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Davidson's Wittgenstein

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Although the later Wittgenstein appears as one of the most influential figures in Davidson's later works on meaning, it is not, for the most part, clear how Davidson interprets and employs Wittgenstein's ideas. In this paper, I will argue that Davidson's later works on meaning can be seen as mainly a manifestation of his attempt to accommodate the later Wittgenstein's basic ideas about meaning and understanding, especially the requirement of drawing the seems right/is right distinction and the way this requirement must be met. These ideas, however, are interpreted by Davidson in his own way. I will then argue that Davidson even attempts to respect Wittgenstein's quietism, provided that we understand this view in the way Davidson does. Having argued for that, I will finally investigate whether, for Davidson at least, his more theoretical and supposedly explanatory projects, such as that of constructing a formal theory of meaning and his use of the notion of triangulation, are in conflict with this Wittgensteinian quietist view.

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1. Davidson on Wittgenstein

It is hard to deny that Donald Davidson's later works on meaning have been in some fashion inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (see, e.g., Davidson 1991b, 1992, 1994b, 1995, 1999b, 2001e). The difficult task, however, is to clearly identify such influences since he seems to have his own unique reading of the main doctrines of the *Investigations*, a sort of reading that has not yet been properly investigated. What is clear is that Wittgenstein's remarks on private language, rule-following, and ostensive learning are taken seriously by Davidson. To see how these ideas manifest themselves in Davidson's works, we should first briefly look at his later view of meaning, in which such Wittgensteinian ideas are the main concern of Davidson.

1.1. Davidson's later view of meaning

Let me briefly explain what I mean by Davidson's "later works". By Davidson's "earlier works" I mean his famous papers on how to construct a formal theory of meaning on the basis of a Tarski-style theory of truth and the discussion of radical interpretation (see, e.g., Davidson 1965, 1967, 1968, 1973a,b, 1974a). In this period, Davidson focuses on the features of a theory of truth which can systematically specify, in its theorems, the truth-condition of any sentence of the language for which the theory is constructed, via specifying, in the theory's axioms, the semantic properties of different parts of the sentences, such as the reference of names and the satisfaction conditions for predicates. In order to be assured that the theory is producing the right sort of truth-conditions, it should be constructed by an interpreter (a radical interpreter) who supposedly possesses no detailed information of the language under consideration and the mental states of the speaker.

Davidson's "later works", though still take such Tarski-style theories to be what can best describe the linguistic skills of the speaker to speak and the interpreter to understand, shift the focus to the conditions on success in communication, as well as the conditions on how language and thought may generally emerge. His discussion of the role of rules and conventions in explaining such success and his remarks on the notion of triangulation appear in this part of his philosophical writings. Such a shift, however, is *not* a shift from one project to an entirely different one; rather a shift in focus. Davidson does not abandon the important results of his earlier project; rather he applies them to a different sort of situation. He is still concerned with how a theory can systematically specify the meaning of the speakers' utterances, whether they speak in the standard way or deviate from it. Nonetheless, it is clear that the sort of problems he faces in this case—i.e., the case of "non-radical interpretation" (see, e.g., Heal 1997, 300)—is in some respects different from those he had to deal with in his discussion of radical interpretation, though insofar as "understanding" the speech of others is concerned, the problems do not differ dramatically.[1]

The way I want to construe Davidson's later view of meaning is to treat it as a view which emerges as an alternative to what Davidson takes to be an inadequate, but widely accepted, explanation of the practice of meaning something by an utterance. Davidson's attack on this view starts especially by his paper "Communication and Convention" (1984a).[2] In this paper,

[1] For more on this issue, see Glüer (2011, 110–11, 121–24), Heal (1997), and Ludwig and Lepore (2005, 22–23, 74–77).

[2] It is not a mere coincidence, I believe, that such an attack on conventionalism and communitarianism starts less than two years after the publication of Saul Kripke's book on Wittgenstein (1982), in which Kripke takes Wittgen-

Davidson argues that the practice of speaking a language is not at all comparable to the practices in which following rules or conforming to conventions is essential, such as that of playing and winning a game or doing mathematics. The latter practices have a combination of features that speaking a language lacks.[3] Here, we are most concerned with the alternative view which Davidson arrives at after rejecting the above view. According to this alternative Davidsonian view, "linguistic communication does not require . . . rule-governed repetition" at all (Davidson 1984a, 279–80).[4]

For Davidson, "convention does not help explain what is basic to linguistic communication" (1984a, 280), and this is the idea that is repeated, and more broadly argued for, in his more recent papers on the topic, at least in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (1986), "The Second Person" (1992), and "The Social Aspect of Language" (1994b). Davidson now believes that following rules or conforming to certain conventions is *neither necessary nor sufficient* for successful communication between two people to be achieved.[5] Davidson's reason for such a claim goes as follows. Knowledge of the conventional meaning of words is not necessary because the speaker may use her words differently from the way her speech-community uses them and, according to Davidson, we usually have no trouble understanding such utterances.[6] The reason is that if the available evidence and clues are enough for the interpreter to understand the speaker's utterance in the way the speaker intended it to be understood, communication has been successful, and the interpreter's or the speaker's knowledge of what the words conventionally or otherwise mean would thereby play no essential role in explaining such success. Nor is knowledge of the conventional meaning of words sufficient for their communication to be successful because in order to understand what the speaker intends to mean by her words, even if she means what the words conventionally mean, the interpreter needs knowledge and information over and above mere knowledge of the conventional meaning of the words. The interpreter at least needs to know that the speaker *intended* her words to mean what they conventionally mean: "even when a speaker is speaking in accord with a socially acceptable theory he speaks with the intention of being understood in a certain way, and this intention depends on . . . how he believes or assumes they will understand him" (Davidson 1994b, 122). Much different information is involved in reaching such an understanding including, for instance, knowledge of the fact that the speaker, if happy, changes her use of such and such words in such and such a way and if sad, would conform to the standard way of using them, etc.

The next problem which Davidson's alternative view faces is to answer the question how we can decide whether the speaker has gone wrong, whether she succeeds (or fails) to speak in an understandable way. Davidson's solution is to take "the intention to be taken to mean what one wants to be taken to mean" to constitute a *norm* against which the verbal behaviour of the speaker can be measured. As he puts it, such an intention "is common to all verbal behaviour" and "provides a purpose which

stein to be offering a sort of communitarianist view of meaning. Although, in "Communication and Convention", Davidson does not mention Wittgenstein or Kripke's Wittgenstein, in the later relevant papers—which basically develop similar criticisms to those put forward in "Communications and Convention"—Wittgenstein and then Kripke's Wittgenstein gradually show up. See, e.g., Davidson (1992, 1994b, 2001e).

[3]The features are put by Davidson as follows: (1) Those who play a game usually want, or at least, "*represent* themselves as wanting to win"; (2) "one can win only by making moves defined by the rules of the game, and winning is wholly defined by the rules"; and (3) "winning can be, and often is, an end in itself" (Davidson 1984a, 267). According to Davidson, "no linguistic behaviour has this combination of features" (Davidson 1984a, 267).

[4]For more on Davidson's criticisms of conventionalism, see, e.g., Glüer (2001, 2013), Fennell (2015), and Wheeler (2013).

[5]Davidson does not draw a clear distinction between the notion of a rule and that of a convention. As we will see, he later uses these notions, together with those of institutions, customs, norms, and standard, interchangeably.

