

# On Not Giving Up the World – Davidson and the Grounds of Belief

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**ABSTRACT:** What is the relation between our beliefs, or thoughts in general, and the perceptual experience of the world that gives rise to those beliefs? Donald Davidson is usually taken to have a well-known answer to this question that runs as follows: while our beliefs are, at least in part, caused by our experience, such experience does not thereby count as providing a rational ground for those beliefs; our beliefs are thus evidentially grounded in other beliefs, but not in the experience that gives rise to them. John McDowell, among others, has challenged this Davidsonian picture on the grounds that it actually severs the connection between beliefs and their proper evidential grounds. Against such a view, this paper argues the Davidsonian position grounds belief in the specificity of our own locatedness in the world, and in the more general and prior embeddedness of belief in the world that is a part of the very concept of belief.

**KEYWORDS:** Belief, Knowledge, Experience, Reasons, Realism, Content

Commitment to a certain sort of everyday ‘realism’ has always seemed to me an important, if sometimes unstated, element in Donald Davidson’s thinking. I once asked Davidson about this directly, and after some brief discussion of what might be involved, he acknowledged his willingness to accept such a characterisation, adding that he thought the sort of ‘realism’ at issue was obvious and commonsensical, and that he saw his own work as largely an attempt to articulate and elaborate upon just such basic ideas and commitments. For this reason, he said, he was often surprised at the opposition his ideas sometimes engendered.

The sort of ‘everyday realism’ at issue here is not, of course, the same as the metaphysical style of realism associated with the longstanding realism/antirealism dispute; it can be seen to consist, instead, in the idea that the starting point for philosophy, and that to which philosophy has to do justice, is our ordinary, everyday involvement with the world.<sup>1</sup> Such realism seems to be at the forefront of a number of Davidson’s essays, perhaps most notably in *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,* and its famous

concluding claim that 'In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.'<sup>2</sup> In this respect, Davidson's rejection of the third dogma, according to which a clear distinction is to be made between conceptual scheme and empirical content, along with the 'myth of the subjective' with which that dogma is associated, is not about the rejection of intellectual, cultural or historical difference,<sup>3</sup> but instead attempts to bring into clear focus the untenability of any attempt to understand knowledge or thought in a way that would treat it as somehow composed of distinct conceptual and empirical elements or as arising through the confrontation between the interiority of the subject (whether expressed in terms of language, concepts or private states) and the exteriority of objects.

In taking such a line, Davidson was not advancing a completely unprecedented point of view. Indeed, at least in its general form, the position is one that can also be discerned in philosophers such as Whitehead (an early influence on Davidson, even though superseded by that of Quine) as well as in Wittgenstein, and within a very different tradition, in Heidegger and Gadamer. What Davidson did, however, was to advance this position from within a specifically 'analytic' philosophical framework and in terms that connected directly with contemporary debates within the broadly Anglo-American philosophical tradition. Yet if Davidson himself could be surprised at the way his views were received, it is also true that his views have not always been well understood. In particular, the centrality of what I have referred to as Davidson's 'everyday realism' is not always clearly recognised or, if it is, its significance is often not appreciated.

There is much that could be said about this issue, but here I want to focus on the way in which it relates to a question that has gained much recent prominence, particularly in the work of John McDowell, namely, what is the relation between our beliefs, or thoughts in general, and the perceptual experience of the world that gives rise to those beliefs? Davidson is usually taken to have a well-known answer to this question that runs as follows:

while our beliefs are, at least in part, caused by experience, such experience does not thereby count as providing a rational ground for those beliefs; our beliefs are thus evidentially grounded in other beliefs, but not in the experience that gives rise to them. It is to this position that McDowell refers when he writes that: "Davidson thinks that experience can be nothing but an extra-conceptual impact on sensibility. So he concludes that experience must be outside the space of reasons. According to Davidson, experience is causally relevant to a subject's beliefs and judgements, but it has no bearing on their status as justified or warranted".<sup>4</sup>

