calls to mind the contrast between the human—or social—sciences and the natural sciences which are fundamental for Quine. (The name "socialism" is just as pregnant and risks confusion of Davidson's externalism with Tyler Burge's *social* externalism. Unlike Burge, Davidson does not think that one's society is a relevant parameter for semantic theorizing [Davidson, 2001c, 27].) In my view, just as Quine would relinquish empiricism but not naturalism if science demanded it, Davidson would relinquish his "rationalist" claims but not his humanism if he were presented with a compelling alternative analysis of our concepts "language use" or "mindedness."

<sup>28</sup>For example, in thinking someone else has made a perceptual *mistake* we attribute a false belief to them [Davidson, 1984, 170]). Put another way, we are taking ourselves to recognize a truth about the world which they have failed to grasp.

<sup>29</sup>By appealing to his own ignorance, Davidson leaves himself open to a critic who could provide an account of how non-linguistic rational animals could develop the belief-truth distinction. Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig have recently taken up this challenge, suggesting that a lone, non-linguistic individual could "self-triangulate" with her past self and acquire the belief-truth distinction by theorizing that *she* had made an error about the world [Lepore and Ludwig, 2005, 402]. In my view, this suggestion problematically assumes that we can make sense of a non-linguistic, lone individual individuating her sensory stream, which is necessary if we are to understand her as having "concepts" with determinate references in the world.

<sup>30</sup>For Davidson, to have a belief is to be *interpretable* as having that belief. His reasoning here (as elsewhere) is not crudely verificationist. He does not *directly* infer that a being has no beliefs from the fact that we cannot interpret it. Rather, this inference is based upon his humanist grasp of the role "belief" plays in our language. In Davidson's view, the primary application of "belief" is in situations where we wish to ascribe to minds (either our own or another's) some particular propositional content being endorsed. If the "mind" in question cannot be interpreted as endorsing a particular content, as *having a belief that  $\phi$* , then any temptation we have to say that the "mind" nevertheless *does* have "beliefs" is at best a metaphorical extension of our concepts (e.g. "My cat believes that it

is dinner time”). These considerations lead Davidson to defend claims that others have found counterintuitive, e.g. neither non-linguistic animals nor pre-linguistic infants have thoughts or beliefs [Davidson, 1984, 163]; [Davidson, 2001c, 101].

<sup>31</sup>Compare Stroud: “I could not check my beliefs about the physical world against the facts of the world [by using scientific testing procedures such as observation] . . . if I at the same time [regard] *all* my beliefs about the world as nothing more than a ‘construction or projection from stimulations’ in the way Quine intends. I would have no independent information about that world that I could use as a test or a check” [Stroud, 1984, 244, original emphasis]. Stroud’s criticism of Quine’s view is that *because* my beliefs concerning the world lack an independent check, they *may* all be wrong. Quine can respond to Stroud, as I argued above, by agreeing with him that our scientific testing procedures—even those as basic as observation—may indeed mislead us, because all of science is fallible. This is why Quine supposes that “the Humean predicament is the human predicament” [Quine, 1969, 72]; although we lack certainty about the nature of the world, we can nevertheless theorize successfully about it (and moreover, theorize about how we can theorize successfully about it). In contrast, Davidson goes beyond Stroud in insisting that the “independent information” needed for an individual to have a “test or a check” about her beliefs concerning the world is knowledge of another’s mind, for it is only by interpreting another’s mind that one can be said to have beliefs about the world oneself. Davidson’s humanist criticism of Quine is that, *because* in Quine’s epistemology my “beliefs” concerning the world lack the independent check garnered by another mind, they do not count as beliefs at all.

<sup>32</sup>Indeed, Quine’s appeal to empathy demonstrates that he recognizes the need for a subjective-objective contrast in language acquisition [Quine, 1992, 42]. In Quine’s view, a mother teaching her daughter how to apply color words, for example, must empathetically project herself into her daughter’s position and imagine what aspect of their shared environment she is attending to in order to appropriately reward or admonish her intermittent utterances of “red!”

<sup>33</sup>In an interview with Giovanna Borradori in 1990, Davidson encapsulates his position: “The empiricists have it exactly backwards, because they think that first one knows what’s in his own mind, then, with luck, he finds out what is in the outside world, and, with even more luck, he finds out what is in somebody else’s mind. I think differently. First we find out what is in somebody else’s mind, and by then we have got all the rest. Of course, I really think that it all comes at the same time” [Borradori, 1994, 50].