[6]See Davidson (1986, 90), especially for his famous example of Mrs. Malaprop.

any speaker must have in speaking, and thus constitutes a norm against which speakers and others can measure the success of verbal behavior" (Davidson 1994b, 120). Such a norm is what Davidson is left with after arguing that conforming to the social way of using words is neither necessary nor sufficient for success in communication. Davidson takes the idiolect—the particular way a speaker intends to speak on particular occasions—rather than the language—as a previously fixed set of (syntactical and semantical) rules—to be primary. The problem is "if the former [is conceptually primary], the apparent absence of a social norm makes it hard to account for success in communication; if the latter, the danger is that the norm has no clear relation to practice" (Davidson 1994b, 109). Davidson rejected the philosophical importance of the latter norm, that is, the requirement of speaking as others do. Davidson's alternative norm is linked with the purpose Davidson thinks every speaker has, and must have, when she starts a conversation with another: she intends her utterance to be understood in a particular way, whether or not such a way of speaking accords with the conventional way. This is, one may prefer to add, an action-guiding norm governing the speaker's way of using words and providing Davidson with a different notion of correctness. If the speaker deviates from the conventional way of speaking, it does not follow that she has gone wrong *if* her utterance is understood in the way she intended. She has gone wrong *if* she fails to make her utterance understood by her hearer. Thus Davidson concludes, "meaning . . . gets its life from those situations in which someone intends . . . that his words will be understood in a certain way, and they are" (Davidson 1994b, 120; see also 1986, 97, 99, 101; 1991a 1–2; 1993a, 171–74; 1987a, 457; 1992, 111–12, 116). The speaker is not even required to continue speaking as she did in the past since, again, success in this practice depends on the speaker's intentionally or otherwise providing enough evidence and clues for her interpreter to reach the intended interpretation of the speaker's utterance (see, e.g., Davidson 1984a, 277–78; 1992, 114). Therefore, if there is anything to be "shared" by the speaker and the interpreter, it is what the *speaker* means by her utterance, that is, their "understanding of the speaker's words" (Davidson 1986, 96). They are not required to mean the same thing by the same word or speak as any others do. Rather "meaning something requires that by and large one follows a practice of one's own, a practice that can be understood by others" (Davidson 1994b, 125).

2. Davidson on the Wittgensteinian Seems Right/Is Right Distinction

Davidson's concern was to accommodate

> the distinction Wittgenstein has made central to the study of meaning, the distinction between using words correctly and merely thinking one is using them correctly, without appeal to the test of common usage. (Davidson 1994b, 119)

Recall that Davidson has already rejected the sort of straightforward criterion which took conforming to, or failing to conform to, some previously fixed conventions to be what determines the speaker's success, or failure, in her practice of meaning something by an utterance. But, as Davidson asks,

> if there is no social practice with which to compare the speaker's performance, won't whatever the speaker says be, as Wittgenstein remarks, in accord with some rule (i.e., in accord with some language)? (Davidson 1992, 116)

What worried Davidson was indeed to find a way to avoid the paradox which Wittgenstein has famously introduced in the *Philosophical Investigations*:

> This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.
> (Wittgenstein 1953, §201)

Having rejected the conventionalist and communitarianist norms, Davidson now sees his account vulnerable to this paradox: given that he has granted the speaker with freedom of using words in whatever way she may intend, if there is no public criterion for assessing the speaker's responses, we must take whatever seems right to her to be right, no matter how she responds. Davidson's concern was to rescue his account from such a threat.

He proposed "being interpreted as intended" as his new norm for evaluating the behaviour of the speaker. Although the speaker follows a practice of her own, she may still fail to speak in an interpretable way because, for instance, she may fail to provide enough evidence for her interpreter to successfully interpret her utterance. In such cases, although it may *seem* to the speaker that she means something by her utterance, she actually fails to do so.[7] This criterion helps Davidson to distinguish between the situations in which the speaker merely intends her utterance to be interpreted in a particular way and the situations in which her utterance is interpreted in that way. On this view, however, there has to be a second person interpreting the speaker's utterances if there is to be any account of error available at all, i.e., any chance to draw the seems right/is right distinction. For Davidson, such a distinction and the way to draw it are all fundamentally Wittgensteinian. As he says, the solution "Wittgenstein seems to offer . . . is: without an interpreter no substance can be given to the claim that the speaker has gone wrong" (Davidson 1992, 116). These remarks more clearly appear in Davidson's discussion of the notion of triangulation.

2.1. Triangulation and ostensive learning

We can see how fundamental the Wittgensteinian aforementioned distinction becomes for Davidson by looking at his discussion of the notion of triangulation.[8] Davidson is an externalist about meaning. According to his version of externalism, "what a person's words mean depends in the most basic cases on the kinds of objects and events that have caused the person to hold the words to be applicable" (Davidson 1987a, 456; see also 1991b, 213; 2001e, 138; 1988b, 44–45). This means that in order to understand what the speaker means by her words, the interpreter must at least successfully determine to what objects or events in the world the speaker intends to apply her words. He must find out what (typically) causes the speaker to utter the words she does. In this sense, the "actual external cause" of the speaker's utterance must be determined first if the utterance is to have any meaning at all. Davidson's claim is that without the presence of a second person linguistically interacting with the speaker, there would be no determinate cause for the speaker's responses and thoughts at all and thereby no meaning and mental content. This claim and the problems which Davidson's discussion of triangulation detects, on my reading of Davidson's remarks on these issues, are all deeply inspired by Wittgenstein's remarks on private language and ostensive learning. Let me briefly introduce their views of ostensive learning. In order to do so, I will first focus on the way Wittgenstein introduces what he calls "ostensive teaching of words". It is important for our discussion because, for Davidson, "ostensive learning . . . is an example of triangulation" (Davidson 2001e, 114).

Wittgenstein introduces the notion of ostensive learning in this famous passage:

> An important part of the training will consist in the teacher's pointing to the objects, directing the child's attention to them, and at the same time uttering a word . . . (I do not want to call this "ostensive definition", because the child cannot as yet *ask* what the name is. I will call it "ostensive teaching of words" . . .).
>
> (Wittgenstein 1953, §6)

[7] For Davidson, this also explains the fallibility of self-knowledge. See, e.g., Davidson (1984b, 111).

[8] This notion appears in several of Davidson's writings, see, e.g., Davidson (1982, 105; 1991b, 212–13; 1992, 117–19; 1994b, 124; 1999b, 128–30; 2001b; and 2001e, 143).

Would engaging in this process be enough to say that the learner has learnt the meaning of the words she utters or their correct use? Wittgenstein and Davidson both reply negatively. I believe their reasons are similar, though their focus is different: Davidson thinks that "Wittgenstein . . . thought this point applies only when the stimulus is private; I think it holds for all cases" (Davidson 1994b, 124). Wittgenstein focuses on "private ostension definitions", while Davidson's concern includes all sorts of stimuli, especially the external ones (though as Wittgenstein's examples in the above passage show, Wittgenstein too begins by the process of learning how to apply certain words to external objects). Davidson even extends his point to the case of learning the *conventional meanings* of words:

> If we think of ostension only as the teaching of a socially viable meaning we miss the essential [Wittgensteinian] lesson, which is that for the learner ostension is not learning something already there. The learner is in a meaning baptism. (Davidson 1997c, 140)

Wittgenstein made a similar point when he said "the child cannot as yet *ask* what the name is" (Wittgenstein 1953, §6). What does Wittgenstein think of this process?

The way our words get connected with certain items in the world is the concern of Wittgenstein in the beginning of his *Investigations* when he talks about Augustine's picture of human language: "the individual words in language name objects . . . Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands" (1953, §1). Our first impression is that the link between language and the world is secured through engaging in the process of ostensive learning. As Wittgenstein says, "when they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved toward something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out" (§1). In this process of, say, conditioning and generalizing, "I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires" (§1). Wittgenstein's concern here is as general as Davidson's: he talks about learning words by ostension when the stimuli are external (observable objects and events) and then using them in the case of private stimuli. But Wittgenstein's reasons for why this process alone fails to bestow meaning to our words are offered in his discussion of private ostension definitions:

> What would it be like if human beings shewed no outward signs of pain . . . ? Then it would be impossible to teach a child the use of the word "tooth-ache". Well, let's assume the child . . . invents a name for the sensation! . . . When one says "He gave a name to his sensation" one forgets that a great deal of stage-setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense. (Wittgenstein 1953, §257)

What is the real problem here? To name something and to understand what that word names requires understanding what it is to go wrong, that is, to make a mistake, and this cannot be achieved in isolation, without having some public criterion for evaluating the learner's responses. This problem is the main, or perhaps the only, concern of Davidson's discussion of the notion of triangulation: What does it take for a creature to acquire the concept of error, to command the distinction between what seems right to it and what is actually right? The paradox Wittgenstein earlier introduced is the result of failing to provide such a norm against which the speaker's responses can be assessed.

Wittgenstein believes that if there is no manifestation of these inner states or processes and no public criterion for evaluating the learner's relevant responses, we have no other way than to embrace the unwelcome conclusion that whatever seems right to her is right. When there are others observing and responding to the speaker's responses, there appears an opportunity to tell whether the speaker has responded correctly to such and such stimuli. Otherwise, the paradox of everything's being right and wrong at the same time would be waiting for us. Davidson nicely puts his reading of Wittgenstein's remarks on this matter as follows:

> Wittgenstein has suggested, or at least I take him to have suggested, that we would not have the concept of getting things wrong or right if it were not for our interactions with other people. (Davidson 1999b, 129)

As Wittgenstein says in his discussion of rule-following:

> to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule "privately": otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it. (Wittgenstein 1953, §202)

Davidson points to a similar problem:

> in the early stage of ostensive learning, error has no point for the learner . . . and where error has no point, there is not a concept or thought. (Davidson 2000, 14)

As we will see in the next section, especially in Davidson's discussion of triangulation, this Wittgensteinian problem does not disappear simply if we shift from internal stimuli to external ones, such as tables and trees.