Against Davidson, McDowell argues that such an approach threatens to undermine any sense in which our beliefs can properly be said to be about the perceptual experiences, and so also the entities, that cause them. And if this relation fails then we also lose any sense in which our beliefs can be said properly to be adequate to those entities, that is, to the very objects of belief. McDowell thus assimilates the Davidsonian position to a form of coherentism<sup>5</sup> that, far from reassuring us of our connection with the world, actually undermines that connection. To illustrate this point, McDowell asks us to consider the well-known scenario according to which one could be a disembodied brain immersed in a vat of fluid within a mad scientist's laboratory (the sceptic, of course, would have us believe that it is possible that all or any of us could be such brains) – what would the beliefs of such a brain be about? McDowell responds by citing Richard Rorty's claim that on the Davidsonian account "if one were a brain in a vat, it would be correct to interpret one's beliefs as largely true beliefs about the brain's electronic environment"<sup>6</sup> But McDowell argues that such a response "does not calm the fear that our picture leaves our thinking possibly out of touch with the world outside us. It just gives us a dizzying sense that our grip on what it is that we believe is not as firm as we thought."<sup>7</sup>

The real problem here, according to McDowell, is that the Davidsonian account allows the interpreter to adjust the beliefs attributed (whether to an envatted brain or any other believer) in a way that may fit the environmental

circumstances, but which is nevertheless disengaged from the way that environment is actually presented in experience.<sup>8</sup> The result is that while one can always readjust attributions of belief so as to maintain the overall truth of belief (as well as maintaining the believer's grasp of the contents of belief), the possibility of such adjustment seems to undermine the connection between particular beliefs and the worldly entities those beliefs are about – the connection with the world is maintained at a global level, but apparently lost at the level of the particular. McDowell takes this to imply that the Davidsonian approach cannot retain any real sense in which our beliefs connect with the objects, or experiences, that are specific to them. McDowell's own solution is to claim that perceptual experience, while not itself a form of belief or judgement, must itself be accessible to such belief or judgement, and so must also be open to rational appropriation. Thus McDowell claims that perceptual experience must fall within 'the space of reasons' – meaning that the compass of the rational and the conceptual must include the experiential – and in arguing thus McDowell rejects, not only Davidson's apparent insistence on the purely causal role played by perceptual experience, but also the claims of those, such as Gareth Evans, who argue for an evidentiary or grounding role for perceptual experience, but claim that the content of such experience must nevertheless be non-conceptual in character.<sup>9</sup>

McDowell's discussion, and particularly the way he places Davidson in contrast with certain empiricist positions, tends to emphasise the coherentist elements in the Davidsonian position. Those coherentist, or better, holist<sup>10</sup> elements are certainly there – Davidson himself notes in replying to McDowell that when it comes to our perceptual beliefs, they require "no more in the way of rational support than coherence with their fellows"<sup>11</sup> – but this does not mean that beliefs are thereby cut off from the perceptual experience that gives rise to them. What it means instead is that beliefs cannot be understood other than in terms of their rational interconnection with other beliefs, as well as with attitudes and behaviour. But since the rational is, as Davidson has always emphasised, not independent of the causal, even though

it is also distinct from it, so Davidson's holism itself implies the interconnection of beliefs with their objects, of mind with world.<sup>12</sup>

It is a familiar Davidsonian precept that nothing is a reason simply in virtue of being a cause. Consequently, an event may function to bring about certain beliefs, desires and so forth, and yet that event need not, at least not just in virtue of the causal role it plays, have any rational connection with the attitudes to which it gives rise. Where some event enters into a rational connection with some other event, however, as one belief may provide a reason for another, then the reason will also be a cause. Thus my believing that what I see is a kangaroo in the car park causes me to believe, providing certain other conditions are also satisfied, that there is a kangaroo in the car park, and the first belief may also provide a reason for the second: why do I think there is a kangaroo in the carpark – because I saw it.

The simple idea that not all causes are reasons, but that all (real) reasons are causes – an idea already famously present in Davidson's thinking long before 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge'<sup>13</sup> – is a crucial and incontrovertible element in the Davidsonian approach. It is central to much of Davidson's philosophy of mind and action, but it also underpins Davidson's account of the relation between belief and its worldly causes. Traditional empiricist epistemology has tended to look for some way of mediating between belief and the causes of belief as a way of providing an evidential grounding for belief. Davidson does not reject the need for beliefs to be grounded evidentially, but he does reject the idea that this can be achieved by looking to any form of mediation between belief and cause. Not merely does this open up the possibility of scepticism,<sup>14</sup> but such mediation is neither possible nor is it necessary.