<sup>34</sup>Quine thus appeals to his naturalist methodology to refuse Davidson’s distinctively humanist epistemological claim. But this cuts both ways. The priority Davidson gives to analyzing the concepts expressed in our language, and his resulting inability to conceive of how beings could develop what humans call “minds” with “beliefs” about the external world *except* through linguistic interpretation, undermines the import of Quine’s naturalist theory of reification, based as it is on an

*individual’s* sensory stimulations.

<sup>35</sup>I am not suggesting that Quine thinks that the naturalist *should* refuse this standard: far from it, given the fluent conversations she generally enjoys with others. The point is rather that she *may* intelligibly refuse it. Even if *every* member of her speech community were to object to one of her beliefs, the stubborn naturalist is in principle free to explain the “disagreement” by supposing that the fault lies in her translation manual, not her own belief. She then ought to justify her hypothesis at the scientific tribunal by setting about constructing an alternative manual.

<sup>36</sup>This is why Davidson holds disagreement over words to be cause for mutual reinterpretation about the world. Communication is a constant struggle to interpret, and make ourselves interpretable to, our interlocutor [Davidson, 2005, 102].

<sup>37</sup>Similarly, Davidson rules out skepticism about the external world: since it is part of any interpretive project of discovering beliefs (including self-interpretation of one’s own beliefs) to rule most of the beliefs one discovers true, we cannot make sense of the possibility of a person having totally false beliefs about the world [Davidson, 2001c, 150].

<sup>38</sup>Discussing a similar case, Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests we may have evidence that the aliens are communicating if, when we gag them, “their actions fall into confusion” [Wittgenstein, 1951, §207]. There are a surprising number of weird and wonderful aliens that philosophers have imagined encountering to test their intuitions about language ascription (see especially [Tennant, 1999], and [Marvan, 2003]). Nevertheless, since my aim here is to explain how Quine and Davidson differ in evaluating these sorts of cases rather than to defend a particular claim in the philosophy of language, I shall restrict my focus as far as possible to this relatively pedestrian “human-like” alien species.

<sup>39</sup>Upon witnessing native behavior he found inexplicable, the pioneering anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl posited that the natives he was observing had a “prelogical mentality” [Lévy-Bruhl, 1926]. Quine objected that this overwhelmingly implausible hypothesis had to be false: “pre-logicality is a trait injected by bad translators” [Quine, 1963, 387]. But, logic has no monopoly on “overwhelmingly implausible” hypotheses. Quine thinks we have reason to reject our manual if we discover that we are translating *any* truth we consider “obvious” as false for the aliens (e.g. if the aliens dissent from the utterance we thought to translate by our “it is raining” on a rainy day, we have probably gone wrong).

<sup>40</sup>Strictly speaking, Quine thinks that the translation of truth-functional operators is also indeterminate. We might construct two equally successful yet jointly incompatible manuals which assign the truth-functional operators to different alien noises [Quine, 1975, 314, 319]. But we cannot *begin* translating until we have provisionally taken some alien noises to be assent and dissent, and a key part of our evidence for doing so will be the aliens’ reactions to the noises we translate as the truth-functional operators (e.g. the aliens should “assent” to all utterances they “dissent” from when we attach the “negation” noise), and so Quine begins describ-

ing radical translation with this much of the alien tongue fixed (though subject to future disconfirmation). Although Quine takes the translation of the quantifiers to be indeterminate, he thinks we have an excellent *pragmatic* reason to translate the aliens as using first-order logic because this hypothesis generally results in smooth dialogue. This is true of other humans as much as of aliens.

<sup>41</sup>A litany of philosophers, including [Blackburn, 1984], [Bar-On, 1994], and [Hacker, 1996], mistake such remarks to expose Davidson as a verificationist, an attitude widely excoriated as a remnant of logical positivism. But rather, it is Davidson's humanism which justifies this view. Since what humans find intelligible is based upon the way we apply concepts in our linguistic interactions, if our words are divorced from their ordinary uses—for example, if we try to contemplate an uninterpretable language—we quickly fall into unintelligibility.

<sup>42</sup>Quine may add that she should consider alternative hypotheses. Perhaps the alien noises merely function as warning cries, like the cries of seagulls. We might, that is, be able to locate alien “observation sentences” and translate them after a fashion (perhaps they always cry “gavagai” when near a predator), but, because we cannot find any logical structure in their noises, be disinclined to call their cries “language” (unless we wish to say seagulls use language). The details of the case will determine which hypothesis is preferable. To take just one example, the length of observation will be a relevant parameter. If the linguist is venting her frustration after working for a few hours, we may fault her; if she has been working for a few years, we may question the aliens' capacity for language.