Davidson also argues against the claim that *correction* alone may enable the learner to acquire the concept of error. When the learner goes wrong, for instance, by applying "table" to a chair, the teacher can correct her responses and it then seems as if she is going right by now applying "table" in the way her teacher does. Davidson, however, believes that

> corrections . . . can in themselves do no more than improve the dispositions we were born with, and dispositions, as Wittgenstein emphasized, have no normative force. (Davidson 1997c, 138)

Dispositions do not tell how the learner *ought* to use the word in future cases; they rather tell how she *is* using the word. For Davidson, the learner *herself* should acquire and apply the concept of truth: she should master the seems right/is right distinction. This is the difference between mere disposition to respond in a certain way and *judging* that a way of responding is correct (correct, of course, in the way Davidson introduced the notion, that is, speaking in an understandable way). Animals' responses can be corrected: we can train a parrot to respond by "table" to certain things and if it goes wrong, we can correct it. But the stimuli and the responses are viewed as "correct" only from *our* point of view, from the point of view of those who already possess the concept of truth. Thus,

> you can deceive yourself into thinking that the child is talking if it makes sounds which, if made by a genuine language user, would have a definite meaning. (It is even possible to do this with chimpanzees). (Davidson 1999b, 127)

Engaging in the process of ostensive learning is not by itself enough to say of the creature that it possesses meaningful responses:

> The interaction between adult and child in the ostensive learning situation . . . provides the necessary conditions for the emergence of language and propositional thought, by creating a space in which there can be success and failure. What is clear is that we can say the child thinks something is red . . . *only if* it appreciates the distinction between the judgment and the truth for itself . . . It is the step from . . . mere conditioned response to what Wittgenstein called "following a rule". This is where the concept of truth enters. (Davidson 2000, 13–14)

Judgements involve the possession of a rich set of concepts and propositional attitudes:

> being able to discriminate cats is not the same thing as having the concept of a cat. You have the concept of a cat only if you can make sense of the idea of *misapplying* the concept, of believing or judging that something is a cat which is not a cat. (Davidson 1999b, 124)[9]

Crediting the speaker with the concept of truth, which enables her to name things, really presupposes "a great deal of stage-setting in the language", as Wittgenstein said. Thus, for both

[9] And the holism of the mental would imply that "unless you have a lot of beliefs about what a cat is, you don't have the concept of a cat" (Davidson 1999b, 124). See also Davidson (1982, 98–99).

Davidson and Wittgenstein, ostensive learning, corrections and mere correlation between the creatures' responses (between, for instance, the parrot's and mine) would not be sufficient to say that the learner has mastered the seems right/is right distinction, though it seems to be a necessary condition.[10]

This, however, does not mean that there is no difference between Wittgenstein and Davidson on this matter. Both agreed that lacking a public criterion for assessing the speaker's responses leads to the conclusion that

> whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about right. (Wittgenstein 1953, §258)

Davidson, however, believes that it does not matter whether the teacher teaches the learner to respond in the same way in which her speech community does. For Davidson, such a particular (Dummettian) notion of "agreement in use" is not basic; it is rather a "shallow notion of correct usage" (Davidson 1986, 91) which should be thrown away. It is true that Davidson seems to depart from Wittgenstein here, but what he adds later makes his view again very similar to Wittgenstein's. Davidson believes that essential to the development of thought and language is

> the fact that all people generalize naturally in much the same ways . . . The sharing of responses to stimuli found similar allows an interpersonal element to emerge. (Davidson 1997c, 140)

This is not a radically different claim from Wittgenstein's. For Davidson, in order for the speaker's responses to be counted as correct she does not have to go on in the same way as others do. But, at least at the earlier stages of language learning, sharing similar responses to similar things in the world is taken by Davidson to be an essential element in the emergence of language and thought.[11] In the end, they both take the existence of a certain sort of shared responses to be fundamental for the creatures to be said to command the seems right/is right distinction.[12]

[10] As Wittgenstein says, ostensive learning "will form an important part of the training" (Wittgenstein 1953, §2).

[11] For a similar point, see Miller (2017, 320–23).

2.2. Triangulation, private language, and externalism

As previously indicated, Davidson is an externalist about meaning, but whether the later Wittgenstein approves this view is a matter of controversy. In order to investigate whether Davidson is following Wittgenstein with regard to the problems with meaning-determination and other relevant issues, we do not need to show that Wittgenstein too is an externalist or if he is, his version of externalism is compatible with Davidson's. It would rather be enough to show that Davidson's concerns here are largely Wittgensteinian. However, with regard to the matter of externalism, both can be said to take the *context* of use very seriously, together with the necessity of the existence of a public criterion for assessing the speaker's responses and the dependence of such a criterion on the presence of a community of speakers, or at least another speaker, interacting with the subject. William Child, for instance, believes that, for Wittgenstein too,

> the content of a subject's thoughts and words . . . depends not just on . . . the words she is disposed to utter, but also on the context in which these things occur. And, like modern externalists, Wittgenstein sometimes supports his externalist claims by Twin-Earth-style thought experiments. (Child 2010, 63)

Diane Proudfoot also believes that "Wittgenstein was an externalist", according to whom

> A's psychological states and their representational contents are individuated in terms of A's behaviour, history, and social environment, irrespective of A's internal states. (Proudfoot 2004, 289)

[12] Another difference between the two, which I will have no space to discuss here, is the matter of relativism. Davidson rejects conceptual relativism and claims that if something can be said to be a language, it is translatable into our own language. See, e.g., Davidson (1974b, 1988b). But, on the contrary, Wittgenstein seems to believe that "[i]f a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (Wittgenstein 1953, §225).

Davidson's externalism would be compatible with these claims, especially with the view that the history of the speaker's interactions with others and the environment, as well as the context of using words, plays a vital role in determining the meaning of the speaker's utterances.[13] These externalist readings of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* would help to see why Davidson's discussion of the notion of triangulation can be taken to be a more general treatment of the problems Wittgenstein already uncovers in his discussion of rule-following and private language. According to Proudfoot, Wittgenstein believed that "an entity A that behaves in accordance with a rule is a rule-follower only if A has a certain history and environment" (Proudfoot 2004, 289). As indicated in the previous section, Davidson thought of this Wittgensteinian remark on rule-following as pointing to the distinction between mere dispositions to respond in certain ways and judging that one way of responding is correct. His discussion of triangulation, I believe, is an attempt to show that, for Wittgensteinian reasons, it cannot be enough that two people merely correlate their similar responses to some stimuli, whether the stimuli are external or internal.

Davidson believes that, for a solitary speaker considered in isolation, it is doubly ambiguous to what objects she is responding: "Cause is doubly indeterminate: with respect to width, and with respect to distance" (Davidson 1999b, 129).[14] For a solitary speaker, it is not determinate (I) whether it is a proximal cause, e.g., some stimulation on the speaker's skin, or a distal cause, e.g., an object a certain distance from her in the world, that actually causes the speaker's responses ("the distance or the depth problem") and (II) whether it is one aspect of the cause rather than another that indeed causes the speaker's thoughts and utterances ("the width or aspect problem"). Not only does any such cause-determination require the speaker to possess the concept of truth, or command the Wittgensteinian seems right/is right distinction, but without having such a concept the objectivity of thought would also be lost since in order for a creature to have objective thoughts, it must be aware of the distinction between believing that something is the case and that thing's being the case independently of what the creature believes (see, e.g., Davidson 1991b, 217). Davidson's Wittgensteinian reason is that in the case of a solitaire, whatever she takes to be the actual cause of her responses will be the actual cause of her responses, no matter what it is. This means that whatever she takes to be a correct response would be correct and hence, as Wittgenstein puts it, we cannot talk about correctness anymore:

> As Wittgenstein says, by yourself you can't tell the difference between the situations seeming the same and being the same.
>
> (Davidson 1994b, 124)

Nothing essentially new has been offered by Davidson here but to cite Wittgenstein's remarks on private language and rule-following.