Causes are not, in virtue simply of being causes, reasons. The way Davidson puts this latter point in 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' (and this is the basis for the 'coherentism' that is the focus of McDowell's discussion) is by saying that "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief".<sup>15</sup> The problem Davidson identifies is

that any attempt to find something (“sensation, perception, the given, experience, sense data, the passing show”<sup>16</sup>) within the causal process that gives rise to belief, but which can also count as a reason for belief, must already be a belief. Although Davidson does not elaborate on the reasons for this latter claim, it seems clear that any argument here would have to proceed by looking to the way in which rational connections between states must be connections that obtain, at least minimally, in virtue of the content of those states, and not merely because of their causal association (although if reasons are causes, then there will be a causal connection between the states at issue that obtains in virtue of the rational, that is content-related, connection that also holds between them). We might be tempted to say then, that no state can count as a rational state – that is, a state that can function as a reason – unless it is a contentful state, and something like this idea could be said to be the basis for the distinction between reasons and causes. The latter distinction thus turns out to be a version of the distinction between states (or between states as they are identified under certain descriptions) that have content (which states can thereby function as reasons) and those that do not. This does not take us very far, however, and it would be useful to have some further clarification of the ideas of content and of states that have content – especially, one might say, of beliefs – that are at issue here.

Much energy has been spent in recent years in discussions of the nature of content, and particularly on the issue of conceptual versus non-conceptual content. Yet there is at least one relatively straightforward way of characterizing content that seems unavoidable: content, inasmuch as it belongs to particular states or attitudes, is just what is expressed in statements or propositions. Such a characterization does not imply either that such statements or propositions (or the concepts that may figure in them) have any necessary role within the actual structure of contentful states as such,<sup>17</sup> or that any particular statement or proposition can exhaustively capture the content of any state or attitude. Instead this is a quite minimal way of understanding content that focuses on the idea that, with respect to any state that has

content, and regardless of whether we characterise the state as a belief or something else or view the content at issue as conceptual or non-conceptual, determinate or indeterminate, it should nevertheless be possible to provide some specification of the content at issue. Of course, this says nothing about how precise or determinate that specification must be (and on Davidsonian grounds one would almost certainly want to hold that any specification of content will be subject to a degree of indeterminacy), but it does make clear the need for some such specification to be possible that follows from the way in which contentful states are, at least in part, identified and individuated by their contents<sup>18</sup> – indeed, an inability to provide any specification whatsoever ought, under normal circumstances, to give rise to doubts as to whether there is any content to be specified in the first place. On this account, talk of non-conceptual content need not imply that there is a special form of content that resists conceptualisation or propositional expression, but rather can be construed as referring to states or attitudes that have content, but the possession of which need not require any particular conceptual or propositional capacities.<sup>19</sup>

It is not so much content, however, as the attitudes that have content, particularly beliefs, that seem to me to be the proper focus for discussion here – and this is especially so as regards the relation between McDowell and Davidson. For the most part, philosophers have tended to construe the notion of belief in fairly narrow ways or else to assume a much clearer concept of belief, and of its associated notions, than is actually warranted. McDowell, for instance, seems to take a view of belief according to which belief is defined in terms of the disposition to make judgements.<sup>20</sup> It is not at all clear, however, that this does much to illuminate the concept of belief (although it is not that wholly out of place in the Davidsonian context) – it seems rather to shift attention onto the nature of judgement. Other than the truism that belief is a matter of holding true, Davidson nowhere offers a simple definition of belief (or, indeed, of any other important concept<sup>21</sup>), but he does offer considerable discussion of the way in which belief relates to other elements within the

structure of rationality, and the character of his discussion also implies an understanding of belief that treats belief, along with other attitudes, in much a broader fashion than is to be found in McDowell or in the analytic philosophical literature more generally.

I recall a student of Bert Dreyfus once putting to Davidson, after a class on the philosophy of action in 1992, the idea that the Davidsonian focus on belief leaves out the way in which our behaviour and attitudes are grounded in behavioural skills, dispositions and habit. Davidson's response was to ask why one would suppose that belief should be construed in so narrow a way – why, he asked, can't a belief take the form of a habit?<sup>22</sup> Certainly, while belief can be formally explicated in terms of the concept of holding true or, related to this, of judging that something is the case, it would seem that the real nature of belief is better elucidated by reference to the way in which belief connects up with other attitudes, notably desire, and with action. Davidson's early work in the philosophy of action, notably 'Actions, Reasons and Causes' can be construed as offering, or perhaps depending upon, just such a conception of belief, but it is in the development of the more explicitly holistic account that is associated with the ideas of radical interpretation and triangulation that such a conception comes more clearly into view.