<sup>43</sup>Having established a canonical logic into which contemporary scientists can regiment their theories, Quine thinks ontological philosophers can describe the general categories to which current science is committed. He presents his own canonical logic in *Philosophy of Logic* ([Quine, 1986]).

<sup>44</sup>This famous passage from Quine might be thought to discredit my interpretation: “[Consider] the familiar remark that even the most audacious system-builder is bound by the law of contradiction. How is he really bound? If he were to accept contradiction, he would so re-adjust his logical laws as to insure distinctions of some sort; for the classical laws yield all sentences as consequences of any contradiction. But then we would proceed to reconstrue his heroically novel logic as a non-contradictory logic, perhaps even as familiar logic, in perverse notation” [Quine, 1960, 59]. Many critics have taken Quine's point here to be that, try as one might, one cannot help but be bound by the classical logical constants if one is to construct a theory (e.g. [Berger, 1990]). On this reading, Quine is developing a powerful argument that the law of contradiction is incontrovertible for all rational beings since one cannot deny it and still construct predictive theories. But what Quine actually says in this passage is that *we*, i.e. classical logicians, *would* reconstrue the alien logic in our own terms. By this, Quine means that our manual of translation would use our current logic to describe their deviant theories so that we can begin communicating with them (in Quine's attenuated sense). Given that

*our* current logic is the basis of our theories, beginning translation by locating a pattern of language in the native behavior onto which our logical structure can be read is an excellent rule for translation. Yet, given the indeterminacy of translation, to begin translating in this way is still a pragmatic convention of *ours*, and does not reveal an “essential” truth about the role of classical logic in the alien tongue or the centrality of classical logic to all languages or all theories. Rather, it only shows that first-order logic is *currently* central to *our* web of belief, and currently indispensable for our projects of radical translation. Quine writes that in radical translation, “‘Save logical truth’ . . . is a rule which, compatibly with all stimulus meanings and other verbal dispositions, could be obeyed or flouted. But it is not capricious. The very want to determinacy puts a premium on adhering to this strong and simple rule as partial determinant” [Quine, 1975, 318].

<sup>45</sup>It should be clear that Quine would not find this new skeptical argument compelling. To the naturalist who appreciates that all science is fallible, wondering “whether our logic is the *right* logic” upon encountering such aliens (where “rightness” is just adequacy for future theorizing) is the appropriate attitude to have. Space prevents me from exploring the important similarities (and just as important, but less obvious, differences) between Davidson and Frege exposed by this Davidsonian argument (see [Frege, 1997, 203]).

<sup>46</sup>I have not sought to criticize controversial theses to which both Quine and Davidson subscribe, like anomalous monism, the denial of which might lead one to think both wrong. But since naturalism and humanism are *perspectives* one may take toward philosophy, even their critics stand to learn from attending to their disagreement.

<sup>47</sup>One should not be misled by my use of “nonhuman” here; I am not suggesting Davidson thinks that there could be radically different *nonhuman* conceptual schemes. Davidson does not think that concepts exist independently of us to be split into “human” and “nonhuman” ways of understanding the world. The category of concepts *is* human, so using “nonhuman” in this context is just another way of marking what humanists find unintelligible.

<sup>48</sup>This is how Carnap suggests we ought to treat the disagreement between classical logicians and intuitionists. Philosophers should use whichever logic best fits their sensibility, tolerate those who make a different choice, and get on with the business of analyzing scientific language. At some future time, philosophers could reflect on which logic had allowed for the best explanation of science [Carnap, 2002, 164-5, 332].

<sup>49</sup>A detailed explanation of why not must await another paper. Carnap argues that inquirers need to agree on a system of logic and which truths they consider “analytic” before they can debate. Yet, Quine and Davidson both reject the analytic/synthetic distinction. If there is a sense in which naturalism and humanism are incommensurable, it cannot be explained in this way. There is also subtle work to be done in explaining how Quine's and Davidson's appeals to the intelligible limits

of language is compatible with their rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction. McDowell, for example, argues Davidson's perspective allows the distinction to be recuperated in a new form [McDowell, 1994, 157-8]: analytic truths become those which delineate the necessary structure of our human understanding. Quine also came to recuperate the distinction, holding as analytic those sentences that all individuals within a community learn to hold true when learning their language [Quine, 1974, 78-80]. I suspect that this continuity reveals important insights into not only Quine and Davidson, but also the methodology of analytic philosophy.

<sup>50</sup>For example, T1 will endorse, and T2 will reject, the sentence "successfully interpreting alien scientists might require radically altering our logic."

<sup>51</sup>Assume no general principle will decide the case; i.e., T1 and T2 are equally simple, conservative, and so on.

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