However, if for having meaningful responses the causes of the responses should get determined, then both the distance and the width problems should be solved. Davidson's idea is that employing the notion of triangulation would help to deal with the problems. He first distinguishes between "primitive" and "linguistic" triangulation (see, e.g., Davidson 1992, 117; 1993a, 176–77; 1993b, 609–10; 1994b, 124; 1997c, 140–41; 1998b, 86; 1999b, 130). Primitive triangulation involves the responses of two creatures, each of them similarly responds to a certain stimulus in

[13] Cf. Davidson's important context-sensitive notion of "first meaning" (1986, 91). See also Davidson's famous Swampman example (1987a, 443–44).

[14] Of course, Wittgenstein is not a causal-theorist and this is another difference between the two. As Proudfoot puts it, for Wittgenstein, "ordinary (belief-desire) psychological explanation is not causal; we can give different such explanations of the behaviour of individuals who are physical duplicates but have different histories or environments" (Proudfoot 2004, 289). Although Davidson takes causal relations between the speaker and the world to be essential, he does not deny that two people alike in all physical states may differ in what they mean by their words because of the differences in the history of their interactions with the world (see, again, his Swampman argument, Davidson 1987a, 443–44). I will say more about Davidson's especial use of the notion of causality in due course.

the world and to the other creature's responses to that stimulus. This, according to Davidson, helps to locate the actual cause of the creatures' responses. As indicated before, Davidson appeals to the Wittgensteinian remarks on ostensive learning and takes such a basic situation as an instance of triangulation.[15] Suppose that a child, in whatever way, is taught to respond by "table" to what we are responding to by "table". In this situation, "where the lines from child to table and us to table converge, 'the' stimulus is located" (Davidson 1992, 119). The "actual cause" of the child's response is the stimulus in the world to which we and the child *similarly* respond by "table". Moreover, as each of us is observing the other's responses, our similar responses are thereby correlated so that if such a correlation breaks it creates the space for the child to make sense of the concept of truth: if the child responds by "chair" to the same stimulus to which we all were responding by "table", the child finds out that there is a difference between what she took to be the right response and what is the right one independently of what seemed to her.

Davidson thinks that being engaged in primitive triangulation would not be enough to claim that the creatures now possess a language and thoughts since such a form of triangulation emerges between animals with no language too (see Davidson 1999b, 130; 1997c, 140). Primitive triangulation is not sufficient, though necessary, for the creatures' responses to become meaningful. Davidson then claims that what needs to be added is linguistic interactions: "Language fills in and enriches the base of the triangle" (1993b, 610). What Davidson means by linguistic triangulation is indeed nothing but engaging in the procedure of mutual interpretation or "linguistic communication" (1982, 105):

> the only way of knowing that . . . the second creature or person . . . is reacting to the same object as oneself is to know that the other person has the same object in mind . . . For two people to know of each other that they are so related, that their thoughts are so related, requires that they be in communication . . . they must each be an interpreter of the other. (Davidson 1992, 120–21)[16]

There was a deep problem in the primitive triangulation that mutual interpretation is now supposed to solve, that is, that no matter how similar the responses of the two creatures to an object are and how many times such similar responses are repeated, there are always different *aspects* of the object that can be taken to be prompting those similar responses in the creatures, and there was nothing, in primitive triangulation, by appealing to which we could show that the creatures respond to the *same* aspect of the object.

This may look like the Quinean indeterminacy problem. But the fact that, for Davidson, the aspect problem is solved via engaging in mutual interpretation—as Davidson said above, interpretation enables the one "to know that the other person has *the same object in mind*"—shows that it differs from the indeterminacy problem. There are controversies about Davidson's treatment of W. V. Quine's indeterminacy of translation arguments as well as his reading of Kripke's Wittgenstein's sceptical problem. The limitations of space do not allow me to engage in this discussion here.[17] But a point is worth noting with regard to the Quinean indeterminacy problem and the Davidsonian aspect problem. According to Quine, the indeterminacy of translation implies that "two conflicting manuals of translation can both do justice to all dispositions to behavior, and that, in such a case, there is no fact of the matter of which manual is right" (Quine 1981, 23). And he concludes that "where indeterminacy of translation applies, there is no real question of right choice; there is no fact of

[15] See Davidson (1994a, 435–36; 1997c, 138–40; 1998b, 86–90; 2000, 13–14; 2001d, xv). For a discussion of this issue, see Stroud (2017, 125–27).

[16] For discussions of this issue and of Davidson's "argument from triangulation", see Verheggen (1997, 2006, 2007); Verheggen and Myers (2016), Glüer (2006; 2011, 232–41), Talmage (1997), Lasonen and Marvan (2004), and Ludwig and Lepore (2005, section 22).

[17] For discussions of this issue, see Verheggen and Sultanescu (2019), Hossein Khani (2019, 2018a,b), and Kemp (2012, 127).

the matter" (Quine 1968, 275). Although Davidson, controversially I believe (Hossein Khani 2018a), treats this problem as if it is an epistemological problem and claims that it "does not entail that there are no facts of the matter" (Davidson 1999a, 596), he does *not* think that the indeterminacy problem would be *solved* by engaging in the procedure of interpretation and thereby in the linguistic triangulation. The aspect problem, as Davidson puts it, implies that even if we can determine that the stimulus is distal (rather than proximal), the primitive triangulation—i.e., mere correlations between our similar responses to that object (such as the process of ostensive learning)—would not be enough to determine whether we are both responding to the same *aspect* of that stimulus. He thinks that this is the Wittgensteinian problem which has to be solved because, for Wittgenstein too, ostensive learning was not enough to claim that one is responding to the same aspect of the object as I do. We need something more than mere dispositions to respond, even similarly, to certain stimuli in the world. We need, as Davidson's Wittgenstein suggested, to be assured of the fact that the learner herself has mastered the seems right/is right distinction and that she and her teacher interpret each other and are interpreted by each other. In this case, Davidson thinks that the problem is solved: both the triangulators, through interpreting each other, would get access to the mind of the other; they would know that they are responding to the *same* object. The Quinean indeterminacy problem, even on Davidson's reading of it, would *not* be solved in this way because Quine and Davidson have already taken both the speaker and the translator to possess rich enough languages and to be equipped with the concepts required to make the relevant judgements about the translations of the speaker's utterances. While Davidson thinks that the aspect problem is solved once the triangulators engage in mutual interpretation, he thinks that the indeterminacy problem *remains* because in interpreting a speaker we may always face the situations in which two options are available: either to interpret the speaker's utterance as meaning something different (but to attribute to her the same belief as we did in the past) or to attribute a different belief to her (but to take the speaker to mean the same thing as she did in the past; see, e.g., Davidson 1998a, 317; 1973b, 139).

What we have so far considered can show how Davidson's later works on meaning have been vastly and mainly dedicated to the project of finding an alternative way—different, for instance, from that of Saul Kripke's and Michael Dummett's—to accommodate Wittgenstein's fundamental remarks on meaning, especially the requirement of drawing the seems right/is right distinction.[18] Without commanding such a distinction, which itself requires communication with others, there would be no practice of meaning something by an utterance. As Davidson puts it,

> the central argument against private languages is that, unless a language is shared, there is no way to distinguish between using the language correctly and using it incorrectly; only communication with another can supply an objective check.
>
> (Davidson 1991b, 209–10)

And what he means by such "an objective check" is very similar to Wittgenstein's search for a *public* criterion to assess the speaker's responses to the world and to her own internal states.[19] The problem Davidson proposes and the solution he offers are both extracted from Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, as he himself says, "it [triangulation] does end with what may be Wittgenstein's conclusion: language is necessarily a social affair" (Davidson 1992, 117). Again, "without a second person there is, as

[18] My aim in this paper has been to remain faithful to what Davidson says of Wittgenstein's remarks in the *Investigations*, rather than Kripke's reading of it. Davidson's interpretation of Wittgenstein is different from Kripke's and Dummett's. I believe Davidson attempts to offer an alternative reading of what he thinks Wittgenstein has made central to the study of meaning.

[19] Davidson famously argues that knowledge of the external world, knowledge of other minds, and knowledge of one's own mind are all interconnected and none has priority over the other. See Davidson (1991b, 213).

Wittgenstein powerfully suggests, no basis for a judgement that a reaction is wrong or, therefore, right" (Davidson 1997b, 83; see also 2001d, xv, and 2000, 14). As discussed in Section 2.1, what Davidson learns from Wittgenstein is that "to have a belief it is not enough to discriminate among aspects of the world, to behave in different ways in different circumstances; a snail or a periwinkle does this. Having a belief demands in addition appreciating the contrast between true belief and false, between appearance and reality, mere seeming and being" (Davidson 1991b, 209).