The holistic, externalist approach to the mental that lies at the heart of essays such as 'The Myth of the Subjective' or 'Three Varieties of Knowledge' necessitates a radical shift in the way in which belief, along with other attitudes, is to be understood: rather than being treated as private, 'internal' states whose connection with the world can always be doubted, belief has to be viewed as already connected to the world via the tripartite structure that encompasses believer, interpreter and world. This structure is one that is established and maintained, not through the passive reception of perceptual experience on the part of believer and interpreter, but through their active engagement with one another and participation in the world. Belief cannot, on this account, be separated from action, but must instead be understood in intimate relation to it. One might thus treat beliefs as dispositions to action

that, while they do not determine or necessitate action, are nevertheless expressed either directly in action (including linguistic action) or indirectly via other attitudes or beliefs to which they are rationally, and so causally, connected. Davidson does not himself offer any such explicit characterisation, but not only does it seem to be consistent with his more general account, it also has clear precedents in the tradition of American pragmatist thought out of which Davidson's own work, in part, emerges.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, one of the most important, and perhaps even unique features of the Davidsonian account would seem to be the way in which that account brings together the idea of rational and causal connectedness in specific relation to beliefs and attitudes. The behaviourally oriented conception of belief that I have outlined above, according to which belief cannot be understood in separation from action, can be seen as arising out of such an integrated understanding of reason and cause, as well as reinforcing such an integrated understanding. Moreover, the integration of reason and cause, especially when considered in conjunction with the idea of a necessary connection between belief and action, also sheds important light on the way in which beliefs are connected with other beliefs, and so on the structure of rationality – 'the space of reasons' – as such.

The most basic beliefs we have about the world, what Davidson sometimes calls 'perceptual beliefs', are generated as a result of our causal interaction with the world, and with particular events or things, as that occurs through our senses. Now just what beliefs arise on the basis of a specific encounter will depend, in part on the event or thing encountered, but also on the other beliefs, capacities and so forth that we possess. So, for instance, an encounter with an echidna may lead you to form the belief that you have just seen your first monotreme, but only if you already have certain other beliefs about both echidnas and monotremes. The identification of beliefs depends on identifying the objects of beliefs, and, in the case of our most basic beliefs, that depends on identifying the causes of those beliefs. Once again, of course, how we identify the causes of belief will depend on other beliefs, capacities

and so forth, but what is crucial to note here is the way in which the identification of belief depends both on our being causally embedded in the world (which includes our being able to be causally affected by the world through our senses) and on our own acquaintance with the character of that causal embeddedness (in our own case as well as that of those whom we aim to interpret) – it depends, in other words, on the beliefs we have about the causes of our and others’ beliefs.

The identification of beliefs depends on identifying the causes of belief, and so the identification of beliefs depends on already having access to the causal connections that obtain between particular beliefs and the world. In addition, however, the very descriptions under which we identify certain events and entities as the causes of belief, and so as the objects of belief, are descriptions that are themselves determined through the way in which our own worldly engagement and that of our interlocutors intersect, and so are dependent on the common causal engagement that we and our interlocutors share. Thus I can identify the boiling kettle before us as the object of both my belief that the kettle is boiling and your belief that the kettle is boiling because it is the boiling of the kettle (rather than, say, certain perturbations in our auditory and visual fields) that is a common focus for our orientation as agents in that particular circumstance. Such orientation is a matter not only of perceptual experience, but also of behavioural engagement – which are themselves tied closely together.

The perceptual-behavioural engagement that is at issue here has at least three axes: one that unites me with my interlocutor; one that unites me with the event or entity that is the object of my belief or attitude; and one that unites my interlocutor with that same event or entity. It is this tripartite structure that Davidson describes in terms of the process of triangulation. Such triangulation can be understood as a matter of the ongoing adjustment of our own dispositions, and the dispositions we attribute to others, in the light of our changing environmental circumstances. That task is, of course, one that is always undertaken from within a particular context or locale, and

so it is always particular beliefs, particular dispositions, particular configurations of things with respect to which we adjust and orient ourselves. Triangulation thus depends on the way in which interpreter, interlocutor, and entity or event come together within a particular environmental circumstance, while triangulation is itself a matter of the articulation and integration of elements brought together in this way. In this fashion, the holism that characterises belief (and the broader complex of attitude, action and world), and that is evident in the integration that occurs in and through triangulation, is always and only operative in relation to specific involvements and locations. It is for this reason that I have argued elsewhere, on essentially the same Davidsonian grounds adduced here, in favour of a way of understanding the 'psychological', the 'intentional' or, we might say, the 'rational', as always 'topographically' constituted in terms of active, embodied locatedness – in terms of the structure of a topos or place.<sup>24</sup>

What makes for rationality as such is indeed the way in which the complex dispositional structure of belief, and of attitude, is bound up with action, and so with the world, by means of the connectedness of the embodied agent in her localised environment – a connectedness that is a matter of both content and of cause. Uncovering the rationality of particular beliefs is thus always a matter of delineating a particular epistemic topography – of uncovering a particular configuration of attitude, behaviour and environment. Such a configuration can be seen to constitute a particular 'rational space', although it is a space is itself underlain by the causal interconnectedness of the elements that make it up. In this latter respect, we may say that, in general, it is our causal embeddedness in the world (which underlies our perceptual-behavioural engagement), and the exact structure of that embeddedness in any particular case, that plays the essential role in our ability to identify the rational connections between beliefs – both our own as well as those of others. It is just such causal embeddedness that underpins the very possibility of content and so of rationality, and inasmuch as such embeddedness is itself tied to our capacities as agents, that is, to our capacity

both to affect as well as to be affected by the world, so we may say that the space of reasons actually turns out to be identical with the space of agency.<sup>25</sup>

Viewed in this way, it should be apparent that the Davidsonian approach does not lose the connection between particular beliefs and the worldly causes of belief, but actually depends upon those connections in order to identify the contents of belief. Indeed, the very identity of beliefs may be said to depend both on the connections between beliefs, and between beliefs and the events and entities that give rise to them and which they are about. The evidential grounding of belief is thus always based, first, in the specific causal and rational connections that are relevant to the belief in question, and, second, in the general structure that binds together belief, agency and world. The evidential grounding that applies in the first case – grounding that proceeds through exhibiting and explicating the specific causal and rational connections that are relevant to particular beliefs – is itself dependent on the more general grounding that is given in the second case – the grounding that consists in exhibiting and explicating the inter-relatedness of belief, agency and world as such. However, that second, more general form of grounding provides nothing more, and need provide nothing more, than an assurance that our reliance on the particular instances of evidential grounding arrived at in the first case, on the basis of our everyday, ongoing activities, is indeed warranted.

Understanding the relation between thought and experience, between beliefs and the perceptual objects of belief, is thus not a matter of finding something that will mediate between the two. Even were such mediation possible, it could not accomplish the task that is required. If belief is already taken to stand outside the world, such that it needs somehow to be reconnected with it, then it will always remain in such a state of dislocation. This is, as we have already seen, one of the central points in Davidson's argument in 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge'. Whatever we might look to as a potential candidate for the required mediation must either already be taken up into the framework of belief, in which case there is no

need for anything other than belief, or else it cannot supply the necessary mediation in the first place. McDowell's solution is to argue that there is some state, which is not yet a belief, and yet can be taken up by belief, and so is rationally accessible.<sup>26</sup> As Davidson points out, however, the idea of such a state remains quite unclear.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the need for such a state, in McDowell's account, is forced upon us precisely because of the way in which McDowell constrains the notion of belief itself. If belief is indeed understood in the broader fashion argued here, then there is no need to introduce any other intermediate state as that to which belief is addressed and in which it is grounded. The need for such a broader, behaviourally-oriented conception of belief is itself a consequence of the holistic nature of belief, and of attitudes generally, according to which belief has to be seen as standing in an essential relation to other beliefs and attitudes, to behaviour, and to the environmental circumstances in which belief arises and action occurs. Moreover, that holistic conception of belief, and of the interconnection of belief with both behaviour and with the world, is itself closely tied to the Davidsonian view of the necessary interconnection of reason with cause.

Of course, the holistic character of belief also leads to a necessary indeterminacy in the identification and attribution of belief – there is thus always more than one way of correctly attributing beliefs. As we saw above, it is for this reason that McDowell takes Davidsonian holism or 'coherentism' to undermine the relation between belief and its objects. Yet the indeterminacy of belief does not undermine either the reality of belief as such or the relation between belief and its objects. Strictly speaking, indeterminacy relates, not to beliefs or to the objects of belief, but rather to the way in which these are identified and described. Thus, to use one of Davidson's favourite examples, the fact that we can measure temperature using either Celsius or Fahrenheit does not mean that there is, to use a Quinean phrase, no 'fact of the matter' at issue here – it does not imply that there are no determinate temperatures at issue. Similarly, the fact that we can describe the interconnected system, of beliefs, behaviour and environment in more than

one way does not mean that there is nothing determinate that is the subject of such description. The tendency to suppose otherwise is largely a result of the fact that it is only under certain descriptions that beliefs are identified.