I believe, however, that Davidson also respects Wittgenstein's quietist approach to philosophical perplexities. In order to show this, let me begin by Davidson's remarks on how two people may reach an understanding of each other.

3. Davidson on Prior and Passing Theories

Davidson claimed that although it is up to an individual speaker alone to decide what her words mean, this practice is essentially social since without an interpreter interpreting the speaker, there would be no meaning to be intended at all. Davidson sometimes puts these remarks in terms of the theories which philosophers and theorists may employ to systematically *describe* the speakers' abilities to speak and understand. Such theories, even in Davidson's later works, are still Tarski-style theories of truth (see Davidson 1986, 95–96), though Davidson believes that if the speakers' abilities to speak and to interpret are not necessarily limited to what they have learnt before, e.g., some fixed set of rules determining the "correct" use of words, then the theories modeling such abilities should not be treated as fixed in advance of the particular conversation they have with each other and constrained to generate just the conventional meanings of the words. In this regard, he distinguishes between what he calls "prior theories" and "passing theories":

> For the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the passing theory is how he *does* interpret the utterance. For the speaker, the prior theory is what he *believes* the interpreter's prior theory to be, while the passing theory is the theory that he *intends* the interpreter to use. (Davidson 1986, 101)

Prior theories contain what the speaker or the interpreter knows *before* their particular conversation begins. They have expectations of how the future conversation between the two may go, of the "expected meanings"—as we may call them so—which the speaker may attach to her words and which the interpreter is prepared to grasp on the basis of his previous interpretations of the speaker. This is just to say that the speaker, based on her expectations of what the interpreter knows about her and the environment, *knows how* to speak in an understandable way. Such prior theories can contain the conventional meanings of words. But Davidson adds that they can also contain information about the use of the words, or their meanings, in the past. If we want to describe the situation, it is *as if* the speaker and the interpreter are equipped with a prior theory of interpretation (see Davidson 1986, 100). As before, Davidson argues that sharing such prior theories is neither necessary nor sufficient for guaranteeing success in their communication since what matters is what the speaker *now* intends to mean by her words. The speaker may go on differently this time. Passing theories produce what the speaker presently intends to mean by her words on this particular occasion. For Davidson, communication is successful simply if passing theories coincide, that is, if the speaker speaks in an interpretable way and the interpreter interprets the speaker in the way the speaker intended her utterance to be interpreted: "What two people need, if they are to understand one another through speech, is the ability to converge on passing theories from utterance to utterance" (Davidson 1986, 106). If that is true, then "it is not a condition on successful communication that prior theories be shared" (Davidson 1986, 103).

More importantly, Davidson makes a second claim which is not usually appreciated by his commentators. He believes that

reaching such an agreement on what the speaker intends to mean by her words—converging on passing theories—is *not* something that can be formalized or characterized especially in terms of some previously fixed conventions. The communicators possess certain linguistic skills, the abilities to know how to use words (to apply them to certain things in the world) in an understandable way and how to understand the utterances of others via using the available evidence and clues. For Davidson, the process through which they come to such an understanding (or convergence) cannot be explained in terms of their following some rules or conventions since such abilities are acquired in different ways and hence the communicators' strategies to reach such a convergence would be different: they have different backgrounds of knowledge, information, gender, social status, family, personality, habits, and so on. Therefore, "there are no rules for arriving at passing theories" (Davidson 1986, 107). This means that there are no rules following which guarantees success in communication. There are no such rules because in order to converge on a passing theory—to speak in an understandable way and to understand the speech of another—much non-linguistic general information is required. As Davidson puts it,

> a passing theory . . . is derived by wit, luck, and wisdom from a private vocabulary and grammar, knowledge of the ways people get their point across, and rules of thumb for figuring out what deviations from the dictionary are most likely. (Davidson 1986, 107)

Does this mean that we could not try to say more about this process? It seems that we could, but Davidson does not think that we should. Pushing towards offering more explanations of these processes and practices would lead to misunderstandings of them (as we will see in Davidson's attack on Dummett). This is the reason why Davidson concludes that "there is no . . . chance of regularizing, or teaching, this process" (1986, 107).

Therefore, understanding a language, for Davidson, is to master a technic, to know how to use words in an understandable way. But this is a view of knowing-how irreducible to that of knowing-that. Although, for Davidson, the speakers' ability to speak and understand can still be *described* by employing a Tarski-style theory of truth, it does not mean that they have thereby *propositional knowledge* of such theories: speakers neither explicitly nor implicitly know such theories, and it is not because of knowing such theories that they can communicate with each other. As he states,

> to say that an explicit theory for interpreting a speaker is a model of the interpreter's linguistic competence is not to suggest that the interpreter knows any such theory . . . They are rather claims about what must be said to give a satisfactory *description* of the competence of the interpreter. (Davidson 1986, 95–96, emphasis added)

Our talk of such theories

> comes to no more than the fact that the speaker is able to speak *as if* he believed the interpreter would interpret him in the way the theory describes, and the fact that the interpreter is prepared so to interpret him. (Davidson 1990b, 312, emphases added)

For, and this is important, "it is not altogether obvious that there is anything we actually know which plays an essential role in interpretation" (1973b, 125). Hence, Davidson's remarks do not aim "to say that either speaker or interpreter is aware of or has *propositional knowledge* of the contents of such a theory" (1990b, 312, emphases added). The reason, again, is that in speaking and understanding much general information, luck, intuition, non-propositional and non-linguistic knowledge is involved. Speakers rather know how to speak in an interpretable way. This is all Davidson has to tell us. He just describes the situation, rather than explains it.

3.1. Dummett vs. Davidson on the social character of language

Davidson rejected the idea that shared linguistic practices across a community of speakers, such as the conventional way of using

words, can be taken to be essential to their success in communication. One may take this claim to be standing against the Wittgensteinian idea that agreement across a community of speakers is basic to the existence of our everyday linguistic practices. But, according to Davidson's *reading* of Wittgenstein, what Wittgenstein is suggesting via his discussion of private language and rule-following is that speaking a language is necessarily a social activity and this claim, for Davidson, should not be treated as amounting to any form of conventionalism or communitarianism, according to which sharing certain rules, norms, conventions, or in general any shared way of speaking is essential to the existence of successful communication. For this, Davidson says "while I accept the idea that communication is the source of objectivity, I do not think communication depends on speakers using the same words to express the same thoughts" (Davidson 1991b, 209 n 1). For him, the requirement of meaning the same thing by the same words is a limited conception of "agreement" and Wittgenstein's remarks do not lead to such an idea. What Davidson took Wittgenstein to be suggesting is a wider and deeper conception of an "agreement": the agreement between the speaker and the interpreter regarding what the *speaker* intends her utterance to mean. Such a conception of agreement involves what we may call a *Davidsonian interpretation* of the Wittgensteinian idea of "form of life":

> much successful communing goes on that does not depend on previously learned common practices, for recognizing this helps us appreciate the extent to which understanding, even of the literal meaning of a speaker's utterances, depends on shared general information and familiarity with non-linguistic institutions (a 'way of life'). (Davidson 1994b, 119)

I will soon come back to this important passage.

Davidson's rejection of conventionalism and similar views, as indicated in Section 1.1, stems from his rejection of a particular mode of theorizing about our linguistic practices, i.e., the idea that speaking a language and playing games are analogous. One of the advocates of such a view is Dummett. Davidson criticizes Dummett's reading of Wittgenstein regarding the social aspect of language. As he says,

> I hold that the answer to the question what it is to go on as before demands reference to social interaction. Where I disagree [with Dummett] is on how this demand can be met. (Davidson 1994b, 124)

Davidson takes the notion of an idiolect (the particular way a particular speaker speaks on a specific occasion) to be basic, while Dummett takes the notion of a language (as a set of syntactical and semantical rules) to be essential to the existence of our basic linguistic practices, such as that of assertion (see, e.g., Davidson 1979, 110). As Davidson says of his difference with Dummett,

> My mistake, in his [Dummett's] eyes, is that I take defining a language as the philosophically rather unimportant task of grouping idiolects. (Davidson 1994b, 111)

Dummett certainly thinks so because, for him,

> conventions . . . are what constitute a social practice; to repudiate the role of convention is to deny that a language is in this sense a practice. (Dummett 1986, 474)

For Davidson, however, we should get rid of these "shallow" notions. What is basic to communication is understanding: if the utterance of the speaker is successfully interpreted as she intended, it does not really matter whether her use of words is appraised to be correct (or incorrect) in accordance with certain rules or agreed-on conventions. For this reason, Davidson famously concludes that

> there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed . . . We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases . . . we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions. (Davidson 1986, 107)

Dummett thinks of this view of language as "absurd", since "the need for the notion of a language is apparent" (Dummett 1986, 474). For him,

> our use of our language [should be] considered as a conventional practice in which we progressively learn to engage as we learn to speak. (Dummett 1996, 160)

We saw, in Section 1.1, why Davidson took such a view to be leading to a misunderstanding of such practices: it took speaking a language and playing and winning a game to be analogous; this analogy is "radically defective" (Davidson 1984a, 268).