In this respect, however, Rorty's claim, cited by McDowell, that the way to interpret the beliefs of an envatted brain would be to take them as referring to the brain's electronic environment (rather than to the entities and events that make up the ordinary world outside that environment) itself tends somewhat to confuse the issue. What the Rortyan account leaves out is the way in which interpretation is indeed a three-way endeavour that depends on the relation between our beliefs and their causes, on the relation between our interlocutors' beliefs and their causes, and on the relation between ourselves and our interlocutors as that is articulated behaviourally, especially through our linguistic behaviour. That means that the way we identify beliefs and the objects of belief is not independent of the way in which beliefs and the objects of belief are also identified by our interlocutors. It thus cannot be taken as a settled question as to just how to interpret the beliefs of an envatted brain. We may start by looking to the brain's electronic environment, but we may well end by looking somewhere else. Nothing can decide the matter short of an actual interpretive encounter – short of our actual engagement with another. In fact, no matter what the actual circumstances in which we find ourselves, it is only through our perceptual and behavioural engagement with those circumstances, as well as with others who are similarly located, that we can even be said to have beliefs – in the absence of such engagement, there can be no basis on which beliefs can be attributed and identified, either in our own case or in that of others.

Belief is not a state that stands apart from the world, and in need of reconnecting with it, but is rather one of the concepts by means of which we are able to describe, explain and articulate that very embeddedness. Much of traditional epistemology has depended on construing belief in a way that already abstracts from its role in this respect, treating it, instead, as a narrower, more 'theoretical' notion that always stands in need of explicit

justification. Yet although it is certainly possible to treat belief in this way (and sometimes there may be good reason to do so), such a way of understanding belief emphasises one aspect of belief at the expense of another. The concept of belief refers in two directions: belief has content inasmuch as it is already connected to the world, but since belief always includes the possibility of error, so it also includes the ever-present possibility of a certain disconnection from the world. The theoretical concept of belief that has stood at the heart of traditional epistemology, the theoretical concept of belief referred to immediately above, gives priority to the second of these directions – belief as including the possibility of error. Yet both of these aspects of belief have to be held together. Thus the possibility of error in belief depends on the connection of belief with the world inasmuch as such connection is necessary for belief to have content (and without content there is nothing about which belief can be in error); on the other hand, for belief to have content depends on a certain disconnection of belief from the world inasmuch as the content of belief always stands in contrast to the objects of belief (belief is indeed about its objects rather than identical with them).

The realism that I attributed to Davidson at the beginning of this discussion is thus not a realism that derives from any metaphysical guarantee of the truth of our beliefs. In fact, quite the opposite is the case – it is Davidson's conception of belief, and of our attitudes in general, as determined and justified only in and through the particular and contingent features of our worldly location that underpins his realism. In this respect Davidson's realism is indeed closely connected with his holism – what McDowell refers to as Davidson's 'coherentism'. As should already be evident, however, such holism is not just a matter of the interconnectedness of beliefs, nor even of belief with behaviour, but of the necessary embeddedness, both causal and rational, of belief in a larger worldly environment. It is thus that we can look to beliefs as giving us access to the world, and to the world as giving us access to beliefs. The embedded character of belief itself reflects the embedded character of our own existence – the world is the ever present and already

given background against which all of our attitudes and behaviour are delineated and determined. It is a background that is always configured, however, in terms of particular places or locations – it is, indeed, the particularity and partiality of our worldly embeddedness that makes for the possibility of error. In this respect, however, it turns out that it is our very engagement in the world, and the nature of that engagement, that underpins the idea that we can be wrong about the world.

Davidsonian ‘realism’, if we can call it that, does not ‘give up the world’, but returns us to it through relinquishing the idea that the world is anything more than is given in and through our ongoing, everyday involvement with things or that our beliefs can be grounded other than in such everyday involvement. Not only is it a mistake to look for more than this, but, as it happens, nothing more is needed. As Marcia Cavell writes:

Philosophy begins in the only place it can, here, in the midst of things, with thinkers who are already accomplished at thinking and whose thinking takes time and the world for granted...Knowledge is not anchored vertically, and by that token no particular piece of it can be given a lifetime guarantee. It is held in place by the very contingencies it takes for granted, as are one’s mind and one’s existence as a self<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Such a reading of Davidson was at the heart of my 1992 book, Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). In ‘Truth Without Correspondence to Reality’, Philosophy and Social Hope (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), p.43 n.24, Richard Rorty noted his ‘regret’ at my use of the term ‘realism’ in this context. I take Rorty’s regret to have been based on the assumption that the term cannot be employed other than in terms of the problematic understanding of

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realism that is so central to the realism/antirealism dispute. In contrast, I would argue that the 'everyday' sense of realism I invoke here is not only distinct from any more technical philosophical uses of the term, but is embedded in much of our ordinary thought and discourse. The difference between us on this matter is probably less indicative of any disagreement on the substantive matters at issue, and more to do with a difference in philosophical strategy – whereas Rorty recommended the abandonment of those terms that have become philosophically problematic, my preference is to try to reclaim at least some of those terms through their reconceptualisation.

<sup>2</sup> Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 2001), p.198.

<sup>3</sup> Although this has not prevented many of Davidson's critics from interpreting his position in just this way as a preliminary to demonstrating its, supposedly obvious, falsity – see, for instance, Michael N. Forster, 'On the Very Idea of Denying the Existence of Radically Different Conceptual Schemes', Inquiry 41 (1998), pp.133-85.

<sup>4</sup> Mind and World (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), p.14.

<sup>5</sup> See McDowell, Mind and World, pp.14-18.

<sup>6</sup> Mind and World, p.16-17; McDowell is citing Rorty's comments in 'Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth', in E. LePore (ed.), Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp.333-55. As McDowell at one point admits (see Mind and World, p.146), it is less Davidson as such that is the focus of much of his criticism than the version of Davidson that Rorty presents in this essay.

<sup>7</sup> Mind and World, p.17.

<sup>8</sup> See Mind and World, p.17, n.14: "The problem is that in the argument Rorty attributes to Davidson, we ring changes on the actual environment (as seen by the interpreter and brought into interpretation) without changing how things strike the believer, even while the interpretation is supposed

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to capture how the believer is in touch with her world". It is notable that, in this respect, McDowell does not make the mistake, so common to many readers of Davidson, of thinking that the Davidsonian position compromises our knowledge of the contents of our beliefs – on this point see my 'Self Knowledge and Scepticism', Erkenntnis 40 (1994), pp.165-184.

<sup>9</sup> See Mind and World, pp.62ff.

<sup>10</sup> McDowell's talk of coherentism is undoubtedly encouraged by Davidson's own talk of coherentism in 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' (Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001], pp. 137-53) – talk that lends itself readily to the sort of problematic construal of the Davidsonian position that McDowell advances in Mind and World and elsewhere. But what is actually at issue in the Davidsonian account, even in 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', is not coherentism so much as holism – the sort of holism with respect to which I tried to give a more detailed account in Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning (see especially pp.53ff) and which became an increasingly explicit element in Davidson's later writings (it is notable that it is really only in 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' that the idea of coherence has such a central role and in his later comments on that essay he says that his emphasis on coherence was "misplaced" – see 'Afterthoughts', Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, p.155).

<sup>11</sup> Davidson, 'Reply to John McDowell', Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed.), The Philosophy of Donald Davidson, Library of Living Philosophers XXVII (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), p.106.

<sup>12</sup> See 'Reply to John McDowell', p.106.

<sup>13</sup> See especially, of course, 'Actions, Reasons and Causes' from 1963 reprinted in Essays on Actions and Events (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 2001). As Davidson comments in his reply to McDowell in the Library of Living Philosophers volume: "I have from almost my first published essay

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(‘Actions, reasons and Causes’) emphasized the essential and ineliminable way causality is built into mental concepts and explanations” (‘Reply to John McDowell’, p.106).

- <sup>14</sup> That skepticism does indeed follow from such a position is one of the considerations that Davidson argues should count against it, see, for instance, ‘Reply to McDowell’, p.105 – the point also appears, of course, in ‘The Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge’ and elsewhere.
- <sup>15</sup> Davidson, ‘A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge’, p.141.
- <sup>16</sup> ‘A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge’, p.141.
- <sup>17</sup> Much of the discussion of content seems to be hampered by the idea that for concepts or propositions to have a significant role in relation to content it must be the case that such concepts or propositions themselves have some role in the way in which such content is internally structured or articulated, that is, such concepts or propositions must somehow be part of (‘internal to’) the states in question. At least so far as talk of propositions are concerned (and something similar can probably be said for concepts too), this simply confused: propositions or statements are that by means of which content is expressed, but they are not themselves internal to any contentful state nor are they part of or internal to content as such. This point bears on Mark Wrathall’s claim (see his ‘Non-rational grounds and mind-transcendental objects’ (in Jeff Malpas [ed], From Kant to Davidson: Philosophy and the Idea of the Transcendental [London: Routledge, 2002], pp.197-209), that the familiarity with the world that provides a ‘non-rational’ ground for our beliefs may be capable of conceptual or propositional description, but is not itself conceptually or propositionally articulated.
- <sup>18</sup> One may argue that they are also identified and individuated by the causal relations into which they enter, but since contentful states are, *ipso facto*, also states that enter into forms of rational connection with other states, and their causal connections to other states are also partly dependent