Dummett's and Davidson's readings of Wittgenstein's remarks on the social character of language diverge on another important point. For Dummett, Wittgenstein's slogan that "meaning is use" implies that "the knowledge in which a speaker's understanding of a sentence consists must be capable of being fully manifested by his linguistic practice" (Dummett 1996, 116; see also 36, 91, 108, 113, 116, 179–80, and 1991, 305–06). A speaker's grasp of the concept of *square* must be manifested in her ability "to discriminate between things that are square and those that are not" (Dummett 1996, 98); hence, the speaker is to apply the word to square things and not to others (on this, see also Wright 1987, 247). Davidson's attack on such a view was inspired by Wittgenstein's remarks on ostensive learning, according to which what is fundamental here is the speaker's ability to judge that "square" can be understandably applied to some things, rather than her disposition to discriminate between the things that are a certain way and those that are not. Forming such a judgement, for Davidson, essentially depended on the speaker's possession, and application, of the concept of truth. Dummett extends his view to the case of sentences. In the crucial case of undecidable sentences,[20] the speaker fails to fully manifest her knowledge of such sentences' meanings (their truth-conditions). Thus, as he says,

> the notion of truth . . . must be explained, in some manner, in terms of our capacity to recognize statements as true, and not in terms of a condition which transcends human capacities. (Dummett 1996, 76)

Davidson's view, however, is different:

> I considered truth to be the central primitive concept, and hoped, by detailing truth's structure, to get at meaning. (Davidson 2001c, xiv)

Meaning can have a chance to emerge if the speaker grasps the seems right/is right distinction. Davidson's Wittgenstein's view of the social character of language implies that the speaker's understanding of the meaning of her words is not required to be manifested in her rule-governed use of the words; rather in her success in communication. The speaker is free to intend to use her words in whatever way she may *only if* such a use can be understood by her hearer in the way the speaker intended. This is a different sort of view, different from conventionalist and communitarianist conceptions of meaning.[21] Davidson, hence, believes that Dummett's reading of Wittgenstein misses an essential feature of our linguistic practices:

> Dummett thinks that by promoting the primacy of the idiolect I run afoul of Wittgenstein's ban on private languages; in my view Dummett, by making language primary, has misplaced the essential social element in linguistic behavior. (Davidson 1994b, 109)

Davidson rather "looks at language from the start as a social transaction and therefore concentrates on what one person can learn about another in the context of a shared world" (Davidson 1988a, 190).[22]

[20] That is, the ones "for which a speaker has some effective procedure which will, in a finite time, put him into a position in which he can recognize whether or not the conditions for the truth of the sentence is satisfied" (Dummett 1996, 45).

[21] For a defense of Davidson, see McDowell (1981).

[22] For more on this disagreement between Dummett and Davidson, see Ludwig and Lepore (2007).

Davidson extends the domain of his criticism:

> if the concept of following a rule is not quite appropriate to describe meaning something by saying something, it is also questionable whether . . . we should accept without question the idea that meaning something demands (as opposed to sometimes involving) a convention, custom, or institution. (Davidson 1992, 114)

This claim looks like a rejection of Wittgenstein's view that using a language is to master a technic and that agreement across a community of speakers sharing their basic linguistic practices is fundamental to the existence of such practices. As Wittgenstein says,

> To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions). To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique. (Wittgenstein 1953, §199)

However, we saw why it would be too fast to conclude that Davidson is against such a view since, according to Davidson's reading of Wittgenstein, such institutions are still fundamental to the existence of our linguistic practices, but Davidson's Wittgenstein disagrees (with Dummett's) that these institutions must be limited to those of shared rules and conventions about correct use across a speech-community. Davidson denies the essentiality of "linguistic institutions" for the existence of our linguistic practices, but his target is not Wittgenstein, rather a particular (here, Dummett's and elsewhere Kripke's) reading of Wittgenstein. What Davidson opposes is the view that these institutions can be taken to be essentially determining the meaning of words, or their correct use, *in advance of* the particular conversation two people may have and, as a result, to count any deviation from this particular way of speaking as a linguistic error. Davidson reads Wittgenstein's ideas differently. As he puts it,

> Perhaps we [Dummett and Davidson] even agree on the underlying reason, namely Wittgenstein's, that without a social environment nothing could count as misapplying words in speech. Where we part company is in how we think the social environment makes its essential contribution. (Davidson 1994b, 113)

The important point to note here is that Davidson does not have the same negative view of what he calls "non-linguistic institutions" or a "way of life". Davidson and Dummett offer two different readings of Wittgenstein's idea of a form of life and of what this notion implies: according to one reading, a "form of life" (conceived as "linguistic institutions") implies the existence of wide agreements across a community of speakers (in the form of a fixed set of rules or conventions) about what words mean or how they ought to be used, and according to the other, a "form of life" (conceived as "non-linguistic institutions") treats sharing non-linguistic information as essential to the existence of such practices, together with the familiarity with the speaker's attitudes, environment, habits, life, and so forth. It is this latter conception of "agreement" which Davidson takes seriously. Moreover, as indicated in Section 3, Davidson thinks that there would be no *explanation* of how such an agreement is reached because, again, it involves such non-linguistic information. We can at best only *describe* what is probably involved in success in understanding. Consider the way Davidson describes such general knowledge, i.e., a way of life:

> The knowledge on which we rely, however intuitively, is just about everything we know. This is why I wrote that there are no rules for arriving at passing theories.
> (Davidson 1998a, 327; see also Davidson 1986, 107)

There is no finite list of things a speaker should know in order to say of her that she has possessed the ability to speak and to understand. Such knowledge, to repeat, is very similar to a form of knowing-how or mastering a technic:

> Knowing a language is . . . like knowing how to ride a bicycle.
> (Davidson 1998a, 325)

Davidson here is by all means Wittgensteinian. What about his view of Wittgenstein's quietism?

4. Davidson and the Matter of Description vs. Explanation

Davidson's treatment of the aforementioned problems about meaning, especially his discussion of triangulation and his rejection of conventionalism and communitarianism, showed how he attempts to resist what he takes to be a bad philosophy, implausible theories about our most basic linguistic practices. Such theories (which, for him, many philosophers have endorsed) cannot explain what is basic to linguistic communication, that is, mutual understanding; and this latter, Davidson seemed to believe, should be left unexplained. Although he argues against a certain sort of understating of such practices, he himself does not really tell us what it is to mean something by an utterance and what it is to understand such utterances. He just invites us to look at the role our habits, intuition, and non-linguistic information—which we have of each other, of the world and of the occasion of speech—plays in our success in these practices. I believe Davidson's reasons for his reluctance to provide such explanations are Wittgensteinian. This point needs more clarification.

4.1. Wittgenstein's quietism

I have claimed that Davidson does not actually provide us with any explanation of meaning-determination and success in communication and I already tried to cite evidence for the additional claim that Davidson is not inclined to do so mostly for Wittgensteinian reasons. This is an important metaphilosophical point about Davidson's works and perhaps the source of many controversies about his metaphysical positions about meaning. To begin with, we can imagine different routes Davidson could pursue if he really wanted to follow an anti-quietist approach in order to deal with the aforementioned issues about meaning and communication. To give some examples, Frederick Stoutland (1982a,b) and Louise Antony (1994), for instance, attempt to argue that Davidson's philosophy of language can be construed as anti-realistic and incompatible with semantic realism.[23] Mark Platts (1997, 1980) thinks that Davidson's philosophy can be labeled realistic and Jeff Malpas (1992, 14) attempts to argue "for a view of Davidson as a 'realist'". Claudine Verheggen and Robert Myers argue that Davidson can be interpreted as a non-reductionist about meaning (Verheggen and Myers 2016, 88–90). What about Davidson as a quietist? This option has not yet been properly investigated and the reason might be that Davidson has never been clear about his metaphilosophical view. What I aim to do here is to provide more evidence to support a quietist reading of Davidson. But let me first briefly introduce what I mean by Wittgenstein's quietism.