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upon those rational and hence contentful connections, so the causal relations into which such states enter are not independent of the connections that obtain in virtue of their content.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Tim Crane's characterization of non-conceptual content in his entry on that topic in Edward Craig (ed.), Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (London: Routledge, 1998), p.641.

<sup>20</sup> See Mind and World, p.60.

<sup>21</sup> Davidson notes the difficulty in providing such a definition with respect to truth in 'Afterthoughts', Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, p.156, and it seems clear that he would also take the difficulty as applying more generally.

<sup>22</sup> In this respect, Dreyfus' own sometime characterization of Davidson as committed to a form of 'theoretical' as opposed to 'practical' holism (see Dreyfus, 'Holism and Hermeneutics', Review of Metaphysics, 34 (1980), pp.3-23) itself rests on a narrow and 'theoretical' construal of belief that is not shared by Davidson.

<sup>23</sup> See for instance, C. S. Peirce, 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear', in Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Vol 5, Pragmatism and Pragmaticism (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1935).

<sup>24</sup> See my Place and Experience, passim.

<sup>25</sup> This is essentially the argument I advanced, in slightly different terms, in 'The Constitution of the Mind: Kant and Davidson on the Unity of Consciousness', International Journal of Philosophical Studies, 00 (1999), pp.1-30; see also 'The Space of Agency', in Krister Segerberg and Ryszard Sliwinski (eds.), A philosophical smorgasbord; Essays on action, truth and other things in honour of Frederick Stoutland, Uppsala Philosophical Series 52 (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2003), pp.99-118 and, more generally, Place and Experience.

<sup>26</sup> In this respect, and notwithstanding the differences between them, both Davidson and McDowell agree on the need for thought and belief to be

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rationaly grounded. Mark Wrathall largely accepts McDowell's criticism of Davidson, but also argues that both Davidson and McDowell are mistaken in this common assumption of rationality (see Wrathall, 'Non-rational grounds and mind-transcendental objects', esp. p.202). Instead, argues Wrathall, our thoughts are grounded in our prior familiarity with the world through a relationship Wrathall calls 'motivational' (the term is one Wrathall takes from Merleau-Ponty - see The Phenomenology of Perception, trans Colin Smith [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962], pp.49ff). Such a motivational relationship is not causal, since it is structured in terms of meaning, but neither is it rational, since it is not itself conceptually or rationally articulated (though it may be described in rational or conceptual terms) and so is not available to be taken up in inference and justification. There seem to me to be a number of problems with Wrathall's account. One such problem is that the idea of motivation and the 'non-rational' character of the grounding it supposedly provides is left somewhat obscure. In fact, given that the relation of motivation is indeed a relation of meaning, it is hard to see, at least from a Davidsonian perspective, how that relation can be other than rational. For states to be related in terms of their meaning is for them to be related in terms of their content, and relations of content are ipso facto rational relations. The emphasis on rationality here means that such states can provide reasons for other states, but this does not mean that such states have to enter into inferential or justificatory processes. Moreover, given the way in which Merleau-Ponty defines the idea of 'motivation' (see The Phenomenology of Perception, p.49-50), it seems to me that there is more common ground with Davidson than Wrathall allows - Merleau-Ponty argues for the need for a more fluid relation that is not that of mere efficient causality nor of strict logical determination, and it is this he terms 'motivational'. Davidson's own use of 'rational' seems closer to the way Merleau-Ponty employs talk of 'motivation', especially when one considers the

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behaviourally-oriented conception of belief to which Davidson seems committed and the way in which belief is itself grounded in the tripartite structure of our particular embeddedness in the world.

<sup>27</sup> See 'Reply to McDowell', p.107. The sort of state that McDowell looks to have in mind here seems to be a neutral state that nevertheless has content - rather like a belief stripped of the attitudinal component of 'holding true'.

<sup>28</sup> Marcia Cavell, The Psychoanalytic Mind (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.41.