Wittgenstein has famously stated that

> philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is. (Wittgenstein 1953, §124)

According to Wittgenstein, our actual linguistic practices *cannot* be given any foundation. Does he have any reason for this claim? It seems he has: attempting to provide such a foundation leads to philosophical misunderstandings of such practices, which amount to unwelcome conclusions, such as that of the rule-following paradox. Davidson too stopped explaining such practices because he thought that such a foundation for these practices *cannot* be given and he believed so not because he thought it is *impossible to try* to offer one, but because doing so would lead to philosophical misunderstandings. For him, one who wishes to explain our actual linguistic practices would fail

[23] See Miller and Hossein Khani (2015) for a criticism of Stoutland and for the claim that Davidson's philosophy is compatible with realism. See also Child (2001) for a middle position.

to fully appreciate their essential feature, that is, that they are social practices in which not only is the presence of others interacting with each other essential to their existence, but much non-linguistic information is also involved in such a way that any attempt to regulate them would inevitably fail to do justice to the complexities of such practices. Employing the notion of rules and conventions (in general, linguistic institutions) would be as unhelpful as the claim that speakers have propositional knowledge of theories of meaning leading them to understand each other.

Wittgenstein claimed that "the philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness" (Wittgenstein 1953, §255). But what does this claim imply? Is Wittgenstein against just *any* sort of attempt to talk about these questions and problems? He definitely is not and it is not plausible to think so: in order to treat an illness, you need to know about it, to properly investigate it and to successfully describe it. As John McDowell puts it,

> [Wittgenstein] is talking about a particular mode of philosophical activity. We do best not to take him to be making pronouncements about just anything that counts as philosophy".
>
> (McDowell 2009, 367)

> [Wittgenstein's] aim here is to give philosophy peace, in the face of a temptation to find a mystery, which would need to be alleviated by substantive philosophy. The label is all right if all it conveys is the aim of quieting the felt need for substantive philosophy.
>
> (McDowell 2009, 370)

What is such a temptation in the case of meaning? Marie McGinn (1997) traces the root of it back to the temptation to apply scientific methods to what we ought not. Wittgenstein has famously said that

> philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and to answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics and leads philosophers into complete darkness.
>
> (Wittgenstein 1958, 18)

Wittgenstein surely does not discard science or the merits of scientific methods in general; rather, as McGinn puts it, he believes that

> the methods of science, in particular the ideas of explanation and discovery, are misleading and inappropriate when applied to questions like "What is meaning?", "What is thought?".
>
> (McGinn 1997, 20)[24]

I think, in many respects, Davidson agrees with such a quietist view. We discussed his similar way of treating a variety of problems about meaning, e.g., about knowledge of meaning-theories, convergence on passing theories and the shift from primitive to linguistic triangulation (on which I will say more). In all such crucial cases, Davidson thought that doing more to explain them is a temptation that should be avoided if we want to avoid misunderstanding them. Davidson, in addition, famously stated that applying the methods of science to the questions like "What is meaning?" and "What is thought?" is misleading. Doing so leads to misunderstanding of the mental realm and the essential difference between the way the mental and the physical can be described, a claim which supplies additional evidence for his consent to Wittgenstein's quietism.

Davidson draws a significant distinction between the application of the laws of science and the rules of rationality. Although he employs the notion of causality in his explanation of intentional action, that is, although he believes that "at least some mental events interact causally with physical events" , he denies that there can be any "strict deterministic laws on the basis of which mental events can be predicted and explained" (Davidson 1970, 208). Davidson thinks that his employment of the concept of causality may be taken to be standing against the Wittgensteinian idea that "the methods of the poet, the critic, and the

[24] Here I am not concerned with the philosophers who are against Wittgenstein's quietism, such as Wright (2001) and, to some extent, Brandom (1994). On Wittgenstein's quietism, see also Malcolm (1984), Rorty (1982, 22; 2007), Horwich (2013), Kenny (2006), Mulhall (2007), Fogelin (2009), Price (2015), and Macarthur (2008, 2017).

social scientist not only are different from, but also opposed to, the methods of the sciences of (the rest of) nature" (Davidson 1993a, 168). He agrees that using the notion of causality may seem like here we are tempted to apply the methods of science, but he rejects that there can be nomological connections between the mental and the physical (that is, psychophysical laws governing this relation) because the realm of the mental is governed by a different sort of rules, the rules of rationality.[25] For Davidson, this distinction would help to reconcile the two views (his and Wittgenstein's) which were mistakenly thought to be radically different. The mistake stems from a misunderstanding of the role which the notion of causality is supposed to play in his view, a mistake which vanishes once we notice that Davidson aims to use "the 'unscientific' concept of cause" (1990a, 98). This, however, does not mean that the gap between the mental and the physical now disappears; it is rather a gap "that must exist between two schemes of description and explanation, one, the mental, being essentially normative, the other not" (1990a, 98). This normative character of mental concepts is "a primitive aspect of rationality" (1987b, 115). Following McGinn's interpretation of Wittgenstein's quietism, Davidson too agrees that "there can be no serious science or sciences of the mental" (1995, 122–23). Searching for such a science is a temptation to avoid. Otherwise, it would lead to a misunderstanding of the essential feature of the mental and the semantical. Davidson confesses that his reasons here are Wittgensteinian too since it was Wittgenstein who said:

> The confusion and barrenness of psychology is not to be explained by calling it a "young science"; its state is not comparable with that of physics . . .
>
> The existence of the experimental method makes us think we have the means of solving the problems which trouble us; though problem and method pass one another by. (Wittgenstein 1953, II, xiv)

[25] Such as the principle of charity which "maximizes intelligibility" (Davidson 1991b, 215) in the speaker's behaviour by attributing true (or even sometimes false) beliefs to her.

Having quoted this passage from Wittgenstein, Davidson continues:

> I take this to apply not just to psychology as it existed when Wittgenstein wrote, but to be a judgment *sub specie aeternitatis*. (Davidson 1995, 117)

5. Wittgenstein's Quietism and Davidson's Triangulation

Was Davidson really after offering an "explanation" of meaning-determination in his discussion of triangulation? As I have generally pointed out, I think he was not. Triangulation at best added a causal story to what we may call the meaning-determination process. At the end of the day, Davidson did not provide us with anything newer than what he, inspired by Wittgenstein, had already offered: engaging in mutual interpretation, induction and evidence-collecting, this time more vividly combined with features of his externalism. I argued that although Davidson is admittedly an externalist and Wittgenstein may or may not be so, the problems they were concerned with were essentially of the same kind. Moreover, I also showed that using the notion of triangulation by Davidson is all about meeting Wittgenstein's essential requirement of drawing the seems right/is right distinction, without appealing to shared practices of a speech-community. But does Davidson *explain* how the concepts of right and wrong are acquired, how creatures come up with meaningful responses, or how the aspect problem is solved via engaging in linguistic triangulation? He does not; he rather leaves us with an analogy alone. Consider his description of what he calls the "argument" from triangulation:

> To complete the "argument", however, I need to show that the *only* way one could come to have the belief–truth [the seems right/is

> right] contrast is through having the concept of intersubjective truth. I confess I do not know how to show this . . . In place of an argument . . . I offer . . . [an] analogy. (Davidson 1982, 105)

The analogy that Davidson then offers is a description of a triangular situation. Consider also this passage:

> What must be added to a meaningless sound, uttered at moments appropriate for that same sound, uttered as speech, to transmute the former into the latter? . . . I am under no illusion that I can provide anything like an analysis; perhaps there is no answer that does not lead in a circle. (Davidson 1997c, 139)

Davidson admits that any such attempt would probably lead to a philosophical misunderstanding, a circular account of what makes it the case that one sound can be viewed as meaningful and another cannot. He does not think that any proper analysis, any foundation, can be offered of it; rather just some analogy, some description of the situations in which some creatures may come up with a language, i.e., the situation of triangulation between the creatures which are inclined to respond to the world in similar ways, very similar to the situations Wittgenstein described in his discussion of ostensive learning. Both Wittgenstein and Davidson saw involving in such situations alone as insufficient to explain what makes a sound meaningful and both seemed to end up with the idea that it is better we leave the matter as it is and instead look at our linguistic practices and see how essential the role of complex "non-linguistic institutions" is in these practices. Davidson followed Wittgenstein to argue that language and thought are essentially social:

> Wittgenstein expresses this idea when he talks of the difference between following a rule and merely thinking one is following a rule; . . . [his] point isn't that consensus defines the concept of truth but that it creates the space for its application. If this is right, then thought as well as language is necessarily social.
> (Davidson 1999b, 129)

If language is so, there needs to be some sort of agreement between the speaker and the interpreter, but, as Davidson reads the Wittgensteinian notion of "agreement", we only need agreement on understanding, rather than agreement on rule-governed uses of words:

> Wittgenstein put us on the track of the only possible answer . . . The source of the concept of objective truth is interpersonal communication. Thought depends on communication.
> (Davidson 1991b, 209)[26]

And, for Davidson, this "follows at once if we suppose that language is essential to thought and we agree with Wittgenstein that there cannot be a private language" (1991b, 209). Davidson, in his own Wittgensteinian way, invites us to look at our everyday linguistic practices and their extreme complexities and warns us of the misunderstandings which his Wittgenstein detected before: further attempts to explain these practices, as Davidson previously argued for, lead either to circular accounts or to implausible (Dummettian) ones. Davidson too "is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity" (Wittgenstein 1953, §23).

With regard to Wittgenstein's quietism and Davidson's triangulation we can still say more. In Davidson's triangulation, it was nothing but the *similarity* of responses of the triangulators that could give rise to the existence of a sort of correctness conditions. Sharing such responses was essential, according to Davidson, if there is to be any opportunity for them to grasp the seems right/is right distinction: when the correlation between their (previously) similar responses is broken, one can now observe that the other is responding differently. But what is the source of such similarities? For Davidson,

> all creatures . . . treat some stimuli as more alike than others. The criterion of such classifying activity is similarity of response. Evo-

[26] For a different view on this matter, see Wikforss (2017, 63).

> lution and subsequent learning no doubt explain these patterns of behavior. (Davidson 1991b, 212)

Davidson's appeal to evolution and such *empirical* facts is just his way of confirming that we do not really know *why* the creatures like us respond similarly. As he says, "evolution has made us more or less fit for our environment, but evolution could not endow us with concepts" (1997c, 134). Here too Davidson, like Wittgenstein, concedes that it is nothing but an empirical fact about us that we generally agree in our responses to the world. As Wittgenstein (1953, §226) puts it, "What has to be accepted, the given, is . . . *forms of life*".

I also suggested that triangulation is better understood as an analogy, a metaphor, that at best shows how Davidson's externalism can accommodate the Wittgensteinian seems right/is right distinction: no creature can have determinate causes for her responses and hence meaningful responses without mastering this distinction. It is true that Davidson brings in the notion of *linguistic* triangulation after showing that primitive triangulation cannot be enough for language and thoughts to emerge, but he did not really offer any explanation of such a significant jump from primitive (non-linguistic) triangulation to linguistic triangulation:

> [I]t is only in interpersonal communication that there can be thought . . . The reason for this is, in my opinion, that there is no other way to answer Wittgenstein's question, in what consists the difference between thinking one is following a rule, and actually following it . . . Our thoughts and words carry us out into the world . . . This connection with the world can be established only by shared reactions to a shared environment [i.e., Triangulation]. (Davidson 1997a, 274–75)

He just tells us that once our responses are linguistic, the depth and the width problems are solved and hence we have meaningful responses. We saw that neither did he offer any argument *establishing* the claim that in order to have meaningful responses we necessarily need linguistic communication (he just offered an analogy), nor did he explain why the above problems are *solved* if our responses become linguistic. How is linguistic triangulation supposed to solve the aspect or width problem? Even without knowing the details about linguistic triangulation, it is clear that the creatures' responses merely turning into linguistic would not *by itself* help to solve this problem. A parrot's responding by "table" in the presence of the same table in view does not help to claim that it now possesses a language and thoughts. The creatures' responses becoming linguistic would matter, however, only if we presume in advance that linguistic responses are already *meaningful*, or as Davidson said, that the triangulators are capable of making judgements about the correctness (understandability) of their responses. Making such an assumption presupposes, rather than explains, that the aspect problem is solved. This is the reason why Davidson thinks that saying more on this would lead to either circular explanations or miscontruals of these matters. We better not to attempt to explain them. And this is one reason why I think Davidson's use of the notion of triangulation is nothing more than an analogy to *describe* such practices. But, what about Davidson's project of constructing formal theories of meaning?

6. Davidson's Theory of Meaning and Wittgenstein's Quietism

According to Davidson, Richard Rorty's worry is that there is a tension between Davidson's semantical project and Davidson's use of Wittgensteinian remarks. As he puts Rorty's criticism,

> Rorty sees some of my views as serving his Wittgensteinian agenda . . . He is less pleased by my persistent interest in Tarskian semantics. Like many others, he views these tendencies as opposed, and urges me to forgo the second. But I can't, because what Rorty holds to be antithetical modes of philosophizing I see as interdependent aspects of the same enterprise. Insofar as I have arrived

> at . . . Wittgensteinian thoughts, it is largely through having taken a third person approach to the problems of intentionality, and this is an approach which has always seemed to me to require (along with much more) the framework provided by the structures of formal semantics and decision theory. (Davidson 1998a, 315)

Davidson here reads Wittgenstein's view in his own way. Not only does he rightly point out that his methodology of taking the third-person stand point is essentially Wittgensteinian, but he also tells us that his early semantical project is not in conflict with Wittgenstein's agenda, among which quietism is prominent. His reason is that without talking about formal theories of meaning, which, for him, systematically *describe* the speakers' linguistic skills, we cannot even start saying anything interesting about such skills and powers. As Davidson (1986, 103) says, "only a full recursive theory can do justice to these powers". I think Davidson is right in his claim that the matter of *describing* the speakers' abilities is not necessarily in conflict with Wittgenstein's quietism. As McDowell (2009) pointed out, Wittgenstein's quietism is not against just any attempt to talk about our linguistic practices. Michael Luntley nicely puts the point when he introduces Wittgenstein's quietism about meaning as the view that "all that can be done is to describe the practices by which we mean things with words and how we respond and how we take ourselves in all this to be bound by norms" (Luntley 2003, 99). Davidson is completely on board with Wittgenstein's quietism on this matter. Although Davidson does his best to describe linguistic practices and abilities, he does not involve in explaining how such abilities emerge, how we use them to reach an understanding of each other, or any claim about speakers' having any sort of propositional knowledge of such theories. Davidson himself warned us that we should not confuse the hope to describe such abilities with the hope to formalize or characterize what is really involved in arriving at understanding. He sees these remarks to be in harmony with each other and with Wittgenstein's agenda:

> Rorty suggests that you can grasp my arguments for saying that interpreting a speaker involves knowing one's way around in the world even if you have no interest in a systematic theory of language. But I did not say that knowing one's way around in the world didn't include skills that can only be *described* by appeal to a formal theory. (Davidson 1998a, 316, emphasis added)

At the points we expect philosophical explanations from Davidson, he leaves us with philosophical descriptions and analogies. As McDowell, Kenny, Luntley, McGinn, and many others warned us, Wittgenstein's quietism does not imply giving up on saying anything interesting about linguistic practices (indeed, the *Investigations* is full of such interesting remarks). This view does not prevent us from thinking about them and describing them. Rather Wittgenstein's quietism reminds us of when we should give up on explaining and stop applying methods which are not suitable for dealing with a certain sort of problems. I believe Davidson is completely aware of these issues.[27]

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that Davidson's later view of meaning emerges as an attempt to remove certain sorts of philosophical misunderstanding of our most basic linguistic practices. For Davidson, such practices are successful simply if the interpreter and the speaker reach an agreement on what the speaker means by her words, though no philosophical explanation of the way such success can be achieved is forthcoming. Although Davidson's main concern is to accommodate the main Wittgensteinian ideas about meaning and linguistic understanding, he does not

[27] Verheggen (2017, 97) thinks that Wittgenstein's quietism is "a label Davidson would certainly not embrace". In this paper, I tried to argue against such a claim: not only does he embrace Wittgensteinian quietism, but, contra what McDowell (1994, 17) claims, such a quietism in Davidson's works does not enter "too late"; rather it has been present even in his earlier philosophical works, or at least, the later Davidson thinks so.

believe that his discussion of formal theories of meaning or his use of triangulation is in conflict with Wittgenstein's quietism.

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